

Copyright

by

Anna Fore Waymack

2013

**The Report Committee for Anna Fore Waymack
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:**

Speaking Through the “Open-Ers”:

How Age Feminizes Chaucer’s Reeve

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Daniel Birkholz

Elizabeth Scala

**Speaking Through the “Open-Ers”:
How Age Feminizes Chaucer’s Reeve**

by

Anna Fore Waymack, BA.

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

**The University of Texas at Austin
May 2013**

Acknowledgements

I owe enormous thanks to Dan Birkholz and Mark Waymack for their extreme patience with me throughout this past year, especially after my concussion. Without Elizabeth Scala or Minerva Ahumada I would have had neither the ability nor the confidence to tackle the theoretical ideas in this report. Hannah Wojciehowski gave much-needed early cheerleading about age studies. And finally, this whole process could never have worked without a supportive cohort of friends and colleagues, out of whom I'd especially like to thank Emily Pietrowski for regular writing sessions, Scott Garbacz and Courtney Barajas for feedback, and Luke Landtroop for inspiring the initial idea.

Abstract

Speaking Through the “Open-Ers”:

How Age Feminizes Chaucer’s Reeve

Anna Fore Waymack, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

Supervisor: Daniel Birkholz

The *Reeve’s Prologue* in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* represents one of the most prominent medieval narratives of old age. In his bitter tirade the Reeve emphasizes the topics of impotence, sexuality, power and voice through a series of metaphors involving horses, leeks, coals, and medlar fruit. Though the *Prologue* itself has been extensively discussed, little of the discussion has been in the context of age studies. Nor have scholars paid much attention to the medlar, called by its colloquial name “open-ers.” The Reeve chooses to describe himself and other older men through this unmistakably sexualized and repulsive term, raising paradoxical issues of rottenness and ripeness. He uses the medlar to resist fourteenth-century age culture and reconfigure his identity into a submissive, open one. Where impotence has removed agency and voice, this new identity enables a feminized voice, a claim to desire, and an ability to *quyte* the Miller for what the Reeve perceived as an ageist story meant to mock him. However, a Lacanian reading suggests that in grappling with his impotence, the Reeve has come to realize the futility

of signifying and the difficulties of expressing desire. The *Reeve's Prologue* thus exposes the breakdown of desire in the *Reeve's Tale* and raises larger questions about the influence of older age on tale-telling, especially in a masculine register.

Table of Contents

SPEAKING THROUGH THE “OPEN-ERS”: HOW AGE FEMINIZES CHAUCER’S REEVE..	1
Medieval men: gaps in age studies	3
Open-ers: the Reeve’s new body	6
Open rebellion.....	15
Thwarted desires in the <i>Reeve’s Tale</i>	30
Bibliography	38

SPEAKING THROUGH THE “OPEN-ERS”: HOW AGE FEMINIZES CHAUCER’S REEVE

The *Canterbury Tales* are generally understood to be Chaucer’s last works before he died.¹ Even if the conventional tribulations of older age did not directly affect Chaucer or cause his death, he was evidently concerned with them at several points throughout the process of writing. He writes about numerous characters where age is a defining trait; we see wise Egeus and implacable Saturn in the *Knight’s Tale*, laughable Januarie in the *Merchant’s Tale*, and the Pardoner’s mysterious Old Man.² Among these instances, the *Reeve’s Prologue* presents old age as being integral to the act of tale-telling for older characters, creating anxieties about signification that have potential implications for the aging author as well. The Reeve grounds his *Prologue* on his own old age. He disclaims that “ik am oold; me list not pley for age” (I 3867) but almost immediately proceeds to “speke of” the very “ribaudye” (I 3866) he had just dismissed, contradicting himself. He sets up a paradox by delving into topics he had decreed inappropriate or impossible, and wavers on whether being unable to “pley” (I 3867) or “doon” (I 3881) prevents him from speech or, conversely, mandates it. After the *Miller’s Tale*’s broader questions about storytelling, the Reeve raises fears that society’s age roles and expectations of asexuality

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) xxix. All quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* will be referenced by fragment and line numbers.

² Marilyn Sandidge argues for a Chaucer who tries to subvert the role of his own older age by telling a deliberately childish tale of *Sir Thopas*, and then retaliating at the pilgrims’ censure with the age-appropriate but deadly dull *Melibee*. “Forty Years of Plague: Attitudes toward Old Age in the Tales of Boccaccio and Chaucer,” *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007). 357-73 at 371. I would like to go further and, taking into account the other figures of older age that Chaucer depicts, tentatively suggest that Chaucer was in denial about and resistant to his own aging (a not uncommon phenomenon even now), and that this influenced his attitudes and depictions throughout the *Canterbury Tales*.

for older people preclude those people from expressing desire or connecting with others.³ These fears and the Reeve's frustrated desires then erupt in the *Reeve's Tale* through rapes and beatings.

The plots and interactions of the *Reeve's Tale* depend upon the *Prologue*, in which Chaucer establishes a means of speech, power, and legitimized desire for the aging storyteller. This speech is predicated upon the Reeve's denigrating himself as "an open-ers—/ [Which] ilke fruyt is ever lenger the wers,/ Til it be roten" (I 3871-73). The *open-ers* fruit prominently features a hole. Using the concept of this fruit, the Reeve re-structures his identity around concepts of orifices, holes, rottenness and, incongruously, a late ripeness, comparing old men to the *open-ers* with "Til we be roten, kan we nat be rype" (I 3875). I will establish and historicize how the Reeve represents himself as aged and then explore how his internalized old age problematizes his identity and voice, an issue with potential implications for the aging poet. The Reeve, having created this new and feminized identity of the *open-ers*, becomes aware of the limits of expressing desire. Finally, building on the identity problems of old age, I will show how the Reeve's new, bleak perspective on signification and desire emerges in and determines the course of the *Reeve's Tale*.⁴

³ I should acknowledge at the start that I will be taking some liberty with the concept of "age." By medieval scientific standards, the Reeve does not appear to be in pronounced, advanced older age, but his self-perception matters more to the argument here. I am treating the term age exclusively as older age, and aging as "aging-into-the-later-years," which will undoubtedly set age theorists and gerontologists on edge. Moreover, I am failing at times to differentiate the social, physical, temporal, and ideological aspects of age as a construct, and can only apologize to age theorists in general and Margaret Morganroth Gullette in particular, who presents the difficulties in age definitions and heuristics in *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago UP, 2004), 104-106.

⁴ Unfortunately, fully tackling Chaucer's interest in age would require a book instead of an M.A. thesis. I hope in this more limited space to provoke interest in the topic and suggest its overlooked importance to at least parts of the *Canterbury Tales*.

MEDIEVAL MEN: GAPS IN AGE STUDIES

As I am arguing that the Reeve always speaks through his age and is hyperaware of age roles, I would like to give a brief background in age studies to establish key terms for understanding and contextualizing the Reeve's identity. Alongside the terms I will make the case for age studies' relevance and potential applications for medievalists. Compared to feminism, queer theory, and disability studies, all of which have impacted medieval literary criticism, age studies remains neglected. Still an emerging field, and one that literary criticism as a whole has been slower than other humanities disciplines to adopt, age studies tends to be subsumed by disability studies in an ideologically problematic manner.⁵

When not treated as a subset of disability studies, current age studies conversations are dominated by feminism; a large number of feminist scholars seem to have discovered age studies through the similar issues of marginalization and through the higher stakes aging often presents for women.⁶ One leading age critic has remarked, in response to a question about how men might experience older age, that the experience of aging is female; another, Margaret Cruikshank, states in her introduction to *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging* "the fact that 'old' means 'women'."⁷ The most

⁵ Despite similarities between the two fields, aging does not necessitate disability. Focusing primarily on the disabling aspects of aging prejudices the discourse towards negative experiences, promotes our cultural tendency towards decline narratives, and ignores the depth and multitude of issues in aging.

⁶ The most high-profile treatise on aging is Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age*, perhaps neglected because unlike *The Second Sex*, it presents an almost unremittingly bleak view of its topic without hope for mitigating the negative aspects of aging. In most cultures, women lose more cultural capital as they age, in part due to their value being determined by youthful beauty and fertility.

⁷ Margaret Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging*, 2nd ed (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2009), x.

recent Aging Studies email update lists exactly three journals running special issues on old age: *Femspec*, *Gender Work and Organization*, and the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*.⁸

Age studies also emphasizes the present. Most prominent literary criticism on aging tackles twentieth-century texts.⁹ But pre-modern texts offer more of interest than just *King Lear*'s foregrounded issues of dementia, power, and retirement. Western literature has set the parameters of our contemporary age culture. Twenty-first century American attitudes, especially the more negative ones, seem to owe more to medieval age culture than Classical age culture.¹⁰ If further study confirms this, then medieval literary and historical criticism offers invaluable perspective on twenty-first century age ideology. While Hollywood has recently increased the number of narratives featuring older people, we are still uneasy with older people foregrounding themselves, having sexual identities, talking about their health, or appearing to withhold power from the younger generation, all activities which Chaucer has the Reeve attempt while pushing against proscribed age roles.¹¹ Another parallel across centuries is altered communication

⁸ Leni Marshall, "[enews@agingstudies.org] Aging Studies and Age Studies eNews, 20 April 2013," message to the aging studies listserv, 20 April 2013.

⁹ Leni Marshall and Cynthia Port are two of the most active scholars in the field; for examples of the possibilities age studies offers for psychoanalytic theory, I recommend Marshall's "Through (with) the Looking Glass: Revisiting Lacan and Woodward in 'Méconnaissance,' the Mirror Stage of Old Age," *Feminist Formations* 24.2 (2012): 52-76, and for temporality, Port's "No Future? Aging, Temporality, History, and Reverse Chronologies," *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 4 (2012): 1-19. As far as recent books on age in English literature, Helen Small's *The Long Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007) is the seminal work. Christopher Martin has published *Constituting Old Age in Early Modern English Literature from Queen Elizabeth to King Lear*, (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012). Medievalists may be interested in older works by J. A. Burrow and Mary Dove.

