

Pleyng with May's Age in Oxford, New College MS 314

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

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

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

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

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

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

² Carissa M. Harris, 'Inserting "A grete tente, a thrifty, and a long": Sexual Obscenity and Scribal Innovation in Fifteenth-Century Manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales*,' *Essays in Medieval Studies* 27 (2011), 45–60 at p. 54. On the likely non-consent of these sexual encounters, see Nicole Nolan Sidhu, "'To Late for to Crie": Female Desire, Fabliau Politics, and Classical Legend in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*,' *Exemplaria* 21 (1) (2009), 3–23.

³ The other prominent additions and variants occur in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and the *Shipman's Tale* (ff. 107v, 202r). See discussion in Harris, 'Inserting,' 52–3; Mary C. Flannery, '[Looking for Scribal Play in Oxford, New College MS 314](#),' *New College Notes* 12, no. 3 (2019).

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, cited fragment and line numbers in the *Merchant's Tale* refer to Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

She saide it was [th]e meriest fit
That ever in her lif she was at yet
Milordis tente she saide servith me not thus
He foldith twifolde be swete Jhesus
He may not swyve worth a leek
And yet he is ful gentil [and] ful meek
This is levir to me [th]an an evynsong⁵

Those responsible for the additions are careful, as in most cases of line additions, to preserve the rhyme scheme, so that here the 'grete wrong' rhymes instead with the less transgressive 'evynsong'. Indeed, both Harris and Mary C. Flannery interpret these added lines as essentially sex-positive. For Flannery, they are an example of 'scribal play' within the manuscript as a whole, as well as giving us a 'very clear sense of how much May is enjoying the encounter'.⁶ Harris points to May's use of *swyve*, the Middle English equivalent to 'fuck', as a moment of empowerment: by putting this obscene word in the mouths of May as well as Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, 'our unknown redactor allows Chaucer's women to articulate their own sexual subjectivities and to name intercourse with the same precise expression available to male speakers in the *Tales*'.⁷

Both Harris and Flannery are attempting to reframe the dominant earlier interpretation of these spurious lines, articulated by Rosalind Field in 1994: that the added lines are merely 'the response of a literal minded redactor' unsatisfied by the Merchant's claim that he 'kan nat glose'.⁸ Field reads the attribution of *swyve* to May, 'one of the most inscrutable of Chaucer's women', as degrading rather than empowering.⁹ Field is herself responding to even earlier interpretations, such as those of Alfred David and Martin Stevens, who viewed the lines as 'wretched but enthusiastic doggerel' that is merely 'uncontained merriment'.¹⁰

I should like to stoke the fire of this scholarly debate by drawing our attention to one of the lines that has received little scholarly attention so far. Field notes that spurious-May's claim that Damyan's 'tente' is the 'meriest fit' is 'at last a thoroughly Chaucerian expression', and 'exactly what we would expect Chaucer's May to say'.¹¹ It is also clear from the lines that May is disparaging of her husband Januarie's sexual performance; as Flannery points out, the image of the elderly 'tente' folded over itself 'twifold' is 'a vivid and off-putting image indeed'.¹² Yet the commentators have little to say about the expression that directly contrasts May's encounters with Januarie and Damyan: the idea that this pleasure is unlike anything she has experienced 'ever in her lif'. This line raises two important questions—one that relates to the *Merchant's Tale* as a whole, and the other that pertains specifically to MS 314. First, how might our interpretation of the added lines be informed by the evidence we have of May's earlier sexual experiences with Januarie? Second, how long *is* May's 'lif' so far, and how might that also colour our readings of this scene?

⁵ Oxford, New College, MS 314, f. 95v, lines 20–27. All transcriptions are my own; I have rendered thorn as [th] for ease.

⁶ Flannery, [Looking for Scribal Play](#).

⁷ Harris, 'Inserting', 52.

⁸ Rosalind Field, "'Superfluous Ribaldry': Spurious Lines in the *Merchant's Tale*", *The Chaucer Review* 28 (4) (1994), 353–67, at p. 362.

⁹ *ibid.*, 365.

