



Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences

Department of English Language and Literature

**“BLAMETH NAT ME”: POPULAR RESISTANCE AND
CHAUCEER’S WOMEN IN HIS FABLIAUX**

Azime Pekşen

Master’s Thesis

Ankara, 2013

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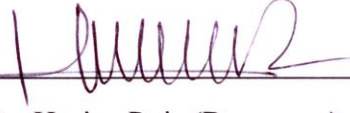
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KABUL VE ONAY

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Azime PEKŞEN

To my family

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ÖZET

PEKŞEN, Azime. “Beni Suçlama”: Popüler Direniş ve Chaucer’ın Fabliyölerinde Kadınlar, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara, 2013.

Bu tezin amacı, John Fiske’in popüler kültür kavramından yararlanarak, direniş figürleri olarak Chaucer’ın fabliyölerindeki (fabliau) kadınların güçsüzün kullandığı taktik, kurnazlık ve hilelerle kendi mağduriyetlerini nasıl savuşturdıklarını ve bu ikincil konumlarını nasıl kendi lehlerine çevirdiklerini Chaucer’ın *Değirmenci’nin Hikayesi* (the *Miller’s Tale*), *Kahya’nın Hikayesi* (the *Reeve’s Tale*), *Tüccar’ın Hikayesi* (the *Merchant’s Tale*) ve *Gemici’nin Hikayesi*’nde (the *Shipman’s Tale*) yer alan güç mücadelesindeki kadınların duruşunun ayrıntılı analiziyle incelemektir. Eşini aldatan, şehvet düşkün ve entrikacı kadınların aslında fabliyölerdeki güç mücadelesinde ikincil konumda bulunduğu tartışılmıştır. Bu nedenle, fabliyölerdeki kadınlar zulmedenden ziyade zulüm görendir, ve bu mağduriyetlerine evlilik dışı ilişkiler ve kişisel mekanların yıkıcı kullanımıyla baş kaldırmaktadırlar. Dolayısıyla, Chaucer’ın fabliyölerindeki kadınlar evliliklerindeki mağduriyetlerine kendilerini ikincil konuma iten egemen kültürün kaynaklarını kullanarak karşı koyarlar. Chaucer’ın fabliyölerinde, kadınların baskıcı yapı ve normlara karşı direnişi John Fiske’in popüler kültür teorileri bağlamında incelenmektedir. Bu bakımdan, *Değirmenci’nin Hikayesi*’nde Alisoun, *Kahya’nın Hikayesi*’nde değirmencinin karısı ve kızı Malyne, *Tüccar’ın Hikayesi*’nde May ve *Gemici’nin Hikayesi*’nde tüccarın karısı direnen ve başkaldıran kadınlardır ve kendi muhalif anlamlarını ve zevklerini egemen söylemin kaynaklarından faydalanarak üretirler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Chaucer’ın fabliyöleri, fabliyöda kadın, *Değirmenci’nin Hikayesi*, *Kahya’nın Hikayesi*, *Tüccar’ın Hikayesi*, *Gemici’nin Hikayesi*, popüler direniş, popüler zevk.

ABSTRACT

PEKŞEN, Azime. “Blameth Nat Me”: Popular Resistance and Chaucer’s Women in His Fabliaux, Master’s Thesis, Ankara, 2013.

The aim of this thesis is to examine through Fiske’s popular culture theory how Chaucer’s women in his fabliaux as figures of resistance avert their inferiority and how they subvert their subordination to their empowerment through using “the tactics, guileful ruses and artful stratagems of the weak” with a detailed analysis of Chaucer’s women and their relation to power in the *Miller’s Tale*, the *Reeve’s Tale*, the *Merchant’s Tale* and the *Shipman’s Tale*. It is argued that the adulterous, scheming and promiscuous women actually occupy a secondary position in the power struggle in the fabliaux. Thus, they are victims rather than victimizers and they contest their subjugation through their illicit sexual pursuits and subversive use of the domestic space. Chaucer’s women in his fabliaux, thus, resist their subjugation in marriage using the resources of the dominant. Chaucer’s women’s resistance to the oppressive structures and norms are analysed in the context of John Fiske’s popular culture theories. In this respect, Alisoun in the *Miller’s Tale*, Malyne and Symkyn’s wife in the *Reeve’s Tale*, May in the *Merchant’s Tale* and the merchant’s wife in the *Shipman’s Tale* are women of resistance and create their own oppositional meanings and pleasures out of the resources of the dominant.

Keywords: Chaucer’s fabliaux, woman in fabliaux, the *Miller’s Tale*, the *Reeve’s Tale*, the *Merchant’s Tale*, the *Shipman’s Tale*, popular resistance, popular pleasure.

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INTRODUCTION

As a popular genre of medieval English literature, fabliau is a short, bawdy and humorous story of the adultery of a young wife who is married to an old husband. Chaucer as an English fableur includes four fabliaux in the *Canterbury Tales*: the *Miller's Tale*, the *Reeve's Tale*, the *Merchant's Tale*, and the *Shipman's Tale*. In these fabliaux, Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*, the miller's wife in the *Reeve's Tale*, May in the *Merchant's Tale* and the merchant's wife in the *Shipman's Tale* are engaged in extramarital affairs. Their representations as adulterous and lecherous seem to reinforce the antifeminist claims of the genre; however, contrary to women's traditional representations as passive and submissive, their active participation to the action in the fabliaux empowers them to re-define their subordinate position. Although Chaucer's women in his fabliaux are deprived and subject to the forces of the dominant completely, they create oppositional meanings and pleasure through using the resources of the dominant power, which subjugates them. They position themselves within and against the dominant through subversive use of their bodies and private space. Indeed, they employ "the tactics and guileful ruses of the weak" to follow their illicit sexual adventures and gain partial freedom of their bodies and spaces. Analysing Chaucer's women's resistance in his fabliaux to the dominant structures in the context of John Fiske's popular culture theory, this thesis aims to examine how Chaucer's women in the fabliaux as figures of resistance and pleasure evade their subjection and how they turn their subordination to their advantage through utilizing "the tactics, artful stratagems and tricks of the weak."

