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Marie and Chaucer's Contrasting Approaches to Moral Responsibility

The *Lais* of Marie de France and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* use ambiguity in contrasting ways in order to evade ethical responsibility for the morality, or lack thereof, in their respective stories. The *Lais*, a collection of twelve short narrative poems, and the *Canterbury Tales*, a framing narrative with many perspectives, both suggest that there is moral meaning to be found within the stories. These moral lessons are often riddled with offensive material, such as in Marie's *lais Bisclavret* and Chaucer's *The Reeve's Tale*, where Marie and Chaucer seem to justify harmful rhetoric and themes of abuse for different reasons and through different methods. Marie and Chaucer are both prominent authorial figures within their respective bodies of writing, however, they take different approaches to how they convey their position on these offensive topics to their readers. Their approaches can be analyzed through the lens of gender, as Marie is forced to defend her retelling of the story in her Prologue, whereas Chaucer is able to put this responsibility back onto the readers, representing the gender bias within the time period.

Ultimately, both author's positionality, specifically through the lens of gender, is vital to understanding how they portrayed, interpreted, and defended offensive material within their works and why they should not be void of criticism or ethical accountability simply because of the time period.

While Chaucer does not necessarily take responsibility for any offensive material, he does make the conscious decision to acknowledge any discourse that may occur surrounding the

tales. Chaucer acknowledges the possible discourse as he speaks in first person to the audience and proclaims that “For Goddes love demeth nat that I seye / Of yvel entente, but that I moot reherce / Hir tales, all be they bettre or werse / Or elles falsen som of my mateere. / And therfore whoso list it nat yheere, / Turne over the leef, and chese another tale (*Miller’s Prologue*, lines 3172-77).” This section of text is representative of Chaucer’s attempt to avoid any direct criticism that may be exerted onto the tales early in the text. Taken at face value, it seems to be an offering or warning to the reader that if they do not like a tale they can simply move onto the next. However, examining this suggestion within the context of the tales as a whole along with Marie’s *lais*, Chaucer seems to be placing the responsibility of the quality and interpretation of content onto the reader rather than himself. Instead of encouraging the reader to use reading comprehension to analyze or critique a tale they may not approve of, he simply tells them to move on and find one that is more well suited to them. This sentiment is exemplified as Chaucer continues saying, “Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse / And eek moralitee and hoolynesse. / Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys (*Miller’s Prologue*, lines 3179-3181).” The last line emphasizes Chaucer’s attempt to tell the reader that if they choose the wrong tale to read, then that is their burden to bear. This line seems less like an offering to the reader, and more of an attempt by Chaucer to pass off the torch of blame to the reader on whether they enjoy a tale or not. This method lacks the acknowledgement of any moral qualms that Chaucer may take with the tales, showing his lack of ethical responsibility for them. Contrastingly, Marie makes no attempt to tell the reader how to read the *lais*, but rather separates herself from the stories she is telling by emphasizing her duty to spread knowledge.

Though Marie does not insert herself as deeply into the text as Chaucer, she does reveal key aspects of her personhood within the Prologue. The details about her positionality are

representative of why Marie, unlike Chaucer who places the responsibility onto the reader, feels the need to justify and defend her text's existence. The very first lines of the Prologue reads, "One whom God has given knowledge / and good eloquence in speaking / should not keep quiet nor hide on this account / but rather should willingly show **herself** (*Prologue*, lines 1-4,)." These lines illustrate how Marie is justifying the use of her voice to create the text, as well as refusing to abide by the misogynistic narrative that women should not be heard in a societal setting. The use of the pronoun "herself" situates Marie's gender into the text and cements the idea that she has a moral duty to use her intelligence to share the stories she has heard. She emphasizes the value of educating others with her intellect, rather than Chaucer who places the responsibility of comprehension onto the reader and which tale they choose. Marie also emphasizes a crucial fact of her authorial position within the Prologue that, "[she undertakes] to bring together some *lais* / by making rhymes and retelling them (*Prologue*, lines 47-48)." These lines make it clear that Marie is not the writer of these stories, but merely brings them together to share to the audience. Marie is not the creator of the stories like Chaucer, which limits her authorial responsibility to sharing the *lais* in order to expand the knowledge of others. Likewise, Marie makes the conscious choice to remain fairly separate from the audience with few exceptions, while Chaucer makes it a much larger point to position himself within the text.

