

USING INVITATIONAL RHETORIC TO READ SILENCE, WOMEN, AND NATURE IN
CHAUCER'S *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

A Thesis
by
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Abstract

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The role of nature in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is not a new topic of discussion among medieval scholarship or literary scholarship in general, but it is my hope that this thesis's focus on the way the women of the *Tales* interact and coexist with nature, the ways both are mutually oppressed, and in turn how both entities still exert power and wield agency might reveal empowering readings of the text that show how women and nature use silence for their own benefits. Using the concept of invitational rhetoric from Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin's essay "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for Invitational Rhetoric" as a framework and method of writing this thesis, I wish to propose my ideas in feminist fashion rather than through what Foss and Griffin believe is the masculine/patriarchal practice of traditional rhetoric, or persuasion. The mutual oppression of women and nature is a long tradition studied by various feminists – such as Val Plumwood, Sherry Ortner, and Susan Griffin – and this thesis draws directly from their work and is indebted to their previous and ongoing efforts. The other very large, important piece of

scholarship this essay employs is Elizabeth Schneider's "Feminism and the False Dichotomy of Victimization and Agency," also published in 1995. This piece explores the perceived, and often believed, binary-based relationship between being a victim and possessing agency that plagues the justice system in regards to battered and abused women. Applying Schneider's ideas from this legally-focused text, I present various perspectives that one could adopt when reading the *Tales* in order to provide positive, empowering readings while still acknowledging the oppression and mistreatment of both women and nature throughout.

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Dedication

For my parents.

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Introduction

Traditional rhetoric is defined by its purpose and ability to persuade and change the opinions, beliefs, and/or minds of the audience. This dynamic creates an unequal balance of power between the rhetor and the audience, and it is this lack of equity that invitational rhetoric seeks to provide an alternative to and create a rhetorical space for. Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin outline the feminist ideals of equality, immanent value, and self-determination in their foundational text “Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for Invitational Rhetoric” (1995). Invitational rhetoric exemplifies the equal playing field of a rhetorical situation by maintaining its goal of *understanding* rather than persuasion when it comes to complex and complicated issues. By employing this rhetorical strategy, my paper proposes a different perspective by which to view the women characters, nature, and their interactive roles in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (2008). This is to say that this paper will use invitational rhetoric as a frame or way in which I will write, rather than a strategy the characters utilize themselves or have a specific relationship to. Women and nature, often linked in areas such as nurturing, care, and beauty, are also linked in their mutual oppression by patriarchal, capitalist, and imperialist societies. Viewed as wild, untamable, unlimited resources, both woman and nature are taken advantage of and often receive nothing in return. For example, the belief that humans have dominion over the earth and use of its resources without eventual repercussions is still prevalent today, as we see through the international debate surrounding climate change. This situation translates into the domestic sphere of the household as well, where it is still often the mother, or other women in the household, that are charged with raising children and keeping house, receiving no payment (monetary or

otherwise) in return. Using foundational literature from ecofeminists, I will trace the link through the history and literature of ecofeminism and rhetorical theory and show not only how and where the link appears in Chaucer's work but also how one might be able to read the connections as empowering.

The Canterbury Tales (2008) have been studied many times over in varying and different ways and, in recent decades, much of the focus has shifted toward the way the women in the tales can be read and interpreted. Are the women pilgrims truly as they seem to be? Which of the female characters portrayed in the pilgrims' tales are meant to be read as role models, and which are meant to be examples of "bad" or "unchaste" women? Does the intent of the author (Chaucer and/or narrator of the tale) matter? How are we meant to interpret the adherence to traditional values? Though these questions can never be answered for certain, as it is with the vast majority of literature (especially that which is pre-modern), they can still be considered for a modern audience. Recent scholarship involving reclaiming both women's literature and women *in* literature can attest to the importance of doing this work. Therefore, this paper seeks to provide yet another lens through which to view the women of Chaucer's most famous text and how they are, in conjunction with the natural realm, subjected to a patriarchy-dominated world in which they are able to create their own invitational, rhetorical spaces.

The scholarship concerning ecofeminism – and, more broadly, ecocriticism – has also evolved drastically over the past couple of decades compared to other areas of study including feminist studies. In my search for specific scholarship regarding a relationship between ecofeminism, or even ecocriticism, and Chaucer's works, namely the *Tales* (2008), there have not been an abundance of results. Ecofeminism is already a smaller field in

comparison with others because of its lack of popularity amongst certain groups of feminists and certain groups of ecocritics, but it is even further vastly unexplored when it concerns the medieval period. I believe that this paper will bridge gaps between ecofeminist (and ecocritical) scholarship, feminist theory, and medieval literature. Though there is not a great body of scholarship specific to Chaucer and/or medieval literature as it is related to ecofeminism, there has been a more substantial amount of scholarship written on Chaucer's and medieval literature's relationship with nature, more along the lines of ecocritical work, rather than ecofeminism specifically. Using various theories and my selected primary text, I hope to show the importance of continuing to look at classic literature through new and diverse lenses. I need to clarify here that, though I will be using both ecocritical and ecofeminist approaches to analyze Chaucer's text, I do not mean to conflate the two. However, they both include important theoretical work that is essential to this project, and therefore I will be drawing from both fields to complete this project.

Though there is not much scholarship directly relating to an ecofeminist reading of *The Canterbury Tales* (2008), I will be situating my paper within foundational and current ecocritical, feminist, and ecofeminist texts. Theorists like Audre Lorde, whose essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1984) has become a foundational feminist text, will provide the framework for the feminist principles I will build my own discussion upon. Another very important piece of work very relevant to my topic is Elizabeth Schneider's "Feminism and the False Dichotomy of Victimization and Agency" (1995) that explores the perceived, and often believed, binary-based relationship between being a victim and possessing agency that plagues "legal reform work for battered women" (389). Schneider further discusses the recoil against, or critical response to, all women being labeled as victims

and the idea that there is no room for agency within victimization that had gained popularity within feminist discourse at the time. She proposes that victimization and agency are not mutually exclusive because of women's lived experiences, social circumstances, etc. Using this claim, I will look at the ways that women in the text can both embody agency and also have experiences that would allow them to claim victimhood. Other feminist works I will be drawing upon are Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) which outlines the concept of *Écriture féminine* that allows women to create a space for themselves by writing their own identities into being; Heilbrun and Stimpson's "Theories of Feminist Criticism: A Dialogue" (1975); Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: from the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (1993); and Rosemarie Tong's newest edition of *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (2009). All of these works are foundational and provide an essential review of feminist scholarship since its modern inception in the 18th century, and, in Lerner's case, traces women's role in society since the medieval period, which is even more relevant to this project.

Another area of study that is integral to this paper is the intersection of feminism and rhetorical strategies, specifically invitational rhetoric and silence. Because I will be utilizing invitational rhetoric as a lens through which to read *The Canterbury Tales* (2008) and its women characters, I feel that it is imperative that this paper is also modeled after this type of rhetoric itself. As previously mentioned, Foss and Griffin's "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric" (1995) uses the feminist principles of equality, immanent value, and self-determination to build a definition of rhetoric that seeks to create a rhetorical situation in which rhetor and audience are equal and there is no power disparity between the two (5-6). I have chosen this theory because, though it can be argued that some audience's

beliefs are objectively wrong or immoral – especially from an ecofeminist’s point of view – it is my belief that an invitational rhetorical allows for a more calm, polite space in which a discussion can take place rather than an argument. Because the rhetor and the audience are giving each other respect in this space, no one should feel as if the other is demeaning them or devaluing their opinion, which in turn often avoids the chaos of a heated debate in which one party or the other, or both, walk away having learned nothing in addition to being even more shut off to the idea the other was trying to present in the first place. Another reason I find invitational rhetoric so applicable to this text is the fact that one could argue that the pilgrims are, on some level, enacting invitational rhetoric themselves. The point of the pilgrims’ stories, technically for the sake of their competition, is to see who can tell the best story; in the General Prologue, the Host specifies that they are telling them for their own pleasure and entertainment (lines 775-776; 791-801). This initial setting for the pilgrims’ storytelling, therefore, is relatively free of stakes (except for a free night’s dinner).

Additionally, throughout the *Tales* (2008) we see some interaction between the pilgrims in the prologues and epilogues of their stories, with some mocking the others’ stories, yet there is little evidence to the claim that they are trying to change one another’s minds about the topics they are discussing. It seems, rather, that they are all simply presenting stories that represent or say something about their own ideals and beliefs, which could be considered an invitational rhetorical act.

In a more recent article that Griffin co-writes with Jennifer Emerling Bone and T.M. Linda Scholz – “Beyond Traditional Conceptualizations of Rhetoric: Invitational Rhetoric and a Move Toward Civility” (2008) – the authors engage with criticism of invitational rhetoric. Bone, Griffin, and Scholz draw a connection between invitational rhetoric and

civility, claiming that using invitational rhetoric can be useful in making “ethical exchanges in difficult situations” (435). Through my analysis of this text, I will show how the women of the text utilize invitational rhetoric in this way in addition to others. Another aspect of invitational rhetoric that is significant is that of listening; Foss and Griffin emphasize the importance of an equal exchange of information, and this includes not only the audience listening to the rhetor, but the rhetor also listening to the audience. Other scholars have also recently been focusing on the importance of listening as a rhetorical strategy. Wendy Wolters Hinshaw’s “Making Ourselves Vulnerable: A Feminist Pedagogy of Listening” (2011) focuses on the act of listening as vital in relation to silence, as listening requires a certain level of silence. She uses Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening in order to understand and counter resistance to feminism or feminist discussions, specifically in the traditional classroom, between teacher and student(s). Though Hinshaw applies Ratcliffe’s theory specially to the classroom, its principles and the theory of listening itself is integral and applicable to the storytelling framework of the *Tales* (2008), which lends itself well to a reading using these practices.

The rhetoric of silence is another element vital to my analysis regarding feminist invitational rhetoric. In Robert L. Scott’s early essay, appropriately titled “Rhetoric and Silence” (1972) he discusses the relationship between traditional rhetoric and silence, the privilege of silence, the choice to be silent, and the various uses of silence, such as for respect, lack of language acquisition, contemplation, etc (n.p.). The multiple uses of silence are very important to consider, especially within an invitational feminist analysis. I will use Scott’s and other scholars’ ideas in order to connect women’s agency to the concept of silence, especially since silence is still often read as passivity on the part of the silent entity.

Some other scholarship I will be drawing upon is Christina Luckyj's *'A moving Rhetoricke': Gender and Silence in Early Modern England* (2002) and Jessica Lee Shumake's

"Reconceptualizing Communication and Rhetoric from a Feminist Perspective" (2002).

These works, especially Shumake's, explore why alternate modes of rhetoric are important to feminist theories, specifically including invitational rhetoric. In invitational rhetorical fashion, Shumake does not completely reject persuasive rhetoric, but rather finds ways to use both it and a "more humane model" of rhetoric in a feminist context (n.p.). Luckyj's book in turn focuses on the difference between choosing to be silent and being silenced as well as the various reasons silence is used and the multiple ways silences can be interpreted by different readers. Though her examples use primary texts from the early modern period, her discussion of silence and gender is still relevant to this study. Works regarding rhetorical spaces and gender tend to acknowledge that rhetoric and speech are, in fact, gendered, and that women's placement in restrained spaces of speech has still allowed them to find ways to be agentic and subversive in creative ways. These works include *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound* (2013), a collection of essays that covers the intersections between feminism and silence and how this combination can illuminate power *through* silence where, on the surface, it seems the opposite. It also includes a history of how feminism has viewed silence, examples of subversive silences, the many ways silence can take form – refusal, solidarity, pedagogical practice, etc. – silence and nature, sexuality and silence, silence and healing, and more. James Martin's "Embodied Speech: Rhetoric and the Politics of Gender" (2014) discusses how rhetoric has been gendered and the consequences of this, i.e. how women's speech has been relegated to a default category that is deemed lesser than men's speech. He further focuses on the ways that speakers physically represent themselves and

how this embodied speech can affect an audience's reception of the rhetor's speech. This will be useful in my analysis of my chosen text since we readers are privy to physical descriptions of the women characters (both the pilgrims and the women in their tales) as well as their stories and speeches. Mary Beard's *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (2017) also relates the complexities and multiplicities of silence. Beard uses a historical approach to look at how women being silenced in the public sphere is rooted in classical Greek and Roman theories of rhetoric. All of these works will help me both build a foundation on important texts in the field while also using very recent scholarship to keep my analysis relevant.