Medieval women constituted the most deprived group in the medieval society. They were not even included in the tripartite estate division. Medieval society was made up of three estates (*ordines*) – Worshippers (*oratores*), Warriors (*bellatores*) and Workers (*laboratores*) (Rigby 26, Shahar 1). This tripartite structure of medieval hierarchical society designated specific functions and roles for every class to achieve a harmonious and single society. However, such a description of medieval society left women out and women were denied a place in these three estates. In this regard, Shulamith Shahar states that,

[. . .] from the twelfth century onwards, women were almost always categorized separately. They are described as a distinct class, subdivided according to their social-economic, rather than ‘socio-professional’ positions. Otherwise, they are subdivided according to their personal, i.e. marital status, a division never applied to men. (2)

It is important to state that women in the Middle Ages were treated as a different class. Hence, medieval women could be regarded and analysed as a “minority group” (Hacker 111). In fact, women as a minority group “[were] singled out from the others in the society in which they live[d] for differential and unequal treatment, and [. . .] regard[ed] themselves as objects of collective discrimination” (Wirth 347). Medieval women as objects of shared discrimination; thus, were classified as a marginal group and were defined in relation to major medieval institutions.

Classified as a distinct estate, “the fourth estate,” medieval women were considered to have specific sins and faults attributed to them (Shahar 3). Vanity, pride, greed, promiscuity, gluttony, drunkenness, bad temper, fickleness were some of these sins and faults ascribed to women because of which women were barred from public offices or any job requiring authority (Shahar 3). Consequently, women were mostly given the responsibility of domestic occupations such as serving well to the husband and bringing up children. The idea of good women in the Middle Ages was that women should dedicate themselves to their husbands and children and that women should acknowledge their sins and virtues efficiently. As Jacqueline Murray states, in the Middle Ages,

[w]omen were considered inferior and their virtue was interpreted according to the degree to which they accepted their theoretical and social inferiority. Submission and obedience were virtues. Pride, ambition, and autonomy were perceived ultimately as rebellious, and as crimes against both the natural and the moral order. The best thing inferior woman could do was to know her place. (2)

Not having a chance to claim a space for themselves, medieval women were both encouraged and obliged to remain in the space which was defined by two crucial institutions – “the Church and the aristocracy” (Power 9). Indeed, the idea of women, which was an ideological formation of these influential medieval institutions, displays how medieval women’s sphere was rigidly defined and restricted. Remaining in her allotted space was an indispensable virtue for women in the Middle Ages. Barbara A.

Hanawalt¹ points out, “[a] woman's reputation might hinge on her ability to remain in a particular, acceptable space” (19). Thus, if women exceeded the borders of their acceptable space, they would be perceived as rebellious and sinful. The acceptable space for women differed according to the social class she belonged to (Hanawalt 19).

Medieval English literature recognises women's powerlessness and secondariness as essential virtues to be acquired and labels women who are bereft of these virtues as immoral and rebellious. In fact, medieval English literature has a controversial attitude towards women (Whitaker xiii). On the one hand, women are idealized as submissive, passive and obedient; on the other hand, they are condemned as seductive, active and disobedient. The reasons for this conflicting representation of women in literary works are problematic and multifaceted (Fries 48-49, Whitaker xiii).

One of the reasons is the antifeminist tradition that marginalizes women as a subordinate group. Antifeminism or misogyny is defined as “[h]atred or dislike of, or prejudice against women” (“misogyny”). Antifeminism and the Middle Ages seem so coterminous that the word ‘medieval’ seems redundant in the term ‘medieval misogyny’ because of “the assumptions governing our perception of the Middle Ages [a]s the viral presence of antifeminism” (Bloch “Medieval” 1). However, medieval misogyny is a deep-rooted tradition which began to culminate even before the Middle Ages. Having a multi-layered background, misogyny is too miscellaneous and too vast to be simplified. As Howard Bloch argues, medieval misogyny can be traced back to the Old Testament and to Ancient Greek culture (“Medieval” 1). Also, it dates back to Judaic law (Blamires et. al 2). Its traces can be observed in “ecclesiastical writing, letters, sermons, theological tracts, discussions and compilations of canon law; scientific works, as part and parcel of biological, gynaecological, and medical knowledge; and philosophy” (Bloch “Medieval” 1). As a discursive power, it dominates almost all areas in social and political life.

In the classical view, woman's inferiority is affirmed both etymologically and physiologically. In *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle states, “[t]he male provides the ‘form’ and the ‘principle of the movement’, the female provides the body, in other words, the material” (109). Aristotle further argues:

An animal is a living body, a body with the Soul in it. The female always provides the material, the male provides that which fashions the material into shape; this, in our view, is the specific characteristic of each of the sexes: that is what it means to be male or female. (185)

According to Aristotle, because of woman's role, she is 'the matter in procreation, which will be 'formed' by man. He defines the female as passive in nature and describes the female sex as "a deformed male" (Murray 4).