¹⁰ Most relevant to Chaucer's era is what appears to be a distinct parallel between fourteenth and twenty-first century fears of older people's powers, numbers and symbolism, created in both cases by (the perception of) an aging demographic larger than normal. I would also point out learned invisibility, demonstrated by in the Reeve's worries about and resistance to this invisibility, and a historically not universal conflation of old age and death, seen in the symbolism of the Old Man in the *Pardoner's Tale*.

¹¹ In just the past year, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, *Amour*, and *Hope Springs* have all aimed for box office success, no doubt inspired by aging Baby Boomers' wallets. Separately, it is worth noting the

between generations; the sixth-century poet Maximianus, speaking with an aged voice, frets about making his poetry palatable to the young, while modern psychologists study the occurrence of “elderspeak” in intergenerational communications, in which addresses to older people are “characterized by a slow rate of speaking, simple sentence structure and vocabulary, and repetitions.”¹²

Aging studies offers medievalists several additional topics with rich potential. One current debate that could profit from medieval or early modern scholars is the notion of a post-Industrial “speed-up” of the life course.¹³ Old age also offers a largely unexplored approach into issues of temporality.¹⁴ Mary Dove, who writes on treatments of the lifespan in medieval literature, suggests that the “ageing process itself is one of Ricardian poetry’s most characteristic *matières*.”¹⁵ Despite the thorough examples Dove provides, we have yet to treat aging-through-life as a serious and common topic of that

position we put older people into by resenting conversation concerning their health even while expecting them to “perform sickness” in a socially constructed age role. See Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old*, 41.

¹² Even while discussing his own old age, Maximianus digresses in a ploy for sympathy with, “it is worth our while to mention youth/And speak but little of my own old age,/To clear the reader’s mind of unnerving thoughts/And make him care to learn my woeful tale.” Gabriele Zerbi and Maximianus, *Gabriele Zerbi, Gerontocomia: On the Care of the Aged; and Maximianus, Elegies on Old Age and Love*, trans L. R. Lind (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1988) Elegy III 1-4. For further information on elderspeak see Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old*, 145.

¹³ Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, 29. The conversation in general makes assertions about our current propensity for narrowing age categories “decadism,” “generationalism.”

¹⁴ I would particularly like to point out Judith Halberstam’s “epistemology of youth” here, the focus she devotes to “youth/adult binary,” and her spotlight on youth cultures and temporal extensions of queer youth as missing, currently, a companion text about the other end of the age spectrum. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York UP, 2005), 176.

¹⁵ Mary Dove, *The Perfect Age of Man’s Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 126. Dove further suggests after reading it through an age studies perspective that Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* is “one of the most unconventional and unpredictable of all the Ricardian poems which challenge the commonplaces associated with the ages of man’s life” 147. The similarly unconventional treatment of age in the *Reeve’s Prologue* and *Tale* lead me to believe Chaucer’s broader works may present some of the most intricate and rebellious treatments in canonical literature of different ages.

era. As age studies right now delves into the notion of performativity, specific research projects leap from the Classical to Elizabethan, neglecting medieval mystery plays. But beyond trendy topics there is a basic need for medievalists to increase visibility and counter damaging misassumptions about the “Dark Ages” like that of one sincere modern historian who asked me if the Middle Ages truly had a concept of old age, since everyone must have died so young.

Age studies utilizes some terms and premises similar to but less widely disseminated than those of gender studies. Old age is a social construct. Unlike other social constructs, “age is the only characteristic that is universal and constantly changing.”¹⁶ But in addition to being a social construct, age is a matter of physiology and the reality of the body, through which an ailing 65-year-old may well experience the discomforts of aging more than a healthy 80-year-old. Age is also a chronological measurement of the passage of time, one’s generational identity, and a locus of heavy symbolism and abstraction.¹⁷ Finally, an “age identity,” as defined by Margaret Morganroth Gullette, “comprehends each person’s collection of ‘information’ about age and aging in general and stories about their own age and aging in particular” (Gullette 15).

OPEN-ERS: THE REEVE’S NEW BODY

Chaucer and his fictional Reeve’s age identities existed in an age culture distinct from ours, in which our modern assumptions about older age and culture will give us the wrong cues; historicization is required. Moreover, the Reeve’s chosen descriptions of

¹⁶ Bill Bytheway, *Unmasking Age: The Significance of Age for Social Research* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2011), 216.

¹⁷ This multiplicity of meanings for old age poses a thorny problem for feminists; as Cruikshank puts it, “The vigor with which feminists have challenged notions of biological determinism leaves us in an awkward position with aging because this process happens in/to our bodies” (1-2).

himself and, implicitly, of his surrounding age culture in the *Reeve's Prologue* are incompatible with not only his *General Prologue* description but also with his very act of speaking, even as he raises issues of speech. The most prominent of his metaphors for age comes halfway through the *Reeve's Prologue* when he cites the *open-ers*, the fruit of the medlar: "I fare as dooth an open-ers" (I 3871). He does not use the medlar as a compliment to himself, but defines it as "That ilke fruyt is ever lenger the wers/ Til it be roten in mullok or in stree" (I 3872-73). The Reeve connects the medlar to the unpleasant state of old men in particular. He explains how "We olde men, I drede, so fare we:/ Til we be roten, kan we nat be rype" and brings up at the very end this belated ripeness (I 3874-75). Overall the comparison adds a sexual aspect to medieval aging that appears as a psychological rupture to the Reeve's identity. He now describes himself as not only unappealing but *open*, defined by a hole. The rupture and the image of the medlar enable the Reeve to reconfigure his identity with a new, feminized voice.

An older person in Chaucer's time would have had a great deal at stake in trying to reshape their age identity. Even compared to our current alarmist rhetoric on Social Security and aging demographics, Chaucer lived during some of the tensest intergenerational relations in recorded history. Toward the end of the fourteenth century, the plague had created a situation in which older people constituted three times a normal proportion, as the plague tended to kill the young rather than older people who had gained immunity.¹⁸ We perhaps see traces of this situation in the *Pardoner's Tale*, as three young men die while the older man cannot. Concentrating power, property, and the

¹⁸ Georges Minois, *History of Old Age from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 212-216. Minois explores this at length and provides detailed statistics and historical evidence. Sandidge borrows these for her article on the correlations between the plague and Boccaccio and Chaucer's attitudes towards age, and summarizes some key statistics neatly on 365: "While life expectancy in England dropped from 35.3 years for men born between 1200 and 1275 to 17.3 for men born between 1348 and 1375, the life expectancy for men 60 years old actually increased in that same period by almost two years."

more desirable women in the hands of the oldest generation led to resentment. Georges Minois cites Christine de Pisan, a contemporary of Chaucer, on the situation: “There is quite often argument and discord, as much in outlook as in conversation, between old people and young ones, to the point that they can hardly stand each other, as though they were members of two different species” (Minois 220). In this quotation we hear echoes of the Miller’s claim: “youth and elde is often at debaat” (I 3230).¹⁹ Antagonism seems to come from both sides in literature of the time. The Green Knight dismisses Arthur’s court as “bot berdlez chylder” (“only beardless children”), finding some element of lack in their youth.²⁰

In addition to fourteenth-century strife, cultures throughout the Middle Ages did not necessarily revere older people as sources of wisdom and knowledge.²¹ Though a few elements of respect for experience existed, and the *Knight’s Tale*’s Egeus may be one example of an older wise man, such a character was not the dominant stereotype.²² Pat Thane goes so far as to claim that there was no “veneration of old people as such” and that when “they were credited with especial insight it was as often attributed to the

¹⁹ The *Canterbury Tales* also has the age-conscious banter between the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath. Though he initially cuts her off, he later asks her to “teche us yonge men of youre praktike” (III 187). He comes to respect her enough to apply this *praktike* to his own *Prologue*. *Youthe* and *elde* can, it seems, communicate at times.

²⁰ *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), line 280.

²¹ Our images of Merlin as an invaluable, aged adviser are somewhat anomalous, complicated further by post-Chaucerian depictions of him as aging backwards.

²² For the disagreement on Egeus, see Sandidge’s reply to Alicia K. Nitecki’s “Figures of Old Age in Fourteenth-Century English Literature,” *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto: PIMS, 1990) 107-116. As for the Old Man in the *Pardoner’s Tale*, who gives advice, suggests “it is no curteisye/ To speken to an old man vileynye” (VI 739-40), and asks “Ne dooth unto an oold man noon harm now,/ Namore than that ye wolde men did to yow/ In age” (VI 745-47), his use as a life-like example of older men fairly expecting respect is complicated by his highly allegorical and symbolic nature.

innocent wisdom sometimes associated with children—the ‘second childhood’ to which the very old regressed—as to any special quality of old age.”²³

Aging also had a moral valence, and literary depictions of old people tend to impute evil to them. In *Piers Plowman*, several vices are personified as older men. Lechery is “pale as a pellet, in the palsy he semed” (V 77), and “as a leek that hadde yleye longe in the sonne,/ So loked he with lene chekes” (V 81-2), reminiscent of the Reeve’s claim to have “an hoor heed and a grene tayle,/ As hath a leek” (I 3878-79).²⁴ Wrath has ‘his nekke hangyng’ (V 134) like Chaucer’s Januarie, while Coveitise has bleary eyes and “as a letheren purs lolled hise chekes—/ Wel sidder than his chyn thei chyveled for elde” (V 189-90). Wrath, listed as “anger,” and Coveitise are two of the “foure sparkles” that the Reeve claims “longen unto eelde” (I 3885), suggesting that they may have been widely understood, beyond just the Reeve’s claim to them, as sins specific to old age. Aging, punishment for Original Sin like the pain of childbirth and the necessity of labor, was “a metaphor for the transience and vanity of all worldly things” (Shahar 39, 59).