Chaucer has a very strong authorial presence within the tales, specifically when he includes himself within his very own frame narrative. He appears amongst the other pilgrims telling stories in the frame narrative, showing how he is an active participant within the narration. Chaucer, however, still remains somewhat allusive in his authorial presence because he chooses to omit details about his personal being. He shapes the narrative but implies that there is a separation between his writing and the characters who narrate the tales themselves. This puts

the creative license onto the characters who are narrating the tales, rather than himself who is choosing to create these characters. Chaucer appears to position himself outside the bounds of the character's narration even when he retracts the works that he feels hold deficiencies at the end of the text. He once more puts the responsibility of graphic content back onto the tales themselves saying that "All that is written is for our doctrine (*Canterbury Tales*, p. 570)." His claim that each tale holds a moral meaning of its own seems to be Chaucer's weak justification for why certain offensive views and harmful rhetoric is used. His reasoning for the offensive topics being portrayed is that there should be a greater lesson learned, which represents how the moral lessons themselves are often riddled with irony. A clear example of this is within *The Reeve's Tale* where Chaucer attempts to make humor out of sexual assault.

In *The Reeve's Tale*, Aleyn and John are two men who are tricked out of their rightful amount of flour by the Miller. In order to get revenge on him, Aleyn decides to have non-consensual sex with the Miller's daughter and John deceives the Miller's wife into having sex with him. Chaucer graphically describes the scene where the Miller's daughter is being taken advantage of saying, "And up he rist, and by the wenche he crepte. / This wenche lay upright and faste slepte, / Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie, / That it had been to late for it crie (*The Reeve's Tale*, 4193-96)." Chaucer's description of sexual assault is not only not conventionally funny, but is also a very harmful topic that can be disturbing to readers. This disturbing commentary is made again when describing the assault on the Miller's wife by John saying, "And nyste wher she was, for it was derk. / But faire and wel she creepe into the clerk / And lith ful stille and wolde han caught a sleepe. / Withinne a while this John the clerk up leepe, / And on this goode wyf he leith on soore (*The Reeve's Tale*, 4225-29)." The fact that Chaucer chooses to punish the Miller by using sexualized violence against the women in his life is highly unfunny

and extremely dangerous. The common trope of rape or other forms of sexualized violence being used as a punch line contributes to the normalization of sexual assault, particularly as a form of punishment. It is further concerning that the moral of the story, as stated by Chaucer is, “Hym thar nat wene that yvele dooth. / A gylour shal himself bigyled be (*The Reeve’s Tale*, 4320-21).” This moral is essentially if you do evil, then you should expect bad things to come to you. It does not address any of the negative aspects of sexual violence and essentially justifies them by saying that the Miller had it coming to him because of his prior misdeeds. This story of deliberate cruelty and vindictiveness towards women is ultimately left with an ambiguous ending that does not condemn sexual assault in the slightest. The weaponization of sexism in this tale should not be dismissed by Chaucer placing responsibility on the Reeve character or merely saying the reader should choose another tale if they do not like it. Though it is the Reeve telling this tale, Chaucer is ultimately responsible for the ramifications of the story. The justification of it being the reader’s responsibility to move on while reading is illogical and impractical due to the harmful nature of the story. Similarly, the story *Bisclavret* also follows an analogous theme of punishing wickedness which in turn justifies the use of offensive topics.

In the *lais Bisclavret*, mutilation is used as a form of punishment, which shows the societal sentiment against deformity and disability during the time period. Marie tells the story of a knight, Bisclavret, who turns into a werewolf for 3 days every week, leaving his wife alone. He confides his situation to his questioning wife who in turn betrays him and uses her lover to steal her husband’s clothes, leaving Bisclavret stuck as a wolf. The story eventually resolves as the wife’s misdeeds are revealed when her nose is bitten off by the werewolf, which later results in Bisclavret being transformed back into a human and his wife and her lover becoming exiled. As the women’s eternal punishment, “Many women of that line, in truth, were born without noses

and lived like that, noseless (*Bisclavret*, line 312).” This tale has a similar moral theme to *The Reeve’s Tale*, which is that if you do something bad, you should expect something bad to happen to you in return. The parallels between the stories represent the justification of revenge by both Marie and Chaucer. The authors promote the idea of vengeance which occurs under the umbrella of sexualized violence and physical deformity. *Bisclavret* also utilizes highly offensive topics and harmful rhetoric as it demonizes physical deformity in the same way that Chaucer seems to make light of sexualized violence. These similar themes both perpetuate the use of harmful actions, showing how Marie and Chaucer, though in different ways, shift ethical responsibility from author to reader.

Though Chaucer and Marie shift the responsibilities of their stories for different reasons and in different ways, they both ultimately should be held responsible for the way in which they utilize offensive material. The key differences between the two authors highlight Chaucer’s active role in the material, as well as the sexism that Marie may have faced as a female author. Chaucer is a strong authorial figure within the text, though his use of ambiguity shifts moral obligation to the reader rather than himself. Marie, contrastingly, remains ambiguous by portraying herself as a female author upholding her duty to share knowledge. She also separates herself from the *lais* on the principle that she is retelling them, rather than creating them. These methods, though enacted in contrasting ways, end up having a similar effect in isolating the authors from their texts and justifying the use of damaging topics. This is apparent in *The Reeve’s Tale* and *Bisclavret* as neither author seems to take complete ownership or responsibility for the offensive and harmful themes portrayed in them.

Works Cited

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