

Oxford, New College MS 314 is something of an infamous manuscript among Chaucer scholars. At first glance, MS 314 (c. 1450–70) is a fairly standard copy of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer’s famous unfinished poem. Absent the illuminations and gilding of more celebrated manuscripts such as the Ellesmere, the simple rubrication of MS 314 might even strike readers as plain. However, it takes only a brief page-through to realise that this manuscript is hardly as tight-laced as its stiff binding would suggest. Most obvious is a marginal drawing on the final folio of the *Ræves Tale* in which someone—likely a reader—has depicted the lower half of a female body, complete with detailed pubic hair, emerging between two curious triangular containers.¹ As Carissa Harris has noted, this drawing appears in close proximity to descriptions in the *Ræves Tale* of two women being sexually penetrated. As Harris puts it, ‘a penetrative crux in Chaucer’s text incites another reader to further imagine the transgressive “how” of the sexual encounter in a pornographic creative exercise’.² In this article, I want to briefly explore how another penetrative crux—that in the pear-tree sex scene of the *Merchant’s Tale*—makes demands upon readers of MS 314 in both generative and disturbing ways given a crucial variation in the manuscript related to age.

The drawing of the female pudenda is not the only place in MS 314 where obscenity in Chaucer’s text apparently inspires further obscenities, nor the only instance of readers visualising the logistics of a sex scene through spurious pornographic additions. The manuscript’s text is embellished in various places by non-Chaucerian lines, most prominently in the *Merchant’s Tale* in which fourteen lines are added.³ Like the drawing of the naked woman, these lines focus on the body of a woman—specifically, May, the young wife of the elderly Januarie, who has schemed for her geriatric husband to lift her into a pear tree where she can copulate with her youthful lover, Damyan. The accepted Chaucerian text renders this moment with a blend of coy deference and shocking bodily specificity:

Ladies, I prey yow that ye be nat wrooth;
 I kan nat glose, I am a rude man
 And sodeynly anon this Damyan
 Gan pulle up the smok and yn he throng. (lines 2350–2353)⁴

What follows in most manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* is an abrupt change of perspective: the god Pluto, watching all of this, becomes enraged at May’s adulterous duplicity, and his vengeance narratively interrupts the arboreal coitus (‘And whan that Pluto saugh this grete wrong . . .’ (line 2354)). In short, the ‘throng’ of Damyan’s penis rhymes with the ‘wrong’ of the lovers’ act. Not so in MS 314, in which eight of the fourteen spurious lines appear at this point:

[Gan pulle up the smok and yn he throng]
 A greet tente. a thrifty [and] a long

¹ New College Library, Oxford, MS 314, f. 51r.

² Carissa M. Harris, ‘Inserting “A grete tente, a thrifty, and a] TJ1 06 Tf0.00BT/F2 12 Tf1 0 0 1 37569m12 reW*ñBT/F2 9.96 Tf1 0 0 1 305

These variations have two effects. The first is to exaggerate the humour that Niebrzydowski identifies. How much more absurd to imagine a woman of twenty as useless and past her prime, especially given that at this time it was not uncommon for women to marry in their late twenties, and would likely be pregnant, breastfeeding, and child-rearing through at least the first half of her thirties, provided that she did not die in childbirth.²⁴ The other effect, however, is more questionable on feminist grounds. If we return to the added lines that are also present in MS 314, the age-related variants also mean that the person praising the length and fit of her lover's penis is, *at most*, sixteen years old.

To be clear, sixteen-year-olds in the medieval period and today are fully capable of making

as a literary project, and for deepening our readings of the *Merchant's Tale* as a text intimately concerned with what can and cannot be seen, surmised, and known 'certeyn'.

Immediately apparent when one looks through MS 314 is that the folios on which the added lines and the drawing of the naked female body appear are darker than those in the rest of the manuscript. They have been opened more times, handled by more hands, pored over for more hours. No doubt this is due in part to their uniqueness, but that uniqueness is always intertwined with their suggestive and even pornographic potential. E. Talbot Donaldson once wrote that the *Merchant's Tale* evokes 'a state of nervousness from which only the most resolutely unflappable reader can free himself'.²⁸ This reader is not unflappable, nor does she believe this is a weakness. Rather, the nervousness engendered by the tale's rendition in MS 314 is an important symptom. It might open up possibilities for scribal empowerment of May, but equally to potential scribal and readerly lasciviousness—a version of *pley* that perhaps cleaves closer to Januarie's usage.

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²⁸ E. Talbot Donaldson, 'The Effect of the *Merchant's Tale*', in *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), pp. 30–45, at p. 43, quoted in Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, p. 246.