²³ Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 46. Shulamith Shahar explores the confusing images of older people at greater length: “The old man was believed to possess wisdom, an accumulated experience of life, cooler passions (as already noted by Plato and Aristotle), serenity and, though not as often as a child, the ability to see the unseen. At the same time, the old person was held to have feebler mental faculties and to tend to irascibility, melancholy, miserliness (this was mentioned very often), a complaining and grumbling disposition, cowardice, suspiciousness, despondency, shamelessness and a rejection of all things new,” in *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: ‘Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain’* (NY: Routledge, 1997), 70. She adds that, “Despite their awareness of the old person’s weakness, [medieval] writers displayed none of the tolerance and understanding which were often shown to children and even to young people. As Bartholomaeus Angelicus said, ‘Everyone judges the old man’” (73).

²⁴ For *Piers Plowman* in this paragraph, I will be citing the Everyman edition, based on the B-text. William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London: Everyman, 1995). Curiously, in the context of the vengeful Reeve, Lechery’s motivation is given as “to wreke himself he thoughte/ With werkes or with words. . .Ech a word that he warp was of a neddres tonge;/ Of chidyng and of chalangyng was his chief liflode” (V 84-87).

Distinct from the moral context, the *Reeve's Prologue* is also situated within the tradition of the "old man's lament," a popular trope in fourteenth-century literature. Chaucer drew metaphors and themes for both the *Reeve's Prologue* and the *Pardoner's Tale* from several previous old man's laments dating as far back as the sixth century.²⁵ These laments follow a relatively set form, discussing the unpleasantness of old age as part of an overriding theme of *memento mori*. The Reeve, however, breaks this mold in a number of places. Unlike the old man in the *Pardoner's Tale* and countless other old man's laments, the Reeve does not complain about death's slowness; by departing from this tradition Chaucer makes the Reeve a lifelike character rather than a codified trope.

Given that the "most frequent way to depict the aged and their miseries in the fourteenth-century was to concentrate on physical appearances," the Reeve's physical description resists this tendency towards the grotesque (Nitecki, "Convention of the Old Man's Lament" 78). Personified Old Age has not beaten the Reeve up as he has the narrator of *Piers Plowman*, and no rhetorical text would adopt the Reeve's appearance as a memorable image for schoolboys.²⁶ The Reeve's complaints restrict themselves to ability rather than appearance. In short, given the theme of the *Reeve's Prologue* and literary precedents in the fourteenth century, Chaucer departs from tradition by being

²⁵ For the reach of such laments through the fourteenth-century, especially in Chaucer, see Alicia K. Nitecki, "The Convention of the Old Man's Lament in the *Pardoner's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 16.1 (1981): 76-84. She summarizes the genre: "Someone raises a question or makes a comment about old age or about death's slowness in arriving. Frequently, old age is contrasted with youth. In the narrative poetry, the old man's complaint then becomes one side of an exchange between youth and age. The old man's traditional function is that of spiritual guide or warning of mortality, though he himself may or may not be wise. The moral nature of the old man himself is normally ambiguous; the aged figure is frequently ludicrous or contemptible regardless of his didactic role," (76-77).

²⁶ In the C-text of *Piers Plowman*, Elde "hitte me vnder the ere—vnnethe may ich here./ He boffeded me aboute the mouthe and beet out my wang-teeth/ And guyed me in gowtes...And of the wo that Y was ynne my wyf hadde reuthe/ And wesched wel witterly that Y were in heuene./ For the lyme that she loued me fore and leef was to fele/ A nyhtes...Y ne myhte in none manere maken hit at here wille" (XXII 190-197). Cited from William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008).

atypically kind to the Reeve in the *General Prologue*. He is “sclendre” and “lene” (I 587, 591) but not skeletal. Chaucer the pilgrim even fails to note the white hair the Reeve later highlights with the leek metaphor. The drawing-out of “Ful longe” (I 591) and comparison to a staff suggest an uprightness and straightness, not a hunched or suffering figure. The rest focuses on the Reeve’s business practices, avoiding the norm of revolting and gruesome imagery.²⁷

Due, in fact, to the comparatively palatable imagery, the Reeve’s physical age has been a recurring problem for any consistent reading of both the *General Prologue* and the *Reeve’s Prologue*, to the point where we need to justify treating them as the same character. Thane finds the Reeve frustrating, saying that, “Chaucer was either unaware of or untroubled by these conflicting images of the old age of the same person, or perhaps he was consciously opposing the conventional, self-pitying, poetic image offered by the Reeve, with his own realistic description of a sharp, healthy old man” (Thane 51). On a more literary note, George Coffman complains about the change in tone between the *General Prologue* and the *Reeve’s Prologue*. He tries to resolve it by claiming that as Chaucer “became overwhelmingly interested in the Reeve’s passage” he “forgot for the time being the Reeve of the General Prologue.”²⁸ But the Reeve does not complain of his physical appearance, nor even of aches or slowness that would be visible to the other pilgrims. The Reeve presents only invisible issues such as impotence save one telling exception: he cannot deny his age because his “white top writeth myne olde yeris” (I

²⁷ As a contrasting example, Matthew of Vendôme describes a hypothetical older woman with, “Her vile and deformed cheeks, rigid with wrinkles, have/ Become crusted with blotches polluted by the eyes’/ putrid flow,” and “Her ear flows with filth. Unrounded they swarm with worms;/ Obese and dripping, they flop here and there.” Matthew of Vendôme, *Ars Versificatoria*, trans. Roger P. Parr (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette UP, 1981), 39.

²⁸ George R. Coffman, “Old Age from Horace to Chaucer: Some Literary Affinities and Adventures of an Idea,” *Speculum* 9 (1934): 249-277, at 227.

3869).²⁹ Here, medieval thinking on the Ages of Man helps to understand both the Reeve and Chaucer. If the *Reeve's Prologue* is written in the paradigm of the typical four-age division, a paradigm linked to vernacular writing and “increasingly common in England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries,” then impotence and white hairs are sufficient to tip the Reeve into the very broad category of old age.³⁰ J. A. Burrow goes further and asserts that the *Knight's Tale* “certainly implies, more clearly than its Italian original, a scheme of three ages.”³¹

The Reeve predicates his old age physically, then, on his “white top” and impotence alone, and he ties both to communication. He claims he will not speak of “ribaudye” (I 3866) because he is old, and yet in both prologue and tale sex dominates the conversation. He mentions how old men “desireth folie” (I 3880) though they “may not doon” (I 3881) and its alternative, “than wol we speke” (I 3881). Indeed, he encapsulates desire, folly, the “grene tayl” (I 3878), and “pley” (I 3867) within his speech, demonstrating his meaning, claiming and renouncing lust, and linking lust to speech. Moreover, Carol Heffernan has explained the Reeve's subsequent cask metaphor as also linking speech to desire and impotence. She describes how in old age “the ‘stream of lyf’ (semen) is reduced to a trickle; it ‘droppeth on the chymbe’ (3895)...functionless now, the phallus is transformed into the foolish tongue...which can merely brag of sexual

²⁹ One almost wonders here if Chaucer sees himself as writing his “olde yeris” into the *Tales*.

³⁰ Medieval thinkers divided the Ages of Man into, typically, three (see *The Parlement of the Three Ages*), four, or seven stages. Though the seven-age divisions did differentiate between old age and decrepitude, they were “never so dominant culturally as is sometimes thought” (Thane 47).

³¹ J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 11.

extravaganzas that are past.”³² Garrulousness fills the void impotence creates, speech substituting for action.

The most puzzling piece of the Reeve’s internalized age culture, also tied to speech, comes through one of the few repulsive images Chaucer uses: the medlar fruit, rotten before it is ripe and cited by its suggestive colloquial name *open-ers*.³³ Medlars make the origin of that nickname visually explicit through a prominent, puckered hole surrounded by pubic-looking tendrils in the brown or red fruit. To make them edible, medlars must first undergo bletting (rotting). The metaphor of the *open-ers*, addressed by scholars so far without reference to the *Reeve’s Tale*, sits at the intersection of the Reeve’s aging, identity, and desires.³⁴ The medlar raises questions of how the Reeve constitutes and blurs ripeness and rottenness and what the association between old age and *open-ness* means.

Despite contemporary scholarly neglect, early readers claimed significance for the word. In the Ellesmere manuscript in f. 41v. and opposite the words *open-ers* is a sketch of what appears to be an unusually phallic leek, reflecting the Reeve’s reference to having “an hoor heed and a grene tayl,/ As hath a leek” (I 3878-79). Three lines down from *open-ers* and roughly an inch and a half to the right of the text lies a solitary gloss,

³² Carol Falvo Heffernan “A Reconsideration of the Cask Figure in the ‘Reeve’s Prologue.’” *The Chaucer Review* 15.1 (1980): 37-43, at 41.

³³ While “open-ers” can denote either quince or medlar, the Reeve’s clear negative associations with the term suggest medlar rather than the quince, which was associated with “happiness, love and fruitfulness,” dedicated to Venus in Roman times, and given to newlyweds. “Open-ars,” *Middle English Dictionary*, 2001, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=byte&byte=130621222&egdisplay=open&egs=130623114> (accessed 12/12/12). Jules Janick and Robert E. Paull, *The Encyclopedia of Fruit & Nuts* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 634.

