

The Canon's Yeoman's Tale

The *Canon Yeoman's Tale*: Invention, Discovery, Problem-Solving, and Innovation

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The *Canon Yeoman's Tale* is one of Chaucer's strangest and most perplexing texts, although it has too often been overlooked in the undergraduate classroom. It pulls together a moral narrative with detailed recitations of alchemical science, admonishments against duplicity with exact instructions on how to deceive. The *Tale* comes immediately after the *Second Nun's Tale* (the two together form Fragment VIII/Group G); indeed, the arrival of the Canon and his Yeoman into the company of pilgrims disrupts the communal reaction to the nun's hagiography of St. Cecilia. The *Prologue* and two sections of the *Tale* move fluidly between a specificity of identities (this Canon, this Yeoman) to a depersonalized generalization (other canons, other assistants) as they tell story after story of how those who aspire to the science of alchemy will suffer the consequences of their unnatural ambition and sinful avarice. In this chapter, I treat the *Canon Yeoman's Tale* as a broad critique of new scientific ways of knowing and of creating, applying reproductive theory to Chaucer's text in order to tease out the moral boundaries he draws between intellectual innovation and human perversity.

Tools

Medieval Theories of Reproduction

When we speak of theories of reproduction in the Middle Ages, we draw upon a variety of intellectual discourses, not all of which happily align with one another. For the medieval Christian understanding of how humans and animals multiplied and produced offspring was a matter of theological dogma, ancient medical philosophy, new medical philosophy, political theory, and experiential observation. The stakes of the negotiation between these forces and their practitioners were immense, as the conceptualization of how bodies came together to create new bodies in turn was an intrinsic component of codifying sex, gender, and hierarchical power.

Most theories of reproduction explained the process through a system of contraries. Male complexions were hot and dry, while women's were cold and moist; it was the combination of the two that allowed a fecund climate to be developed in the womb.^[1] There were two competing theories of how these contraries combined, however, with marked divergences in terms of the assignation of conceptive authority and sexed difference. The Greek philosopher Galen's (d. 210 CE) gynecological theories dominated the early Middle Ages, and held that both

sexual partners, male and female, emitted seed.^[2] It was the combination of the two sperms that came together into the creation of a child. Although the male spermatic contribution was “more active” than the female, both were full participants in conception. In contrast, the reproductive theories of Aristotle, which became increasingly authoritative in medical discourse after the thirteenth-century within Western Christendom, held that man alone contributed sperm to the conception of the fetus; woman provided only the passive, menstrual matter (itself an undigested superfluity) for the man’s seed to shape (Laqueur 41-3). We see many contradictory blurrings of these two theories within medieval references to gynecology and reproduction, but gradually by the later Middle Ages, even when authors occasionally referenced the two-seed theory, they did so from a more deeply entrenched perspective on the primacy of the male in reproduction.

Thus, the late medieval theories of reproduction tended to focus on male labor, male spirit, and male virility, with women serving only as the defective material with which their craftsman skill was forced to work. Even before the spread of Aristotelian reproductive theory, the conceptive process had been imagined in terms of male creation and craftsmanship. The twelfth-century theologian, Alan of Lille, imagines conception as a hammer striking an anvil; he complains that homosexuality is a “man hammer[ing] on an anvil which issues no seeds” (69).^[3] The Pseudo-Albertus Magnus gynecology, *De secretis mulierum*, similarly offers a vision of human conception as craft: “Just as a carpenter alone is the efficient cause, and the house is the effect, in that he alters and disposes the matter of the house, so the male seed alters the female menses into the shape of a human being” (quoted in Lemay 64).^[4] By the late Middle Ages, the marginalization of the female role in human reproduction was becoming increasingly commonplace, although the coexistent presence of earlier, Galenic works in literary circulation meant that the association of woman with menstrual matter alone was still not exclusive or uncontested.