¹⁰ Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 171; Martin Stevens, "'And Venus Laugheth": An Interpretation of the *Merchant's Tale*", *The Chaucer Review* 7 (2) (1972), 118–31, at p. 128.

¹¹ Field, "'Superfluous Ribaldry'", 363.

¹² Flannery, [Looking for Scribal Play](#).

The first question is somewhat simpler to answer, though still dependent on contemporaneous feminism(s). It is no coincidence that the most pro-May readings I have cited, by Harris and Flannery respectively, are also the most recent, and consequently the most informed by readings of May that recognise the complexity of her position as a sexual participant. Since the 1970s, when both David and Stevens wrote, feminist scholarship on the *Merchant's Tale* has revisited the tale's sex scenes, including those between May and Januarie that precede the pear-tree incident. The first is their wedding night, during which Januarie begins to 'manace' May 'in his herte', planning to 'streyne' her '[h]arder than evere Parys died Eleyne [Helen of Troy]' (lines 1752–4). He then does so, kissing her with his rough beard '[l]yk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere' (line 1825). May is silent. The only insight we glean comes at the scene's conclusion: 'She preyseth nat his pleyng worth a bene' (line 1854). May's clear lack of enjoyment has led Christine Rose to assess the wedding night as 'a repulsive (but amusing) scene of rape'.¹³ Januarie even seems to be aware of the possibility of marital rape when he promises May that while he 'moot trespace' upon her as his wife, 'It is no fors how longe that we pleye', for they are married and (he) can do no sin (lines 1825–35).

The tale's repeated use of *pley* as a euphemism for sexual satisfaction shines another light on Flannery's suggestion that we look to the added lines as examples of scribal play rather than simply 'literal minded' doggerel.¹⁴ It appears again when Januarie's garden is first introduced, as the place he prefers to 'walke and pleye' (line 2043). Again, the *pleyng* is sexual and, if not explicitly non-consensual, entirely dictated by Januarie's desires rather than May's. Januarie unlocks the garden 'whan that *hym* leste', in order to do 'thynges whiche that were nat doon abedde, / *He* in the gardyn parfourned hem and spedde' (lines 2047–52). The discrepancy in Chaucer's text between Januarie and May's experiences supports not only the added lines' invocation of May's displeasure with her husband's 'tente', but also a modern feminist reading in which they allow May to be more than a silent, purchased bride, carted from bedroom to garden to satisfy her husband's lecherous urges.¹⁵ In contrast to all of the tale's other sex scenes, in which May is a passive, silent object, the added lines present a vocal, verbally transgressive heroine who has finally demanded and received sexual pleasure on her own terms.

The alignment between May's verbal transgression and the archetype of the sex-crazed *mal mariée* is a point of critique for Field, who, unlike Harris and Flannery, argues that the added lines bring May 'into comfortable conformity with a received stereotype, that of the indiscreet and unfaithful wife', whose language 'is as low as her behavior'.¹⁶ Neither Field, Harris, nor Flannery address May's potential status as a survivor of marital rape, nor how that status might influence readers' (and scribes') eagerness to allow her a sex scene in which she is at last enjoying herself fully.¹⁷ As compelling as it is to think about a scribe potentially reclaiming obscenity for May's sexual satisfaction, I cannot help but wonder if it is indeed too 'comfortable' to present the pear-tree sex as

¹³ Christine M. Rose, 'Reading Chaucer Reading Rape,' in *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 21–60, at p. 41.

¹⁴ *Middle English Dictionary*, 'plei(e, n.', sense 5 <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED33653/>> (Accessed: 23 December 2023).

¹⁵ Though Harris does not directly address the question of marital rape, she emphasises the 'mutual erotic pleasure' they propose, in contrast to 'Chaucer's penetrative poetics': 'Inserting', 47.

¹⁶ Field, "'Superfluous Ribaldry'", 365.