³⁴ In one example, Helge Kökeritz suggests that Chaucer’s use of vulgar colloquialisms in the *Reeve’s Tale* was a deliberate attempt to “reflect the...colloquial background—the chit-chat of the office and the tavern, at street-corners or in the marketplace.” But such language in the *Prologue* clashes with the Reeve who initially objects to *ribaudye*, especially aimed at himself. Kökeritz, “Rhetorical Word-Play in Chaucer,” *PMLA* 69.4 (1954): 937-52, at 952.

atypical of the Latinate ones found elsewhere in the manuscript, repeating the word “open-ers.”³⁵ The script of this gloss is approximately fifteenth-century, suggesting that both the writer and the sketcher made their annotations early in the manuscript’s history.³⁶

Two more recent scholars have noticed this word. Thomas Ross mentions it in *Chaucer’s Bawdy*, calling it, “A descriptive (open-arse) if unappetizing name for the medlar.”³⁷ He links the medlar’s appearance to female genitalia, but then concludes that Chaucer must not have made the association. Alicia Nitecki finds the word “particularly suggestive” and evocative of Nicholas’ unfortunate position at the end of the preceding story, hinting at the Reeve’s unacknowledged thoughts (Nitecki, “Figures of Old Age” 113). This seems more plausible, though *open-ers* may also function as a reference to Alisoun. In the *Miller’s Tale*, Alisoun puts out her “naked ers” (I 3734), her “hole” (I 3732) with a “berd...al rough and long yherd” (I 3737-38). This description fits well with the shape of an actual medlar fruit, linking the Reeve to both Alisoun and Nicholas.³⁸ The dual reference (in addition to the Reeve’s openly identifying with John) creates a confused identity for the Reeve in terms of gender but also action: is the Reeve meant to be passively, femininely waiting and open? Or is he actively reconfiguring definitions in the same manner as Alisoun substitutes one hole for another? The medlar is

³⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales: The New Ellesmere Chaucer Facsimile (of Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9)*, ed. Daniel Woodward and Martin Stevens (San Marino, California: Huntington Library Press, 1995) f41v.

³⁶ I believe that the sketch of the leek predates the gloss, as the gloss appears to be written as close to the line containing “open-ers” in the text as is possible given the inconveniently placed sketch.

³⁷ Thomas Wynne Ross, *Chaucer’s Bawdy* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972), 152-3.

³⁸ Although Nicholas’ and the Reeve’ positions resemble each other, it is easier to read Nicholas into the Reeve’s identity as a vestige of masculinity. Reversing the association between them and reading the impotent Reeve into Nicholas runs into the problem that Nicholas does not *only* define himself as a hole, and has proven his virility in contrast to the Reeve by *pleying* with Alisoun all night.

not the only sexually-tinged imagery chosen by the Reeve. He mentions a wine cask with a phallic tap from which “The streem of lyf now droppeth” (I 3895) and a leek whose “grene tayl” (I 3878) references desire. But both of these metaphors present masculine images through the descriptions the Reeve chooses.³⁹ The medlar causes by far the most gender confusion through its ambiguous association with either Alisoun or Nicholas, and it allows the Reeve to transmute his voice from an absent, formerly masculine one to a feminized one.

OPEN REBELLION

Before the Reeve can transmute his voice from the standard marginalized one of old age, he needs impotence to problematize his identity and create a decaying, chaotic mess. He makes the choice to dismiss cultural invisibility and quiet, internal decay. Instead, he openly utilizes that decay to create a new hole and voice with which to express desire, despite the psychological implications of his metaphorical emptiness that force him to face the difficulties in signifying. His new, “ripe” voice is feminized and therefore placed into a comprehensible category. Chaucer has the Reeve recognize the deviancy and dangers of his new speech and sexual identity and reconfigure himself to be understandable by the other pilgrims, though repulsive. The Reeve must sacrifice the shreds of his previous identity and any claim to activity to utilize this new, uncomfortable, almost fecal voice. But embracing this new voice rather than accepting the expectations of asexuality is worth the sacrifice. The voice enables him to answer the Miller and reclaim at least partial control over his own narrative rather than lose all power and submit to being a caricature.

³⁹ The wine cask admittedly implies a hole through the tap, but the Reeve’s words focus on the tap rather than the hole here.

The images of the hole and of rotting with which the Reeve identifies himself have laid him open with their new importance.⁴⁰ In addressing the problems posed by bodies and passages, Butler writes that personal boundaries are “confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer.”⁴¹ The Reeve, given the orifice with which he has just defined himself, may become increasingly aware of the loss of himself. His former self has decayed and been cracked open, while his current, aged self continues to dwindle in tandem with the rotting of the medlar. The *open-ers* also introduces the threat of the outer becoming inner, the introduction of the alien Other and compromise of his physical and internal self. According to Butler,

‘inner’ and ‘outer’ constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject. When that subject is challenged, the meaning and necessity of the terms are subject to displacement. If the ‘inner world’ no longer designates a topos, then the internal fixity of the self and, indeed, the internal locale of gender identity, become similarly suspect (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 170-71).

While the Reeve’s character as we know it seems disinclined to accept displacement and penetration inherent for him in homosexual intercourse, the Miller nonetheless has brought such aspects to mind by having Nicholas struck “amydde the ers” (I 3810) not a hundred lines before. Therefore, such sexually passive exposure remains hypothetical but nonetheless influential on the Reeve’s psyche. Boundaries he had thought fixed dissolve. With his subject challenged and inner fixity untethered, more than the Reeve’s gender identity becomes suspect. The breach problematizes and unlinks his identification with

⁴⁰ To be clear, an individual’s approaching end only weakly connects to the concept of rottenness. Old age as rottenness implies a drawn-out process with no clear temporal boundaries, no obvious point of interception by death. Rottenness suggests a degraded, softer, weaker, repulsive stage of life—the final stage—but is not a metaphor carrying an inevitable deadline with it. The Pardoner’s Old Man, we know, finds this torturous.

⁴¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (NY:Routledge, 1999; Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002) ,170.

his own body, causing a dissociation common in age-focused literature.⁴² Such dissociation for the Reeve leads to increased focus on *wyl* (I 3880, 3887), on speech, and on grim emotional *gleedes* (I 3883) including lying and anger, plausible responses to a changed and failing body. According to medieval age culture, the Reeve should model culturally acceptable invisibility, make pretense at a lack of desire rather than emphasizing *wyl*, and withdraw from the public sphere of discourse. Choosing instead to insist on speech draws attention to the very breach redefining the Reeve and his associated, now deviant, remaining desires. Speech itself is consequent upon desire, and the *Miller's Tale* has already established *erses* as both objects of (accidental) desire and tools for achieving one's own desire.

The *open-ers* illuminates the Reeve's other metaphors in the context of speech and sexuality. The cask, which has "yronne/ Til that almoost al empty is the tone" (I 3893-94), reveals a similar crisis: the active flow has trickled off so that the now defunct tap becomes an open hole rather than a phallic symbol, the hollowness inside the cask echoing the medlar's rottenness. This hollowness and rottenness is reminiscent of Carolyn Dinshaw's reading of the Pardoner as a eunuch; both Pardoner and Reeve are incapable of normative heterosexuality. Dinshaw reads the Pardoner as trying to achieve "*caritas*, a state of oneness, plenitude, fullness."⁴³ The depleted wine cask conceals empty space. Similarly, the medlar's characteristic trait is its hole. The Reeve, though

⁴² Marshall explores the consequences and possibilities of misrecognition at greater length, but in short explains that, "Experiencing one's body in bits and pieces is potentially anguishing, because such an event is foreign to adults, disrupts a person's illusory wholeness, and interrupts the seemingly rigid boundaries of the body created during the Lacanian mirror stage. Inflexible borders may provide some safety, but they limit the possibilities for additional development" ("Through (with) the Looking Glass," 68).

⁴³ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 159.

less morally bereft, perceives himself as desiring fullness and affirmation in much the same manner as the Pardoner.⁴⁴

Less applicable here are Dinshaw's "partial objects," objects "used by the subject in an attempt to fill the lack brought into being by the loss of an original ideal, an original wholeness and plenitude" (Dinshaw 165). The Reeve responds to impotence, functioning here similarly to castration, by redefining himself as, rather than rebelling against, lack and emptiness. If his metaphors of negative space and almost desperate verbosity correlate to the Pardoner, then the Reeve too "forever seeks reunion, forever seeks the realm of original fullness" (167). But unlike the Pardoner in Dinshaw's reading, the Reeve cannot blindly displace the quest for fullness into relics and fetishes. The changes wrought by old age have forced him to confront his own emptiness and recognize the meaninglessness of phallic substitutions.

But desire is present; with his impotence the Reeve becomes an explicit example of the "lack through which desire is instituted" and evinces desire as "the desire for desire, the desire of the Other" as he broadcasts his openness and receptivity to the company of pilgrims.⁴⁵ He has, too, become the female, searching for "the organ that is endowed with this signifying function [that] takes on the value of a fetish thereby."⁴⁶ The closest the Reeve has to a fetish is the lusted-for but unobtainable male organs of others

⁴⁴ Although I would like to avoid the question of the Reeve's morality here, it would be irresponsible not to mention the narrator's perception of the Reeve's speech as *sermonyng* (I 3899) and the Host's labeling it *hooly writ* (3902), as well as the emptiness several scholars find in the Reeve's spiritually-based old man's lament sans any spiritual content. The Reeve may not have the official authority of the Pardoner, but he attempts similar speeches with similar underlying problems.

⁴⁵ Jacques Lacan, "Du Trieb de Freud et du désir du psychanalyste," *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 852; trans. David Macey, in *Jacques Lacan*, ed. Anika Lemaire (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977) in Dinshaw 266 ft. 33.

⁴⁶ Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (London: Norton, 2002) 271-280, at 279.

as substitutes for his own.⁴⁷ Where the Pardoner may have false hope of wholeness through his relics, the Reeve must face the inescapable fact of his permanent separation from phallic signification, and with it acknowledge a more general futility of communicating his desire.

The rottenness of the medlar correlates with and enables this male, aged openness. The Reeve is rotten before he is ripe in a feminized sense; he is impotent and softening, bereft of typical contours of masculinity. Butler poses the question, “What is left when the body rendered coherent through the category of sex is disaggregated, rendered chaotic? Can this body be re-membered, be put back together again? Are there possibilities of agency that do not require the coherent reassembling of this construct?” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 161). Rottenness has disaggregated and rendered chaotic the Reeve’s sexual identity. The process of acknowledging his own rottenness, experienced as the inexorable decay, disintegration, and dysfunction of his once-cohesive body, shatters and ruptures both body and agency for the Reeve. The rottenness is distasteful, with the medlar growing “ever lenger the wers” (I 3872). The gradual process of the medlar’s repulsive deterioration parallels that of the Reeve’s body both sexually and functionally.