One other intersection of theory this project explores is that of ecological studies and rhetorical theories of silence, in which I will combine ecofeminist and rhetorical studies. This juncture also includes feminist theories, as the focus of the paper is ecofeminism and invitational rhetoric, both grounded in feminist ideals. Scholarship published in the past decade often relies upon ethical issues and debates. Susan Griffin's ecofeminist text *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1980) is a formative book in this area of study. Griffin uses many different forms of literature, including scientific texts and manuals and her own poetic prose style, to explore the relationship between women and nature and their mutual oppression by patriarchal forces that use both science and cultural forces to enact this oppression. This idea is the basis of ecofeminist thought, and this project would not be complete without work that outlines the concept carefully. More recent feminist scholarship explores care and unpaid labor regarding women, especially as mothers. Lloro-Bidart and Semenko's contemporary article "Toward a Feminist Ethic of Self-Care for Environmental Educators" (2017) focuses on feminist theories about care, emotional labor, and self-care, and combines these with praxis of environmental education. These authors look at both the

pros and cons of associating women with care, expand upon notions of self-care in conversation with women's unpaid labor, and relate these theories to women's lived experiences and "the political contexts in which they work" (Lloro-Bidart and Semenko 21). Though it might seem far-removed from fictional medieval women, I plan to connect Lloro-Bidart and Semenko's research to the *Tales* (2008) through a discussion of the labor of the women characters and the ways in which it is both beneficial yet dangerous to associate these women with "traditional" female qualities such as care and compassion. Overall, the links between ecofeminism, silence, and invitational rhetoric are not unfathomable, as is evidenced by the recent scholarly work cited here. In this paper, I will further connect these three with a study of the text that will shed new light on ways of reading medieval literature and applying these readings to our current situation.

In order to demonstrate the rhetorical strategies mentioned above, I will be analyzing the women characters Emelye ("The Knight's Tale"), Griselda ("The Clerk's Tale"), May ("The Merchant's Tale"), and Pertelote ("The Nun's Priest's Tale") from Chaucer's collection of *The Canterbury Tales* (2008) in separate chapters. I will seek to reveal, first, how these characters are subject to a traditional and patriarchal rhetorical space; second, how this unequitable space places both women and nature in the same sphere of oppression; and third, how the female characters use their speech (or lack thereof) and their relationships with nature to create their own spaces for subversion, empowerment, and opportunity. To draw a clear picture of these connections, my title is "Using Invitational Rhetoric to Read Silence, Women, and Nature in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*." This introduction presents relevant topics, presents the theories and theorists I will be building my thesis upon, and explains the ways in which this paper will utilize invitational rhetoric – both in analysis and practice. The

following chapters will be organized by tales, with the analysis of the Wife of Bath and Prioress included in the chapters about their corresponding tales. I believe it would be too difficult and repetitive to organize chapters by theory, as all three theories I am drawing upon constantly overlap and intertwine. However, certain characters in the text deal with similar situations and therefore employ the same strategies that will become clear as I explore each tale in turn. Therefore, I will be able to use comparable strategies in order to analyze these tales. For example, both Emelye (“The Knight’s Tale”) and Griselda (“The Clerk’s Tale”) endure trials in marriage, either before or after they enter it. Other characters, such as the Wife of Bath and the Prioress, exist within Chaucer’s story but outside of the tales themselves, so analyses of their characters would be better done with their respective tales, with comparison to each other included as well. As mentioned previously, I hope this project will be able to fill some of the gaps that exist not only in ecocritical and ecofeminist studies, but also between these areas of scholarship and the analyses of medieval texts. My final chapter and conclusion will also provide the stakes of this project, as critical scholarship without the element of praxis can be lacking real-world stakes, and, if the point of feminist and ecological studies is not to try and encourage new perspectives, then what is it? This is not to say that education on these matters is not a goal of this paper, but rather, I do hope that any learning that occurs through the reading of this piece might manifest itself later as, or inspire, change.

Chapter One: Foundations

*“History is too important to feminism to leave to patriarchal methodologies.” – Judith Allen,
1987*

In order to move forward with analyzing Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (2008), it is crucial to understand the frameworks in which I am situating my proposals. First, I will begin by explaining why I have chosen the word “proposals” instead of “arguments,” or something similar. The foundation of this entire paper rests in the concept of invitational rhetoric as it is outlined and explained by Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin in their essay “Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric” (1995). Foss and Griffin present this rhetorical strategy as an alternative to the classical rhetorical strategy of persuasion, which they propose is part of the patriarchal discourse of domination, specifically “the conscious intent to change others,” therefore implying the concept that mankind’s purpose is to change the environment/earth and others, and that this is innate human nature (2).¹ Invitational rhetoric is instead rooted in “feminist principles, immanent value, and self-determination” with a focus on “safety, value, and freedom” (Foss and Griffin 2). The point of invitational rhetoric, as I interpret it, is to create a rhetorical situation in which both rhetor and audience have the freedom to choose to understand and/or accept the information being presented; if the audience chooses either to not listen to the rhetor or accept their point of view, the rhetor respects this choice (Foss and Griffin 12). Invitational rhetoric defines feminism for its purposes as valuing equality, immanent value, and self-determination, all of which “explicitly challenge” the values of coercive change and domination of patriarchal rhetoric (Foss and Griffin 4). The space of an invitational rhetorical situation, then, places all parties

¹ The connection to the domination of nature is something that is also very relevant to my discussion, and I will further explore it later in this chapter.

involved on a level playing field, so to speak, in which all opinions are valued, all participants feel a sense of immanent value, as worth is not determined by a hierarchy or earned, and all elitism is abolished. Mutual respect is perhaps the best way to describe an invitational rhetorical space, where the rhetor conveys that the audience's ideas and feelings will be respected, therefore allowing a sense of value in the audience. This, then, creates a space in which the rhetor and audience feel safe, specifically "security and freedom from danger" (Foss and Griffin 10-11).

One very important, though seemingly minor, aspect of invitational rhetoric is the rhetor's attempt to "minimize or neutralize" hindrances to the audience's understanding (Foss and Griffin 6). This can mean a number of different things depending on the situation, but for the sake of this paper, I will apply it to my own writing, as I believe it is important to make academia available to as many people as possible. Though the academic landscape is changing rapidly and daily, there is still a dangerous sense of elitism amidst higher education and the academy that often excludes authors with less educational accreditation and authors with less conventional writing styles; invitational rhetoric is one way to combat this elitism without the academy suffering while more people benefit. As invitational rhetoric can be applied to many (if not all) situations, it is crucial to acknowledge and accept that, yes, change is possible in an invitational rhetorical situation, but it is not the purpose. The purpose of invitational rhetoric *is* to allow marginalized groups, including women, to "transform systems of domination and oppression" (Foss and Griffin 16). In addition, either the rhetor *or* the audience can change, and the audience has the *choice* of changing; according to Foss and Griffin, traditional rhetoric attempts to *force* a change of identity or role of the audience (6). The matter of choice is the crux of invitational rhetoric; Foss and Griffin imply that the

traditional, patriarchal rhetoric of persuasion leaves almost no room for choice, as they contend that persuasion can present as more of a manipulative approach than an educational, open conversation (3). Along with this comes the rhetor's willingness to yield, regardless of whether they have enacted change in the audience or not (Foss and Griffin 7). The overall goal of invitational rhetorical situations is to "[encourage] the exploration of yet other rhetorics that do not involve" the goal of changing minds or opinions and to "contribute to the efforts of communication scholars who are working to develop models for cooperative, nonadversarial, and ethical communication" (Foss and Griffin 15). Invitational rhetoric, though generally useful and worth considering as an alternative form of rhetoric, is especially pertinent to this paper because it allows marginalized groups, including women, to "transform systems of domination and oppression," as it is based in feminist theory and practice (Foss and Griffin 16). It should be noted, however, that invitational rhetoric is not confined to conversations about or concerning feminism, does not suggest that this is how all women do or should communicate, and is not limited to use by women (Foss and Griffin 5).

"If there is a right, a privilege, or an obligation to speak out, must there not also be a right, a privilege, or an obligation to remain silent?" – Robert L. Scott, 1972

All of this talk about rhetoric encourages and sometimes even implies the need for speech and words, yet there is also room for silence within critical feminist rhetorical theories. Silence as its own form of saying something is an idea that has been in the critical consciousness for a while, as the quote above by Robert L. Scott, appearing in his essay "Rhetoric and Silence" (1972) shows. Wendy Wolters Hinshaw gives us one advantage of silence: listening. Hinshaw adapts Krista Ratcliffe's theory of rhetorical listening – from the book *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (2005) – for the classroom, but

I believe it is also applicable in other situations, such as the presentation of an essay like this one. According to Hinshaw, “Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening premises a metonymic model of identification, disidentification, and non-identification that addresses the coercive power in such appeals for ‘common ground’ and provides avenues for agency and dialogue that do not depend upon commonality” (267). In other words, Ratcliffe’s theory, like Foss and Griffin’s invitational rhetoric, points out the harm coercion and/or persuasion can do and offers a “new way of thinking,” specifically about feminism, that allows for “alternative ways for communicating ... that are not premised on ... identifications” (Hinshaw 267). In my own understanding, by identifications, disidentifications, and non-identifications, Hinshaw is referring to the ways students build their beliefs and opinions (268). Therefore, Hinshaw is advocating the use of communication strategies that do not set out to change these students’ identifications, whatever they may be, throughout the process of teaching them about feminism (268). This theory is similar to invitational rhetoric in many other ways, including the possibility of change, but not the aim to change, as well as “inevitable” difference of opinions, or identifications, with the effort to avoid conflict (Hinshaw 269). What is very important about both invitational rhetoric and Hinshaw’s adaptation of Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening, in the context of feminism, is that both parties, whether speaking or listening (being silent), have equal “privileged positions” and value one another’s positions (Hinshaw 274). Hinshaw believes this is the “best way for feminists in the academy to keep all movements against social oppression, which exist both inside and outside the academy” relevant to feminist principles of equality (276). This is one of the reasons I have included Hinshaw’s application and Ratcliffe’s theory as a structural part of

this paper as they are related to invitational rhetoric, as it will technically become part of the academy.

I hope it is clear by now that this paper concerns itself deeply with feminism, both the theories and praxis of it. It is always tricky (and risky) business looking at pre-modern texts and applying the word “feminism” or “feminist lens,” because there was no general concept of feminism until the 20th century. However, my view is that there is much to be said about today’s feminism and feminist strategies by looking at the past, even as far into the past as the Middle Ages. As Judith Allen writes, “Feminism has always engaged with the practice of history. Accounting for the present situation of women involves scrutiny of the past” (173). Though we obviously cannot take fictional, historical texts to be historically accurate, it would be remiss to say they are not part of history, as history informs art and vice versa. In *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (2017), Mary Beard provides an interesting overview to the history of women by giving us a history of women’s silence. Beard opens her book with the line: “When it comes to silencing women, Western culture has had thousands of years of practice” (xi). She tells the story of Telemachus and Penelope in the beginning of the *Odyssey* when Penelope requests that a bard perform a happier tune rather than one about Odysseus and his men struggling to return home. At this point, Telemachus, Penelope’s son, tells his mother that she should return to her room and essentially “mind her own business,” so to speak, because speaking aloud is reserved for men, not women such as herself. Beard calls this exchange “a nice demonstration that right where written evidence for Western culture starts, women’s voices are not being heard in the public sphere” (4). The rest of *Women & Power* takes a heavily political focus, exploring the struggles of female politicians and their positions of power. Therefore, its message is worth considering in relation to this

paper. Beard also acknowledges the “simple diagnosis of ‘misogyny’ that we tend a bit lazily to fall back on” in today’s feminism (8). I find this critique valid, as I do not believe Beard means to criticize feminist scholars specifically, but rather the feminism of wider society or the general public that has become increasingly popular. Indeed, feminists – mostly those who do not employ or study feminism critically – have moved away from “calling out” strategies in which oppression is simply pointed out, as if the conversation is settled there. However, concepts well-known to scholars trickle down more slowly into the general consciousness than they circulate in academic settings, allowing for the gap that Beard is pointing out: “if we want to understand – and do something about – the fact that women, even when they are not silenced, still have to pay a very high price for being heard, we need to recognise that it is a bit more complicated and that there is a long back-story” (8).