Medieval misogyny derives from similar ancient philosophies which are revisited and reinterpreted in the light of Christian theology and its doctrines. Saint Thomas Aquinas, for instance, contends that "[. . .] [T]he father, as the active partner, is a principle in a higher way than the mother, who supplies the passive or material element" (172). Aquinas reconciles Aristotelian male/female, active/passive and form/matter; and extends Aristotle's "biological-philosophical concepts of male and female into cosmic distinctions: maleness is active, femaleness is passive" (Horowitz 186). Accordingly, the common view, that is, man should dominate woman since woman is imperfect, is developed by Church Fathers. In Genesis, it is stated:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (1.26-27).

The Church Fathers adopt a hierarchical view and define the female sex as inferior. As Bloch argues, the creation of woman is also linked to a linguistic act ("Medieval" 9). Since Adam, "the namer of things" (Bloch "Medieval" 9), is the first to speak and to name the woman as Eve, woman also becomes the creation of Adam. Thus, "woman is by definition a derivation of man, who as the direct creation of God remains both chronologically antecedent and ontologically prior" (Bloch "Medieval" 10). Interpretations of the creation subordinate women to men since the man is created in God's own image and the woman is taken "out of Man" (Gen. 2.23). Thus, woman is marginalized as secondary, derivative, supervenient, supplemental, inferior, debased, scandalous and perverse (Bloch "Medieval" 10).

Not only woman's secondary position in the creation, but also her active part in the Original Sin urges Saint Paul to state that:

Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man: but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed; then Eve. And Adam was not seduced; but the woman being seduced was in transgression. Yet she shall be saved through childbearing: if she continues in faith and love and sanctification with sobriety. (2 Tim. 8-15)

St Augustine, another important figure to contribute to the medieval misogyny, borrows much from St Paul; however, his focus is rather on the sin that woman committed. He contends that:

(x1. 37) We must give consideration to the statement, 'And you shall be subject to your husband, and he shall rule over you,' to see how it can be understood in the proper sense. For we must believe that even before her sin woman had been made to be ruled by her husband and to be submissive and subject to him [. . .] St. Paul says, 'Through love serve one another.' But by no means would he say, 'Have dominion over one another, but St Paul does not permit a woman to rule over a man. The sentence pronounced by God gave this power rather to man; and it is not by her nature but rather by her sin that woman deserved to have her husband for a master. (170-171)

St. Augustine states that woman's inferiority to man is because of the sin she committed as well as her nature. Therefore, he concludes that man should have ultimate authority over woman whose nature is rather weak. Similarly, according to Saint John Chrysostom,

The woman taught the man once and made him guilty of disobedience, and ruined everything. Therefore, because she made bad use of her power over the man, or rather her equality with, God made her subject to her husband. 'Your desire shall be for your husband [and he shall rule over you].' (70-72).

St. Chrysostom stresses the fearful result of woman's dominion over man and accordingly confirms woman's necessary subjection to man not only because of her deceitful role in the Fall but also because of her "shallow intellects, vulnerable to heresy" (Blamires et. al 59). Evidently, as Muriel Whitaker states,

[w]oman in medieval Christendom bore a double burden: the inferiority of having been created from Adam's rib and the guilt of having, through disobedience, lost Paradise and condemned the race to pain, sin and death.
(xi)

This negative view of woman is somehow modified by the Cult of Virgin Mary. In the Cult of Virgin Mary, woman is esteemed, dignified and venerable. Yet, Virgin Mary is modelled as passive. Her passivity is often considered as a source of esteem and honour; however, it is used as a stratagem of oppression. She is idealized as an obedient and pious woman (Reis *Adem'in Bilmediği* 21).

In the model of Eve, woman is unreliable, weak and deceitful. Eve is usually described with pejorative adjectives because she is the one to be tempted by the devil, to eat the forbidden fruit and to tempt Adam to eat it. Accordingly, Eve causes man's fall with her rebellious attempt and active role in the Original Sin (Gen. 3:6).

Both the Cult of Virgin Mary and the model of Eve shaped the concept of woman in the Middle Ages. The Cult of Virgin Mary is regarded the gist of an ideal woman. Yet, the model of Eve represents the woman's fickle and unreliable nature.

Along with Mary and Eve dualism, women and men were also stereotypically defined in binary oppositions by the dominant medieval institutions – “the Church and the aristocracy” (Power 9). In this regard, it is important to note that the model of woman in the Middle Ages is based on the principle that woman and man are considered as opposites, and men are regarded as the superior since woman is attributed the negative and undesirable characteristics (Reis *Ademin Bilmediği*² 21). As Caroline Walker Bynum states: “*Male* and *female* were contrasted and asymmetrically valued as intellect/body, active/passive, rational/irrational, reason/emotion, self-control/lust, judgment/mercy, and order/disorder” (257). These dualisms place male as the superior, and woman as the inferior.

Medieval misogyny as a combination of Christianity and the classical philosophy plays a crucial role in the images of women in the literary works. Fabliau³ as a genre employs the misogynistic discourse which “runs like a rich vein throughout the breadth of

medieval literature” (Bloch ‘Medieval’ 1) as it represents women as promiscuous, lascivious, scheming, adulterous, lecheorus and fickle.