Juxtaposed with rottenness, the ensuing ripeness carries a sexual and fundamentally gendered valence. The Reeve must resign any hypothetical *active* sexual role and adopt a feminized passive one, culturally abdicating at least some power in order to retain a claim on desire. Through this, the Reeve hopes to re-member both body and agency. Yet ripeness implies conditions for speaking not previously present and thus creates a different body and agency, agency predicated upon seemingly empty speech.

⁴⁷ Although the Reeve “baar a rusty blade” (I 618) I am more inclined to read this as metaphor for impotence and his own “rusty” disuse rather than as a fetish or substitute.

Restricted from action and control, the Reeve reconfigures his identity to be granted a voice. When he asserts of old men that, “whan we may nat doon, than wol we speke” (I 3881), he is attempting to stake out space for discourse predicated on continued (though recognizably futile) desire. This discourse becomes feminized chatter; the metaphor of the splashing cask’s tap changes from a phallus dripping semen to a tongue creating meaningless noise.

The Reeve, clearly thinking in terms of sex and desire throughout his *Prologue*, uses the term *open-ers* to reach for a definable sexual identity. The *open-ers* medlar fruit he describes himself as becomes, literally, an open arse. The same hole that ruptures the Reeve’s identity imparts to him this new passive, submissive, feminized outlet for his sexuality, whether real or hypothetical. He declares himself through the very *open-ness* to be receptive to any prospective, desirous, and, implicitly, younger partner. This does not mean that the Reeve in his old age engages in homosexual sex; there is no indication that he ever *uses* this remaining sexual outlet. But he nonetheless maintains an identity for the world as a desirous, sexual being by creating this concept of anal potentiality. In doing so, he has transmuted his heterosexual masculine identity, already invalidated and rendered laughable by impotence, into a feminized but culturally comprehensible sexuality.

Chaucer further feminizes the Reeve by having him speak of fruit. The Miller describes Alisoun as a “newe pere-jonette tree” (I 3248) and links her mouth to apples (I 3262). May in the *Merchant’s Tale* chooses the tree “charged...with fruyt” (IV 2211) for her sexual endeavors and “moste han of the peres” (IV 2331). These women have reached sexual ripeness in their youth, emphasized by the inappropriate old age of their

husbands.⁴⁸ Both, however, are associated with spring while medlars are picked in November. The Reeve, then, is feminized but not female; his ripeness instead refers to a late stage of a sexualized masculine life.

The Reeve's insistence on sexuality deviates from medieval scholastic expectations of old age.⁴⁹ Impotence is meant as a barrier to lust and to sin, a moral corrective, one of the few benefits of age. Shahar writes,

The writers of moralistic literature also believed that the sexual drive ebbed in old age. It ought therefore to have been easier for the old person, whose body was no longer a source of temptation, to avoid sin and to repent. Moralistic literature described the lustful old man as one who violated the laws of nature and behaved like a madman (78).

Impotence serves to remind younger people of the contemptibility of the flesh, although several dramatic depictions of old men focus on ludicrousness through "sordid aspects of impotence" rather than on the "moral implications" of the matter (Nitecki, "Figures of Old Age" 113). The Reeve has only mastered the sordid side of impotence. Rather than reforming him, his impotence leads to further moral degradation.

If Susan Signe Morrison is right that the Pardoner's presence perverts the pilgrimage, so does the Reeve's, for "pilgrimage is intimately linked with the body, where one body (the pilgrim) is propelled to another body (the relic) in a church (in the shape of the cross Christ's body was on.) Pilgrimage, an ordered ritual (at least in theory),

⁴⁸ The Miller's description of John, "he was old/ And demed himself been lik a cokewold" (I 3225-6) implies the dangers in such an age gap, while Januarie is explicitly warned, "The yongeste man that is in al this route/ Is bisy ynough to bryngen it aboute/ To han his wyf alone. Trusteth me/ Ye shul nat plesen hire fully yeres thre—/ This is to seyn, to doon hire ful plesaunce" (IV 1559-1563).

⁴⁹ This is not to say that people were unaware of continued desire in older age, but rather that older people were expected not to act upon it. The consequences of acting out lust, at least in literary records, were mockery: "The chief sin and foolishness of an old man...was to keep seeking carnal relations" (Shahar 77).

is the effort to purify the self and body.”⁵⁰ By aligning his incomplete body with the filth of the *open-ers* rather than bodily purification, the Reeve taints the entire pilgrimage. Associating truth and cynicism with anuses in Chaucer, Will Stockton claims that by farting, speaking through the rear end, “the arse generates laughter that has the power to deflate the highest pretensions, secular and spiritual, right and left.”⁵¹ After losing his phallus, the Reeve substitutes this *open-ers*. This anal substitution renders any speech from him religiously dangerous.⁵² If we accept Stockton’s argument for associating truth with arses, his assertion that Lacan’s “connection between the sodomitical anus and *das Ding* makes itself felt in the *Canterbury Tales* around issues of unrepresentable sacred secrets and divine privacy,” then the Reeve’s aged chatter is, instead, loaded with meaning (Stockton 154). Just as Nicholas responds to Absolon’s provoking, “Spek, sweete bryd” (I 3805) with a fart “As greet as it had been a thonder-dent” (I 3807), the Reeve retaliates against the Miller’s provocation with his garrulous speech even as he exposes himself.

It is when Osewald foregrounds his emptiness and vulnerability that he is able to create triumphantly disruptive speech. But the conditions for his speech necessitate acknowledging his vulnerability. Chaucer places the Reeve in an uncomfortable liminal state, feminized but not feminine. Although the Reeve has malfunctioning desire rather than an absent phallus, Jacques Lacan’s theories about castration still apply: the Reeve

⁵⁰ Susan Signe Morrison, *Excrement in the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer’s Fecopoetics* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 77.

⁵¹ Will Stockton, “Cynicism and the Anal Erotics of Chaucer’s Pardoner,” *Exemplaria* 20.2 (2008): 143-164, at 148. Stockton deals with cynicism, the Pardoner, and the *Miller’s Tale* in ways that may be applicable to the Reeve.

⁵² Stockton argues that when “the Host refuses the relics’ transcendence by equating them with the Pardoner’s own soiled breeches, he unwittingly reveals how easy it is to desubliminate the relics that await the pilgrims at the end of their journey,” (153). Morrison deals with the dangerous relationship of religion to excrement at greater length in her book.

now “could not identify with the ideal type of his sex or even answer the needs of his partner in sexual relations without grave risk” (Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus” 271). He cannot function as a heteronormative male. He not only perceives himself as incapable of attracting a lover but recognizes that he would not achieve his desires by interacting with a partner of either gender. A woman, acceptable to both him and society, would demand the phallus that no longer functions.⁵³ A man, with the phallus the Reeve sees as essential to completeness, challenges the Reeve’s masculinity, his psychological integrity, and his physical boundaries.

The Reeve further resists the masculine/feminine binary with a series of equine images. We find horses twice compared to the Reeve in the *Reeve’s Prologue*. Osewold paints himself as a horse who has left the open fields of “gras tyme” (I 3868) for the domesticated stable, and comments on how he still has a “coltes tooth” (I 3888). This established identification with horses enables us to discover the Reeve’s self representative in his *Tale*: the horse Bayard, who when set loose exemplifies desire by running after the “wilde mares” with a “wehee” (I 4065-66). Sandy Feinstein identifies Bayard as a gelding but claims that doing so “does not negate the allegorical and iconographic readings; on the contrary, it adds another dimension to the allegorical possibilities by suggesting the spiritual impotence of unrestrained appetite.”⁵⁴ An emphasis on appetite does surface in the *Reeve’s Prologue*. The Reeve makes scattered references to being stuck with “a nayl” (I 3877) symbolizing desire, having a “grene taylor” (I 3878) of lust, desiring “folie evere in oon” (I 3880), and having the colt’s tooth

⁵³ The fifth elegy in the Late Antique *Elegies of Maximian*, with which Chaucer was undoubtedly familiar and borrowed elements from for the *Pardoner’s Tale*, vividly illustrates this very situation at length. Maximianus describes the young girl involved: “Angered, she kept on demanding the tribute I owed her./ Urging and scolding” (Maximianus, *Elegy V* 51-2).

⁵⁴ Sandy Feinstein, “The ‘Reeve’s Tale’: About That Horse,” *The Chaucer Review* 26.1 (1991): 99-106, at 100.

that represents a younger man's appetite. As for the problems of associating a denatured being with a merely impotent one, Feinstein points out that a gelded horse "is not devoid of interest in mares"(102, 104). She claims that for the Reeve, "Bayard might provide a sympathetic exemplum of frustrated impotence rather than of satisfied lust" (104). The Reeve, then, reaffirms his right to desire through Bayard's actions even as he recognizes the impossibility of obtaining his stymied wishes. The Reeve can be more direct when narrating Bayard's account, as Bayard has no old age to stigmatize sexuality, but the frustrated or at least absent conclusion for both the Reeve and the horse stays the same; we do not see them succeeding sexually.

If the Reeve associates himself with a gelding, we need to refer again to discussions on the confusingly gendered Pardoner, whom Chaucer calls a "geldyng or a mare" (I 691). Dinshaw writes,

the crucial distinction in patriarchal culture between man and woman is really between man and not-man; if the Pardoner is a eunuch... he is a man who, significantly, is not a man (he is a not-man); but if he is an effeminate male... he is womanish but not a woman (a not-woman, or, better, a not-not-man). If he is neither man nor not-man, his identity is constituted by a negation of, or alienation from, the Same *and* the Other in androcentric culture (158).