Text

Geoffrey Chaucer’s account of alchemists and their machinations is a tale concerned with creation and craftsmanship. If it has not been typically contextualized with reproductive theory, I would argue that is largely a result of the exclusively masculine nature of its characters. There are no wombs to be found in the *Prologue*, *Prima Pars*, or *Secunda Pars*. And yet, there are rudimentary, uterus-like crucibles, containing (or failing to contain) chemical transformations, not to mention clumps of coal that birth other, finer minerals from their humble depths. Most importantly, there are men attempting to work, and shape, and form matter, forcing it to accord with their wills. Katharine Eggert has argued that in Early Modern England, alchemy was imagined as a scientific way for men to explore the possibility of reproducing without female participation, in chemical laboratories rather than in wombs (157-68). Eggert’s sources postdate the composition of *The Canterbury Tales* and its contemporary alchemical texts by two hundred years, but the impulse to create, and to create with other men rather than with women, appears to be a central aspect in Chaucer’s imagining of what happens in alchemical laboratories and his condemnation thereto. The *Canon Yeoman’s Tale*, a story told by the disillusioned servant of a lying and false alchemist, may serve as a Chaucerian critique of the male desire to use technological and scientific innovation to generate alone, excluding women from creation and thus overthrowing the normative pairing of sex contraries upon which medieval religious, social, and political authority resided.

The problem for those medieval men who wished to generate outside of the female body was twofold: obtaining sufficiently active sperm (the male conceptive power) and obtaining sufficiently passive material (the female conceptive power). If a man was able to find some matter that might substitute for the female menstrual contribution, then perhaps he might be able to capitalize upon his own seminal capacity to produce offspring with that substitute, rather than with a woman. We see such speculation in *De secretis mulierum*, with one commentator offering the “biological fact” that, “If a cat ejaculated on some sage, and a man ate some of this sage, then cats would be generated in his stomach and would have to be expelled by vomiting” (Lemay 66). This is a cross-species, same-sex generation of offspring. The man’s stomach is able to serve as an alternative for the woman’s womb (and, indeed, in Middle English, the word “womb” may indicate either stomach or uterus), with the digestive superfluity becoming the feminized “prima materia” upon which the male active power (the feline semen) works its procreative power.^[5] This opinion is offered as part of a duality of scientific theorization on alternative conception, that also speculates whether women can provide the catalytic sperm for their own pregnancies. The same text moves fluidly, if confusingly, between the one- and two-seed theories of procreation, but asserts that female nocturnal emission may similarly result in the growth of a mass of flesh within the abdomen which will represent as a false pregnancy (Lemay 67-8). Again, we see the malleability of the conceptive matter in comparison to the power of the semen; the text even warns that such procreations do not only happen in the stomach, but can occur “whenever the sperm falls elsewhere,” a rather terrifying prospect (Lemay 67).

The radical implications of such reproductive beliefs do not appear to have escaped Chaucer’s Canon, Yeoman, and assorted alchemists. The scientific theories of alchemy, according to the Yeoman, operate upon an image of the mutual collaboration of spirit and matter, transposed from human flesh to mineral form. He gives a long, aggressively erudite recitation of such ingredients; in the midst of his performance of arcane knowledge, he colloquializes his work by moving from specific chemical etymologies to the type of opposition of sex contraries that his audience will quickly understand.

Noght helpeth us; oure labour is in veyn.
Ne eek oure spiritis ascensioun,
Ne oure materes that lyen al fix adoun,
Mowe in our werking no thyng us availle,
For lost is al oure labour and travaille. (CYT 777-81)

One should understand alchemy, the Yeoman teaches, as a chemical parody of human coitus, and human conception. Into his womb-like pot (often referred to within scientific texts by the uterine term, matrix), the alchemist has concentrated on mixing chemicals and minerals according to their classification as active or passive, male or female. Furthermore, he has done so in recognition of the sex-segregated nature of their powers. And, the scientific materials do not reject his classification; on the contrary, the male powers turn into smoke with great activity, the female powers lie feminine and passive in the pot.

