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2013

# Marriage: Suffering and Bliss

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### Recommended Citation

O'Connor, S. (2013). *Marriage: Suffering and Bliss* (Undergraduate honors thesis, University of Redlands). Retrieved from [https://inspire.redlands.edu/cas\\_honors/469](https://inspire.redlands.edu/cas_honors/469)

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Shannon O'Connor

Senior Honors Thesis

March 2013

### Marriage: Suffering and Bliss

In *The Canterbury Tales*, the perfect marriage is one where tension leads to yielding, resulting in bliss. According to the Wife of Bath, she has enough authority on the topic of marriage, through her extensive life experience, to lecture on “the wo that is in mariage.” While on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, she draws attention to a gender-power struggle in marriage, and through her prologue and tale, explores a theme of what women most desire. Mousing conventional misogynistic notions of the time, Alisoun seeks the kind of authority that within her culture is traditionally offered to men. She exemplifies a woman’s desire to choose not only what she wants for herself, but also a wife’s desire for *maistrie* and *soverayntee* within her marriage. Although *maistrie* and sovereignty are often times used interchangeably, they refer to physical and/or financial dominance as well as governance over one’s own body. Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* both supports and challenges this theme of women’s *maistrie* and *soverayntee* throughout, specifically within three tales from “The Marriage Group”: the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, the *Clerk’s Tale*, and the *Franklin’s Tale*. Although the wives, Alisoun, Grisilde, and Dorigen, antithetically approach mastery and sovereignty in their marriages, they demonstrate that wives are paradoxically capable of dominating while still yielding to their spouses. However, one may challenge the idea that the tales reveal a blissful marriage deriving from a domineering wife, concluding instead that the husbands undeniably possess, and never surrender, any *soverayntee* and *maistrie*. To explain this medieval battle of the sexes, I will argue the perspectives of the wives in these three tales, unveiling their varying approaches to obtaining marital dominance through sex, money, stubbornness, wantonness, promises, and yielding, and I will ultimately

declare the wives victorious in this gender-power battle, while at the same time showing how the husbands greatly benefit.

The Marriage Group is a collection of tales from the *Canterbury Tales* that debate marriage as being the “most important problem in organized society” (Kittredge, 539). Beginning with the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and concluding with the *Franklin's Tale*, this group dramatizes the spirit of medieval marriage, both conventionally and unconventionally, engaging the reader to consider all things possible within marriage. George Kittredge initially introduced the marriage debate in 1915, declaring the *Franklin's Tale* the solution to it, insisting that the Franklin argued “There should be no assertion of sovereignty on either side. Love must be the controlling principle — perfect, gentle love, which brings forbearance with it” (Kittredge, 545). On the other hand, Cathy Hume, who most recently resurrected the marriage debate, insists that “Chaucer produce[d] no alternative model of his own” (213). I, however, strongly disagree with both Kittredge and Hume, and argue that not only does the *Franklin's Tale* not provide a resolution to the marriage debate but instead that the Tales suggest a blissful marriage requires a precarious balance of both tension (fisticuffs or woe), and yielding (from a husband and wife). In addition, I will challenge this process of tension, yielding, and bliss by turning to a tale outside of the Marriage Group, the *Knight's Tale*, which seems least likely to follow the process I've outlined, and provide evidence that it too experiences an unfolding process in which tensions lead to yielding, ultimately resulting in harmony and marital bliss.

It is Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, who begins the argument on marriage for she considers herself to be an expert:

Experience, though noon auctoritee

Were in this world, is right ynough for me

To speke of wo that is in mariage:

For, lordings, sith I twelf yeer was of age,

Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve,

Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve. (Chaucer 102: 1-6)

Having been previously wed five times from the age of twelve (she is forty when the pilgrimage is underway), the Wife claims to have enough life experience to be considered a credible source, arguing against the alleged authorities who are male Church Fathers and who argue for virginity and against multiple marriages. Because she has had five husbands "at church door," and because she informs us how she finagled their wealth, we assume that Alisoun is financially well to do. Furthermore, her flamboyant attire expresses a heightened independence: "Hir coverchiefs ful fine were of ground;/ I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound/ That on Sunday weren upon hir heed./ Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed,/ Ful streite y-teyd, and shoos ful moiste and newe" (14:453-56). In addition, her red complexion reveals her heated sexuality: "Bold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe" (14: 457-58). Because there is such emphasis on the color "red," both in her clothes and her face, the Wife's independent nature as well as her carnal appetite is revealed (Hallissy 42-43). Therefore, unlike clergymen, who write the laws of marriage while possessing little firsthand marital experience, Alisoun considers herself to be an expert on marriage, not because of books read, but rather because of her years of life experience as a sovereign wife.

Throughout her prologue, Alisoun explains her five marriages. Through her experience, she has learned that husbands can be classified as good or bad, rich or poor, and old or young, and she insists that money and sex maintain high priority within a marriage:

I shal seye sooth, tho housbondes that I hadde,  
 As three of hem were gode and two were bade.  
 The three men were gode, and riche, and olde;  
 Unnethe mighte they that statut holde  
 In which that they were bounden unto me.  
 Ye woot wel what I mene of this, pardee!  
 As help me God, I laughe whan I thinke  
 How pitously a-night I made hem swinke. (106: 195-202)

Mocking her first three husbands' feeble states of well-being, the Wife implies that they could no longer adhere to the lawful ways of marriage and that the marital "statut" (dette) could no longer be fulfilled. "Dette was a [mutual] duty to yield up your body to the other [spouse], even if this was against [their] inclination" (Ashton 49); therefore, when the Wife's husbands became too weak to partake in sex, "they had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor" (107: 204). By granting Alisoun all of the monetary rights within the marriage, she obtained maistrie and soveraynetee, establishing both financial and physical dominance. The Wife of Bath's first three husbands are thus summarized as "one composite husband" (Hallissy 115): old, rich men, who were exhausted by Alisoun's biting attacks, and died leaving her abundantly sufficient.

The bad husbands were not so easy to control. Desiring younger men and possessing the financial ability to appeal to them, Alisoun lured her fourth and fifth husbands to her, despite her aging appearance. Alisoun spends little time describing her fourth husband; however, she does refer to him as being a "revelour," and having "hadde a paramour" (59: 453-54). Therefore, because of his infidelity, the Wife emotionally manipulated him by encouraging his jealousy: "Not of my body, in no foul manere,/ But certainly I made folk swich chiere/ That in his owene grece I made him frye/ For anger and for verray jalousie./ By God, in erthe I was his purgatorie"

(113: 485-89). Although he was young and adulterous, Alisoun maintained the upper hand by becoming his purgatory, causing him to fry in his own greasy jealousy and rage. However, Alisoun implies that because she was his purgatory on earth, God may have pitied him for all of the suffering he was subjected to: "Ther was o wight, save God and he, that wiste/ In many wyse how sore I him twist" (113: 493-94); therefore, as opposed to being condemned to hell for committing adultery, he was forgiven and sent to heaven, evidence that regardless of her hellish efforts, Alisoun's dominance proved to benefit her husband.