For a long period of time, fabliau was on the fringes (Boitani 28) and it attracted very little critical attention until 1893. Joseph Bédier, the first major critic to analyse the fabliaux in detail, gives a short definition of fabliau in his seminal work, *Les Fabliaux*. He defines fabliaux as “contes a rire en vers” – “a short, funny story written in verse” (30). In his short definition, Bédier mainly touches upon three basic characteristics of fabliau. According to Bédier, fabliaux are brief and humorous narrative stories which are written in verse. Although his definition is not conclusive, it is generally taken as “a point of departure” (Lacy 24). Per Nykrog takes Bédier’s definition as a point of departure and publishes a comprehensive book which includes a critique of Bédier’s study of the fabliaux. Though their definitions are similar, the addressee of the fabliau poses a problem since Nykrog does not agree with Bédier in relation to fabliaux’s audience. Bédier believes that fabliaux are intended to entertain the bourgeoisie people as the genre is the literary expression of this social class (qtd. in Hines 24). However, Nykrog categorizes fabliau’s audience as “seignorial and aristocratic” (Hines 24) since fabliaux mock the bourgeoisie. However, recent studies display that the fabliaux are for all people and there is no limitation in its reception in relation to the audience (Hopkins “Chaucer’s Fabliaux”).

Fabliau emerged as a French genre in the twelfth century and maintained its favour through the thirteenth century. Most of the extant fabliaux were composed between 1200 and 1340. There are approximately 160 Old French fabliaux which survived in forty-three manuscripts with different versions (Muscatine 4). This estimated number of extant fabliaux shows the popularity of the genre during the Middle Ages (Cooke 11-12, Muscatine 4). Their exact date and author cannot be specified; however, the earliest author is Jean Bodel (Muscatine 4). Bodel, known as the poet of Arras, composed the *Jeu de Saint Nicolas* and the *Chanson des Saisness*, and he is generally considered as the father of the genre (Muscatine 4). Despite its popularity, little is known about the origins of the fabliaux. On the one hand, Comte de Caylus finds the Old French fabliau’s roots in Classical Antiquity although he knows the fact that the poets of the thirteenth and the fourteenth century did not know much about the Greek and Latin

texts (qtd. in Bloch *Scandal* 1). On the other hand, Bédier claims that some fabliaux are derived from oriental sources while some display similarities to the comic literature of Greece and Rome (118). Evidently, old French fabliau's origins cannot be certainly determined; however, it is generally accepted that it was a well-established genre at the beginning of the thirteenth century (Muscatine 4).

The fabliau is usually treated as a light genre with no literary value (Schofield 323, Canby 200). Bédier's statement that the fabliau is "devoid of all literary pretention" is accepted by most scholars. For example, Nykrog notes, "the genre of the light or humorous tale is, by definition, without literary artifice" (qtd. in Bloch *Scandal* 7). Due to their "reputation of being without poetry" (Bloch *Scandal* 7), Old French fabliaux are even regarded as "extended dirty jokes" (Muscatine 2). Since the fabliau plot is based on the love triangle of a young wife, an old gullible husband and a lover, the sexuality and obscenity as themes are inevitably included in the fabliau. The comic nature of the fabliau is derived from bawdy actions and sexual language. Gale Sigal states that, "[t]he humo[u]r of fabliau is primarily sexual, involving various problems of sexual opportunity, privacy, potency, compatibility, rivalry or obstacles to sexual satisfaction" (206). The scandal of the fabliau is also because a new genre for the first time deals with sexual language and sexuality in carnal terms. In other words,

[i]n the thirteenth century, a new genre appeared that dealt with sexual encounter in more materialistic terms. The new form, the fabliau, added the literary language a vocabulary of vulgarisms from the spoken vernacular. At the same time, it gave European literature a new theme: sexuality that betokens no personal fulfilment, but rivalrous interpersonal struggle. (White 185)

Female sexuality in the literary works was never represented as materialistic as in the fabliau. As Mirrer notes, in fabliau, "[d]escriptions of the human genitalia and their various functions during sexual intercourse occur repeatedly as do bawdy accounts of corporeal interactions" (320). As mentioned in detail in the first chapter, surely, these themes are functional in the way they stress "men's view of female sexuality as obscure and mysterious" (Mirrer 320). Obsessive depictions of the body also display the masculine desire to have the ultimate control over the female body; however, they may also represent the female power to subvert the male domination over their bodies.

Despite the fact that the fabliau arrived in England no later than the thirteenth century, only a few English fabliaux survived. Henry S. Canby analyses English fabliaux through grouping the tales into two strata; the first one covers the fabliaux of thirteenth and fourteenth century while the second stratum includes merely Geoffrey Chaucer's fabliaux (205). Although there was no trace of fabliau in Old English literature, Middle English literature produced a few fabliaux – *Dame Sirith*, the first extant English fabliau, *The Pennyworth of Wit* and *The Vox and the Wolf* (Canby 205, Lewis 246). Chaucer's *the Canterbury Tales*; however, includes six fabliaux: the *Miller's Tale*, the *Reeve's Tale*, the *Merchant's Tale*, the *Shipman's Tale*, the *Summoner's Tale* and the *Friar's Tale*⁴. Fabliau as the most frequently represented genre in the *Canterbury Tales* displays two major differences from its old French counterparts. Firstly, Chaucer's precedents do not employ any framework for the fabliaux, but Chaucer uses the Canterbury pilgrimage as a narrative framework (Cooke 171). Moreover, Chaucer's fabliaux are told by the "dramatized narrators who tell tales against each other" (Cooke 171). Thus, Chaucer "infuse[s] [fabliau] with a new, proper and what seems to be a more profitable spirit" (Canby 214).