Instead, the problem lies not in the mineral sexes, but rather in the minerals’ coital mimicry. Added together, despite all the labor and “travaille” (CYT 781) of the alchemists straining to aid them in their conceptive goals, the spermatic and material substitutes do not come together in the

way that their sexed opposition has led the alchemists to hope. Chaucer seems to imagine alchemists as some sort of agricultural collective, putting bulls and cows together to mate, but unfortunately for his alchemists, these male and female livestock have no desire to mate. Moreover, the queerness of this supposedly heterosexual combination of minerals and chemicals is only heightened by the apparent excess of the supply. The Canon and his Yeoman do not add one carefully matched “male” material to its oppositional, and thus female, mate. Instead they add some spermatic matter to some female matter, and then experience the frustration of witnessing the male matter keep to itself and the female matter likewise.

The confusion of quantity and the failure to match accurately one male type with one female seems to plague Chaucer’s alchemists more broadly. The Yeoman moves quickly from his careful enumeration of his scientific recipes to an image of the alchemists of his experience merely conjoining “metals with a certeyn quantitee” (CYT 900) in what might colloquially be termed a mishmash. The results are immediately violent. The pots break quickly, destroying the elements that they contain, which the Yeoman blames upon the unnaturalness of their copulation.

Thise metals been of so greet violence
Oure walles mowe nat make hem resistence,
But if they weren wrought of lym and stoon;
They percen so, and thurgh the wal they goon. (CYT 908-11)

From the Yeoman’s description of the metals’ violence, we may assume that the alchemists here have abandoned their aim of combining contrary with contrary, and instead have brought together like with like, male spermatic power with male spermatic power. The two (or more) violent, active forces are inherently incompatible. This attempt at alternative procreation fails since it has brought together two catalysts without the matter necessary for catalyzation. Moreover, brought together in this “unnatural” way, the two male metals become the catalyst for destruction, rather than for creation. What matter there was—the pot, each metal’s own material form—is destroyed, transforming latent matter into nothingness.

Chaucer’s condemnation of these unnatural alchemists rests partly on their hubris in attempting to play God’s role as singular procreative force, and partly on their blindness to the “unnaturalness” of their scientific experiments in non-heterosexual procreation. Such blindness is made manifest in the response that Chaucer’s alchemists give to the repeated destruction of their conceptive attempts. Instead of critiquing the sexed relationship and sheer quantity of the materials that they have brought together, they attempt to blame the environment surrounding this commixtion. Particularly, they blame the pot, the one passive element of feminized material referenced within the chemical experiment.

Somme seyde it was long on the fir makyng;
Somme seyde nay, it was on the blowyng...
It was nat tempred as it oghte be. (CYT 922-3, 926)

They turn away from the clear causality (which the Yeoman has already identified as originating in the nature of the metals that were being brought together) to focus on critiquing the nature of the effect. The Canon then concludes that, “I am right siker that the pot was crased” (CYT 934).

These avid men with their false science turn to the container of conjunction, that symbol of the womb, as if that was the cause of their mistakes, rather than looking inside it to consider the sexed properties of what it contains. Similarly, they visualize the alchemical process as if it consisted of the active power of the fire acting upon the passive material of the pot, not grasping the way both fire and pot represent merely external forces *outside* the main scheme of chemical procreation.

Chaucer marks his alchemists as misguided and foolish in their refusal to acquiesce to the “normal” reproductive process. And yet, his critique of them goes still further, becoming quite biting as it ultimately queers them personally as well. These scientists are indicted in their own procreative schemes, as men who wish to create with other men.

“This instrument,” quod he [the alchemist], “which that thou seest,
Taak in thyn hand, and put thyself therinne
Of this quyksilver an ounce, and heer bigynne,
In name of Crist, to wexe a filosofre.” (CYT 1119-22)

Chaucer’s “instruments” are frequently, if not exclusively, references to human genitalia. The Wife of Bath, for example, famously declares, “In wyfhod wyl I use my instrument / As frely as my Makere hath it sent” (WBT 149-50). Karma Lochrie has noted the phallic resonances in the Wife of Bath’s understanding of her own instrument; and yet here, the instrument (belonging to a man) is a gynocentric device, a crucible (71-102). The confusion of gender and even of genitalia here is Chaucer’s point. These are alchemists and priests who neither know how to recognize an instrument nor how to employ it.