Alisoun's fifth husband was Jankyn, a twenty year old Oxford Clerk. He was the most difficult husband to control for he was physically aggressive, sexually enthralling, and maintained the greatest authority thus far due to his clerk status. She claimed, "I trowe I loved him beste for that he/ Was of his love daungerous to me,/That thogh he hadde me bete on every bon,/ He koude wyne agayn my love anon" (113: 511-14). By fulfilling the Wife's sexual appetite the way young Jankyn does, Alisoun assents to him, not only allowing him to physically beat her but, "to him yaf I al the lond and fee/ That evere was me yeven therbifore" (116: 630-31). Desperate in life (due to her aging exterior) and therefore desperate in love, Alisoun makes a critical error and cedes her entire fortune to Jankyn, granting him full financial dominance. At this time, Jankyn possesses complete maistrie and sovereignty within the marriage because he is a clerk (which gives him authority), and is physically and financially in control.

Falling into the depths of the medieval misogynistic abyss in which writing equates to authority, Jankyn quickly becomes enslaved by a particular book of "wikked wyves," which he uses to chastise Alisoun. Enraged by the effect this book has on her husband (as it states that all wives are immoral), the Wife declares, "For trusteth wel, it is an impossible/ That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,/ But if it be of holy seintes lyves,/ Ne of noon other woman never the mo"

(118: 688-91), insisting that his book offers no truth about wives for it was written by mere clerks, who could not possibly speak kindly of any wife unless they were referring to a saint. The Wife's profound frustration and abhorrence is directed not only toward Jankyn, but also to the "alleged" authorities of books: clerks who claim to know what is best for a marriage, and yet argue against unrighteous wives, insisting that they are corrupt and evil, ultimately declaring the man's right to dominate. Therefore, as it relates to women and marriage, the authors of these books have little experience; however, women like Alisoun, who have accumulated vast life experience, are void of authority altogether. It is evident at this point within the Wife's prologue that the book of wicked wives has become a significant source of tension within this marriage. According to feminist critic Caroline Dinshaw, the "Wife of Bath's Prologue renovates the patriarchal hermeneutic to accommodate the feminine" (126). Due to the medieval status quo where men are expected to be dominant, Alisoun is expected to be inferior and accept Jankyn's false projections of her as a wicked wife.

As Alisoun's desire to regain maistrie and soverayntee increases each day as she is face to face with the book of wicked wives, she attacks the book (which represents an attack on her husband's authority) and is immediately struck by Jankyn, who reacts to her assault on his book. Falling to the floor, Alisoun breathes, "O! hastow slayn me, false theeft?/ And for my land thus hastow mordred me?" (120: 800-01). An unusually guilt-ridden Jankyn vows never to strike Alisoun again, and pleads for her forgiveness. Upon rising, she hits him once more to enforce the final word. This climax results in her being victorious over Jankyn and thus restores her to what Hallissy calls the "ultimate marital authority" (123). Alisoun concludes her prologue by admitting that she and Jankyn came to a peaceful agreement where "he yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,/ To han the governance of hous and lond...and [whan] that I hadde geten unto me,/"

By maistrie, al the soveraynetee" (120: 813-18). Because Jankyn willingly surrendered all mastery, governance, and sovereignty to Alisoun, she reassumes total dominance within the marriage and as a result, "[they] hadden never debaat" (120:822). As a result of Jankyn yielding to Alisoun, she yields to Jankyn and "was to him as kinde/ As any wyf from Denmark unto Inde/ And also trewe, and so was he to [hire]" (120: 823-25). Alisoun is happiest when she possesses complete marital dominance, and Jankyn benefits from her elated state because his wife is now kinder to him than ever before. In the end, the book of wicked wives has been destroyed, Jankyn *willingly* surrenders his authority, Alisoun satisfyingly maintains mastery and sovereignty while simultaneously becoming a kinder version of herself, a state of mutual peace and respect has been established, and "the wo that is in mariage" ceases to exist.

It is not by coincidence that *the Wife of Bath's Tale* begins with a knight raping a virgin maiden. This reinforces the power-gender struggle taking place: the "ultimate assertion of male maistrie over women" (Cooper 158). Because the knight callously seized an innocent girl's virginity, he is sentenced to death by the king. Interestingly, the king yields to the queen's request to decide whether the knight should be spared or executed (indicating Alisoun's ideal marriage where a husband cedes control unto his wife). After collaborating with her company of women, the queen makes the decision: "I grante thee lyf, if thou canst tellen me/ What thing is it that women most desyren" (122: 904-05). The knight's life is spared only if he can discover an answer to what it is that women most desire. And, as we have previously learned from Alisoun, she believes women most desire to be in control within their marriages.

As the knight sets off on a twelve month journey, he seeks out answers from every possible female authority: "Somme seyde women loven best richesse,/ Somme seyde honour, somme seyde jolynesse;/ Somme riche array, somme seyden lust abedde,/ And ofte tyme to be



widwe and wedde" (123: 925-28). Unfortunately for the knight, the women's answers differ. As the knight's fate hastily closes in on him, "he saugh upon a daunce go/ Of ladies foure and twenty and yet mo;/ Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,/ In hope that som wisdom sholde he lerne" (124: 991-94). As he approaches the dancing women, they disappear and he is left facing a hideous looking old hag, "A fouler wight ther may no man devyse" (125: 999). After a momentary explanation of the knight's dilemma, the hag confidently claims to know the answer to what women most desire and insists that the knight vow to repay her when his life is spared by the queen. He complies: "Have heer my trouthe,' quode the knight, 'I grant'" (125:113). Standing before the court his voice echoed: "My lige lady, generally, quode he,/ Wommen desyren to have sovereyntee/ As wel over hir housbond as hir love,/ And for to been in maistrie him above" (125: 137-40). As we anticipated, knowing the teller, the knight has precisely reiterated everything Alisoun has stated about what women most desire: to dominate their husbands.