This “complicated” and “long back-story” Beard refers to brings us to what is truly the inspiration for this entire project, and that is Elizabeth M. Schneider’s “Feminism and the False Dichotomy of Victimization and Agency,” published in 1995. When I first came across this essay during my first semester of graduate school, it answered many questions that had been posed to me and that I had during my undergraduate studies. Many conversations that started with “Is she just a victim? Or does she have any agency?” were never resolved in my undergraduate classes, so when I was recommended Schneider’s article by a professor, it affirmed a thought I had had many times before: why can’t she be both? Schneider’s research, published in the *New York School of Law Review*, is applied specifically to the cases of battered women survivors first and second to the great pornography debate in feminist discourse. Schneider writes: “I suggest that feminist work has too often been shaped by an incomplete and static view of women as *either* victims *or* agents, and argue that what I

have previously identified as the false dichotomy between women's victimization and women's agency is a central tension within feminism" (387-388). Though it is true that Schneider is not the first, or the last, critic to point out this tension, her practical application and simple explanation is what drew me to this piece and also how I wish to present my own research and proposals. The danger, Schneider claims, that faces battered women within this false dichotomy, is that they cease to be seen as individual women dealing with unique circumstances and therefore are often relegated to one category or another, but usually not both (388-389). Either a woman's agency is questioned: "Why didn't she leave the abusive situation sooner?" Or her victimization is simplified: "She must not have made any effort to escape" (Schneider 389). As for her take on pornography, Schneider viewed anti-pornography efforts as "animated by a view of heterosexual sexuality as victimization that dismissed women's participation and pleasure as sexual actors," which will be a significant part of the discussion on the women of *The Canterbury Tales* (2008) in the following chapters (391). The important takeaway is that Schneider does not ignore either victimization or agency, but rather argues that both are necessary to understanding the "oppression, struggle, and resistance that women experience daily in their ongoing relationships" (389). By investigating all sides to women's experiences, "our work will be more meaningful, and will be more grounded in, and more reflective of" the realistic lives of women, both past and present, fictional and real (Schneider 399).

Mary Beard acknowledges the importance of looking into the past to help move into the future, specifically how "we need to go back to some first principles about the nature of spoken authority" in order to understand how and why women are still struggling to have their voices heard and, when they are heard, taken seriously (40). Throughout her book,

Beard gives many examples of women in history – both fictional and real – that were forcibly silenced or punished for using their voices. Hélène Cixous, in her now classic essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976) offers one possible way for women to speak up: through writing. Cixous herself writes: “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies ... Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (875). Though not all women have the access or privilege to participate in Cixous’s call – which will be discussed further later – it is still an indispensable and important call to make and to answer, if one is able. As Cixous says, “there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman,” so I will not claim to write for other women in the sense that I understand everything about all women, or can speak for all women, especially those of the past – fictional or real (876). The reason for incorporating Cixous’s essay is that she is proposing *one* way for women to have their voices heard and their stories told. This being the premise of this essay – to provide options on how women can overcome or oppose imposed patriarchal silencing – I felt it necessary to include.

“These words are written for those of us whose language is not heard, whose words have been stolen or erased, those robbed of language, who are called voiceless or mute.” – Susan

Griffin, 1980

The dedication in Susan Griffin’s 1980 book titled *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* elicits a similar feeling of solidarity that Cixous’s piece does, and Griffin’s text brings us to the next realm of scholarship that is crucial for an understanding of the analyses to follow, and that is ecofeminism. Ecofeminism has a longer tradition in feminist and ecological studies than many people might realize, as was the case when I first encountered

it. Griffin exposes the mutual oppression of women and nature, including nonhuman animals, through a poetic prose that draws on factual information about historical events, farming, and more. She takes on the perspective of the conquering man, the “naturally” submissive woman, and the domesticated animal (the references to female cows are especially provocative) in order to trace the origins of this mutual oppression and how it has become so ingrained in the general human consciousness. Her work is important to this essay because it combines historical fact with fictionalized internal experiences, showing how fiction, history, and present feminist concerns all converge and are relevant to one another.

Lloro-Bidart and Semenko are also very interested in the cross-section of ecological and feminist studies that make up ecofeminism. Their essay on a feminist ethic of self-care is specifically meant for environmental educators, but, as with previous studies, I believe it will be helpful in application to this paper as well. Lloro-Bidart and Semenko write that, more broadly, “ecofeminist care theorists extensively examine human-animal relationships from perspectives grounded in the embodied and everyday experiences of women, animals, and nature” (19). This focus on individual lives and experiences recalls Hinshaw, Beard, and Schneider’s work, who all acknowledge the importance of individuality and the danger of generalization. Lloro-Bidart and Semenko do, however, make it clear that an understanding of “the political and economic systems that cause suffering” is also necessary if one is to begin to comprehend the complexities of feminism (19). They also value feelings and emotional health in their concept of self-care, as many environmental educators deal with things such as “compassion fatigue” and “cumulative grief,” and often times women are these environmental educators, or even just educators in general (19). However, they do not ignore the dangerous implications involved with continuing to align women and nature as

closer than men and nature because it can perpetuate the belief that women are naturally and inherently more caring than men, and therefore automatically assigning the role of caregiver (for nature, children, animals, etc.) instead of, or more often than, men (20). The authors' occupation with self-care for educators is important to this study because it is vital to acknowledge the work it takes – physical, mental, and emotional – to be a woman as well as a woman who feels she has the responsibility to inform and educate others, something I am trying to do in this paper. It should also be noted that work such as this is based in a long tradition of materialist and socialist feminism – with scholars such as Christine Delphy and Donna Haraway as pioneers and major contributors to their respective fields – both of which were/are focused on the connection between the social oppression capitalism causes for women.

In the first chapter of *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), Val Plumwood tackles the problem that Lloro-Bidart and Semenko mention, which is the fact that it is precarious not only to continue to align women with nature because of the oppression that follows, but also to completely separate women from nature and place them in the “human” category of the “human/nature” binary; this leaves nature and nonhuman animals behind, therefore allowing their oppression to continue. Plumwood notes that “some ecofeminists have endorsed the association between women and nature without critically examining how the association is produced by exclusion” while others, “equally uncritically, have endorsed women's ascent from the sphere of nature into that of culture or reason without remarking the problematic, oppositional nature of a concept of reason defined by such exclusions” (20). Her solution to this problem is “a critical ecological feminism in which women consciously position themselves *with* nature” (21, author's emphasis). The important words to note here

are “critical” and “consciously.” Plumwood claims that feminists cannot, in good conscience, present “arguments for women’s freedom” while also participating in a “putdown of the non-human world,” as this defeats the purpose of critical feminism and moves toward more of a liberal feminism, which seeks only to put women on equal footing with men while participating in a patriarchal system (24, 31). The praxis of Plumwood’s solution is perhaps the most difficult part about it, as it relies on both women and men taking up the task to “challenge the dualised conception of human identity and develop an alternative culture which fully recognises *human* identity as continuous with, not alien from, nature” (36).

“I wished that that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs.” – Hélène Cixous

Cixous’s wish for women to inspire, empower, or enable other women, though it sounds cliché, is exactly the goal I have for this project. Even though my work, and other feminist work, may not change the minds, opinions, or identifications of my audience, I still have the hope that it might reveal a new perspective to someone. As I asked at the end of my introduction, what is the purpose of creating something to be shared if there is no real-world application or praxis that can be implemented? I realize this question might be abrasive because it is not absolutely imperative that all theory include praxis, but it is my identification as an activist that I want to share with my audience, and activism *is* praxis. The strings I will be pulling together – invitational rhetoric, ecofeminism, and the rhetoric of silence – are all grounded in feminism, and are therefore inherently meant to uplift women. Therefore, this project is also dedicated to women, to encouraging and enabling them to speak up or stay silent out of passion, out of compassion, and out of choice.

Chapter Two: Emelye

“If we subtract the portraits of women created by male narrators from the voices that create those women in the works, and listen to what they say, not to what others say about them, we have an entirely different set of female characters.” – Laura L. Howes, 1997

Perhaps it is fitting to begin with “The Knight’s Tale,” as it is the tale that appears first in all manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* (2008). “The Knight’s Tale” is a classic medieval story of chivalric love, complete with the themes of courtly love, love sickness, and a love triangle. It is easy to point out the problematic elements of this tale, and feminist readings that do point out Emelye’s predicament have been part of Chaucer scholarship since feminists began writing on the subject. These readings have only evolved from there to include other elements (such as nature), and I hope this one will become part of that lineage. As with the rest of the tales that will be discussed in following chapters, we will see that there is always more than one way to read the women in Chaucer’s tales.

The Art of Listening

Listening is perhaps the most important element in this tale, both when it occurs and when it does not. From the opening lines of “The Knight’s Tale,” readers can see how the women in the tale are often glossed over, ignored, their voices unheard, specifically by Theseus. In the end, Theseus privileges his own decisions over those of the women directly involved in or affected by such choices. The Knight begins his tale by telling of Theseus’s conquest of the Amazons and his marriage to Hippolyta. The scene of Theseus defeating “the regne of Femenye” and receiving “muchel glorie and greet solempnytee²” in return immediately provides readers with an image of female domination by a violent male force

² ceremony

(I.866; I.870). In addition to this initial silencing of women, readers also are never privy to any indication of Hippolyta's feelings or reactions to her land's conquest or her forced marriage, a silencing on the part of the Knight-narrator himself. In lines 875-878, the Knight-narrator also tells his audience that the story of *how* Theseus defeated the Amazons is, conveniently, too long to include: "And certes, if it nere to long to heere, / I wolde have toold yow fully the manere / How wonnen was the regne of Femenye / By Theseus and by his chivalry." This effectively sets a precedence for excluding the Amazonian women's stories, struggles, and agency for the rest of the tale. In a discussion on advice and counsel in Chaucer's writings, Marc Guidry provides multiple examples throughout the *Tales* of women's voices, opinions, and recommendations being silenced or devalued in favor of those of men, including both Emelye and Hippolyta. This is especially evident in both of their marriages, which Theseus decides upon (Guidry 138-139). Arcite and Palamon are also complicit in such actions because, though they both claim to love Emelye so much to the point that they become physically sick when they cannot have her, neither of them takes the time to ask her about her own wishes, which are revealed to be quite the opposite to theirs. This willful ignorance of the women in their lives could be read as a type of forced silencing, due to men's "well-known deafness" when it comes to the voices of women (Beard 6).

Despite Theseus, Palamon, and Arcite's ignorance of Hippolyta and Emelye's wishes, I propose that, though only momentarily, there are three separate instances in which women's voices are heard, are listened to, and affect the events of the story. The first two specifically influence Theseus's decisions, beginning with his encounter of the mourning women of Thebes. Theseus's first reaction to their crying and wailing comes across as quite selfish and insensitive, as he questions if they have "so greet envye / Of [his] honour, that thus

compleyne and crye?” (I.907-908). But then he asks them if someone has “offended” them, and if he can do anything to help it be “amended,” offering an opportunity for them to speak up (I.909; I.910). We then hear from the oldest woman of the group as she beseeches Theseus to show them pity and recounts how Creon, the lord of Thebes, has desecrated the bodies of the slain men, including their husbands. According to the narrator, Theseus “thought that his herte wolde breke,” and therefore decides to help these women by defeating Creon, taking Thebes, and returning to the widows their husbands’ remains (I.954). Despite the rough start to the conversation between the widows and Theseus, the duke does decide to help the women after hearing their lamentations. Would he have helped other citizens of Thebes had these women not petitioned him? Would he have cared about their fate if they were not women? If the eldest woman would have been less vocal about their sorrows, would he have been moved to help them? Though we can never answer these questions, they are productive to think about because a possible (and likely) answer to all of them is “no.”

The second instance in which Theseus heeds the words of women is when he comes across Arcite and Palamon while out hunting with Emelye and Hippolyta. Just as Theseus is about to kill Palamon, “The queene anon, for verray wommanhede, / Gan for to wepe, and so dide Emelye, / And alle the ladyes in the compaignye” (II.1748-1750). Again, “pitee” and “compassioun” overcome Theseus, and he withdraws his sword (II.1751; II.1770). It could be seen as somewhat demeaning that Theseus seems to only listen to women when they are weeping, since “women ... have been characterized by ... ‘emotional’ speech – a way of communicating that is thought to be excessive, uncontrolled and drenched in sentiment” (Martin 148). Regardless, he is listening, which is notable within the greater context of the poem where women often go unheard. As Joseph D. Parry writes, “Chaucer’s incompletely

interpretable women—who often play the central, generative role in configuring the action and the very character of his poetic narratives—allow Chaucer’s readers to think through the interpretive possibilities and problems that inhere in the processes by which a culture conceptualizes agency, accountability, and justice” (133).