Chaucer's contribution to the genre, as Ann Haselmayer states, is his insertion of realistic portraits of his characters (314). Unlike the Old French fabliaux, Chaucer with his realistic portraits creates an atmosphere of verisimilitude in his fabliaux (Haselmayer 314). Other than the realism as a Chaucerian invention in the genre, the addition of an introduction to the tales is a significant contribution (Canby 209). However, the most striking difference from its precedents and contribution to the genre, as Eve Salisbury notes, is the omission of obvious pornographic characteristics of the French tradition ("Troubling Gender and Genre"). Chaucer omits the notorious descriptions of the body parts and profligate situations, which cover an important part in the French corpus. Salisbury further comments, "[t]he English corpus [. . .] appears to be bowdlerized [and] the pornographic impulses of the French genre made to conform to more decorous behaviours" ("Troubling Gender and Genre").

In Chaucer's version, fabliau, defined as a short humorous and bawdy tale, usually follows a plot which involves an adulterous young wife who cheats on her gullible and old husband (Ruud 223). The action in the fabliaux, thus, revolves around a love

triangle in which the young wife pursues her sexual adventures and betrays her husband with a young and virile man. It further develops around the wife's struggle to hide her sexual exploits until she achieves to manipulate the situation to her own advantage. Because of the obligatory love triangle the genre includes, the fabliau is mostly classified as scandalous. Bloch defines this scandal as "[. . .] the excessiveness of their sexual and scatological obscenity, their anticlericalism, antifeminism, anticourtliness, the consistency with which they indulge the senses [. . .]" (*The Scandal* 11). As Bloch emphasises, the genre is thematically associated with bawdiness, vulgarity and avarice (*The Scandal* 11). In other words, the plot is often pertinent to basic instincts such as sexual lust and greediness. The groundwork of fabliau plot, thus, follows characteristic patterns and usually deals with the gullibility of husbands and the deceit of wives.

The adultery the fabliau includes causes fabliau to be labelled as an antifeminist genre and it is long considered that in the fabliaux, "women are universally pictured as deceivers, sure to be unfaithful to their husbands if given a chance, ill-tempered, vain, nagging, thorns in the side of submissive men and a necessary evil" (Schofield 324). Per Nykrog states that infidelity is the most prevailing female vice in the fabliaux along with other vices such as lying, duplicity, extravagance, pride, disobedience and fickleness (qtd. in Horton 16). Thus,

fabliau presents women as the daughters of Eve, as generally morally reprehensible and dangerous to man; insatiable and extravagant sexual sirens with their bodies, and perjurers, temptresses or endless naggers with their tongues. (Hines 31)

Evidently, the fabliau as a genre with its pejorative and stereotypical descriptions of women corroborates the claims of antifeminism. Indeed, the structure of fabliau also endorses the view of women as deceivers and dupers because of their active participation in the plot. According to Mary Jane Schenk⁵, women in fabliaux are mostly the active agents in the functions of Deception and Misdeed in which they trigger the action in the fabliau (23). Among the four possible roles in the fabliau – the duper, the victim, the auxiliary and the counsellor, women in fabliaux fulfil the role of the duper rather than the victim. So, both thematic and structural analyses of the fabliau

present women as dupers and emphasise the view of woman as dangerous to man. However, women in the fabliaux are also subordinate and marginalized.

Indeed, women in fabliaux are subordinated to the dynamics of the medieval society which allocated women to a very restricted space⁶. Chaucer's women in his fabliaux are all married except Malyne in the *Reeve's Tale*, and marriage as a medieval institution hails them into subordinate positions. In the medieval society, most women were married although there were women who renounced marriage to be able to remain chaste and unattainable. Despite being not an obligation, chastity has been considered as "a more Christian way of life" (Shahar 65) since the beginning of Christianity.

St. Paul permits marriage only as a concession to adultery and immoral behaviour. He states, "[b]ut if they cannot contain, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn" (I Corinthians 7:9). Later, the Church transforms marriage into a sacrament (Shahar 66). Accordingly, the relations between male and female begin to be designated by the Church which "gradually determined the relevant norms, laws and customs" (Shahar 66). The Church gradually creates a positive theory of marriage and organizes the relations of the partners. The Church also forms a hierarchical relationship between the wife and the husband; and establishes the husband as the lord and the master of his wife (Ephesians 5:22-23). Marriage is seen as a consolation after the Fall. In this aspect, John Chrysostom contends that, "[m]arriage was founded after the Fall as a consolation for death. Man, who destines to die, could perpetuate his being through his offspring" (qtd. in Shahar 69). Therefore, it can be stated that procreation is regarded as the main objective of the marriage for some Church fathers. St. Jerome, for example, states that: "Let those take wives and procreate who were condemned by the curse of 'in the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread and the earth shall produce thorns and thistles', my seed shall bear fruit one hundredfold" (qtd. in Shahar 69). In this aspect, the main purposes of marriage are "the avoidance of adultery and procreation" (Aers 145). Thus, it is important to note that woman as the wife in marriage is considered the inferior side and she is considered as a tool for procreation.

The sexual affairs of the married couple are also regulated in the framework of Christianity. The church seems to permit sexuality for procreation. Nonetheless, as

Shahar notes, “theologians not only justified sexual relations for the purpose of procreation; they sometimes justified such relations on a different ground, that of the mutual obligations (*debitum*) of the partners in marriage” (70). Here, the mutual obligations refer to conjugal debt.