Moreover, the scene which Chaucer has imagined between the two men is itself a mockery of reproduction, a literal insemination of this pot with a spermatic power. Take it in your hand, the priest is told, and both put yourself therein and put this spirit therein. Here we see one of the essential paradoxes of alchemy’s technologies of reproduction. The scientists envision this alternative mode of creation as one that occurs outside of themselves, displaced entirely from the human body into the confines of the clay crucible. And yet, the alchemist is never truly separate from the act of creation, and thus Chaucer shows a persistent elision of the active spirits of the minerals with the active, male power of the alchemist himself. Moreover, he implies that science itself is not the de-eroticized act of creation that its practitioners might present. This scene between the priest and alchemist is rife with erotic allusion, as these two men decide to generate together in privacy.

And shette the dore, whils we been aboute
Oure pryvetee, that no man us espie,
Whils that we werke in this philosophie. (CYT 1137-9)

Similarly, Chaucer’s descriptions of the creation process focus on the male labor of the scientists rather than on the male labor of the minerals and metals that they are combining. The alchemical process of generation appears thus less grounded on the specifics of the conceptive science, even displaced into a laboratory, than on the male desire to labor with his own body. For example, the

priest “faste blew the fir / For to come to th’effect of his desir” (CYT 1260-1), while later he offers the Canon his own body (CYT 1288-9) in exchange for the success of their procreation.

These conceptions without women are inherently false in Chaucer’s hands. They might “wexe a filosofre” (CYT 1122), but that will be the only offspring of their union. Moreover, as the Canon’s Yeoman reports to the Canterbury pilgrims, he himself has received only poverty and the loss of physical health in response to his participation in these unnatural sciences. To reproduce with other men, with science rather than the divine ordination of the sexes as the primary facilitator of creation, is an attempt doomed to failure, and to the degradation of self (through the loss of financial and corporeal stability) that is worse than failure. As the Yeoman remarks wryly, “A man may lightly lerne, if he have aught / To multiplie, and brynge his good to naught!” (CYT 1400-1). The offspring of these alternative reproductions are only multiple layers of destruction.

Transformation

1. What modern critiques of alternative reproductive technology might bear some similarities with those offered by Chaucer?
2. This chapter consciously uses a language of sex rather than gender. Why do you think that is and what is the significance of such terminology for the argument?
3. How do Chaucer’s attitudes to the reproductive possibilities of scientific innovation connect to larger medieval discourses about the place of secular study within their society?
4. How does Chaucer conceptualize the category of “woman” based on this chapter?

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Alan of Lille. *The Plaint of Nature*, edited and translated by James J. Sheridan. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1980.

Cadden, Joan. *Nothing Natural is Shameful: Sodomy and Science in Late Medieval Europe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.

Eggert, Katherine. *Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the end of Humanism in Renaissance England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

Laqueur, Thomas. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Lemay, Helen Rodnite, editor and translator. *Women’s Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’s De Secretis Mulierum With Commentaries*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.

Linden, Stanton J. *Darke Hieroglyphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996.

Lochrie, Karma. *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Manzalaoui, M.A., editor. *Secretum Secretorum: Nine English Versions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Notes:

[1] See, for example, the presentation of this theory within Monica H. Green, ed. and trans. *The Trotula: An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 65.

[2] For a discussion of Galen's two-seed model, its implications for medieval gender theory, and its differences from Aristotle and Soranus's gynecological approaches to conception, see: Joan Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11-38, esp. 27-38.

[3] One can see the influence of Galen's theory of reproduction here, as Alan imagines the female activity in conception as the emission of sperm.

[4] A few lines later, the same author refers to conception as an ironsmith working metal.

[5] Chaucer himself uses the word "wombe" when he means stomach in the *Parson's Tale*.



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