Along this line of thinking, I would like to discuss the role that pain can play in silence for the women in this tale specifically and how it is one of the “interpretive possibilities” Parry mentions. As we know, Theseus conquered the Amazons before taking Hippolyta as his wife and relocating both her and Emelye with him in Athens. Because we see Theseus at other times throughout the poem use violence and murder in order to complete his conquests (as with Creon in Thebes), it would be a safe assumption that he did the same with the Amazon women. This means that Hippolyta and Emelye probably watched many of their people die before they were taken as captives, Hippolyta forced into a marriage with her captor, and Emelye given away to two men in marriage on two separate occasions. Della Pollock’s essay “Keeping Quiet: Performing Pain” speaks to these types of circumstances, in which “speaking pain is dangerous” because there is the fear of “potential excesses of speech, the possibility of overspeaking it and violating the tender space it opens” (159). It is not the “unspeakability” of pain, then, that might be keeping Emelye and Hippolyta silent, but rather the desire to avoid reliving the trauma of their pasts (Pollock 159). Besides Emelye’s prayer to Diana, the only times we see Emelye and Hippolyta “speak” are when they are begging Theseus not to kill Palamon (described above) and after Arcite’s death when Emelye is grieving. In both cases, the women are described as beginning to “wepe” (II.1759), and that they shrieked (IV.2817). In the description of Emelye’s mourning, she is not provided with any actual speaking lines, but rather her “woful” disposition is the focus of

the narrator (IV.2910). If we are to take Emelye's grief for Arcite as true, then we can read her lamentations as "a linguistic horizon beyond which there are no words, only inchoate noise, cries, and moans that are incompatible with civil discourse," or speech (Pollock 160). This reading would also apply to the widows of Thebes described earlier, of which only one actually speaks to Theseus. Evidently, there are many ways in which the women in "The Knight's Tale" express themselves, whether it be through silence or grieving, or a combination of the two.

Gardens and Tigers and Funeral Pyres, Oh My

The role of nature in "The Knight's Tale" is perhaps more extensive than one might realize upon an initial reading, especially where it is concerned also with women and their shared silencing. There are three main points that I would like to cover in this part of the chapter: the uses and meanings behind both gardens and forests and how they differ, the purpose of animal imagery throughout the tale, and the description of Arcite's funeral pyre. These three things are not only examples of the part nature plays in this tale, but they also serve to give us insight into an ecofeminist reading of the tale. The depiction of the garden leads us to the first time Palamon and Arcite, and therefore readers, see Emelye:

... in a morwe of May,

That Emelye, that fairer was to sene

Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,

And fresher than the May with floures newe --

For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe,

I noot which was the fyner of hem two -- (I.1034-1039)

The imagery here, in addition to Emelye being in a garden, conjures up images of springtime, freshness, and youth. It is a May morning, the flowers are new and blooming, and Emelye appears both pure like a lily and blushing like a rose. Laura L. Howes argues that gardens such as this one, which would belong to Theseus, “enclose and contain several women in the *Tales*, and come to represent in context the conventional roles that prescribe the activities of medieval women, particularly as wives or as prospective wives” (83). Emelye would fall into the category of “prospective wife,” as she is young and unmarried at this point in the tale. And though this garden might “contain” Emelye, Howes also contends that characters such as Emelye “nevertheless express desires and aspirations that confront or undermine male-centered conventions” (83). Emelye does this when she prays to Diana before the tournament that will decide who she must wed and expresses her true desires. It is fitting that Emelye chooses Diana to petition, as Diana is the Roman goddess of not only the hunt but also chastity. Emelye’s desire is to not be wed at all, and she pleads with Diana: “Chaste goddess, wel wostow³ that I / Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf, / Nor nevere wol I be no love ne wyf” (IV.2304-2306).

Not only this, but she specifically wishes to join Diana on her hunts, saying, “I am ... A mayde, and love huntynge and venerye, / And for to walken in the wodes wilde, / And noght to ben a wyf and be with childe” (IV.2307-2309). Emelye’s desires speak not only to her origins as an Amazonian woman but also her desire to be closer to the unfettered nature of the forest that would free her from the social expectations of marriage and motherhood. Both she and the garden have been tamed by Theseus, groomed into pieces of property that he can control and silence whenever the need arises for him. Sarah Stanbury writes that

³ know, or knowest you

“*Nature* in Middle English often describes a force for generation or desire,” and, while Emelye is allowed to enjoy Theseus’s garden, in her prayer, she specifically names the “wodes wilde” as where she would like to be able to roam and fulfill her desires (Stanbury 2). In her discussion of Chaucer’s use of falconry imagery, Sara Gutmann draws a connection between Emelye and a bird of prey, such as the one in *Parliament of Fowls*, though one does not appear in “The Knight’s Tale.” Gutmann writes: “The continuum from lady to bird negotiates alternative lives and spaces freed from the bounds and bonds of sex and courtly love through feminized ascetic pleasure. Chaucer broaches this ascesis ... through Emelye’s request to traverse the forests wild as Diana’s handmaiden” (72). Gutmann is referring to the female eagle in *Parliament of Fowls* who is able to defer her decision to mate with one of two male eagles, therefore retaining her freedom from “the bounds and bonds of sex and courtly love.” Emelye’s longing to join Diana in the woods speaks to her own wish to not have to choose between her own two male eagles, Arcite and Palamon. Gutmann does not see hope for this future, though, as “both royal forest and walled garden are managed by sovereign power and subject to [Theseus’s] will” (72). The “topsy-turvy world” Emelye wants to live in, one similar to her Amazonian origins with “all-female hunts” is one that “the male reader, narrator, character, and poet cannot offer her” (Gutmann 75). However, Gutmann does provide interesting insight when she points out the lack of agency of the human woman as compared to that of the nonhuman woman: “The woman and the bird of prey operate as agents in a network of violence, intimacy, and language, ultimately revealing the limitations of the human and the possibilities of nonhuman empowerment” (76).

A look at the description of Diana’s temple also sheds more light on Emelye’s desires. We are told that the walls are painted with murals composed of scenes of “hunting

and of shamefast chastitee” (III.2055) and various women who were turned into either animals or other natural elements, such as trees or stars (and one man, Attheon, who was turned into a deer after seeing Diana naked). There is also a statue of Diana on a hunt, clothed in “gaude grene” garments and with “smale houndes al aboute hir feet” (III.2079; III.2076). Though only covering thirty-seven lines, the portrayal of the temple highlights the similarities between Emelye and Diana and both of their associations with nature. It is while surrounded by these images that Emelye expresses her desire to Diana, which Howes calls an “[unexpected] first instance of female dissatisfaction and dissent” (87). It is interesting to compare these images with those that appear in the description of Mars’s temple.⁴ Inside this temple, we also see images of nature, yet they are very different than that of Diana’s temple. The first adjectives we are given are “grisly,” “colde,” and “frosty” (III.1971; III.1973). These kinds of eerie, gloomy adjectives continue into the portrait of the “bareyne” forest painted on the walls, where “ther dwelleth neither man ne best” (III.1976-1977). The version of the woods that Mars’s temple provides is in great contrast to that of Diana’s, void of green color and wildlife, and lines up with the characteristics of Mars as the violent, conquering entity, while Diana is the one who exists with nature more peacefully. The temple of Mars’s images of blood, smoke, darkness, and violence might foreshadow Arcite’s win in the battle for Emelye’s hand in marriage, but I believe it also foreshadows the destruction of nature for the purposes of Arcite’s funeral pyre.

According to Stanbury, Chaucer’s “*Nature*” (author emphasis) is “a personified feminine deity or life force” that is “not entirely benevolent nor is her apparent agency

⁴ In contrast with the depiction of Diana’s temple, that of Mars’s temple takes up more than eighty lines, which could also point to another example of the privileging of men’s desires and voices over those of women, whether this is Chaucer’s intention or not.

uniformly effective” (6). This is to say that, like the women in Chaucer’s tales, Nature’s wielding of agency is not always immediately obvious because of the way it manifests, that is, irregularly and objectively. What is apparent, however, is the violence with which nature is treated in “The Knight’s Tale.” The most outstanding incident regarding this violence is the results of tearing down groves of trees in order to create Arcite’s massive funeral pyre, which should also be noted is in honor of the man Emelye was supposed to be forced to marry, therefore creating a double silencing of both her and the nature she wishes to be a part of. The narrator names more than twenty types of trees that were felled in the process, then proceeds to detail the consequences it has on the nonhuman creatures that used to inhabit the trees:

How they weren feld shal nat be toold for me;
 Ne hou the goddess ronnen up and doun,
 Disherited of hire habitacioun,
 In which they woneden in reste and pees,
 Nymphes, fawnes and amadrides;
 Ne hou the beestes and the briddes alle
 Fledden for fere, whan the wode was falle;
 Ne how the ground agast was of the light,
 That was nat wont to seen the sonne bright;” (IV.2924-2932)

Though the narrator tells us he will not be the one to relay these details, he does exactly this – employing the rhetorical strategy of *occupatio* – which could mean that either he or Chaucer wanted to bring attention to this destruction and its effects. In addition, the sympathy that is elicited here is not only for mythological creatures or woodland animals but also for the

forest floor itself, which is often viewed as inanimate and therefore not alive or worth consideration. This passage might remind modern readers of the advertisements we see today concerning climate change, something that was not necessarily part of the general consciousness in the Middle Ages, but it seemed to be on Chaucer's mind in some capacity. Carolyn Merchant claims that the "Chaucerian ... view of nature was that of a kindly and caring motherly provider," and therefore it was "considered a breach of human ethical behavior to carry out destructive acts against it," so it is quite possible that Chaucer did in fact disapprove of such devastation (3-6). However, we must also weigh this against the frightening imagery of Mars's temple discussed previously and take into account multiple possibilities of different medieval worldviews. Jeremy Withers published an essay in 2012 outlining the ways in which "warriors appropriate nature (particularly animals) while at the same time the poem shows them to have altered materially existing nature in a way that renders these ideological constructions patently false and mutable" (181). He argues that Arcite's funeral preparations "epitomize chivalry's chronic infliction of mastery over the lives of nonhuman creatures" (180-181). Gillian Rudd contends that the forest serves simply as a "backdrop to human affairs," and that it is "dispensable" to humans, hence the deforestation for Arcite's funeral proceedings (50).

Though Withers mentions the deforestation in his essay, his main focus is the use of animal imagery throughout the tale. Both he and Rudd contend that Chaucer's characterization of nature relays "one of the most vivid expressions of the anxiety which forms so great a part of humanity's relation to the non-human world" (Rudd 50). For both, this manifests itself in the depiction of nature in Mars's temple in which "animals ... can freely indulge in their every desire, even ... the consuming of human babies or of the corpses

of grown men” (Withers 179-180). Withers traces this fear throughout the story, along with the contradictory desire of men to be more like animals; he points out that, just as Palamon laments that the gods are able to control the lives of humans “right as another beast,” Palamon also envies the animals’ supposed ability to “al his lust fulfille,” or do whatever will satisfy them out of sheer instinct (I.1309; I.1318). I use the word “supposed” because Withers is also astute in highlighting the fact that, though Palamon believes animals to be completely free of restraint, unlike humans, all of the animals we actually see in the tale are “constrained by human actions” (177). He uses the examples of the horses that appear periodically throughout the poem. The horses are pierced with spurs (II.1704), weighted down with armor (IV.2499), and taken into battle to give advantage to their riders. Not only do we see animals taken advantage of explicitly, but we also see the ways in which the warriors in the story use animal metaphors and references to make violence seem natural, since man is technically an animal. During Palamon and Arcite’s first fight, they are described as “wilde bores” and a “cruel tigre,” as if they are tapping into an innate animal instinct and cannot help but wound one another (II.1655-1660). Withers calls this the moment when “violence as an unavoidable act of biological necessity bursts into full display” (177). It is noted later, however, that this is contradicted by the famed, organized battle in which there is too much ceremony and procedure for their instinct to fight one another to be considered “primal” or “animal,” as animals’ “motives [are] defending one’s offspring or killing prey to acquire life-sustaining food” (Withers 178). In contrast with Rudd, Withers believes that Chaucer is being “deeply critical” of this manipulation of nature because “human associations with animals were often negative in the Middle Ages,” and because the “chivalric class attempts to naturalize their violence by affirming essentialist

connections between themselves and animals, while simultaneously marginalizing and governing them as a resource” (177; 174).