To the queen's delight, the knight has answered correctly. According to the hag, the queen, and the women of the court, women most desire sovereignty and mastery over their husbands. As the knight exhales a deep sigh of relief for being alive and free, the hag turns to the knight and asks him to take her as his wife. Absolutely mortified, he pleads with her to take his goods and property in place of his body, but the hag declines, insisting, "For thogh that I be foul and old and pore,/ I nolde for al the metal ne for ore/ That under erthe is grave or lyth above/ But if thy wyf I were, and eek thy love" (126: 1063-66). Because of his *trouthe*, his binding agreement to the hag, the knight has no other option but to cede to her will. This is poetic justice because the beginning of this tale opens with the knight forcing himself upon a virgin maiden, and

although it was entirely against the maiden's will, the knight may be experiencing feelings similar to that of the maiden by being forced to act against his desire.

On the eve of their wedding night, the knight insists that his wife is too old, grotesque, and low-born to be considered desirable. While she ponders his opinion, the wife strategically applies her aged wisdom, and challenges the knight to choose one of two ideas: one of woman's virtue and one of woman's beauty (Cooper 158):

To han me foul and old til that I deye  
 And be to yow a trewe humble wyf,  
 And nevere yow displeas in al my lyf,  
 Or ells ye wol han me yong and fair,  
 And take youre aventure of the repair. (130: 1220-24)

Contemplating whether to choose a wife who is old and true or one who is young and deceitful, the knight replies, "My lady and my love, and wyf so dere,/ I put me in youre wyse governance:/ Cheseth youreself which may be most pleasance" (130: 1230-32). The hag responds, "Thanne have I gete of you maistrie, quode she,/ Syn I may ches and governe as me lest?" (130: 1236-37). In return for offering his wife maistrie, the hag grants the knight the good parts of both options: "For by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe,/ This is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good" (130: 1240-42); the wife became both beautiful and true, and together "they lived unto hir lyves ende/ In parfit joye" (130: 1257-58). Once again, as it appears in both the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, when a husband yields to his wife, the wife is transformed into an even more generous and kind version of herself, not to mention beautiful, thus reinforcing the overall benefit to the husband and therefore the marriage.

The Wife's tale stresses the ideas of mastery and sovereignty insofar as not only being the answer to what women most desire, but also in that the hag offers the knight the power to choose the type of wife he prefers, and in doing so, he bows respectfully to her, offering his wife the ultimate decision. Although the tale concludes with both spouses surrendering to each other and thus living in perfect joy, is the idea of a built-in tension worth considering? Because men possess maistrie to begin with, is there an ever-present possibility that the knight and therefore other husbands can merely take back the maistrie whenever they want? If this is the case, then the process of tension, yielding, and bliss with the possibility of tension recurring is probable.

Alisoun's voice in the prologue sounds similar to the hag's voice in the tale, with the exception that the tale specifically states, "And she obeyed him in every thing/ that mighte doon him pleasance or lyking" (130: 1255-56). Although the knight willingly granted the hag complete maistrie, she reciprocated the generous act by becoming an obedient wife, which is a surprisingly new strategy in the gender-power struggle. Critic Helen Cooper states, "The Wife of Bath choosing to end her tale in mutual bliss, and doubling maistrie with obedience, presents a view on marriage that is cohesive to the ending of the *Clerk's Tale* as well as the view presented in the *Franklin's Tale*" (163). Is it possible that the Wife of Bath inserted obedience at the end of her Tale as a way to win over her primarily male audience? Among the twenty-nine pilgrims, twenty-six of them are men. Since it was a patriarchal society, would it have been acceptable to conclude the tale with the hag possessing absolute dominance? Or does Alisoun genuinely believe that yielding to your loved one offers more good in a marriage than not? Reverting back to her haggish spirit, Alisoun closes her tale with the following prayer:

Jesu Crist us send

Housbondes meke, yonge, and fresshe abedde,

And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde.

And eek I preye Jesu shorte hir lyves

That nocht wol be governed by hir wyves. (130: 1258-62)

As it relates to marriage, the Wife of Bath remains constant as to what women most desire: abundant sex, money, and power, and she demonstrates in her life and her tale, that not only are women capable of dominating within their marriages, but also that husbands benefit from a domineering yet paradoxically obedient wife, resulting in a blissful marriage.

Critic Margaret Hallissy argues, "While the Wife of Bath described in detail the tactics she used to obtain and maintain domestic sovereignty, the Clerk describes the opposite situation: a marriage in which a husband dominates his wife to the point that she has no will of her own" (156). I agree that Alisoun overtly challenged male authority and sought out marital dominance; however, I will argue that Grisilde also *obtained* control over her husband, through her inexhaustible saintly patience and stubborn obedience. In the *Clerk's Tale*, Grisilde appears to be the antithesis to the Wife of Bath; however, she progressively proves her sovereignty in the gender-power struggle through her steadfastness and willing loyalty, despite her husband's relentless tests. Although at first glance Grisilde appears to lack dignity and strength, she disproves this by the close of the Tale through her unyielding obedience toward Walter, her unwavering fortitude, and above all her ability to cause Walter to capitulate.

Walter is of the highest lineage, "The gentilleste y-born of Lumbardye," and is also recognized for his "honour" and "curteisye" (156: 71-4). Being the noble marquis of Saluces, he was pressured by his liegemen to marry and produce an heir. Initially ridiculing the idea, "To that I never erst thoghte streyne me./ I me rejoysed of my libertee/ That selde tyme is founde in mariage;/ Ther I was free, I moot been in servage" (157: 144-47), Walter believed that by

becoming married, he would be forced to choose servitude over freedom. However, wanting to please his people, he determines to marry, but chooses a peasant girl, Grisilde: "But for to speke of virtuous beautee,/ Than was she oon the fairest under sonne;/for povreliche y-fostred up was she,/ No likerous lust was thurgh hire herte y-ronne" (159: 211-14). Walter chooses Grisilde for he believes she has never experienced a lustful desire in her heart and also because of "her *wommanhede and vertu*, all visible through her abject poverty" (Cooper 196). It is interesting to ponder why a man of noble rank would desire to produce an heir with a peasant woman, and furthermore, why does Walter speak of Grisilde as if, she is in fact, noble?

Although unnecessary to seek the approval of Grisilde's father (he is Walter's feudal subordinate and therefore inferior to Walter), Walter requests his approval out of mere formality (Hallissy 158). Walter claims he "wol *æxe* if it hire wille be/ To be my wyf," (162: 326-27); however, when he approaches Grisilde, he *asserts*, "It lyketh to your fader and to me/ That I yow wedde, and eek it may so stonde,/ As I suppose, ye wol that it so be" (195: 345-47). As opposed to asking for Grisilde's hand in marriage, he "acts as feudal master" (Cooper 195), and assumes that she will comply. Grisilde unequivocally assents to Walter:

Lord, undigne and unworthy  
 Am I to thilke honour that ye me bede;  
 But as ye wol yourself, right so wol I.  
 And heer I swere that nevere willingly  
 In werk ne thought I nil yow disobeye,  
 For to be deed, though me were looth to deye. (163: 359-64)

By doing so, she vows to comply obediently with all of Walter's wishes. It appears as though Grisilde is affirming Walter's sovereign rank above her. She is, and yet it is important to note that "according to the terms of Medieval marriage vows, all wives promised to obey, [thus] to

rule their own wills after the wills of their husbands (Hallissy 158). Therefore, by vowing to abide by Walter's will, Grisilde is merely adhering to the medieval conventions of her time. And although Grisilde's, Alisoun's, and the Hag's paths to marriage may vary greatly, the model of tension, yielding, and bliss (with the promise of more tension) is present throughout.