The Reeve may not get described as a mare at any point, but the feminized component of his aged sexuality serves the same purpose. He has lost his phallus and is a not-man, a fate shared by any medieval man who acknowledges impotence rather than actively pursues the role of *senex amans*. The Reeve steps into a new, feminized role, but well after the allowable age of female sexuality.⁵⁵ Dinshaw might describe him, then, as the not-not-man, womanish but not a woman. Even Bayard's "wehee" is feminized, linking the reader's mind and the Reeve's identity back to Alisoun's girlish giggle (I 4066). The

⁵⁵ For anyone who would like to cite the Wife of Bath as an example of permissible or encouraged sexuality in older women, I'll point out our *continued*, almost prurient interest in her and her blunt, bawdy speech. She is fascinating for her deviation from our expectations.

Reeve's gender identity has become a snarled mess and alienates him from younger people who can make a claim to straightforward sexuality. The Reeve now appears vulnerable, *open*, and displaced by his penetrability. With his gender identity and sexual status suspect, the Reeve's position among the pilgrims and society at large becomes dangerous rather than merely isolated as his initial position riding "evere...hyndreste" (I 622) in the *General Prologue* implied. Butler posits that "to be a subject at all requires first complying with certain norms that govern recognition—that make a person recognizable. And so, non-compliance calls into question the viability of one's life, the ontological conditions of one's persistence."⁵⁶ The Reeve therefore attempts to create a recognizable sexual identity to position himself for identification by the other pilgrims. Butler extends her idea of subjecthood into more general group interaction: "To be a participant in politics, to become part of concerted and collective action, one need not only make the claim for equality, but one needs to act and petition within the terms of equality" ("Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics" vii). Harry Bailey's tale-telling game presents the concerted and collective action; the politics run throughout the frame narrative. To tell his tale and to *quyte* the Miller, the Reeve sees the necessity for prefacing both tale and revenge with his self-definition, enabling his very act of petitioning for attention. Problematically, the Reeve believes that the Miller has determined the dialogue of old age and desire and so even the Reeve's positioning of himself is determined by the Miller's perceived scaffolding.

This self-definition takes the Reeve from an alien, frustrated impotence into the purview of common, more comfortable tropes of inappropriate sexuality in older people. Were the Reeve still capable, like Januarie, in the *Merchant's Tale*, he would inspire

⁵⁶ Judith Butler, "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics," *AIBR* 4.3 (2009): i-xiii, at iv.

mockery instead of confusion, resulting in comfortable caricatures like the aged, “coltish” (IV 1847) Januarie with “slakke skyn aboute his nekke” (IV 1849), who gets his comeuppance.⁵⁷ We see how distastefully he views such a position when he strikes back at the Miller for what he sees as just such mockery. Moreover, since scholars credited age with reducing the sexual drive, they viewed libido in older people as not merely inappropriate but actually unnatural. Shulamith Shahar sees a connection between the two and suggests the derisive attitude stemmed from science, since “desire...did not arise from the old man’s nature. That was why a lecherous old man provoked laughter and mockery.”⁵⁸ The lusty older man was a common stereotype, but not, in this period, a sympathetic one; he sinned in spite of his nature and thereby invited contempt. This cultural context demonstrates the stakes in the Reeve’s need to announce very publically the anality that enables his desire, an announcement he presents despite interpreting the Miller’s carpenter John as an attack upon himself. The Reeve willingly expands upon and assigns to himself this trigger issue of lustful older age, risking exposing himself to worse ridicule than John, just so that he may define himself and, thereby, reenter the social dialogue.

The *Miller’s Tale* has, whether intentionally or not, needled the Reeve into this urgent engagement with the tale-telling contest and defense of himself. He sees himself

⁵⁷ “The various literary genres, just like the folk sayings, mocked the *senex amans* as laughable and grotesque. Folk sayings often referred to the three types whom God hated: the stingy rich man, the proud beggar, and the lecherous old man. The old man was mocked whether he sought love affairs or took a wife although canon law did not forbid old people to marry” (Shahar 79).

⁵⁸ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 78. Shahar explains that “the sin of the old was avarice and miserliness. The old man tended to this sin because he was cold and belonged to the element of earth. He therefore desired to increase the crops, that is to say, to amass more and more possessions and to hold on to them.” The Reeve’s description in the *General Prologue* acknowledges this avarice, as does the Reeve himself in listing *coveitise* (I 3884) as one of the four *gleedes*, but those *gleedes* themselves and the Reeve’s reference to fire in the ashes of old age seem to negate the Reeve, at least, as cold, and the avarice as stemming from that cold.

represented through John the carpenter, cuckolded by his younger wife. The Reeve imagines that he has, in the Miller's representation, lost dominion over his own life narrative: the Miller can create the character of the older carpenter as irrelevant, absurd, and tangential to the action of the narrative. The Miller removes John from the main action of the tale with the poker, has him accept and act according to the narrative of the flood, and grants him *only* that agency of acting within Nicholas's narrative; John's attempts to keep Alisoun to himself fail. Because he accepts Nicholas's tale and his own prescribed role in it, John literally suspends himself from action of the *Miller's Tale*, in "tubbes hangynge in the balkes" (I 3626). If, as Gullette asserts, "Aging involves a narrative. Aging *is* a set of narratives," then the Miller's and Nicholas's wielding of the narrative removes, from the Reeve's perspective, self-determination from older men (Gullette 129). The Reeve moreover has felt excluded from discourse and agency even prior to the start of the tale. When he commands the Miller to "Stynt thy clappe!" (I 3144) he goes unheeded. He is unable to switch the narrative to "othere thynges" (I 3149) or redefine the *Miller's Tale* for the other pilgrims as "a synne and eek a greet folye" (I 3146). The Miller interrupts "ful soone" (I 3150) and seemingly places the Reeve in a diminutive role through the familiar address "Leve brother Osewold" (I 3151) before proceeding to deal with the Reeve's concerns.

The Miller uses what could be taken as patronizing language with, "That knowestow wel thyself, but if thou madde" (I 3156) and "Why artow angry with my tale now?" (I 3157), as if patiently reasoning with the unreasonable and slowly stating the obvious. We almost have here a representation of elderspeak. He marginalizes and silences the Reeve and his concerns, whether legitimate or not, at a point where the Reeve is already hyperaware of becoming marginalized. Current age studies discourse sees such marginalization as feeding into a vicious circle where "the stigma and social

invisibility of old people create and feed a desire for invisibility. When a person is complicit in his or her own erasure, then in some ways the person has chosen to be invisible—an understandable decision if the alternative is social powerlessness and abjection.”⁵⁹ Although this quote refers to contemporary marginalization of older people and our exclusion of all but a powerful few from visibility and mainstream discourse, the principle behind it still applies to the Middle Ages. The Reeve’s reaction to the Miller vehemently resists complicity in his own invisibility. Chaucer uses the Reeve to show how a stand might be taken against marginalization, despite the prospect of a very limited success.

On the surface of things the Reeve’s stand seems to worsen his situation. Edward Vasta sees him as indiscreet in “inviting the pilgrims to seek comparisons between himself and the Miller’s carpenter, self-denigrating in thus imputing to himself some actual fault of some experience for which he is ashamed...”⁶⁰ The narrator notes after the *Miller’s Tale* that “Ne at this tale I saugh no man hym greve,/ But it were oonly Osewold the Reve” (I 3859-60). The Reeve is, after all, the only one angered by the *Miller’s Tale*, on the grounds of a shared, though now past, trade with the carpenter and the Miller’s supposedly malicious depiction of John as too old for his wife. Given the gratuitous age markers Chaucer ascribes to Januarie in the *Merchant’s Tale*, such as “stoupyng age” (IV 1738) and a “nekke lene” (IV 1853) that shakes with extra skin (IV 1849), the Reeve appears to have overreacted. In comparison to Januarie or the old man in the *Pardoner’s*

⁵⁹ Marshall, “Through (with) the Looking Glass,” 60.

⁶⁰ Edward Vasta, “How Chaucer’s Reeve Succeeds,” *Criticism* 25.1 (1983): 1-12, at 2.

Tale, the Miller never gives John markers of old age past the brief mention of a marked age difference and consequent strife.⁶¹

We are left wondering why the Reeve overreacts like this and dwells on his own old age. Vasta notes that unlike the *Prologues* of the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, and the Canon's Yeoman, "the Reeve's confession is uncalled for by anything outside of his mind" (Vasta 2). But the Reeve sees his *Prologue* as a necessary ploy to define himself as a member of the pilgrim-company and a contestant in the Host's tale-telling game.

Once established as a contestant, the Reeve can reach again for some limited form of power despite the reductions old age has mandated. Deborah Ellis finds him a success, in that the Reeve "is not only a guardian, or at least a governor (A 599) of all his lord's property, but is also the active principle that steals (reves) that property and translates it into his own. Moreover, he accomplishes this "subtilly" (A 610), a word that implies skill in language and flattery."⁶² The Reeve continues to manipulate authority and control in old age, deriving and stealing it from his young lord. Older men keeping or stealing power from younger ones was a loaded subject in Chaucer's time.⁶³ The Reeve has announced indirectly that he does not truly possess authority; he "may nat doon" (I 3881) and classifies himself as impotent. Because of this, he must work *subtilly* and slyly.

⁶¹ The word "elde" (I 3230), however, is rather definitive on the fact that John *is* old, especially when contrasted with "youthe" (I 3230) and his "yonge wyf" (I 3233).

⁶² Deborah S. Ellis, "Chaucer's Devilish Reeve," *The Chaucer Review* 27.2 (1992): 150-161 at 155.

⁶³ Shahar finds that "notwithstanding the cultural attitude which said that old people should retreat to the margins, there were men in the ruling strata in the Middle Ages who continued into old age to hold positions in the feudal territories, in the state, and above all in the Church" (76). If the Church practiced this the most egregiously, then we may have one reason for the Reeve's clerical connotations (his hair is "doked lyk a preest biforn" (I 590) and the Host accuses him of speaking "alday of hooly writ" (I 3902) and says, "The devel made a reve for to preche" (I 3903)), portraying him as one of the untouchable old men in the Church, rather than someone who serves past his time at the whim of a young lord.