As we can see, there is a strong connection between the women in “The Knight’s Tale” and the nature it depicts. Whether this association is positive or negative is still debatable, and what exactly all of the allusions and metaphors mean can never be known for sure, but it is worth drawing these connections in order to also show the links between women and nature’s mutual oppression as well as the ways in which both entities wield agency in their own, unique, and differing ways. Val Plumwood’s foundational *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* was first mentioned in the introduction to this paper, and her solution to the problem of associating women with nature and risking the cliché and dangerous image of “Mother Nature” or “Mother Earth” is quite relevant within this discussion. Plumwood acknowledges that “the very idea of a feminine connection with nature seems to many to be regressive and insulting,” but also that the “womannature connection” as she calls it can be beneficial to ecofeminist studies as long as it is *critical* (Plumwood 20-21). This means that when ecofeminists today look at texts such as “The Knight’s Tale,” or *The Canterbury Tales* on the whole, we must “consciously position [ourselves] *with* nature” so that we do not fall into the trap of some forms of feminism that seek to lift women up while pushing away, or rather down, nature and nonhuman animals at the same time (Plumwood 21, author emphasis).

Chapter Three: Griselda

The next woman, Griselda, is similar to Emelye in that both can be viewed as role models for medieval women of their day, quiet and obedient to male authority. But it is also revealed through both of their tales that these young women are also hesitant to comply, resistant, and wield their agency in less than obvious ways. One of the characteristics of “The Clerk’s Tale” that makes it stand out from others is the fact that the marquis chooses a “poor” woman to be his wife as opposed to a princess or fellow noble, and this becomes one of the plot points that recurs throughout the tale and serves as part of the excuse the marquis uses to kick Griselda out of the palace in order to test her once again. Because Griselda grows up in a lower class than the marquis, having to live off the land, per say, she is automatically viewed as closer to nature than a typical marquise, for example. Another important quality of Griselda’s character is her silence throughout the trials her husband, Walter, puts her through during their marriage. As we saw with Emelye, there is much more that can be seen during these moments of silence than is readily apparent.

Though the silence throughout the trials her husband puts her through is the most obvious, I believe that Griselda’s silence begins earlier than this, specifically the day of her wedding. In lines 274-280 of part two, we learn that Griselda does not know she has been chosen to wed the marquis, even on the day of the wedding. When the marquis sees Griselda while out on a hunt one day (which we also talk about later in the chapter), he decides that she is the woman that he wants to marry (II.232-234; II.244-245). Yet, he does not tell her of his intentions until the day of the wedding when he shows up at her house to whisk her away. It is at this moment, however, that we encounter an interruption to Griselda’s silence for the first time. In a departure from the other tales we have and will look at, Walter actually asks

Griselda if she will marry him and includes his conditions for their marriage – that she must obey him in everything without complaint – in his proposal. She must always do what he wants, even if it hurts her, and she cannot show any discontent. While the argument could be made that Griselda agrees to the marriage because she is afraid the marquis will punish her or her family or because she feared him in another way – as Marc Guidry contends:

“[Griselda’s] consent to the arrangement is a hollow formula, a ritual serving to validate the ruler’s power rather than to make governance more inclusive” (139) – there is no evidence in the text, I believe, to suggest that the marquis would harm either Griselda or her father, especially considering he did not fall in love with her upon seeing her “fair ynogh” beauty, but rather because of her “wommanhede” and “bountee” (II.209-210; II.236-245). This removes a level of ownership or possessiveness from the marquis’s idea about his relationship to Griselda, as other men in the tales (e.g., January, whom we will discuss later) are very possessive of their wives because their extraordinary beauty implies eventual infidelity. In the end, however, both Griselda and her father hesitantly agree to the marriage, but it is important to remember that Griselda does give her consent to the marriage and, more importantly, to the “rules” of it.

Trial & Error

We see through the beginning of the marriage that Griselda adapts well to her life of nobility; the people love her for her goodness and elegance (II.407-413), she is a good housewife yet also a ruler who brings peace (II.428-434), and even handles political diplomatic affairs while her husband is away (II.435-441). However, the pleasant beginning to their marriage is soon disrupted when Griselda gives birth to a baby girl, and the marquis decides that he must test Griselda using their newborn daughter even though she has given

him no reason to doubt her up until this point. Both the people of the village and the narrator of the tale judge Walter for feeling the need to test his wife, saying there is no need to do so (III.460-462). To test her loyalty, Walter tells Griselda that the other nobles disapprove of their marriage because of Griselda's poor upbringing, and that he wishes to take their daughter from her to protect themselves, but his words and manner of taking their daughter away heavily implies the death of their child (III.466-493). The marquis clarifies that he will never do anything without Griselda's knowing (which turns out to be a lie), but ultimately does not give her a choice to protest because she promised that she would never disobey him (III.493-497). Griselda is then silent in her response to this. However, I believe that this does not necessarily mean she automatically *accepts* it. Christine Keating outlines three different types of silences in her essay "Resistant Silences," calling them "engaged and oppositional silences" as opposed to "enforced silences" (25). These are silent refusal, silent witness, and deliberative silence. I propose that Griselda is using a position as "silent witness" in order to keep herself, and probably her child, secure and safe. We do not ever know if Griselda believes Walter's story about their child being unsafe because the other nobles disapprove of their marriage, and therefore their bloodline, so her obedience could be due to fear for her child's safety if she were to disagree. In addition, Griselda could be worried about her position at court or even perhaps her father as well. Silent witness, according to Keating, "is often – though it doesn't have to be – organized and collective and is used as a marker of respect, of mourning, of protest, and of defiance" and "replaces an enforced silence with a chosen, commemorative silence" (27). Keating applies this definition to silent protests, such as sit-ins, and I believe Griselda's silence could be read as a type of sit-in. She shows love for her child by asking to bless and kiss it before it is taken away, using her voice, but ultimately

does not indicate any discontent to her husband (III.547-560). It is possible that she takes a moment of silence that she must comply with and uses it as one of mourning for her child and one of protest and defiance against her husband or the nobles supposedly threatening her child. Acting as silent witness, Griselda is able to not only keep herself safe but also try to protect her child to the best of her abilities.

This same situation is repeated when Griselda gives birth to a son four years later, and, two years into his childhood, the marquis spins the same story to Griselda about disapproving nobles. Though we know the narrator and the townspeople are critical of Walter's actions, the narrator provides a kind of explanation as to why the marquis feels the need to test his loyal wife again: "But wedded men he knowe no mesure, / Whan that they fynde a pacient creature" (IV.622-623). In other words, when men find a loyal and patient woman, they cannot help but see how true she will actually remain to them. The narrator also details that Griselda not only left her home behind when she married Walter but also her "wyl" and "libertee" (IV.655-656). I have a hypothesis as to why the tale's narrator makes Griselda so seemingly content in her submission. The outer-frame narrator of the *Tales* compares the Clerk to a quiet "mayde" (I.2). We also see the Clerk mock the Wife of Bath, using her word "maistrie" against her. At the end of the tale, the Clerk tells readers that it is hard to find women as patient as Griselda, and contrasts her with the Wife of Bath and "hire secte" that use their "heigh maistrie" to keep their husbands in line (VI.1170-1172). This might imply or reveal an insecurity of the Clerk, who was explicitly compared to a quiet young woman, just like Griselda. Perhaps he tells this tale – which he learned from someone else in Padua (I.26-28) – and makes fun of the Wife of Bath's desire for control in a marriage to cover his lack of confidence about his own personality traits, which might be perceived as

feminine and therefore lesser than other men. It is clear in Griselda and Walter's marriage that Walter has complete control, and we know that he even takes pleasure in testing Griselda in cruel ways:

And whan this markys say
 The constance of his wyf, he caste adoun
 His eyen two, and wondreth that she may
 In pacience suffer al this array;
 And forth he goth with drery contenance,
 But to his herte it was ful greet pleasance. (IV.667-672)

And though earlier in the tale the narrator/Clerk wonders how the marquis could test his wife in such a way, he seems to shift his tone around lines 719-721: "[Griselda] shewed wel, for no worldly unreste / A wyf, as of himself, nothing ne sholde / Wille in effect, but as hir housbonde wolde." In other words, a wife should not want anything but to please her husband. If the Clerk is insecure about any marriage he might have one day, it would make sense that he would tell a tale about a woman such as Griselda, not one like the Wife of Bath who would want more of a voice in a marriage.

The last test we see the marquis put Griselda through is kicking her out of the castle, pretending to marry a younger woman (who is actually their daughter he has been hiding), and asking Griselda to prepare the bride and the castle for the wedding. There is one specific quote during this part that I would like to focus on, as it is when Griselda breaks her silence, seemingly supporting the marquis's wishes. However, I believe that Griselda is moving from being silent witness to speaking out since she no longer needs to protect herself and, as she has been ostracized from nobility and the life she made at the castle at this point and, as far as

she knows, her children are dead. When Griselda is speaking to Walter about his soon-to-be wife, she asks him to “ne prikke with no tormentynge / This tendre mayden, as ye han doon mo” (VI.1038-1039). Though Griselda technically says “as you have done to others,” it appears that she is talking about herself specifically, as there is no one else in the tale that the marquis has treated like her. In this way, Griselda is finally able to speak her mind about how the marquis hurt her during their marriage but does so in a veiled way as to not be too provocative.

The end of the tale brings us to an interesting conversation about the Clerk’s interpretation of his own story. As discussed above, it is possible that the Clerk does believe that women should be completely obedient to their husbands in marriage, especially considering his own possible insecurities, but the end of the tale might lead us to believe differently. In lines 1142-1162 of part six, the Clerk tells his audience that his story is not meant as a lesson only for wives or women, but rather that it should serve as an example in perseverance when God tests mankind (like Job in the Bible). In the song the Clerk provides, he also gives the following advice to women:

O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence,
 Lat noon humylitee youre tonge naille,
 Ne lat no clerk have cause or diligence
 To write of yow a storie of swich mervaille⁵
 As of Grisildis pacient and kynde. (VI.1183-1187)

This, of course, comes right after he mentions the Wife of Bath’s concept of “maistrie” in what could be interpreted as a mocking tone. Guidry contends that the Clerk is “[challenging]

⁵ marvel

female counsel ... [that] resist[s] silent submission exemplified by Griselda,” and that the Wife’s concept of female counsel is directly opposed to the counsel that Walter receives at the beginning of the tale from his people convincing him to get married (140). However, it is difficult to tell the intentions of the Clerk at this point because he has condemned the marquis’s actions and mocked the Wife of Bath’s concept of “maistrie,” but has also praised Griselda’s obedience and included a song telling women to not remain silent, to govern themselves, and for weaker women to be strong like tigers (VI.1189-1199). If we take his words to be genuine, then they are encouraging to women facing similar situations as Griselda’s; however, if they are not, they would not be out of line with his time period and culture. The larger picture here, I believe, is the ambiguity of Chaucer’s writing. We cannot know for certain if the Clerk, the direct narrator of the tale, truly believes women should speak up for themselves more, and therefore we do not know the same of the narrator of the *Tales*, or Chaucer himself, which speaks both to Chaucer’s writing ability and the possibility of his progressive ideas.