The mutual obligations in marriage recognise women’s sexuality; and this obligation also implies the view of woman as sexually insatiable. In the writings of churchmen, women are represented as “the eternal seductresses of saints and ascetics [who] do not tempt man only in order to dominate him or to bring about his downfall, but in order to satisfy [t]he[i]r own appetites” (Shahar 71).

In addition to the ecclesiastical views of marriage, matrimonial laws also played a vital role in determining the relations between the wife and the husband in medieval society. Medieval laws failed to recognize woman in marriage as equal to man despite providing certain rights to the married woman. Before the law, the woman did not have a voice of her own because her choice did not matter in the marriage. For a proper marriage ceremony, three stages were required: negotiations between families, betrothal and marriage ceremony at the church door (*in facie ecclesiae*) (Shahar 81). Since negotiation between families was the first indispensable stage of a proper marriage ceremony, girls were forced by their families into the marriage. According to the law, the consent to marriage was not given by the bride but by her protector who is her father, brother or a male relative (Shahar 82). Therefore, marriage was regarded as a business transaction in which both sides’ choices were neglected (Aers 154). However, the duties of both parties were rigidly defined. The vital duty of a wife was obedience to her husband, which the law guaranteed. According to Beaumanoir, a French jurist, the husband was free to employ any medium to reform his wife (qtd. in Shahar 84). The husband, as Beaumanoir mentions, had the right to punish her but he could not kill her (qtd. in Shahar 84). Therefore, the marital law demanded the wife’s obedience to the husband. In the cases of violation of the law, both the wife and the husband were punished equally; however, the wife’s adultery was cited more (Shahar 106) and considered as more sinful. Despite identical punishments before law, while a married woman who had an extramarital affair, whether married or single, was regarded as an adulteress, a married man was considered as an adulterer “only if he had relations with a married

woman (a relationship with a spinster or widow was defined only as fornication)” (Shahar 107). Thus, it can be stated that “the institution of marriage blessed by the church [and strengthened by the law] turn[s] the woman from a ‘lady free’ into an object for egoistic male use” (Aers 159).

One of the reasons of woman’s subordination to her husband in medieval marriage was also economic. In the medieval marriage as “an economic unit” (Karras *Sexuality* 85), the wife could not lead a life without the husband’s financial sources since the woman was highly excluded from the working life⁷. The wife’s situation was not suitable to support herself financially (Butler 340). Thus, the wife was excluded from the market place and/or any economic activity; they almost always occupied the private space. As a result, they were considered central to the house.

In the fabliaux, marriages are between unequals. It is often the case that a young woman is married to an old man. In fact, it is highly probable that the young woman of the fabliau is married without her consent. Moreover, the reader or the audience is never addressed about the choice and the desires of the woman, but the desires of the husband are overtly stated. The incompatibility of the ages suggests that the old man pursues sexual satisfaction. Although at the centre of the fabliau plot, we have the woman’s extramarital sexual affairs, woman’s uncontrollable lust in the fabliaux is actually only the backdrop of the husband’s prurience. Moreover, although a married woman is demanded to be prudent, obedient, meek and loyal to her husband, Chaucer’s women in his fabliaux are characterized as tactless, rebellious, assertive and disloyal to the husband. Yet, young wives of the fabliaux are dominated and subjugated by their old husbands in their marriages.

Alisoun in the *Miller’s Tale*, miller’s wife in the *Reeve’s Tale*, May in the *Merchant’s Tale* and the wife in the *Shipman’s Tale* as married women are therefore subordinate to their husbands. These wives in the fabliaux are only represented in the domestic sphere. Alisoun in the *Miller’s Tale*, for instance, occupies only John’s house. Similarly, Malyne and the miller’s wife in the *Reeve’s Tale* are only depicted in Symkyn’s spaces. Both in the *Merchant’s Tale* and the *Shipman’s Tale*, women are also enclosed in their houses, and they are also confined to the gardens, which are also designed as their

husbands' private space. They are not allowed to go beyond these spaces because domestic space is considered as their proper and secure place. Moreover, they are excluded from any economic activity. Then, they cannot lead a life without their husbands' resources. Yet, these resources also subjugate these women. However, they both use these resources for their own advantage and also use them against the system, which subjugates them. Since women's voice is silenced in almost all aspects of marriage in the fabliaux, they are coerced to find creative ways. Therefore, subordinate women, as Joan Ferrante states in a different context,

[w]ith limited opportunities, [. . .] find subtle or hidden ways to exercise such power, to manipulate people and situations, and to spin out fictions which suit them better than reality, fictions by which they can, or hope to, control reality. (213)

Women in fabliaux do not yield to subjection, which the dominant medieval discourse of gender demands. Instead, they create their own meanings and get pleasure in their marginal space. As Anne Ladd states, the deceitful wives in the fabliaux are also the "winning women" (100) because they turn a threatening situation to their own interest. Thus, women in fabliaux "come out on top" (Johnson 299) owing to their quick-wit and ingenuity. Lesley Johnson states,

[i]n many fabliaux where the lover escapes any repercussions of his adultery, the credit is most often due to the quick-thinking wit of the wife who prevents her husband from discovering her lover. We are not encouraged to laugh at the wives in these narratives, nor to condemn them; rather we are invited to laugh with them and to view their success with considerable esteem. (299)

Adultery and the trickery the fabliaux include encourage the audience or the reader not to denounce the immoral nature of women but to laugh together (Johnson 299). Hence, deception in the fabliaux becomes a means of entertainment rather than a tool to condemn women. Charles Muscatine also affirms that trickery is an important virtue in the fabliaux regardless of who is tricking or being tricked (75). Thus, the sexual adventures women pursue in the fabliaux and the trickery they fall back upon do not label them as immoral or fickle. Their function is rather for achieving a comic climax. So, the sexual roles, in Johnson's words, "are used in the fabliaux not necessarily to

confirm or promote sexual stereotypes but as valuable means for overturning conventional relationships or subverting appearances in the interests of comic action” (303). Thus, Chaucer’s women’s extramarital sexual affairs in his fabliaux do not necessarily condemn them as betraying adulterous young wives, but in a way provide them with a temporary empowerment. In this respect, women in the fabliaux as “the subordinate” (Fiske *Understanding* 4), as “the fourth estate” (Shahar 3) and as a “minority group” (Hacker 111) form themselves a culture which is located within and against the power which disempowers them.