The Reeve's passive sexuality amplifies his loss of power. Leo Bersani posits that "those effects of power which, as Foucault has argued, are inherent in the relational itself...[can] most easily be exacerbated, and polarized into relations of mastery and subordination, in sex," and then relates this sexual aspect of power to individuals' bodies and their ability to control the world outside.⁶⁴ The Reeve's sexuality, even though his sex life is purely hypothetical, has implications for how he interacts in any power dynamic now. Furthermore, his sexual identity extends passivity into what Bersani might describe as "a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self" (216). The Reeve has lost not only agency, privilege, and power but also his bodily boundaries and internal coherence. While agency, privilege, and power would perhaps inevitably have been lost through age, the Reeve chooses, without prompting or overt pressure, to foreground his open vulnerability. This choice suggests again immense pressures on either side of having a sexual identity, any sexual identity, in old age as a means to retain some measure of voice. The alternative involves operating within an age culture that demands (though not expects) a lack of desire from its older members and punishes those like Januarie who demonstrate lust. The Reeve maneuvers against this age culture to create a space for legitimized, aged desire, even though creating this space entails public humiliation. But as a consequence of his passivity and feminization, he begins to recognize inherent problems in signification itself.

THWARTED DESIRES IN THE *REEVE'S TALE*

The difficulties the Reeve now finds in signifying emerge as frustrated desires in the *Reeve's Tale*. Even outside of the *Tale*, the Reeve has been trapped within the Miller's framing language and theme. Within the *Tale*, misunderstandings are rife and

⁶⁴ Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 197-222 at 216.

acting on desires inevitably goes awry, resulting in violence. The Reeve's own purposes are thwarted as he aligns *himself* with what is meant to be the Miller's stand-in in the *Reeve's Tale*, Symkyn. Though the pilgrims ignore the implications, the *Reeve's Tale* exposes problems within the very act of storytelling. Chaucer may even question through the Reeve what counts as a successfully told tale when tales themselves must inevitably fail to articulate true desires.

The Reeve presents his *Tale* in what is already a discussion of tale-telling. The *Miller's Prologue* and *Tale* have raised questions of who speaks, why, and what speech is. Ignoring how the Host has assigned precedence to the Monk, the Miller declares that "I kan a noble tale for the nones,/ With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale" (I 3126-27), setting his own tale-telling on a level with the Knight's. Chaucer the pilgrim disclaims that he "moot reherce/ Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,/ Or ells falsen som of my mateere" (I 3173-75), making the reader question what the poet or tale-teller should be held responsible for, what counts as truth in tales, and why Chaucer the poet nonetheless recounts the *Miller's* and the *Reeve's Tales*. Within the *Miller's Tale*, Absolon's malicious request that Alisoun "Spek, sweete bryd" (I 3805), hot poker at the ready, is answered by a fart "As greet as it had been a thunder-dent,/ That with the strook he was almoost yblent" (I 3807-08); speech is not limited to words and has, at times, physical force. Nicholas's constructed tale of a coming Flood introduces desire and the purpose of speech into the conversation. Although all characters but Alisoun are somehow punished in the *Miller's Tale*, the *Tale* nonetheless also reads as a morass of satisfied desires in which all youthful plots work: the Miller *quytes* the Knight by parodying his *Tale*, Nicholas gets a night with Alisoun and a successful prank on John, and Absolon gets revenge.

Following the Knight and the Miller, the Reeve appropriates not only the theme of desire but also the tone of discourse the Miller introduced. He answers the Miller “Right in his cherles termes” (I 3917) and makes an analogy of responding to force with force, “For leveful is with force force of-showve” (I 3912). In this way, as the Reeve begins his tale he has already ceded the phrasing, register, and framework to the Miller by accepting these “cherles termes.” Where the Miller has parodied the *Knight’s Tale*, the Reeve follows with yet another iteration, including the Miller’s trope of a cuckolded husband and the Knight’s and Miller’s two young male suitors. The self-motivation of the Reeve’s entire intention to strike back at the Miller is submerged under the Miller’s introduced impetus of *quyte*-ing.

In his *Tale*, the Reeve expresses nostalgia for his previous power through active, potent, and vivacious characters in a setting where even the local clergy engage in procreative, masculinity-reaffirming sex: Symkyn’s wife is the daughter of “The person of the toun” (I 3943) and was “yfostred in a nonnerye” (I 3946). The clerks differ from the pilgrimage’s own Clerk of Oxford, who is “as coy and stille” as “a mayde / Were new espoused” (IV 2-3). The Reeve attempts to rewrite his disconnected, former, masculine identity into the clerks. The clerks take their revenge through virile sex, making a fool of the Miller’s stand-in Symkyn. Here the Reeve fulfills his desire for an angry rebuttal, exposing through the clerks his longing to *quyte* the Miller personally and dynamically rather than through words. One clerk, Aleyn, alleges that “gif a man in a point be agreved, / That in another he sal be releved...I will have esement” (I 4181-85). This *esement* against a miller takes a sudden, violent sexual form before the daughter can “crie” (I 4196). The Reeve, wishing to reverse his situation and silence the pilgrims’ Miller, inscribes his impulse into his *Tale* as an aggressive and sexual desire. His changed voice enables him to have this desire.

But the Reeve has faced internal emptiness and recognized the inherent problems with signifiers. Stockton believes that,

In their joint fixation on privation, Lacan and Chaucer circle around the same masculine anxieties...As the Miller advises, it is therefore best not to pry into any *pryvetee*, lest one discover that Woman, God, and Woman-as-God do not exist—or, what amounts to the same thing, they only exist outside of signification as figures for the Real.⁶⁵

Chaucer may circle around these anxieties in the *Miller's Tale*, but only as preparation for the *Reeve's Prologue*. The Reeve confronts the emptiness of *das Ding*, which Lacan “metaphorize[s]... as the sodomitical anus” (Stockton 154).

As a result, inconsistencies in message appear in the *Reeve's Prologue* and *Tale*. Paul Ruggiers notes the conflict in how the Reeve seeks vengeance for the Miller's mockery of his carpenter's old age (“how cruel of the Miller to depict old age so easily duped!”) and yet constructs his own miller Symkyn as an older man beaten by two youths he was incapable of treating with due intellectual caution.⁶⁶ This is not a failure of logic on the Reeve's part; working through feminized speech, he acknowledges and recognizes throughout his tale the impossibility of desire and of expressing desire. Though horrified, the Reeve claims and represents his incompleteness to us through the metaphors of the *open-ers* and the emptying cask, both hollow representations of phallic absence. Thrust into this feminized position of a missing signifier, he gains that element of enlightenment. It is then unsurprising that the *gleedes* he lists as available to old men, “Avauntyng, liyng, anger, coveitise” (I 3884), are so cynical and negative.

Another inconsistency emerges when the Reeve builds the miller Symkyn in his own image. Heffernan mentions that despite a superficial resemblance to the pilgrims'

⁶⁵ Stockton 156, drawing on Richard Halpern.

⁶⁶ Paul Ruggiers, *The Art of the Canterbury Tales* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967) 68, 74-75.

Miller, both Symkyn and the Reeve “carry blades at their sides in the style of humble country men; neither is above a little thievery; and if Symkyn is not manifestly as old as Osewold, he is at least old by comparison to the two young scholars.”⁶⁷ Again, the Reeve himself has drawn attention to respective ages, going much further than the Miller’s comment on *youth* and *elde* being at *debaat* (I 3230) through his lengthy *Prologue*. Symkyn, in a parallel to the Reeve, fancies himself clever in outwitting the youths to whom he provides services. Both men fear replacement by the younger generation in terms of cleverness, financial matters, and literally in bed. The tale even mocks Symkyn’s sexual prowess and indirectly implicates his age, by contrasting the clerk John’s performance as better than the wife had had “ful yooore” (I 4230).

Because it recognizes the futility of expressing desire, the *Reeve’s Tale* rebounds upon its teller. Desires throughout it are thwarted. Despite the clerks’ very intention in visiting the Miller, wagering “hir nekke/ [that] The millere should not stele hem half a pekke/ Of corn by sleighte” (I 4009-11), Symkyn steals their flour. Despite Symkyn’s plans, the clerks revenge themselves upon him, usurping his claim to be the tricky one and taking his daughter’s virginity (or “flower”). The wife goes astray when her infant’s cradle marks the incorrect bed, a consequence that, though desired by John, the wife describes as “foule ysped” (I 4220). The same cradle misleads Aleyn as he returns to bed, which leads to the downfall of John’s plans. Aleyn believes because of the “cradel I have mysngo” (I 4255) and therefore boasts to Symkyn instead of John.

The consequences are chaotic violence for all parties. The women are, in the most positive light possible, surprised by or deceived by sex; by our modern understanding of the concept they are raped. Symkyn catches Aleyn “by the throte-bolle... / And he hente

⁶⁷ Heffernan 41.

hym despitously again, / And on the nose he smoot hym with his fest. / Doun ran the bloody stream upon his brest” (I 4273-76). Aleyn is left with “nose and mouth tobroke” (I 4277). When fallen on, the wife cries out that her “herte is broken; help! I nam but deed!” (I 4289). Due to darkness, the wife sees a “whit thyng” (I 4301) and takes her husband’s “pyled skulle” (I 4306) to be the clerk Aleyn in a nightcap. Though she “wende han hit this Aleyn at the fulle” (I 4305), the mistake causes her to strike her husband instead. The Reeve ultimately represents himself through Symkyn, creating a near-total collapse of language and message and undercutting the revenge of the *Reeve’s Tale*, as the Reeve repeats the Miller’s plot of youthe beating elde (I 3230). All schemes in the *Tale* end in violence. Telling this *Tale* removes both the Reeve’s illusions and the readers’ that one can precisely represent one’s desires, and reflects the Reeve’s turmoil still further. Unable to rely upon old boundaries, he cannot differentiate the Otherness of Symkyn the miller, and perhaps the pilgrims’ own Miller, from himself.