Eager as a Tiger

Now I would like to return to the line where the Clerk – genuinely or otherwise – tells “sklendre wyves, fieble as in bataille,” to “Beth egre as is a tygre yond in Ynde” (VI.1198-1199). Regardless of intent, the narrator has chosen to align women with animals; a few lines earlier, he calls “archewyves ... strong as is a greet camaille” (VI.1195-1196). These comparisons, especially the one to a tiger, are reminiscent of the ones made in “The Knight’s Tale” discussed in the previous chapter. The difference is that, here, the strong animal imagery is being assigned to women rather than to men in battle. Though the narrator is speaking as if these women are about to enter real physical battle, we know from the tale that

they are not. Therefore, the animal imagery used here is not for the benefit of militaristic or toxic masculine purposes of naturalizing violence. Rather, it comes across as a method of empowerment for women who embrace the qualities of animals such as tigers and camels, both “wild,” a quality not desirable in women and even feared, as it means they are uncontrollable. Additionally, if we go back to the beginning of the tale, we see that Griselda is associated closely with nature in the limited description we get of her and her home. The tale itself begins with a portrayal of the land the tale takes place in: “Ther is, at the west syde of Ytaille, / Doun at the roote of Vesulus the colde, / A lusty playn, habundant of vitaille⁶” (I.57-59). From these few lines alone we can imagine the land to be lush and fruitful. In part two of the tale the narrator informs the audience that Griselda lives in a small, “delitable” village “In which that povre folk of that village / Hadden hir beestes and hir herbergage⁷, / And of hire labour tooke hir sustenance, / After that the erthe yaf hem habundance” (II.199-203). In other words, the place Griselda grew up in is a small community of people who rely on the earth and its resources in order to survive; they maintain a good relationship with the vegetation, woods, and animals that surround them. It is also implied that Griselda is the one between her and her father that actually does the work around the house, the one that interacts with the surrounding nature: “A fewe sheep, spynnyng, on feeld she kepte; / ... And whan she homward cam, she wolde brynge / Wortes or othere herbes tymes ofte, / The whiche she shredde and seeth for hir lyvyng” (II.223-227).

The alignment of Griselda with nature at this point follows with the themes of hunting that appear in this tale, though less obviously than in “The Knight’s Tale.” Before we even meet Griselda, we learn that the marquis does not wish to marry because he enjoys the

⁶ crops

⁷ lodging, inn, or dwelling

pleasure of being single and, more specifically, immediate satisfaction, too much (I.80; I.145-147). His pursuit of women, in fact, is said to be “As for to hauke and hunte on every syde,” directly comparing women with hunting prey or hawks used in falconry, just as we saw in “The Knight’s Tale” (I.81). Sara Gutmann’s discussion of falconry in Chaucer’s works is pertinent here, as she writes that “Chaucerian encounters of bird and woman belong to a medieval world obsessed with class and gender markers in its venereal pursuits but challenged by a prioritization of the female bird of prey for its size and strength” (69). Griselda is not only a pretty woman that caught the marquis’s eye, but she is also a lower class woman, probably not familiar with falconry or other higher class activities of the sort. The marquis, on the other hand, would probably practice falconry, especially since we know he does in fact go on hunts. The juxtaposition of both their class and genders further exemplifies the marquis’s position of power in the eyes of a medieval audience and Griselda’s own, closer to nature. In addition, if we think of Griselda as the falcon in this situation, she is constantly negotiating a thin line between fearsome, respectable, preferred-over-the-male-of-the-species female falcon and tamed, docile, controllable, submissive because she is a female animal. Gutmann tells us that, though for “all raptorial species, the larger, faster female was prized above the male ... the intimacy demanded by falconry surpasses that of the hunt, and this imbues the symbolic resonance of the falcon in medieval poetry with a latent, and significantly gendered, power” (70). This liminal space is Griselda’s constant opportunity to use her agency in ways that are not too obvious while also keeping herself safe and prosperous. To further follow this metaphor of hunting as finding a mate or wife, we can look at lines 232-234 of part two: “Upon Griselde, this povre creature, / Ful ofte sithe this markys sette his ye / As he on hunting rood paraventure...” Walter first sees

Griselda while out on a hunt, therefore placing her in the same position as whatever animal he was hunting for. Even if the marquis's hunt for the animal ended up being unsuccessful, we know his "hunt" for Griselda – and a wife – was contrarily very successful.

In light of the destruction of nature in the previous chapter, "The Clerk's Tale" is tame in its treatment of nature and, I believe, at its foundations, further reveals the connections between women and nature, both intentional and subconscious. In "The Knight's Tale," both Emelye and the nature surrounding the castle were ignored and mistreated, but in "The Clerk's Tale," we only see Griselda really being mistreated. However, the ways in which she is both connected to and aligned by others with nature are still evident, and this reveals the small spaces in which Griselda is able to navigate some sort of freedom for herself. In the end, Griselda is able to secure a place of nobility for herself and her two children and become an admired and fair ruler to the surrounding people, all through her choice to remain silent.

Chapter Four: May

“The Merchant’s Tale,” like “The Clerk’s Tale,” focuses on the issue of marital fidelity concerning women. The Clerk gives an example of a perfectly faithful woman, Griselda, who never cheats on or disobeys her husband no matter what. As we will see, May is almost entirely the opposite, complying with her husband’s wishes (in bed, specifically), I will propose, only to gain his trust and use this to later fulfill her own desires, not coincidentally in the natural space of a garden. There is much debate about whether men or women are more faithful throughout the whole tale; arguments between Justinus and Placebo, Pluto and Proserpine, and January and May all occur at some point. The Merchant as narrator, though he allows characters of both genders to voice their opinions, makes his own opinion of marriage very clear. The prologue to his tale includes lamentation of his own experience in married life: “‘Wepyng and waylyng, care and oother sorwe / I knowe ynogh, on even and a-morwe,’ / ... ‘and so doon other mo / That wedded been ...’” (1213-1215). According to the Merchant, his wife is a “shrewe” and nothing like faithful Griselda (1222). He is not long-suffering, though, since he has only been married for two months (1233-1234). Regardless, the Merchant has a bad taste about marriage (and it seems women in general) in his mouth, and channels these feelings into a very tongue-in-cheek opening to his tale in which the narrator praises the benefits of marriage. Line 1287 asks: “For who can be so buxom⁸ as a wyf?” The following lines detail how women live to serve and care for their husbands until the day their husbands die (1287-1292). Wives are lauded as gifts from God that last longer than any gift Fortune has to offer, such as personal possessions or land (1311-1318). This message continues all the way through line 1398, presenting examples of

⁸ obedient

respectable historical and Biblical wives, even calling marriage “hony-sweete” (1396).

However, there are hints throughout this section of the tale that point to the Merchant’s true negative feelings regarding marriage. For example, in lines 1356-1361, the narrator says that men will not be led astray or “deceyved” by their wives if they listen to them. The irony here, of course, is that January chooses to believe his wife’s lie at the end of the tale and is actually being cuckolded, or “deceyved.” The whole opening to the tale so positively endorses marriage that it comes across as sarcastic at times like this.

This chapter, then, brings us to May, a character that is a bit of a divergence from the two women we have previously studied. May, perhaps due to her social class, might feel more security in her social standing than, for example, Griselda, who came from poverty, and therefore speaks her mind more freely. We know May is of “small degree,” or a lower class than January, who is said to live like a king (2027), but May might have a stable home or family to return to if she were to be turned out by January. Regardless of the motivation, though, it is clear that May wields her agency differently than either Emelye or Griselda. This is not to say that, simply because May is more outspoken and active in her agency, she is better in any way than the other two women we have already looked at. Each woman exists in different circumstances and, as we have discussed, uses her circumstances to her advantage the best ways she can.

Like with Emelye, there is no explicit agreement on May’s part about her marriage to January. And, similar to Griselda, there is no way to know if May is aware of her marriage before the day of her wedding or if she ever gave any type of consent to the union prior. Marc Guidry, in his essay on “Advice without Consent,” also acknowledges the “conseil” (1480) given to January regarding his marriage while May is left to be unhappy in marriage

(139-140). According to the narrator, once January decides it is May he wants to marry, Justinus and Placebo arrange it “by sly and wys trettee,” possibly implying crafty means of accomplishing their goal (1689-1695). Perhaps more troubling is the description of January and May’s wedding night in which they consummate their marriage. We are told that May is “stille as stoon” upon being brought to her marriage bed, implying some level of fear, or, at the very least, hesitation (1818). January, so confident of his sexual prowess despite his age (1750-1767), is in fact quite disappointing to May (1851-1854). The account the narrator gives of January on this night is not romantic in the slightest; January’s beard is made of “thikke brustles,” and his skin is “sharp as brier” like a shark (1824; 1825). He is “ful of ragerye,” and “The slake skyn aboute his nekke shaketh / Whil that he sang, so chaunteth he and craketh” (1847; 1849-1850). Not only is this physical imagery unpleasant on both the audience’s and May’s part, but what January says to May during all of this is what is most concerning: “... ‘Allas! I moot trespace / To yow, my spouse, and yow greetly offende / Er tyme come that I wil down descende’” (1828-1830). The imagery presented here, I believe, is meant to make readers feel uncomfortable, not only themselves, but also on May’s behalf. As this is their wedding night, this scene sets the tone for their marriage and May’s feelings toward January. January continues, explaining that his “werke” cannot be done quickly and must take time, and that “A man may do no synne with his wyf” within the bonds of marriage (1833-1839). Here we see that January knows his act of having sex with May will “greetly offende” her, yet he *must* do it. From that point on, May “obeyeth, be hire lief or looth” whenever January wants to have sex, as is a spouse’s duty according to tradition. There is also the case of January’s overwhelming jealousy and control of May once he loses his sight. Beginning with line 2057, we are told of January’s loss of sight: “O sodeyn hap! O

thou Fortune unstable! / ... Why hastow Januarie thus deceyved, / That haddest hym for thy fulle freend receyved?" (2057; 2065-2066). It seems that the narrator is blaming "Fortune" and chance for January's situation, but, as we see right before these lines, some gods and goddesses have a role to play in this story as well, specifically Proserpine and her husband Pluto. We are told that, "Ful ofte tyme he Pluto and his queene, / Proserpina, and al hire fayerye, / Disporten⁹ hem and maken melodye / Aboute that welle, and daunced, as men tolde," possibly implying mischievous behavior (2038-2041). After suddenly becoming blind, January becomes very (or more) paranoid about May being unfaithful to him, so he decides that he will not let her go anywhere without having his "hond on hire always" (2085-2091). Obviously, May is very upset by this, especially since it means she cannot be alone with Damian, January's squire. From the beginning of January and May's marriage, specifically their wedding night, we know that Damian is "so ravysshed on his lady May / That for the verray payne he was ny wood¹⁰" (1774-1775). When Damian becomes physically ill because of his lovesickness, January, taking pity on his squire, tells May to visit him in order to comfort him, and from these encounters, May and Damian begin their affair and start planning their fornication in the garden.

As stated in the introduction paragraph of this chapter, I believe that May uses these circumstances she has to endure in order to make the most of her situation and get exactly what she wants without angering her husband or facing consequences. Amy Kaufman writes that interpretations of this tale – which could also be applied to the other tales we have discussed – that only "lament the mistreatment of May ... still empower Januarie's metaphorical mirror as the interpretive lens, rendering May a commodity and a mere

⁹ Entertained, Amused

¹⁰ Almost insane

reflection of male desires” rather than a woman taking initiative and wielding agency (28). In fact, according to Kaufman, most critics do not read May as agentic, some questioning her encounter with Damian as rape rather than consensual, pointing to May’s “passivity” and silence as a sign of her lack of desire for Damian (29). Though this reading is plausible, it is my belief that there is strong evidence to the contrary. From the beginnings of her tryst with Damian, we see May taking charge of the situation. Damian is the first to express his feelings for May in a letter that he discreetly gives to her, which she takes but then rips to pieces and throws in the “pryvee” (1878-1884; 1936-1939; 1950-1954). However, the narrator never tells us if May actually reads Damian’s letter before throwing it away. If she did not read the letter, it could be because she initially had no interest in Damian and chose not to pursue anything with him. If she did read the letter, though, it could be that she did not want anyone else to discover it; Damian tells her that it could lead to his punishment or even death, as he would be betraying January, whom he is supposed to be loyal to as his squire (1942-1943). Either way, by Damian initiating contact between the two of them, May has the *choice* to respond to his letter, unlike in her relationship to January which was chosen for her. Not long after she tears up the letter, we find out that whether by “destynee,” “aventure,” “influence,” “nature,” or “constellacion,” May decides to take pity on Damian and go comfort him again (1967-1986). Sarah Stanbury contends that “Chaucer’s *nature* ... seems to act on us or is within us” and claims, “Nature is a life force” (5). If this is to be applied to “The Merchant’s Tale,” May’s connection with nature (whether as a woman or as a human animal) is partially the reason she is able to pursue Damian. Returning to the fact that May has *chosen* Damian, that Damian is of lower rank than January is evidence that she does not choose Damian to advance her position within society, as he is a squire and January is a knight. Rather, it is

possible that she simply wants sex that will actually please her, or she truly ends up caring for and loving Damian. May then writes Damian a letter in reply, leaves it under his pillow during one of their meetings, and squeezes his hand before leaving, further implying her fondness of him (1995-2008). We could assume that Damian reads this letter for, upon receiving it, he is suddenly cured of his lovesickness for May, and “He dooth al that his lady lust and lyketh” (2012). This description is a direct contrast to May’s relationship with January, in which May is the obedient one.