¹⁷ To be sure, even the added lines do not present a scene of undeniable consent, but May's proactivity in communicating 'al hire entente' to Damyan suggest that their encounter is consensual (lines 2207–2213).

fully enjoyable, fully positive, fully consensual—the antidote, as it were, to the rape that otherwise suffuses the tale.¹⁸

The potential discomfort of May's vocality in the added lines is heightened when we turn to the second question I proposed above, namely, May's age. If in generic terms May is the youthful, shrewish *malmariée*, Januarie is the *senex amans*, the elderly lover. Their age gap is, of course, one of the tale's central themes, and their names signal the chasm between fecund spring and hoary winter. As many scholars have discussed, the tale's recurrent symbols are also linked to seasonal and reproductive forces, including the dominant pear tree, whose fruiting season (traditionally, the month of May) points towards May's potential pregnancy at the tale's conclusion.¹⁹ What I want to focus on here is not necessarily age as a season, but age indicated in *numerical* terms—an aspect of the tale in which MS 314 differs from many other versions of the *Tales*.

Neither Januarie nor May receives a precise numerical age. Chaucer's text indicates that Januarie is at least 'sixty yeer' old (lines 1248, 1252), in keeping with one of the Classical notions of old age.²⁰ May's age, on the other hand, is given a maximum rather than a minimum. As Januarie tells his friends while he searches for a suitable wife:

I wol noon oold wyf han in no manere.
She shal nat passe twenty yeer, certayn;
Oold fish and yong flessch wolde I have fayn. (lines 1416–18)

Several lines later, he again caps May's age, this time at 'thritty yeer of age'; after this, he claims, women are 'but bene-straw and greet forage' (lines 1421–2). Though a modern reader might be tempted to read these criteria in light of medieval life expectancy, and take at face value the idea of women of thirty as worthless husks, there is considerable evidence that medieval women in their thirties were active members of the community, were not treated as enfeebled, and (important to Januarie) had healthy pregnancies and babies.²¹

More likely, Januarie's comments about 'bene-straw' are a moment of tongue-in-cheek humour on Chaucer's (or the Merchant's) part. As Sue Niebrzydowski remarks in her introduction to *Middle-Aged Women in the Middle Ages*, 'The irony of Januarie's insult is never lost on female readers . . . he is very conscious of age withering a woman's physical charm and allure yet he believes himself impervious to the ageing process', including its effects on his sexual performance.²² Yet they also give us an indication of May's age in numerical rather than simply seasonal or stage-of-life terms. If indeed the chosen bride meets Januarie's conditions ('Suffiseth hym hir yowthe and hir beautee' (line 1626)), May is no older than twenty.

¹⁸ Elaine Tuttle Hansen writes that the tale 'normalize[s] and trivializ[es]' rape in myriad ways, including in its Classical allusions to Proserpina, Priapus, and Argus: *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 262.

¹⁹ Alcuin Blamires, 'May in January's Tree: Genealogical Configuration in the *Merchant's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review* 45 (1) (2010), 106–17; Jonathan Fruoco, 'Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Merchant's Tale* et La Dialectique de l'élévation', *Iris* 39 (2019), <<https://publications-prairial.fr/iris/index.php?id=1009>>.

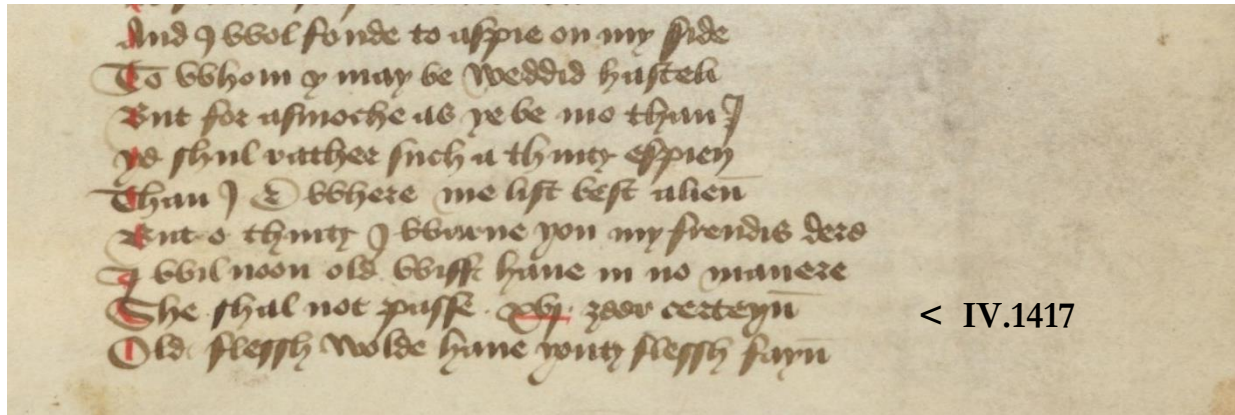
²⁰ For instance, sixty is a turning point in the Four Ages articulated by Johannitius and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), respectively. See J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), pp. 23–4. On youth, the seasons, and the Ages of Man, see Eve Salisbury, *Chaucer and the Child* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 19–28.