Women in the fabliaux establish themselves a popular culture – “the culture of the subordinated and disempowered” (Fiske *Understanding* 4). As Fiske suggests, popular culture always contains the traces of power relations and the signs of both domination and subordination (Fiske *Understanding* 4). It is contradictory in nature since it expresses not only the voice of domination but also of the subordination (Fiske *Understanding* 5). Popular culture is an active process of generating people’s own meanings out of the resources of the power, which also disempowers them (Fiske *Reading* 1). It may also be considered as the eternal struggle of the powerful and the subordinate.

According to Fiske, people play an active role in making their own culture through evading and resisting the forces of domination (*Understanding* 20). Through the expropriation process⁸, the subordinate “make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system that subordinates them” (*Understanding* 15). Paradoxically, subordinated people both collaborate with the power and resist against it. In Fiske’s words, they

align themselves with the forces of domination, for by ignoring the complexity and creativity by which the subordinate cope with the commodity system and its ideology in their everyday lives, the dominant underestimate and thus devalue the conflict and struggle entailed in constructing popular culture [. . .]. (*Understanding* 18-19)

The constant conflict between the power and the disempowered is, thus, a continual struggle that the power underestimates.

Fiske stresses the power of the everyday life in which the subordinate generate their meanings from this struggle. Following Michel de Certeau who adopts a military metaphor to define this struggle as a “guerrilla attack” which never fights against the powerful system openly, but always poses an opposition to it (30), Fiske states that everyday life of the people is the space where the conflictual benefits of the power are discussed, negotiated and challenged (*Understanding* 32). In order to explain the part of the everyday life in popular culture, Fiske makes use of de Certeau’s theory of everyday life and his terms, which are the metaphors of conflict – “strategy, tactic, guerrilla warfare, poaching, guileful ruses and tricks.” For Fiske, De Certeau’s theory proposes that,

the powerful are cumbersome, unimaginative, and overorganized, whereas the weak are creative, nimble and flexible. So the weak use guerrilla tactics against the strategies of the powerful, make poaching raids upon their texts or structures, and play constant tricks. (*Understanding* 32)

The creativity of the weak makes up intricate and subtle ways within the power to resist its domination. The forces of the weak attack the power through “poaching raids” and “guileful ruses.” Since the powerful attempts to exercise its power on every space, the weak is obliged to make use of what they have in their everyday life. The core of the culture of everyday life lies in “adaptation” and “ways of using imposed systems,” or “the trickery” (de Certeau 18):

Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other’s game [. . .] characterise the subtle, the stubborn resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have. In these combatants’s strategems, there is a certain art in placing one’s blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining space [. . .] Even in the field of manipulation and enjoyment. (de Certeau 18)

The popular resistances, hence, consist of ‘the adaptation’ and are achieved through the resources of the power. People have to ‘make do’ and create their own meanings with their creative manoeuvres out of the resources the dominant provides. These manoeuvres are “the tactics of everyday life and of the weak,” through which the subordinate people construct their meanings and derive pleasure out of their meanings. These tactics, as Fiske interprets, are “the ancient art of ‘making do,’ of constructing our

space within and against *their* space, of speaking *our* meanings with *their* language” (*Understanding* 36).

Through the “poaching attacks, guileful ruses and tricks,” people create their own meanings and accordingly they enjoy the pleasure. Popular pleasures originate from the social allegiances constructed by the weak (Fiske *Understanding* 49). Fiske categorizes popular pleasures into two types: “those of evasion, which center around the body and which socially tend to cause offense and scandal, and those of producing meanings, which center around social identity and social relations, and work socially through semiotic resistance to hegemonic force” (*Understanding* 54). The body has been considered as a site upon which meanings can be attributed by the dominant or the disempowered. The effort for the control over the meanings and the pleasures of the body is important in the sense that, “[p]opular pleasures work through and are experienced or expressed through the body, so control over the meanings and behaviours of the body becomes a prime disciplinary apparatus” (Fiske *Understanding* 81). Thus, the excessive pleasures of the body such as drunkenness, sexuality, idleness, rowdiness are usually regarded as menacing threats to the space of the dominant (Fiske *Understanding* 75). The body as a site, where the dominant can exercise its power, is tried to be controlled and its excessive pleasures are attempted to be condemned because these popular pleasures provide the subordinated people to overcome their subjection and avert the domineering agencies of the dominant.

Chaucer’s women in his fabliaux, who are subordinated to their husbands, create defiant meanings. Also, they get pleasure through stealing from the resources of the dominant. In their everyday lives, they challenge the system which subordinates them. They attempt to claim a space for themselves within and against the space of the dominant.