Grisilde's noble spirit was effortlessly embraced by her people: "And so discreet and fair of eloquence,/So benign and so digne of reverence,/ And coude so the peoples herte embrace,/ That ech hire lovede that loked on hir face" (164: 410-13). Managing both her domestic and diplomatic responsibilities, Grisilde proved being born into poverty did not equate to lacking inherent *gentillesse*: the independence of virtue from social rank that the Hag talks about at great length (Cooper 196). In addition to upholding her responsibilities, "she a doughter hath y-bore" (165: 443). Shortly after the arrival of their daughter, Walter devised a plan to prove his maistrie and test his wife: "This markis in his herte longeth so,/ To tempte his wyf, hir sadnesse for to knowe" (165: 451-52). Walter monstrously proceeded to test Grisilde's steadfastness by coercing her to hand over their daughter, suggesting that she could not be the future heir to the throne. Insisting that this was the request of his people, "I moot don with thy doghter for the beste,/ Nat as I wolde but as my peple leste" (166: 489-90), Grisilde responded without judgment as she vowed she would: "She noght ameved/ Neither in word or chere or countenaunce;/ For as it seemed, she was nat agreved" (165: 498-500). Without objection, she obediently handed over their daughter, despite her aching heart, proving to Walter her loyalty, constancy, and obedience.

Two years after the birth of their son, Walter felt inspired to test Grisilde's "paciencie" a second time: "This markis caught yet another lest/ To tempte his wyf yet offer, if he may" (170: 619-20). Walter proceeded to torment Grisilde, insisting this time that their child was unworthy to be the heir to the throne because of his lowly bloodline. According to Walter, he overheard his

people admit, "Whan Walter is agoon,/ Thanne shal the blood of Janicle succeed" (170: 631-32). Janicle is Grisilde's humble father and so not only is Walter demanding that Grisilde abandon their second and only child but he is also unabashedly insulting Grisilde's bloodline. Although Grisilde responds by allowing Walter the freedom to do as he wishes while collectedly maintaining her composure, "Al your plesaunce ferme and stable I holde;/ For wiste I that my death wolde do yow ese,/ Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plese" (171: 663-65), she weakens Walter by causing him to become increasingly more curious as to whether or not Grisilde truly possesses the ability to remain steadfast and loving toward him:

This markis wondreth evere lenger the more  
 Upon hir pacience, and if that he  
 Ne hadde soothly knowen ther-bifore  
 That parfitly hir children loved she,  
 He wolde have wend that of som subtiltee,  
 And of malice or for cruel corage,  
 That she had suffred this with sad visage. (171:687-93)

Knowing the vile demands he has exacted on his wife, Walter questions whether or not Grisilde's heart has remained unchanged. Hume states that although "total wifely obedience to a husband who was conceived as her lord was the conventional ideal, the corollary of this was that [he] was supposed to treat his wife with tenderness and love, looking after her, advising her and rebuking her only mildly" (19). Walter not only strays far from this marital agreement but his curiosity regarding Grisilde's unwavering loyalty has him scheming even further: "What coude a sturdy housbond more devyse/ To preve hir wyfhod and hir stedfastnesse,/ And he continuing evere in sturdinesse" (172: 698-700). Appearing obsessed by wanting to prove her inability to remain lovingly constant and obedient, is it possible that there is a strange battle of stubbornness

taking place within this tale? Is Walter wanting to out-stubborn Grisilde, or is it possible that Grisilde is attempting to do the same to Walter?

Ironically, a once-beloved noble marquis, Walter's actions against Grisilde have become a rising concern for his people, "But ther ben folk of swich condicioun/ That, whan they have a certein purpose take,/ They can nat stinte of hire entencioun" (172: 701-03), for even they realize his actions are unjust. As time passes, "He waiteth if by word or contenance/ That she to him was changed of corage,/ But never coude he finde variance:/ She was ay oon in herte and in visage" (172: 708-11). The fact that Grisilde's love proves to be consistent and unwavering is still not enough for Walter. He insists on subjecting Grisilde to what he believes to be the ultimate test of love and steadfastness: "To the uttereste preve of hir corage,/ Fully to han experience and lore/ If that she were as steadfast as before" (174: 787-89). Following twelve years of marriage, he sought out the pope and had their marriage annulled, stating that it was "To stinte rancor and dissencioun/ Bitwixe his peple and him" (173: 747-48). Announcing that their rupture was for the well-being of his people, Walter cruelly sends Grisilde home, wearing the the same "smok" she arrived in before they were wed (176:890). He also goes on to inform her that he has already found another woman to marry, a woman of "grete estaat" (177:925). Proving her saintly patience yet again, Grisilde accepts Walter's explanation and expresses no sign of indignation.

Soon after Grisilde returns to her village, Walter requests that Grisilde return to the palace and prepare for the wedding festivities for she knows better than anyone else his preferences and tastes. She freely obliges. Upon meeting Walter's new wife, Grisilde graciously greets them by saying, "A fairer say I nevere noon than she" (180: 1033). More astounding than her sincere flattery to Walter's new wife, were the words that followed:



O thing biseke I yow, and warne also,  
 That ye ne prikke with no tormenting  
 This tendre mayden, as ye han don mo.  
 For she is fostred in hire norishinge  
 More tendrely, and to my supposing,  
 She coude nat adversitee endure  
 As coude a povre fostred creature (180: 1037-43)

For the first time, Grisilde steps out of character by speaking up, and directly addresses Walter and the ways in which he tormented her, warning him not to do the same to his new wife, for she is not a peasant and can therefore not endure such severe treatment. In addition, she has proven to Walter precisely what we have known about Grisilde from the beginning, her goodness is unwavering. Furthermore, Grisilde's address to Walther reveals that she did not accept his torture blindly but was in fact consciously aware of his iniquities. Did Grisilde out-stubborn Walter in the end? His reaction to her speaking up suggests its possibility as his cruel (stern) heart did turn (180: 1049):