²¹ Katherine Harvey, *The Fires of Lust: Sex in the Middle Ages* (London: Reaktion Books, 2021), pp. 43–6; Sally Dixon-Smith, 'Marriage', in *Geoffrey Chaucer in Context*, ed. Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 385–92, at p. 386.

²² Sue Niebrzydowski, "'Becoming Bene-Straw': The Middle-Aged Woman in the Middle Ages", in *Middle-Aged Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sue Niebrzydowski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1–14, at p. 1.

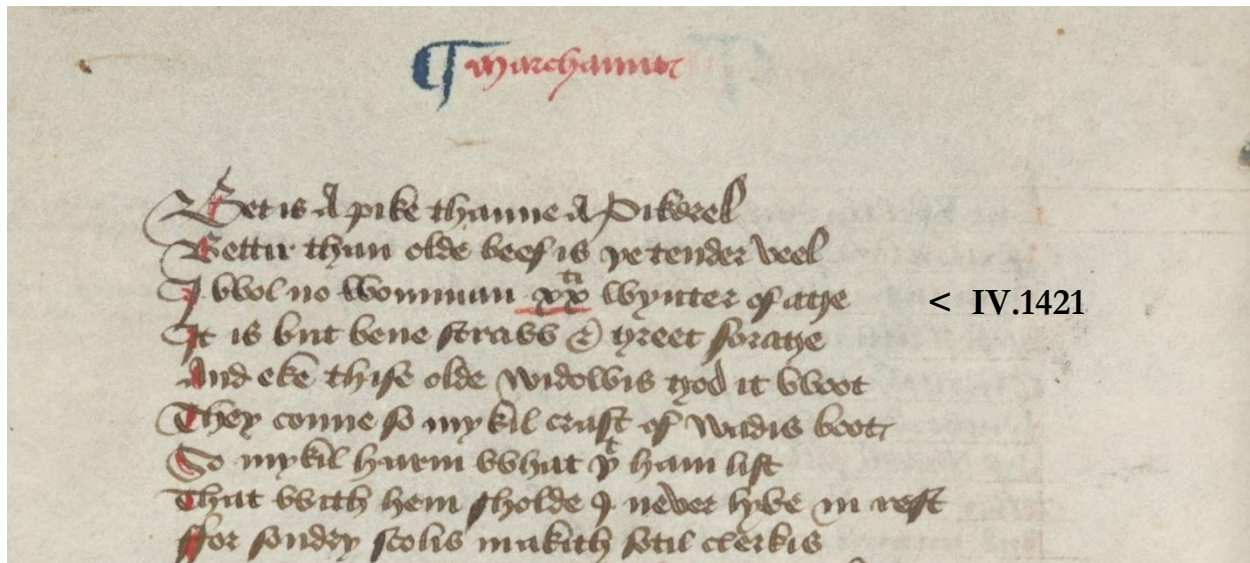
Or at least, May is no older than twenty in the majority of the extant manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*. Oxford, Christ Church MS 152 limits May's age instead to 'lx' (nineteen), while the relevant lines in New College, MS 314 read:

She shal nat passe xvi yeer certeyn
Old flessch wolde have yong flessch fayn[.] (f. 82r)



New College Library, Oxford, MS 314, f. 82r
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The limit here is not twenty, but sixteen. Eleven other manuscripts contain this variation, including British Library, MS Harley 7334 (the 'Harleian manuscript'), which was a favourite of the Victorians.²³ Unsurprisingly, Januarie's other condition is also commonly a variant; MS 314's definition of 'bene-straw and greet forage' is 'xx wynter,' or twenty, rather than thirty.