For the rest of the pilgrims, we can assume the complications of the Reeve’s signifying either miss them, as in the case of the Host, or discomfit them. They, alongside the Miller, have marginalized him; the Host asks of the Reeve’s lengthy address “What amounteth al this wit?” (I 3901) and complains of the space he perceives the Reeve as impinging on with phrases like “alday” (I 3902), “half-wey pryme” (I 3906) and “tarie nat the tyme” (I 3905), trying to abbreviate the Reeve’s tale-telling—the very force of dismissal that the Reeve has been pushing against.⁶⁸ Addressing the Pardoner, Stockton claims,

⁶⁸ The usage of *pryme* hints at prime age, and the concepts of lengthy time may tie in here to the Reeve’s aging. Moreover, the Host hints that the Reeve experiences the passage of time differently from the Host himself and that, in his old age, he has become content to dawdle and linger on boring trivialities. The Reeve’s encapsulation of old age and of his life, for him a verbal sprint hurtling towards the end and the empty cask, conversely forces other pilgrims into a glacially slow experience of time, as if the older man were retarding temporal progress.

Reality (as opposed to the Lacanian Real) is not an objective ‘thing’ to which one must conform, but a fantasy to be shaped by the organization of desire. The Pardoner has not simply failed to adjust to reality; were this the case, his fellow pilgrims (and readers of the *Canterbury Tales* could comfortably dismiss him as irrelevant. ...instead...the Pardoner has touched a collective nerve (Stockton 149-50).

In contrast to the Pardoner, the Reeve *has* adjusted to reality, shaping it rather than conforming, and claiming a safety the Pardoner lacks, speaking of and demonstrating uncomfortable reality by organizing failure of desire throughout the *Reeve’s Tale*. The Reeve may be labeled irrelevant and time-wasting by both the pilgrims and by us, apart from his *quyte*-ing the Miller. But this is in fact the problem his *Prologue* and *Tale* address: they demand our attention, insist on his ability to signify and to desire, and yet instigate a breakdown of successful desire and successful tale-telling. The *Reeve’s Prologue*, while lamenting old age, opens up a new voice for the Reeve, a truthful, awful, feminized one. Through this voice, the Reeve can use his *Tale* to display new insights into desire and communication, though the insights cause failures in both the *Tale* he tells and his effort to pay back the Miller’s supposed insults.

In this way the *Reeve’s Prologue* confers rarely-acknowledged importance upon the *Reeve’s Tale*. By problematizing desire through old age, the *Prologue* challenges the criteria of successful tales. Nor can we read the *Reeve’s Tale* without acknowledging the frustrated, age-induced emotions and anxieties that inspire it. While it is tempting to extrapolate from the *Reeve’s Prologue* to Chaucer’s own old age, there are too many other, differing examples of age in the *Canterbury Tales* to do so definitively. However, Chaucer’s very attention to the matter hints at the cultural stakes for him as he writes several stories that feature inappropriate old age, fears of impotence and young wives, and inactivity in or complacent cuckoldry of the old. Ruggiers raises the *Reeve’s Prologue* as “Chaucer’s own sober and thoughtful processes into old age,” a claim that

deserves further, nuanced exploration even as we might question whether the phrase *open-ers* (or, for that matter, anything out of the Reeve's mouth) ought to suggest sober thought (70-71).

Chaucer even ties himself into the restrictions of his age culture: is Chaucer the Pilgrim rebelling against his perceived role by telling the childish *Sir Thopas*, and is the subsequent dull *Tale of Melibee* a retaliation for being interrupted, as Sandidge has posited? Would the negative connotations attached to almost all of the old men in the *Tales* suggest Chaucer denies application of the category of "old man" to himself, and does he instead embrace the mantle of the eternal poet?⁶⁹ How does older age change the writings of poets like Chaucer and Maximianus? As they face impotence, at least on the page, do their acknowledged problems with signifying make up a crucial element of their writing? Aging and even denial of age are intrinsic to medieval and modern signifying in a way scholars have yet to approach fully.

At the onset of this project I had hoped Chaucer, his impotent Reeve, and his much-imitated predecessor Maximianus would exemplify a medieval model for masculine aging. The Reeve perversely manifested the opposite; his aging is a feminizing process. The feminized ripeness he discovers is not a universal age identity for impotent older men, but is, implicitly, an available identity. So although males could and did experience aging-into-old-age, at least one of the possible pathways remains feminized (albeit not wholly female) and "old," as Cruikshank has pointed out, continues to mean "women."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ For just one of the loaded depictions, I will point out Saturn in the *Knight's Tale*, who finds that "elde hath greet advantage" (I 2447) in wits but also claims to be a scourge of humanity, ruling over "drenching in the see" (I 2456), "the ruyne of the hye halles/The fallynge of the toures and of the walles" (I 2463-4), and other means of death, as well as claiming "maladyes colde,/ The derke treasons, and the castes olde;/ My lookyng is the fader of pestilence" (I 2467-9).

⁷⁰ Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old*, x.

Bibliography

- Baird, John R. and John W. Thieret, "The Medlar (*Mespilus germanica*, Rosaceae) from Antiquity to Obscurity." *Economic Botany*, 43.3 (1989): 328-372.
- Baum, Paull F. "Chaucer's Puns." *PMLA* 71.1 (1956): 225-246.
- , "Chaucer's Puns: A Supplementary List." 73.1 (1958): 167-170.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Coming of Age*. Trans. Patrick O'Brian. NY: Norton, 1996.
- Bersani, Leo. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43, AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism (1987): 197-222.
- Burrow, J. A. *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002.
- , "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics." *AIBR* 4.3 (2009): i-xiii.
- Bytheway, Bill. *Unmasking Age: The Significance of Age for Social Research*. Bristol: The Policy Press, 2011.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- , *The Canterbury Tales: The New Ellesmere Chaucer Facsimile (of Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9)*. Ed. Daniel Woodward and Martin Stevens. San Marino, California: Huntington Library Press, 1995.
- Coffman, George R. "Old Age from Horace to Chaucer: Some Literary Affinities and Adventures of an Idea." *Speculum* 9 (1934): 249-277.
- Cruikshank, Margaret. *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging*. 2nd ed. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2009.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.
- Dove, Mary. *The Perfect Age of Man's Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.

- Ellis, Deborah S. "Chaucer's Devilish Reeve." *The Chaucer Review* 27.2 (1992): 150-161.
- Feinstein, Sandy. "The 'Reeve's Tale': About That Horse." *The Chaucer Review* 26.1 (1991): 99-106.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Fetishism." Trans. Joan Riviere. *C.P.* 5 (1936): 198-204.
- Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. *Aged by Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago UP, 2004.
- Halberstam, Judith. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: NYU Press, 2005.
- Heffernan, Carol Falvo. "A Reconsideration of the Cask Figure in the 'Reeve's Prologue.'" *The Chaucer Review* 15.1 (1980): 37-43.
- Janick, Jules and Robert E. Paull. *The Encyclopedia of Fruit & Nuts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Kökeritz, Helge. "Rhetorical Word-Play in Chaucer." *PMLA* 69.4 (1954): 937-952.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Signification of the Phallus." *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Bruce Fink. London: Norton, 2002. 271-280.
- Langland, William. *The Vision of Piers Plowman*. Ed. A.V.C. Schmidt. 2nd ed. London: Everyman, 1995.
- . *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text*. Ed. Derek Pearsall. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008.
- MacLaine, A. H., "Chaucer's Wine-Cask Image: Word Play in 'The Reeve's Prologue.'" *Medium Aevum* 31 (1962): 129-131.
- Marshall, Leni. "[enews@agingstudies.org] Aging Studies and Age Studies eNews, 20 April 2013." Message to the aging studies listserv. 20 April 2013.
- . "Through (with) the Looking Glass: Revisiting Lacan and Woodward in 'Méconnaissance,' the Mirror Stage of Old Age." *Feminist Formations* 24.2 (2012): 52-76.
- Martin, Christopher. *Constituting Old Age in Early Modern English Literature from Queen Elizabeth to King Lear*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012.

- Matthew of Vendôme. *Ars Versificatoria*. Trans. Roger P. Parr. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette UP, 1981.
- McAlpine, Monica. "Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters." *PMLA* 95 (1980): 8-22.
- Minois, Georges. *History of Old Age from Antiquity to the Renaissance*. Trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.
- Morrison, Susan Signe. *Excrement in the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer's Fecopoetics*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Nitecki, Alicia K. "Figures of Old Age in Fourteenth-Century English Literature." *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*. Ed. Michael M. Sheehan. Toronto: PIMS, 1990. 107-116.
- , "The Convention of the Old Man's Lament in the *Pardoner's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 16.1 (1981): 76-84.
- "Open-ars." *Middle English Dictionary*. 2001. 12 Dec 2012 <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=byte&byte=130621222&egdisplay=open&egs=130623114>>
- The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*. Ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007.
- Port, Cynthia. "No Future? Aging, Temporality, History, and Reverse Chronologies." *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 4 (2012): 1-19.
- Ross, Thomas Wynne. *Chaucer's Bawdy*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1972.
- Ruggiers, Paul. *The Art of the Canterbury Tales*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965.
- Sandidge, Marilyn. "Forty Years of Plague: Attitudes toward Old Age in the Tales of Boccaccio and Chaucer." *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Ed. Albrecht Classen,. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007. 357-73.
- Shahar, Shulamith. *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: 'Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain.'* NY: Routledge, 1997.
- Small, Helen. *The Long Life*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.

Stockton, Will. "Cynicism and the Anal Erotics of Chaucer's Pardoner." *Exemplaria* 20.2 (2008): 143-164.

Thane, Pat. *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

Vasta, Edward. "How Chaucer's Reeve Succeeds." *Criticism* 25.1 (1983): 1-12.

Zerbi, Gabriele and Maximianus. *Gabriele Zerbi, Gerontocomia: On the Care of the Aged; and Maximianus, Elegies on Old Age and Love*. Trans. L. R. Lind. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1988.