"This is ynogh, Grisilde myn," quod he,  
 Be now namore agast ne yvel apayed;  
 I have thy faith and thy bebenignitee,  
 As wel as ever womman was, assayed.  
 In greet estaat , and povreliche arrayed,  
 Now knowe I, dere wyf, thy stedfastnesse,  
 And hir in armes took and gan hire kesse. (180: 1051-57)

As Walter declares *this is enough* a whirlwind of events unfolds and Grisilde's life is amended entirely. Walter professes his unwavering loyalty to her: "Thou art my wife, ne noon other I

have,/ Ne never hadde, as God my soulesave!" (181:1063-64); he safely returns their children to her, "This is thy doghter which thou hast supposed/ To be my wyf; The other faithfully/ Shal be myn heir, as I have ay disposed;/ Thou bare him in thy body trewely" (181: 1065-68), and Grisilde is reinstated, "And strepen hire out of hire rude array,/ And in a cloth of gold that brighte shoon,/ With a croune of many a riche stoon/ Upon hire heed, they into halle hire broghte" (181: 1116-19). Walter's elation is proof of his surrender, for he has finally accepted his wife's noble spirit and loyal self without further question. By doing so, he has willingly relinquished control and positioned Grisilde as the dominant figure. While Walter inflicted a number of relentless trials upon Grisilde, she proved her ability to "do Walter's job rather better than he [could]" (Cooper 199), by remaining steady as a rock throughout, unlike Walter, who grew more and more paranoid. Furthermore, although Walter was initially of higher "estaaat," Grisilde proved to be a better leader than Walter and, therefore, once married, would presumably out do him. Because of Grisilde's stubborn obedience, constancy, and use of her voice, she weakened Walter's ability to hurt her, ultimately resulting in his loss of power while simultaneously increasing hers. In the end, it is Grisilde who has been entirely transformed from peasant girl to royalty. Furthermore, even though Alisoun of Bath, the Hag, and Grisilde differ immensely in their approaches to obtaining maistrie and soverayntee within their marriages, this tale too ends in "bliss," with both spouses surrendering to one another. If this tale is to be considered as a battle of the wills, Grisilde holds out longer and in the process shows she is not only able to do Walter's job but that she is also stronger and therefore the dominant marital figure.

Interestingly, just as Chaucer inserted the idea of obedience upon the closing of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, he does something similar in the *Clerk's Tale*. By highlighting Walter's

abominable subjection of women, specifically in his marriage to Grisilde, he may have consequently provoked a moral attack on the entire patriarchal system at the time (Cooper, 199). Certainly, no one can definitively answer how Chaucer regarded medieval gender traditions, but is his text asking his readers to consider a potentially different ideology, one in which women have a voice? Alisoun insists that “sovereignty is not something to be acknowledged by right, but power that any woman can win by force, by guile, by maistrie” (Green, 21); however, Grisilde proves that a wife can achieve sovereignty through stubborn obedience and constancy. Is the effect of the text to make us recall Alisoun’s vocal frustrations regarding the misogynistic system in which she lives? And should we ask ourselves what would excite a man of noble rank to cruelly inflict grief and torment on his loving and saintly wife? Is Chaucer’s text covertly promoting women and their right to be considered a dominant figure within marriage? Should wives be granted an opportunity to be a central authority both physically and financially, while still maintaining obedience? Or is this yet another form of patriarchal chauvinism, where the men get what they want – an obedient and beautiful wife, since they had the authority to begin with and therefore can take it back? When considering the precarious balance of tension, yielding, and bliss that occurs within these marriages, it is evident that the marriages improve when the husbands yield control to their wives, but also when the wives yield to their husbands. Bliss is not achieved until the tension between spouses results in both spouses yielding to one another; therefore it is not evident at this point whether Chaucer’s stance is feminist or misogynistic.

According to Kittredge, the *Franklin’s Tale* represents a resolution to the extremes of maistrie and soverayntee between the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and the *Clerk’s Tale*, providing a seemingly balanced and equal arrangement. Dorigen and her noble husband, Arveragus have a recipe for marriage that may seem highly unconventional at the time:

Of his free wil he swoor hire as a knight,  
 That nevere in al his lyf he, day ne night,  
 Ne sholde upon him take no maistrie  
 Agayn hir wil, ne kythe hire jalousie,  
 But hire obeye and folwe hir wil in al  
 As any love to his lady shal. (213: 745-50)

Arveragus promises never to take on mastery over Dorigen nor go against her will, but instead advises her to remain true to her own will in all that she does. This approach to marriage, where the husband immediately yields to his wife, is contrary the other two tales. In fact, Arveragus believes mastery forces love away, "Whan maistrie comth, the God of love anon/ Beteth hise winges, and farewell, he is gon!" He also concurs with Alisoun's view: "Wommen of kinde desiren libertee" reinforcing the idea that women desire to be free but also stating that men do, too: "And so do men, if I soth seven shal" (214: 765-70). Dorigen continues to embrace this ideal as she swears to never be deficient in her love, "that nevere sholde ther be defaute in here" (214: 790). Thus Dorigen and Arveragus both agree that "there is a need for marriage to be an equal partnership" (Cooper 234); that both men and women like to be free, and that dominance destroys love. As it appears, neither Dorigen nor Arveragus possesses any kind of maistrie or sovereignty over the other.

Unlike the other two tales which end in wedded bliss, *The Franklin's Tale* begins with it, "Where as he liveth in blisse and in solas./ Who coude telle, but he hadde wedded be,/ The joye, the ese, and the prosperitee/ That is bitwixe an housbonde and his wyf" (215: 802-05).

Immediately, we recognize that the existing model of tension and yielding which has led to marital bliss throughout the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale* is not being applied here. However, we just as quickly identify an obstruction in the model when Arveragus is discharged

to Engeland, and for the first time, Dorigen and Arveragus are forced to live divided thus replacing bliss with tension. Because of this painful separation, Dorigen suffers terribly, "She moorneth, waketh, wayleth, fasteth, pleyne" (215: 819) and remains inconsolable until finally her friends convince her to accompany them alongside the seashore. Little did they know that this walk would in fact deepen her sorrow, as she becomes fixated on the "grisly rokkes blake" (216:859), and fears they represent an evil that will inevitably prevent her husband from safely returning home. As the tale continues, the bliss that was originally shared between Dorigen and Arveragus has quickly dissolved into darkness.

