

An Uncanny May-December Story

by Aaron D. Sommers

Literature provides us with a world full of romance, intrigue and frustrations all mirroring those in the readers' lives. Contrary to the Law of Similar's—propounded by homeopaths—in the area of romance opposites often attract. One surprising example of a so-called May-December marriage is in Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath."¹ Here the title character is forty and he is twenty. One's vivacious, the other's a crank. The wife recognizes the age gap, but also that she has a voracious sexual appetite, "alway a coltes tooth."² The marriage begins well, as they do start in "splendor." Unfortunately, Chaucer notes the age difference is nowhere as deleterious as the difference in personality, which of course does coincide with a difference in age. Perhaps this is a function of a generation gap in the text.

The wife realizes she is married to a man of low earnings, and this does not bother her so much as the fact he yells at her for what I interpreted as her outspokenness. She tears a sheet out of one of his books, symbolizing her efforts to be educated and be proactive, and for this he hits her. The marriage ends as she moves on, unsatisfied financially and intimately.

¹ Gender and romance in Chaucer's Canterbury tales Susan Crane. Princeton Press. 1994.

² The complete works of Geoffrey Chaucer Geoffery Chaucer. Harvard Press. 1903

Also, in "The Miller's Tale," Chaucer depicts the May-December marriage as dangerous. Rarely does it work out for the best. John, a middle-aged carpenter, marries Alison, an eighteen year-old. She is "wilde and young" while he is reserved and older. This marriage starts off uneasy when John wants to contain his wife's unbridled urges. He also realizes that one should wed his equal. Unfortunately, he must compromise and for this decision he pays dearly. Alison sleeps with Nicolas, the young border who is staying in John's house, and John focuses on saving himself instead. He is afraid of an apocalypse, one that Nicholas tells him will happen, and loses sight of his own marriage. While he struggles to prepare for the end times, his wife sleeps with another person, violating the oath of marriage and proving that the union was in name only. Like the title character in the Wife of Bath, the May-December marriage in "Miller's" does not work out; there are too many circumstances to prevent it from being successful.

II.

Importantly, both Margery Kempe and Julian Norwich experienced illness before they became visionary. Kempe's first child was born under excruciating circumstances. She was in great pain during labor, and afterwards she was sick. Her sickness called the attention of a priest who responds to her confessions with great disdain. He yells at her and this appears to exacerbate her pain. Her physical pain seems to lead to a psychological realization. It is that her suffering, from childbirth and afterwards, was a necessary step towards her goal of becoming one with God. Her suffering initiates her first vision, one where she experiences the opposite of

God. She “went out of her mind” and afterwards saw “devils open their mouths, pulling her and hauling her... with great threatening” during this “dread.” Clearly, Kempe first had to suffer both physically and spiritually to understand just how far she was from God and to realize her visions, essential to her mystical experience.

Julian of Norwich also talks of a “bodily sickness” though not necessarily caused by childbirth. However, like Kempe she believes God sent it. Neither mystic is ever the same after the illness. Kempe has visions during and after the pains that give her insight into God. Norwich loses feeling in part of her body and finds that the cross at first increases her suffering as “it had much been occupied with fiends.” Later, she loses her thoughts. Her illness, while debilitating her physically, also takes control of her mind, and it is then she begins to feel better. This turnaround is “a privy working of God,” one that is not found on Earth. Likewise, the visions she has transport her to a different dimension. Like Kempe, Norwich’s illness allows her to transcend this reality and enter a state essential for her mystical union with God.

Kempe thinks sin is her greatest pride because it distances her from God. As a mystic her goal is to become one with God. She has a tendency to enjoy attention. She wears "gold pipes on her head" and makes sure her composure "should be the more staring to men's sight." She has a sexual appetite, and is aware of her power as a woman. She is proud of her upbringing; as her father was a well to do government official. She tells her husband that she deserves the attention of others, and "had full great envy" of others. Instead of being content with what she had, with what God had bestowed on her, she "ever desired more and more." This is dangerous because

pride, to Kempe, is a particular insidious sin. She starts by slandering her husband and then places herself before anyone else. In fact, she realizes it is God whom should be placed before anyone else, and any mystical union is impossible when she is so egoistic.

III.

In Chaucer's "General Prologue" the character of the monk is a hunter. According to the Bible, this is not a pastime of strict religious people nor kind people. He recognizes this; "he yaf nought of that text pulled hen, that saith that hunters been naught holy men." He is mentioned as a person with lust and pleasure, the very opposite of most characterizations of monks, "holy men." With his cavalier attitude, he is still an important churchman, even as he is an inappropriate model. This is a sharp criticism of how those who are deemed most holy can also be the most "reckless."