From this point forward, it is May that orchestrates the meeting with Damian in the garden, making a copy of the key that opens the garden gate and giving it to Damian (2116-2121), signaling to Damian to hide in the pear tree (2207-2218), and convincing January to allow her to use his back to climb the tree herself (2341-2345). The ways May is forced to communicate with Damian could be considered physical silences, as she can only write letters and use hand motions in order to deceive January. May also chooses other silences wisely, such as in bed with January. In what Kaufman calls January’s “one-sided lectures, monologues and songs,” May chooses silence because she does not care for January the way she does for Damian, with whom she shares a “language of erotics” through their “exchanging [of] letters and signs,” or, writing (36). This could be interpreted as a form of Hélène Cixous’s call for women to “to write ... [to] ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality ... it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal” (880). May is still more verbally outspoken than both Emelye and Griselda, even going as far as to contradict January when he implies that he is worried about her fidelity (2175-2183). In response to his words, May begins to cry and says that she is a faithful woman and that, if she were ever unfaithful,

she would want to be drowned in a river (2187-2201). She adds, even though men have “...been evere untrewed, / And wommen have repreve of yow ay newe. / Ye han noon oother contenance, I leeve, / But speke to us of untrust and repreeve” (2203-2206). May’s words, with the help of Proserpine this time, also save her from January’s punishment when he catches her with Damian in the pear tree. As was discussed earlier, Proserpine and Pluto have a hand in January and May’s “fates,” and are directly involved in the scene when May’s infidelity is almost discovered, when Pluto restores January’s sight so that he will not be unwittingly cheated on, and Proserpine gives May the ability to talk her way out of such a compromising situation. This in itself is an example of a woman in “The Merchant’s Tale” using her agency to help another woman through the act of speech. Both May and Proserpine are perhaps equally as outspoken as the other, as Proserpine tells her own husband Pluto: “I am a womman, nedes moot I speke, / Or elles swelle til myn herte breke” (2305-2306). In other words, Proserpine is saying that women *must* speak their minds, or else their hearts will break. May seems to also feel this way, as her response to January above indicates.

This freedom May is able to use to her advantage is found in the garden, in nature. In her essay “Enter the Bedroom: Managing Space for the Erotic in Middle English Romance,” Megan Leitch tells us that “would-be romance lovers worry about how to obtain ... privacy, while their fathers, husbands, hosts or guardians worry about how to prevent it,” which is very true in the case of May, Damian, and January (42). In response to the control of the bedroom, May takes her sensual desires outside to the garden since she must share her bedchamber with January. The role that the garden plays in this tale is immense, allowing May to take charge of her own sexuality. Kaufman writes: “erotic potential is embodied by May herself,” and the garden is the place in which this erotic potential is fulfilled with

Damian (31). In addition, May is constantly compared to summer mornings and other “seasonal and natural images,” not unlike Emelye (Howes 95). The garden is described as “walled al with stoon,” with a locked gate to keep others out (2029; 2044) and so beautiful that even Priapus, the god of gardens, could not “tell / The beautee of the gardyn and the welle / That stood under a laurer alwey grene” (2035-2037). This lush, green setting could be interpreted as an indicator of the potentially procreative acts that occur there, both between January and May and Damian and May. We also know that January enjoys having sex with May in the garden during summertime, when the garden would be in full bloom (2048-2052). This is the time May takes her chance to be with Damian, specifically in the month of June on a particularly warm and sunny day, which coincidentally is the month following May on the calendar, perhaps implying a blossoming of May herself into a woman who has realized her sexual desires and takes initiative to satisfy them (2132-2136). In an ironic line, January himself says ““The winter is goon,”” and I believe the connection between this and his name is not to be lost on the audience’s part (2140). Laura L. Howes writes that gardens in Chaucer’s works can be a “*locus* of male domination” but also acknowledges that in certain situations, they can serve as “contested ground” (83). Howes uses May as a specific example of this, writing that she turns “January’s pleasure park into one of her own” by having sex with Damian in the pear tree with January just below them (84). The importance and implications of nature in the tale do not end here; there is some interesting animal imagery that is a departure from what we have examined in the previous two chapters. Though there is some positive nature imagery such as the idea of “byrd” and “beest” being free to live their lives as they please that we also saw in “The Knight’s Tale,” there is also the reference to the “yok of mariage,” (1278-1285) images connecting bodies of women over the age of twenty

with beef rather than veal, dried beanstalks, and “greet forage” (1419-1422), and also the association of a January’s aging body with a blossoming fruit tree and green laurel (1444-1468) as well as Damian – a man, not a woman – being compared to a domesticated/trained dog (2013-2014). The occasional inverted nature imagery of this tale, if anything, indicates Chaucer’s ambiguity in his intentions and, as Howes puts it, “encourages readers to assume that his characters can choose their own destiny” (86).

In the end, like Griselda, May is able to enjoy a comfortable life as the wife of a rich man, and both women achieve this through different choices in behavior, including silence (2168-2175). May is also able to enjoy Damian in addition to her lifestyle. Though we are not told if they do have further encounters, January regains his sight by the end of the tale and believes May’s lie that January’s sight, so suddenly restored, was not good and therefore untrustworthy, so it would not be unreasonable to assume that he would lift his rule about having a hand on her wherever she goes, giving May more freedom to meet with Damian in secret, without January’s company of course. These comparisons and contrasts between Emelye, Griselda, and May are meant to illuminate the ways in which women, regardless of their actual behavior, are often compared to nature in one way or another, sometimes for their beauty, sometimes for their untamable qualities. They also highlight the numerous methods women have at their disposal, depending on their circumstances, they use in order to survive, keep themselves safe, and/or satisfy their desires. Howes makes the point that, in Chaucer’s works where women make and enjoy their moments of freedom, “female voices intrude into male discourse and, more often than not, subvert the privileged narrative, if only temporarily” (86).

Chapter Five: Pertelote

The last woman we will be discussing is a wonderful example to conclude with, as she is not only a female but also a nonhuman animal. Pertelote the hen embodies the connection between women and nature, specifically animals, as she is a female nonhuman animal, and therefore her perspective is unique and insightful. Though by the end of the tale it could be argued that the narrator is more critical of Pertelote's advice than appreciative, there is still much to be said about the words and actions of this particular hen that can perhaps speak more for themselves than the moralizing narrator. In "The Nun's Priest's Tale," we see nature in a very different way than we have in the tales previously discussed because we are put more directly *into* it. Similar to Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, this tale provides nonhuman animals with (literal) voices, thoughts, emotions, dreams, and more. In the other tales we have looked at, we have only seen nature from the human perspective (as far as characters go, as I am aware both the narrator of the tale and Chaucer are human) and mostly through animal imagery rather than the inclusion of actual animals. "The Nun's Priest's Tale" includes animals not only as characters but also main characters, relegating humans to the background. This tale, therefore, lends itself very well to readings of the intertwining roles of nature, silence, and women in Chaucer's writing.

First, I would like to discuss the concept of critical anthropomorphism as it pertains to writing about nonhuman animals and this tale. Traditional anthropomorphism can be defined as "the habit of attributing traits, *believed to* be uniquely or typically human, to nonhuman entities, such as divinities, machines, or animals" (Karlsson 710). Anthropomorphism is often viewed as negative, as it can be anthropocentric and therefore harmful to humans' already heavily flawed attitude toward nonhuman animals. Fredrik Karlsson contends that

anthropomorphism cannot be avoided “altogether ... at least not if we aspire to give a more complete account of animals than, for example, behaviorist terminology makes possible” (711). In response, critical anthropomorphism seeks to use anthropomorphism in positive, possibly realistic ways that can help humans empathize with animals while also acknowledging both their differences and similarities. Karlsson writes: “Critical anthropomorphism is, I propose, to actively use anthropomorphic projections stemming from the permanent perspective of embodied anthropocentrism together with criteria that assist in discerning trustworthy anthropomorphism from naïve anthropomorphism” (711-712). Similarly, David Morton et al write that critical anthropomorphism “does not ignore empathy and the assault on our sensibilities of animal treatment[;] it requires a willingness to incorporate objective knowledge of the animal’s natural history, nervous system, domestication, and prior experience” (13). This use of scientific fact in critical anthropomorphism helps avoid the trap of personification, which presents animals as *too* similar to humans, therefore valuing human qualities over nonhuman animal ones. Both Karlsson and Morton et al recognize value in critical anthropomorphism, namely psychological (or emotional/mental) anthropomorphism, which is the type of anthropomorphism used in “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale.” I also believe this practice can be beneficial to humanity’s view of nonhuman animals, especially through the medium of fiction. Using fiction to employ anthropomorphism allows for incorporation of scientific fact without having to prove each and every characteristic attributed to the nonhuman animal as real or true. For example, Chaucer and/or the narrator of the tale gives the chickens the ability to think and dream, which is very possible and probable, as well as the ability to speak English, which we know to not be possible. However, even the ability to speak English is

important, as it reverses the idea that nature is silent, or at least not able to communicate with humans through a shared language; in this tale nature is given a literal voice through the chickens, a voice which the human audience will be able to understand. And though we can never know what exactly any given animal is thinking, the same can be said about humans.

With this background on critical anthropomorphism provided, I would like to move into the discussion of the tale, specifically the main animal characters. The opening lines of the tale introduce the widow and her two daughters who tend a small cottage with a handful of animals, but after this, we only see these human characters one more time when they chase after the fox. Otherwise, we are privy to and focused on the lives of the chickens of the house, including their thoughts, dreams, opinions, and emotions. Both Chanticleer and Pertelote are given physical descriptions, just like the human characters in the previous tales. We also are told of Pertelote's disposition and personality, making her unique, not just another hen in another flock. The qualities of dreams, grief, medical knowledge, and arrogance are attributed to the animals in this story, all characteristics which cannot be proven to be real for chickens. However, instead of simply being described exactly like humans throughout the whole tale, the narrator also includes details and descriptions that constantly remind the audience that these characters are, in fact, roosters and hens. For example, during Pertelote's prescription to remedy Chanticleer's troubling dreams, she advises him to "Pekke [herbs] up right as they growe and ete hem yn" (2967). Though her claim to replace the missing town apothecary sounds quite human, the subtle reminder that they are chickens comes from her instruction for Chanticleer to peck the herbs up from the ground. Additionally, the narrator names natural instinct as the cause for Chanticleer's initial response to run away when he spots the fox in the cabbage, saying: "For naturelly a beest

desireth flee / Fro his contrarie, if he may it see, / Though he never erst hadde seyn it with his ye” (3279-3281). Employing critical anthropomorphism in these circumstances allows us to both empathize with the characters because their situation and reactions to their situation are familiar while also recognizing that they are still different – not lesser, just different – from us. Lesley Kordecki takes a more skeptical, though just as plausible, approach to the nonhuman animal perspective we are given in this tale, reminding us that,

we are rarely in the position of the consumed bird, [and] in this story we are in that position and are led to imagine that in the end the danger has been defused:

Chanticleer in his male glory, the supreme cock, with his valued sperm and voice, will now enjoy a long life free from human consumption ... Yet, we reflect that his ‘wives’—the female commodities—perhaps will not, when their egg-laying days are over. (105)

She also points out that the hens in this story are “even more vulnerable” because they are not only animals, but also female (105). Though I believe this tale can be read in a more positive light, it is still essential to recognize the context that these female characters exist in as well, which, if anything, shows how much more subversive and/or agentic they can be despite their circumstances.

Another aspect of the animal characters in this tale that cannot be ignored is the difference between the animals on the cottage property and the fox. In previous tales, we have only seen allusions to and metaphors regarding domesticated/tamed and wild/untamable animals. However, “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” gives us this dichotomy directly through its main characters. We know the widow and her daughters own their small home and the surrounding land they have cultivated into a garden as well as three pigs, three cows, a sheep,

seven hens, and one rooster. Lines 2847-2849 tell us that at least the chickens are enclosed in the yard by a fence, therefore separating them from the surrounding nature, the separate nature of the woods. The narrator/Chaucer uses the classic image of the tricky fox, who lives in the grove outside the widow's tamed nature, to represent the latter side of this coin, though this may not be his intention. Though there is a divide between wild and domesticated nature in this way, the comparison is complicated by the fact that the fox possesses the same capacities as the chickens do and is even more well-spoken than Chanticleer himself.