Aware of Dorigen's increasing distress, her friends "Shopen for to pleyen somewhere ells" and take her to various rivers, springs, and other pleasant places, where they dance and play games (217: 896-900). Among one of the places was an alluring garden, where Dorigen met Aurelius, a "yong, strong, right virtuous, and riche and wys" squire who was "wel beloved, and holden in gret prys" (217: 933-34). Apparently, this adoring squire had loved Dorigen for years but refrained from professing his affection for fear of rejection, "Aurelius,/ Hadde loved hire best of any creature/ Two yeer and more, as washis aventure,/ But never dorste he telle hire his grevaunce" (217: 938-41). According to Hallissy, by attending this garden party, Dorigen violates the customary "seclusion appropriate to a woman whose husband is away" (199); however, Hume rebuts Hallissy, suggesting that Dorigen's "private and public faces required a balance of hierarchy and equality" (20). Therefore, Hallissy's ideal of seclusion may have been at odds with another ideal about a wife's public role. In Dorigen's case, however, regardless of motive, she puts herself in an extremely precarious situation with Aurelius. Pining for her, "Heere at your feet God wolde that I were grave!/ I ne have as now no leyser more to seye:/ Have mercy, swete, or ye wol do me deye!" Aurelius professes his undying affection for

Dorigen. Immediately appalled, Dorigen replies, “By thilke God that yaf me soule and lyf,/ Ne shal I nevere been untrewed wyf” (218: 976-84). However, her initial shock flees rather abruptly when just moments after pledging her loyalty as a wife, Dorigen’s language shifts. Perhaps because she feared Arveragus could not return safely home, Dorigen playfully suggests to Aurelius, “Ye remove alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,/ That they ne lette ship ne boot to goon— / Thanne wol I love yow best of any man;/ Have heer my trouthe, in al that evere I can” (219:993-98). Although she coquettishly promises Aurelius her love if he successfully removes the black rocks, he takes her literally, further increasing the danger taking place within this garden of paradise.

Although the husband, Arveragus is away in Engelond, there is evidence of a gender-power struggle taking place between Dorigen and Aurelius. Dorigen has delivered an enticing proposal to a young, handsome man who yearns for her. The struggle taking place is Aurelius’s desire for a married woman’s love where as Dorigen’s desire is to have the black rocks permanently removed. Ironically, just as Dorigen originally believed the rocks to be the heaviest threat to her blissful marriage with Arveragus, it is precisely their continued existence that will protect the stability of their sacrament (Cooper 199). Her state of distress regarding the rocks or her hidden desire regarding the squire, has led Dorigen to make a significant error in judgment, offering Aurelius an opportunity to claim her as his love. With Arveragus momentarily out of the picture, Dorigen appears to maintain the highest authority in the tale thus far because no one is controlling her. She is essentially in control of herself and therefore maintains sovereignty.

After two years away from one another, Arveragus returns home and the merry couple are once again united. Unbeknownst to them, however, Aurelius took Dorigen’s proposition to remove the rocks to heart, and met with a clerk who practiced “magik naturel” (222:1125),

agreeing to pay him to forge an illusion that made the black rocks disappear. When the illusion was prepared, Aurelius rushed to Dorigen and showed her the “nonexistent” rocks.

Dumbfounded, Dorigen swelled with dread, “Allas! That evere this sholde happe! For wende I nevere, by possibilitee, That swich a monster or merveille might be! It is agayns the process of nature” (227: 1342-45). Overcome with grief, Dorigen considered death or dishonor as her two possible resolutions to her crisis: “Save only deeth or ells dishonor” (227: 1358). After days of heavy lamenting, believing that honor was more valuable than dishonor, she decides to kill herself. “I wol conclude that it is bet for me/ To sleen myself than been defouled thus./ I wol be trewe unto Arveragus” (228: 1422-24), for to be untrue to Arveragus would be shameful.

However, her profound feelings of conviction dissipate, and instead, she surrenders her will unto her husband, leaving him to determine her fate. Arveragus declares, “For God so wisly have mercy on me,/ But if ye sholde youre trouthe kepe and save./ Trouthe is the hyeste thing that man may kepe” (229: 1475-79). He insists that Dorigen keep her word to Aurelius and, similar to the knight with the hag, follow through with her *trouth*, their binding agreement.

At this point, it is unclear as to who possesses maistrie in the marriage, Dorigen or Arveragus. Dorigen spends a considerable amount of time lamenting and claiming to want to kill herself, but ultimately offers Arveragus the right to decide whether or not she should have sex with Aurelius. Arveragus, on the other hand, decides to allow Aurelius a night with his wife and then upon making that decision threatens Dorigen’s life if she ever revealed the truth.

Considering that all of this is taking place because of a mere illusion that the rocks have vanished, leads me to question the entire *Franklin's Tale*, especially as it relates to the original recipe of marriage devised by Dorigen and Arveragus to begin with, but even furthermore, as being a resolution to the marriage debate. Was their wedded bliss in the beginning an illusion? It

appears as though once again the precarious recipe of tension and yielding is necessary in order for a marriage to achieve a blissful state. Certainly, as it relates to Alisoun, the Hag, and Grisilde, each of these wives maintained a higher authority within their marriages, ultimately resulting in a blissful ending, and although this tale begins in bliss, it leads to a wife irrationally wanting to commit suicide and to a rather confused and hypocritical husband. Who then, possesses the mastery and sovereignty in the *Franklin's Tale*?

As Dorigen approaches Aurelius in the garden of paradise, he is touched by Arveragus's willingness to maintain his wife's truth and hold her to her word. Because of Arveragus's perceived generosity, the end of this tale concludes with a blissful assemblage of yielding to one another. Dorigen and Arveragus yield to each another, Aurelius yields to Dorigen, and the clerk yields to Aurelius, signifying a happy ending, and interestingly, a significant lack of accountability from each one of them. Arveragus is not faced with having allowed his wife to commit adultery, Dorigen is freely forgiven for promising herself to another man while her husband was away, Aurelius does not have to deal with the repercussions of attempting to fornicate with a married man's wife, and the clerk is a hero for not collecting money on an immoral agreement to begin with. Insisting that his wife forgo chastity in place of truth may have been likely during the Middle Ages; however, is Arveragus so noble to do such a thing? He insists that their marriage be equal yet threatens her life if she discloses any information about her wantonness. What is even more curious is that Kittredge, who argues the *Franklin's Tale* as being a resolution to the marriage debate, never discusses Arveragus's threat. For if he did, how could he possibly support his own argument? In addition, what if Dorigen meant what she said to Aurelius? In her defense, she never knew for certain whether Arveragus would ever return home safely. Therefore, amid the lovely garden, presented with an opportunity to innocently engage