Also, the friar, a member of a religious order, is traditionally supposed to be a beggar. Yet, he seems greedy, "an esy man to yive penaunce/ ther as he wiste to have good pitaunce." ³The wealthy people in the own as well as women love him; this doesn't sound like an ideal characterization of a person from the church whom is granted exclusive begging rights, one that should be selfless. Indeed, Chaucer criticizes both characters as being selfish and the Church as an institution with ulterior motives.

³ Chaucer's Romance vocabulary
J.E. Mersand.1939.The Comet press

Upon close examination, none of the characters in "The Miller's Tale" are sympathetic. All of them are not understanding of others. When they appear to be, it is for the pursuit of self-interest. The young Nicolas, a person who is learned, is described as "sly and ful privee." He knows how to please a woman and this is because he has tested what he has read about this subject. He is understanding, "sympathetic," only if it means he will be able to please himself.

Likewise, Absolon, is "love sick" but instead of being a womanizer, he attempts to attract a woman by asking her to "have pity" on him. John the Carpenter is one of the least sympathetic characters. He marries a young vivacious woman and wants to hide her from the world. He cannot empathize with her. All of these characters lose sight of what it takes to consider the feelings of others; they worry about their own positions (sexual and otherwise) and never reach any form of sympathy.

During the visit from Julian, Kempe is told to fulfill the will of God. Specifically, Julian advises her to be chaste. Talking about the will of God, she says "he moveth a soul to all chasteness." She says that her body is her temple, and that she must not doubt the motives of God when it comes to these matters. The fits of crying, according to Julian, "torment the Devil." They are signs that God is in her. God "visits a creature with tears, and believes the Holy Ghost is in his soul." Apparently, this is proof Kempe is walking with God. Moreover, Julian advises her to be patient, and to not become discouraged with the faults of the world.

IV.

The Wife of Bath's view of virginity reveals her opinion on another topic that works as a double standard in her society. She notes that "Th'Apostle" speaks of virginity as it applies to women. Why don't men consider it if it is so important? Furthermore, she looks at virginity as a result of an exercise in judgment, not as a "commandment." She said it is not part of marriage. That is something that is not reasonable.

According to the Wife, virginity is considered by some to be a prize.⁴ But to whom? To people who are not married, like the Apostle. Perhaps it is easy to live as a virgin if you are chaste and aspire to be "clene in body and gost." But for the Wife, the concept of virginity cannot be reconciled with her lifestyle. When she is married, she will "bistowe the flour of myn age...in the fruit of marriage." In other words, she will have sex and enjoy the company of men. Still, she does recognize it as "perfection" in the eyes of Christ, but then again, he was not a woman who has the experiences she has.

Margery Kempe makes a deal with her husband. He wants to have sex with her, and her initial response is "I will never grant you..." But later she talks to Jesus who tells her that she no longer fasts "eat and drink as thy husband" she is told. Also, she can go to Jerusalem, pursue the pilgrimage, but also has to pay his debts. In the end, the husband gets the sex, Kempe has him kneel and pray under the cross, and

⁴ English Medieval Romance
W.J. Barron. 1987. Longman Publishing Group

they both eat and drink on a Friday, enjoying themselves. As she says to him "ye shall grant me my desire and ye shall have your desire."

In order to experience God's grace, Julian asks for three gifts. Actually, she prays for them, in order to "feel the blessed passion." She has just persevered through an arduous physical ordeal, and wants to experience Christ's passion, mortal sickness and specific wounds. While this is not "deal making" in the traditional sense, Julian is making a sacrifice—many actually—in order to receive these "gifts."⁵ She desires to suffer, to essentially bargain away her body, so that she can receive God's grace. After all, it is her "deadly body" that is disposable, and the power of God that is indispensable. The deal is done only as Julian experiences her visions, and sees and feels the power of God.

Julian of Norwich talks about homeliness as it relates to an intimate and direct connection to God. Kempe weeps as she empathizes with the pains her Lord has

⁵ The romance of origins: language and sexual difference in Middle English literature G Margherita.1994.University of Pennsylvania Press.

suffered. She is very much connected to God. Kempe also discusses her relationship to God as similar to that of a family. She hears God say "my dearworthy daughter." Thus, with the intrigue in this epic story, amidst the complicated relationships and beyond the religious overtones, the phenomenon that opposites attract is apparent.

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