New College Library, Oxford, MS 314, f. 82v

²³ *Riverside Chaucer*, 1128, textual note to the MerT, line 1417. The other manuscripts are Oxford, Corpus Christi MS 198; British Library, MS Egerton 2726, MS Egerton 2863, MS Egerton 2864, MS Harley 1239, MS Harley 1758, MS Harley 7333, MS Harley 7334, MS Harley 7335; and Petworth, Sussex, Petworth House MS 7.

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

To be clear, sixteen-year-olds in the medieval period and today are fully capable of making informed sexual choices, at least from a broad socio-legal perspective. Since 1885, sixteen has been the age of sexual consent in England; in Chaucer's day, the age of consent to marriage according to canon law—the closest equivalent to sexual consent—was twelve for women and fourteen for men.²⁵ In the medieval imagination, the age of sixteen was also imbued with ideas about sexual awakening and transgression dating to a famous episode in the *Confessions* of St Augustine of Hippo. Augustine recalls how at sixteen, he begins to feel the stirrings of the flesh, and eventually he and a group of rebellious friends indulge their wantonness by stealing the fruit of a pear tree. 'It was sin', he writes, 'that sweetened it'.²⁶ It is possible that the Augustinian connection may have influenced the variant that occurs in MS 314 and the eleven other manuscripts in which sixteen is the upper cap on May's age. What concerns me more here, however, is the fact that of the twelve manuscripts in which May's age is limited to a number less than the typical twenty, only two—New College, MS 314 and British Library, MS Harley 1758—also contain the spurious lines relating to May's pleasure as she fornicates. That is, MS 314 is one of only two manuscripts that, in effect, make explicitly likely the reading I have put forward above: that May is at most sixteen when she is sold to Januarie, potentially maritally raped, and penetrated enjoyably in a tree. To be sure, nothing in the more broadly accepted Chaucerian text specifically *discounts* such a reading; May's age as 'younger than twenty' still allows for the fact that she might be sixteen, or indeed, fourteen, or thirteen, or twelve. Yet I would contend that if we are concerned with scribal intervention, or indeed scribal play, it is irresponsible not to read the added lines in MS 314 in light of the varied age limit that is very much present in this manuscript.

To insist on acknowledgment of the varied age limit is not to insist that May's vocality cannot still be empowered, or that scribal play is impossible where potential child marriage is at stake. Chaucer's text is and always has been more complex than such demands could ever enforce. It is worth asking, however, why a scribe would include both. If, as Charles Owen speculated, the added lines were 'soft pornography of a high enough order' to warrant copying in various manuscripts, how do we react when the pornstar is implied—by medieval standards or by our own—to be a very young adolescent, or a child?²⁷ How can we balance the modern progressive mandate to validate sexual pleasure and self-determination, especially when it comes to survivors of sexual violence, while contending with a tale that refuses to adhere to any 'comfortable' standards of age-based sexual or marital consent? However invested he might have been in the sexual articulacy of Chaucer's women, might the scribe of MS 314 also have found an even younger May a titillating possibility? These are questions that have no easy answers, but they are crucial for developing our understanding of MS 314

²⁴ Harvey, *Fires of Lust*, pp. 43–6; Dixon-Smith, 'Marriage', p. 386.

²⁵ Victoria Bates, 'The Legacy of 1885: Girls and the Age of Sexual Consent', *History & Policy* (8 September 2015), <www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/the-legacy-of-1885-girls-and-the-age-of-sexual-consent>; Dixon-Smith, 'Marriage', p. 386.

²⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions, Volume I: Books 1–8*, ed. and trans. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 73, 79.

²⁷ Charles A. Owen, Jr, *The Manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), p. 58, quoted in Flannery, 'Looking for Scribal Play'.

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

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

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