with a handsome and well respected squire, she seized it. Dorigen has already proven to us through her pre-existing marital arrangement that she does not abide by medieval conventions, strikingly similar to Alisoun of Bath. Perhaps she was merely entertaining Arveragus's wishes to "folwe hir wil in al". Furthermore, she never rejected Aerilius, which could easily imply that she very well may have been considering the idea of a rendezvous. By leaving the decision up to her "noble husband," she yields to him and also relieves herself of accountability altogether. Pressuring Arveragus to make a decision, he chose to share his wife with another man on the basis of "trouth." Arveragus goes on to insist that Dorigen keep their secret tightly concealed: "To no wit tel thou of this aventure" (230:1483). To insist that she tell "no person" about her situation suggests that his intention is to protect his reputation, and that he may be more willing to adhere to medieval conventions than he led on in the beginning of the tale, when he stated that "the God of love anon" if mastery were ever to enter the picture. Therefore, does this support the idea that according to the status quo, a man can indeed take back maistrie at once? As the *Franklin's Tale* concludes, it is evident that Dorigen was granted permission by her husband to fornicate with a young, handsome, intelligent, rich squire, without facing any condemnation. Who, therefore, possesses dominance upon the close of this tale? I confidently claim that the wife does! Although the yielding in this Tale is obscure, Dorigen's triumph is based on the fact that not only did her husband return home safely despite the rocky shoreline, but also, that she was allowed to have sex with Aerilius, indicating a "have your cake and eat it too" scenario. If there is need for more reason why Dorigen concludes the Tale victorious, it is that she and Arveragus end the Tale where they began, in marital bliss.

As we have journeyed through three of the tales that encompass the 'Marriage Group', the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the *Clerk's Tale*, and the *Franklin's Tale*, we can conclude that a

detectable pattern is taking place within them: one where tension, yielding, and wedded bliss occur. These *Tales* demonstrate that when husbands' yield control to their wives, the marriage becomes more harmonious and, therefore, blissful for the husbands insofar as the wives become more obedient and beautiful. Tensions are prevalent early on in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale*; however, the *Franklin's Tale* begins in wedded bliss, but spirals into a webbed catastrophe, only to be relieved by tension and surrender, proving tension to be an essential element of marriage. Is it necessary, however, to limit my argument to tales that only exist within the Marriage Group? Challenging this process of tension, yielding, and bliss with a tale outside of the marriage debate, I will investigate Chaucer's first tale, narrated by his champion pilgrim, the knight. The heroine in the *Knight's Tale*, Emelye, appears to have no agency, no will, and no voice (very similar to Grisilde); however, the *Tale* has a rather unexpected outcome.

The *Knight's Tale* "is an elaborate story of epic proportions and courtly love" (Ashton, 45). Similar to the other three tales, the *Knight's Tale* appears to initially support its misogynistic society at the time, specifically as it relates to men objectifying women; however, exploring the tale more deeply will reveal areas where Chaucer's text may suggest the possibility that medieval beliefs be reconsidered within marriage. However, before we delve into the tensions taking place within the *Knight's Tale*, it is necessary to first address another significant element of the plot, *fate*. Throughout the Middle Ages, before Christianity and the hope for an "everlasting" paradise, was the image of the goddess *Fortuna* and her "ever-lasting" wheel. It was believed that men "striving for worldly advancement," were envisioned as climbing onto Fortuna's wheel. If one were so lucky as to reach the top of the wheel, it symbolized success. However, Fortuna was a woman (changeable by nature), and therefore, could spontaneously spin

her wheel at any time, and change a man's fate at once. Hence, a belief system was adopted where success was merely a "brief and transitory interlude of joy before inevitable woe" (Hallissy 55). The conclusion of the *Knight's Tale*, therefore, relies heavily on fate as well as courtly love, and on a sovereign heroine, Emelye, who may appear to accept or reject medieval conventions.

The *Knight's Tale* begins with the noble duke of Athens, Theseus, having just overthrown the Amazons, the kingdom of women: "What with his wisdom and his chivalrye,/ He conquered al the regne of Femenye" (23: 865-66). Hume describes the Amazons as "women who were uniquely distinguished by their rejection of male control" (137), indicating that these women were utterly self-sufficient. Hippolyta was their former queen, and Emelye is her sister. Upon conquering the Amazons, Theseus returned to Athens with his bride, Hippolyta, and Emelye:

That whilom was y-cleped Scithia,  
 And wedded the queen Ipolita,  
 And broghte hire hoom with him in his contree,  
 With muchel glorie and greet solempnitee,  
 And eek hire yonge suster Emelye.  
 And thus with victorie and with melodye  
 Lete I this noble duk to Athens ryde,  
 And al his hoost, in armes, him bisyde. (23: 867-874)

Although it appears as though Theseus is a boasting brute as he showcases his two trophies, according to medieval conventions, "several marriages [were] made in an attempt to achieve peace between warring lords" (Hume, 134). One might argue that Theseus is actually promoting

peace by uniting two opposing forces, Athens and the Amazons. Looking at it from a sense that manifests in both literature and the real world, marriage is a way of ending war. Uniting as husband and wife, Hippolyta and Theseus have become much more powerful. "Such alliances might consolidate land allowing families to create united estates, and might also put an end to feuds over disputed land claims" (Hume, 15). In addition, it is important to note, that although Hippolyta as an Amazon presumably rejected men, there is no proof throughout the *Knight's Tale* that she resisted marrying Theseus. Furthermore, because Emelye shares the same Amazonian bloodline as Hippolyta and is also a virgin, that is, she rejects men, she appears to be the most sovereign character in the *Knight's Tale* thus far.

Just as Theseus conquered the Amazons, he did the same to Creon, of Thebes. As the villagers stripped clean the defeated men, "two yonge knightes, ligginge by and by,/ Bothe in oon armes, wrought ful richely,/ Of whiche two, Arcita highte that oon,/ And that other knight highte Palamon" (26: 1011-14). Cousins, Arcite and Palamon, were found lying side by side, both wearing the same coat of arms. Although they were wounded and feeble, Theseus returned them to Athens, imprisoning them indefinitely. A year passed as Arcite and Palamon remained locked in a tower. Free to roam within its chambers, Palamon looked out onto the gardens below and, "He cast his eye upon Emelye,/ And therwithal he bleynte and cryde "A!"/ As though he stongen were unto the herte" (28: 1077-79). Believing he had been struck in the eye and then into his heart, he informed his cousin that he had just seen an image of a woman or goddess, in the garden below. According to Hallissy, "Palamon's explanation of his love-injury reflects a medieval belief about falling in love upon first sight of the beloved (58). However, it is quite possible for more than one person to fall in love with the same lady. Therefore, just as Palamon confesses his love for Emelye, Arcite discovers her as well, "And with that sighte hir beautee

hurte him so,/ That, if that Palamon was wounded sore,/ Arcite is hurt as muche as he, or more<sup>37</sup> (29: 1114-16). As this epic tale carries on, these two men, rooted in blood, go head to head, both declaring their love for Emelye to be truer than the other.