Therefore, the same level of intelligence and cognition is attributed to the fox, the wild animal, complicating the dichotomy that humans are wont to see in nature. Dividing nature into these spheres of "wild" and "tame" still lends itself to traditional views of women, namely the difference between "public" and "private" spheres of society. Is it a coincidence that all of the animals at the cottage mentioned, save for Chanticleer, are female? Is it a coincidence that the humans who tend the animals and the garden are all women?

Furthermore, though a majority of the animals are female, we are told that Chanticleer has "governaunce" over them, and that they "doon al his plesaunce," despite the fact that they are just as beautiful as he is (2865-2868). It could be argued that this is due to the "natural" order of the sexes in animals, but in this fictional setting these animals can speak English, so why must they adhere to all other laws of nature? In her essay specifically regarding "The Nun's Priest's Tale," Kordecki states that "the status of the tamed rooster Chanticleer, the epitome of barnyard masculinity ... becomes essential to the tale's message of controlling the voices of others" (103). In her analysis of the "Masculinity of the Dominant Model," Val Plumwood connects this masculinity to a "distinctively human" quality of supposed superior "mental characteristics" that Chanticleer constantly attempts to exemplify (25).

The use of language and rhetoric plays a large role in this tale, especially among the male characters, but I would like to focus on the central female character's speech. Pertelote could be viewed as the most outspoken female character we have seen thus far in our discussion, calling Chanticleer a coward to his face and chiding him for believing in prophetic dreams (2908-2911; 2921-2922). However, her lines are limited to this part of the tale with the rest dedicated to the banter between Chanticleer and the fox (Kordecki 110). This is not to say that Pertelote's words are insignificant, because they are not, but rather is meant to point out that, though she is not given much opportunity to speak, when she is, she takes full advantage of such an opportunity and truly speaks her mind. Pertelote's first speech is in response to Chanticleer being concerned about his dream. As mentioned above, she calls him a coward, and says that, no matter what women say, they want husbands who are "hardy, wise, and free," not foolish or arrogant (2912-2917). In what follows, Pertelote gives a detailed, knowledgeable response as to the reason for Chanticleer's dream, telling him it is connected to his physical body and its humors (choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic, and melancholic), which were held as scientific standard during the medieval time period (2923-2938). She also cites Cato in her response, specifically his quote "Ne do no fors of dremes," or "do not give dreams importance" (2940-2941). She then assures Chanticleer that she will give him the best advice, or the best "conseille," and that she will not lie to him (2945). Her prescription, per se, for Chanticleer is very specific, founded in the science of the four humors, and she names natural ingredients such as "lawriol, centaure, and fumetere," "ellebor, katapuce, ... gaitrys beryis," and "herbe yve" (2963-296). It is important to note here that all of her remedies are made of the herbs and plants that grow around the cottage, utilizing natural remedies to cure Chanticleer. It is interesting also that Chanticleer rejects

these natural remedies; the alignment of women with nature, or as closer to nature than men, even comes through in this situation, in which even a male *animal* disregards a female animal's natural means of medicine. Kordecki also notes this moment in the tale, writing that, "even though the tale prioritizes the masculine" by having Pertelote be wrong about Chanticleer's dream, "her exquisite diagnosis is replete with excellent holistic advice on curing, through laxatives, the somatic cause of what she takes to be the otherwise meaningless narrative of the dream" (108). Still, despite her extensive knowledge and explanation, Chanticleer chooses to disregard Pertelote's instructions and launches into a lengthy speech providing examples of ominous or prophetic dreams that have come true throughout history, such as with Daniel, Joseph, and the Pharaoh of the Old Testament (3128-3135). After this, Pertelote does not speak in the tale anymore.

I suggest that Pertelote's silence could be viewed as a choice. Joseph D. Parry claims that "Chaucer frequently displays keen interest in questions of female agency and responsibility by rendering his female characters at key moments in silences, deferred answers, absences, and unexpected submissiveness," and I believe this is applicable in Pertelote's situation (133). In this case, we know that Chanticleer's dream in fact does end up coming true, whether it is his own fault or not, and the blame is placed on Pertelote for not believing in the prophetic quality of dreams. Line 3256 reads, "Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde," and the narrator uses the example of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to back this claim that women give bad advice; he says that Eve "made Adam fro Paradys to go, / Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese" (3258-3259). Though the narrator immediately backtracks and says he does not wish to offend anyone in the company, that is he is just joking and quoting Chanticleer, it seems that his intention is to blame Pertelote, especially

when these lines are considered in tandem with line 3340: “Allas, his wyf ne roghte nat¹¹ of dremes!” This line comes immediately after the fox snatches Chanticleer away and the narrator is lamenting this “meschaunce” (3341). It is possible that Pertelote would be aware of the responsibility that would be placed on her for Chanticleer’s misfortune, and she then chooses to withhold speaking about the situation through the remainder of the tale. She is still not completely silent, however, when she grieves and mourns Chanticleer’s kidnapping; just like the widows Theseus encounters at the beginning of “The Knight’s Tale,” the hens of the cottage cry and lament Chanticleer, especially Pertelote, who “shrighte / Ful louder than dide Hasdrubales wyf, / Whan that hir housbonde hadde lost his lyf / And that the Romyayns hadde brend Cartage” (3362-3365). Her grieving is a form of silence because she is not speaking words, but also is not completely silent because of her loud weeping. Christine Keating’s concept of “silent witness” is relevant here, similar to Emelye’s grieving of Arcite in “The Knight’s Tale.” According to Keating, “silent witness ... is often ... collective and is used as a marker of respect, of mourning, of protest, and of defiance” (27). There is another possible explanation for Pertelote’s silence for the rest of the tale, one that is also subversive in quality. The end of the tale provides us with more than one moral lesson, and one of these is ““God yeve hym meschaunce, / That is so undiscreet of governaunce / That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees”” (3433-3435). This quote is from the fox after Chanticleer tricks him into opening his mouth so Chanticleer can escape, but I believe the moral itself could be what Pertelote is trying to get at with her silence. Women are often – still, to this day – accused of being overly talkative, chatty, and participating in idle prattle, and Pertelote is probably no stranger to this stereotype (Martin 148). It is also a very strong coincidence, or perhaps a

¹¹ Paid no attention

conscious choice, that she is a hen, as women are often referred to as “clucking hens,” another means of pointing out their excessive talk.

By remaining silent throughout the remainder of the tale, Pertelote is proving that women are not always the ones, or the only ones, that let their wagging tongues get them into trouble; rather, this is a shared characteristic of both men and women. Through Pertelote’s silence we are given the examples of proud Chanticleer, who enables his dream to come true by stretching his neck out to sing (a form of speech), and the fox, who cannot resist the urge to answer Chanticleer, therefore letting his prey get away (Kordecki 111). Once again, Chaucer complicates any ideas we might be able to form about his opinions regarding women or nature, or their silence, by providing us with multiple speculations as to why his female characters do what they do in juxtaposition with a narrator with a clearly negative view of women. As Laura L. Howes writes, “Chaucer presents not only the stereotypes of women that promote misogyny, but also characters who do not fit those stereotypes” (87). And though she is not specifically referencing “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” Sara Gutmann’s quote “Modifying, or regendering, the chivalric portrait ... we can engage a human-animal hybrid that lends new insight into the medieval presentation of female subjectivity,” is applicable in the case of this tale as well, as the human-animal hybrid Gutmann references is quite literal (80). She also writes that “Chaucer’s women and birds ... maintain their potentiality for transgression and deferral,” which I believe describes Pertelote’s actions exceptionally well, since we will never know for sure her motivations, especially for keeping silent in the latter part of the tale (Gutmann 80). Whether it was intentional or not, Chaucer’s conflation of women and nonhuman animals in this tale arguably demolishes the binaries of male/female, reason/emotion, and human/animal through Pertelote’s character rather than

simply elevating Pertelote above Chanticleer and other nonhuman animals above humans.

Pertelote is shown to possess control of her emotions and intelligence regarding matters

Chanticleer has no idea of, such as natural remedies, and both she and Chanticleer are given

the cognitive abilities attributed to humans in the other tales. Therefore, as we have seen with

the previous three women and their tales, Chaucer's ambiguous moralistic intentions allow

for the potential subversion of patriarchal and anthropocentric norms through his female

characters.

Conclusion

It is my hope that, throughout this discussion, it has become evident that there are myriad ways to view Chaucer's writing, especially concerning women and nature in his tales and their abilities to subvert traditional, oppressive norms, whether through actively speaking out or remaining silent. I also hope that my audience will be able to recognize the culturally produced connection between women and nature that has been ingrained in the human consciousness since ancient times. As Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead write in their introduction to *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, "[the] natural features of gender, and natural processes of sex and reproduction furnish only a suggestive and ambiguous backdrop to the cultural organization of gender and sexuality" (1). Ortner and Whitehead also acknowledge that "[the] very emphasis on the biological factor *within* different cultural traditions is variable," which is to say that conceptions of masculinity and femininity can fluctuate or differ, even within the same culture (1, author emphasis). For the purposes of my paper, I believe Ortner and Whitehead's perspective supports my idea that the women and nature in the *Tales* can be read in many ways. I also wish that I have revealed how this connection can be used both to women's advantage and disadvantage. The texts we have looked at – "The Knight's Tale," "The Clerks' Tale," "The Merchant's Tale," and "The Nun's Priest's Tale" – all present women, nature, and their shared silences in very different ways, with similarities that can be traced all the way from regal Emelye to patient Griselda to Pertelote the hen. On the surface, both the women and nature in these tales seem mostly helpless and, sometimes, compliant in their oppression. However, I have presented evidence that speaks to the opposite. Even Griselda, the most silent and obedient of all the ladies, navigates her circumstances with the potential of

subversion that allows her to live a comfortable life, acting as a benevolent and well-loved ruler.

Through my presentation of these alternative ways of viewing women and nature in *The Canterbury Tales*, I have strived to employ invitational rhetoric in my own writing method, which is founded in feminist ideals, in order to add to the immense body of scholarship about Chaucer's famous collection of tales. I believe that feminism is meant to pervade every area of scholarly work, including how it is presented. These readings of the selected tales are potentially empowering, not only for the characters in the stories (including nature), but also for an audience that wishes to see the subversive within the oppressive without ignoring historical and cultural context. It has been debated over the years what exactly Chaucer's stance on women was, some calling him proto-feminist and others claiming he was misogynistic. It is my belief, as well as some of the scholars I have quoted throughout this project, that Chaucer's work is ambiguous, whether intentionally or otherwise, and therefore leaves room for interpretation, including the reading of the women in the tales as rebellious in their own way and able to wield their agency according to their own terms.

The role of nature in Chaucer's work is also a main focus of this project, as it displays authority and agency, continually overlapping and intertwining with women. Both entities are mutually oppressed by the same dominant, masculine culture of the Western world, and I propose that they rely on each other in order to survive in this culture as well as prosper. Emelye uses the private garden on Theseus's grounds as her personal escape from the life she has been forced into; Griselda relies on her humble roots using the land to survive in order to guide herself through the trials her husband inflicts upon her, having to eventually return to

these roots; May coopts January's pleasure garden for her own means of sexual satisfaction; and Pertelote, in her position as a nonhuman animal, literally gives a voice to nature. All of these women and the nature they encounter are both silenced, both trying to survive at the hands of men, deserve to be recognized for their efforts, not only for their victimization and/or oppression. I always return to Elizabeth Schneider's "Feminism and the False Dichotomy of Victimization and Agency" for this exact reason. As Schneider argues, to view women only as victims reduces their efforts to escape their situations, but to view them only as powerful, agentic beings discounts the occurrence of any victimization or trauma that could have occurred. Existing in the gray area between neither wholly victim nor agent is the context for many women, and therefore recognizing how these fictional women – created by a male author and male narrators, no less – navigate this liminal space allows for modern audiences to realize that women, and the earth they live on and with, share similar experiences across time. Women have always dealt with this, and will continue to, but also have made great progress since Chaucer's time, and will continue to do so, making even greater strides when popular feminism grows to include nature, realizing that not only do women need equality, but that the whole system that assigns value is flawed. This system is the one that mutually oppresses women and nature, that silences them. It is my belief that, in order to move toward this, feminists must educate themselves and others, still adhering to feminist principles, such as with invitational rhetoric, looking to history and literature as examples of the various experiences women can have while also acknowledging the solidarity among women and between women and nature.

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Vita

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