Seven years pass, and Arcite and Palamon have independently been freed from their tower, but remain painfully imprisoned by their love for Emelye. Crossing paths in a deep forest, the two blood-brothers vow to return the next morning to battle one another for Emelye's love. Just as they are about to kill each other, Theseus enters the forest and addresses them, demanding they explain their trespassing. Hearing their love for Emelye, and also that they are his prisoners, Theseus declares: "This is a short conclusioun./ Youre owne mouth, by your confessioun,/ Hath dampned you, and I wol it recorde;/ It nedeth nought to pyne yow with the corde./ Ye shul be deed, by mighty Mars the rede!" (42: 1742-47). Just as he insists they die, Hippolyta bursts into tears with Emelye immediately following, pleading to let them live. Similar to the *Wife of Bath's Tale* where the king yields to the queen and her court of women, Theseus yields to the lamenting women, and suggests a tournament take place in order to determine who is worthy of marrying Emelye. Not only have Arcite and Palamon been freed from their prison, but they have freely professed their love for Emelye and have thus been granted an opportunity to rightfully fight for her. Although this appears as though the men possess control, Emelye is still a virgin for at least another year (which turns into several years) and that chastity grants her maistrie and sovereignty over the men.

As tensions rise, so do the elaborate walls and statues for this medieval competition, lavishly illustrated with carvings and paintings of the gods and goddesses they are dedicated to. Theseus has chosen Venus, the goddess of love, Mars, the god of war, and Diana, the goddess of

chastity to be honored. The night before the battle, Arcite prays for a battle victory to Mars, Palamon prays for Emelye's love to Venus, and interestingly, Emelye prays to Diana:

Chaste goddesse, wel wostow that I  
 Desire to been a mayden al my lyf,  
 Ne never wol I be no love ne wyf.  
 I am, thou woost, yet of thy companye,  
 A mayde, and love hunting and venerye,  
 And for to walken in the wodes wilde,  
 And noight to been a wyf and be with childe. (54: 2304-10)

As Emelye attempts to associate herself with goddess Diana, explaining how she is chaste like her, and prefers to be like the Amazons, wild and free, without a husband or child, Diana responds with fire, indicating that Emelye will in fact marry either Arcite or Palamon.

Considering Palamon mistook Emelye for a possible goddess in the garden, it is noteworthy that Diana is making it evident to Emelye that she is *not* a goddess and that she is a woman and so her fate will be to surrender and marry a noble man, just as her sister did. The theatre fills and the competition is underway. Just as Arcite requested, he wins the battle. However, as he approaches Emelye to offer her a dowry, the earth shakes below him, causing him to fall from his horse, to his death. And just like that, goddess Fortuna spun her wheel, ejecting Arcite from *joy* to *woe*, at once. Palamon ends the competition, not as the victor of the battle, but as the victor of love, and *years later*, after sorrowing over Arcite's death, Palamon and Emelye "maken vertu of necessitee" (70: 3041) and marry one another.

The *Knight's Tale* begins like many of Chaucer's tales, where it appears as though he applauds medieval conventions and misogynistic beliefs. I am suggesting, however, that this tale

be read from the point of view of a noble duke, who promotes peace, marries the queen of a female kingdom, and unites their opposing forces for the greater good of all. Acting out of complete convention as a brother-in-law/guardian (Hume, 132), he arranges a noble wedding, insisting that his sister-in-law marry the most worthy knight available. Tying this tale back to marriage and sovereignty, tension and yielding, I argue that Emelye is the most sovereign character throughout this tale. Why is this so? At each point she is the powerful one: She begins the tale with noble blood as a sister to the queen of the Amazons, Hippolyta. She becomes the sister-in-law to the duke of Athens, Theseus. Palamon mistakes her for a goddess in the garden and throughout the entire tale she is sublimely elevated, distancing herself from Arcite and Palamon. Having said all of this, there is yet another point, essential for this medieval heroine to be considered most sovereign, and that is her unwavering virginity. In agreeing to Theseus's request that she marry Palamon, Emelye does yield to Theseus and Palamon; however, she remains a virgin throughout the entire tale which lasted for several years, hence remaining in complete control of her body, and thus maintaining Emelye's sovereign status. And in the end, "he hir serveth so gentilly" (71: 3104); Palamon serves Emelye, relinquishing all dominance and authority. "For now is Palamon in alle wele,/ Living in blisse, in richesse, and in hele,/ And Emelye him loveth so tenderly" (71: 3101-03). Stepping outside of the Marriage Group with the *Knight's Tale*, it too suggests a precarious balance of tension and yielding, as we have identified throughout the other marriages, as being essential to a marriage ending in bliss.

In Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a heavily controversial gender-power debate occurs within four of the tales: the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, the *Clerk's Tale*, the *Franklin's Tale*, and the *Knight's Tale*. Written during a patriarchal, misogynistic time, five wives, Alisoun, the Hag, Grisilde, Dorigen, and Emelye obtain maistrie and soverayntee within

their marriages by experiencing a process of tension, yielding, and bliss. The Wife of Bath initiates the debate by proclaiming to be an expert on “the wo that is in mariage.” In addition, she reveals her truth behind “what women most desire.” Out living five husbands, Alisoun believes she is an expert on the subject of marriage, far more so than any Church Father could possibly be. Challenging medieval conventions, these women apply their heated sexuality, monetary wealth, aged wisdom, pious patience, stubborn obedience, wanton promises, and willingness to yield to obtain dominance within their marriages. Through the cackling voice of the Wife of Bath to the silent steadfastness of Grisilde, I question a former misconceived notion about the *Franklin's Tale*, by arguing that it is not a resolution to the marriage debate but that it is in fact just as controversial, tense, and blissful as the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale*. Furthermore, I challenge my thesis with a tale outside of the Marriage Group, the *Knight's Tale* and argue that however unsettling the truth may be, according to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, when it comes to marriage, tension is and must be present. In addition, it is essential that a husband and wife willingly yield to each other in order to achieve a harmonious and blissful marriage in the end. In a heated battle of the sexes, Chaucer, through his *Canterbury Tales*, not only extends a radical opportunity for women to be considered the possessors of maistrie and soverayntee within marriage, but also unveils a model of marriage, indicating that the best way to deal with marriage is to follow Emelye's lead and accept your fate, for in the end marriage is the same for everyone, suffering through tense times, yielding to one another while still experiencing moments of wedded bliss, however momentary they might be. It is necessary, however, to understand that just as the book of wicked wives can be replaced and the black rocks can easily return, so can a husband retract the phrase *it is enough* or any other surrender of



maistrie. As it relates to the Middle Ages and medieval conventions, according to the status quo, men dominate, and therefore can at anytime potentially *take back what they have given*.

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