Chaucer’s women in his fabliaux pursue extra-marital sexual affairs, through which their choices and needs are performed. They evade their subjection through these sexual exploits. Women in the fabliaux, thus, “contest their subjection through physical excess and bold gestures to undermine the male control over their bodies as young women reconstructing their subordinate position” (Reis “Chaucer’s Fabliau Women” 124). They create their own meanings and get pleasure in stealing from the available male

space which systematically condemns and excludes them. Although Chaucer's women are denied the power to renounce the dominant discourse completely, they construct "artful stratagems" against the system. They re-form their position by speaking within and against the dominant patriarchal discourse. Women in the fabliaux, thus, demonstrate popular resistance, and can be considered as figures of resistance who establish themselves a culture in which they produce oppositional meanings and pleasure.

Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale* is subordinated to her husband. Yet, she demonstrates resistance to him. Alisoun, an eighteen-year-old wife who is married to an old man, uses the advantages of being a married woman and pursues her extramarital sexual affair with Nicholas. In other words, she reacts against her oppressor through her sexual body. Alisoun employs her body, which is regarded as John's property, for her own ends. Moreover, she uses John's bedroom for her illicit sexual activities with Nicholas. She does not totally defy her oppressor's meanings but positions herself "always in reaction to, and never as part of, the forces of the domination" (Fiske *Understanding* 43).

Similarly, the wife and the daughter in the *Reeve's Tale* are women of resistance rather than subservience. Although they do not have the power to reject their inferiority, they evade their subordination which Symkyn, the husband and the father, demands. The wife and the daughter produce their own meanings through the use of their bodies and domestic sphere. They also foreground their own pleasure and meanings through averting Symkyn's oppression.

Likewise, May in the *Merchant's Tale*, is also married to an old man, Januarie, who marries her for his sexual appetite. May; however, subverts his masculine desire to shape her as a sexual object and forms her own meanings and takes pleasure from her extramarital sexual pursuits. Her use of her own body and the domestic spaces as a means of resistance to her husband Januarie liberates her in spite of the fact that it is temporary.

The merchant's wife in the *Shipman's Tale* turns a dangerous situation to her own interest with her deceitful ruses. She even acquires a financial profit through her

creative manoeuvres. She makes do with what she has and gets pleasure in her sexual exploits. In this aspect, Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*, the wife and the daughter in the *Reeve's Tale*, May in the *Merchant's Tale* and the wife in the *Shipman's Tale* are all women of resistance. They utilize the power's resources for their own ends and their exploitation of these resources empowers them. Although they are deprived of the power to renounce the dominant discourses completely, they construct "artful stratagems" against them. They re-form their position by speaking within and against the dominant patriarchal discourse.

In the first chapter of this thesis, it is argued that women in Chaucer's the *Miller's Tale*, the *Reeve's Tale*, the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale* resist the dominant medieval discourse of gender through their illicit sexual pursuits and popular pleasure they gain by means of their sexual bodies. In this regard, Alisoun, Malyne, the miller's wife, May and the merchant's wife in Chaucer's fabliaux achieve partial authority of their bodies. Their sexual acts empower them and provide them with a temporary relief from the impositions of the dominant on the weak.

The second chapter argues that Chaucer's women in the *Miller's Tale*, the *Reeve's Tale*, the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale* resist the oppressive discourse of gender through their control and manipulation of domestic spaces for their own interests. As married women, Alisoun, the miller's wife, May and the merchant's wife are all enclosed in private spaces of their houses and gardens. Although the private space is where women are kept and protected, Chaucer's women in his fabliaux exploit these places/spaces and turn them into their own spaces in which they satisfy their own desires and needs. With their hit-and-run tactics, they show spatial resistance and become "winning women" (Ladd 100).

In conclusion, Chaucer's women in the *Miller's Tale*, the *Reeve's Tale*, the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale* can be considered as the subordinate in their marriages and they struggle for power through the tactics of the popular. In this aspect, they become "willing participants in plans which circumvent the acknowledged power and the right of their [. . .] husbands over their body as they follow their own schemes of sexual fulfilment" (Reis "Chaucer's Fabliau Women" 133). Through adopting tactics defined

as “the tactics of the weak” by Fiske, Chaucer’s women in his fabliaux construct their own meanings and redefine their subordinate position through their sexual exploitations and spatial resistance. In this respect, Chaucer’s women in the fabliaux invest the resources of the dominant culture with their own meanings, which provides them with temporary relief from and fleeting triumph over the oppressive structures that subordinate them.

CHAPTER I

“THIS IS A WIKKED JAPE”: WOMEN’S SEXUAL BODY IN THE FABLIAUX AND POPULAR PLEASURE

He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.

– The Holy Bible, John 8:7

I wol caste a ston.

– Alisoun, *The Miller’s Tale*

This chapter examines Chaucer’s women’s resistance to the dominant forces in the *Miller’s Tale*, the *Reeve’s Tale*, the *Merchant’s Tale* and the *Shipman’s Tale*. In terms of power relations, women in these fabliaux are subordinated to their husbands in their marriages. However, these women as the weak display resistance to them through their extramarital sexual affairs and pleasure they gain through using their sexual bodies. Although they are deprived of the power to renounce the dominant discourse of sexuality which disempowers and marginalizes women as passive, they generate “artful stratagems and tricks” against the system. Thus, Chaucer’s women in his fabliaux introduce their own culture in which they gain partial freedom of their own body which is regarded as the property of the husband, and enjoy popular pleasure through their sexual exploits. Although representation of women as promiscuous and adulterous in the fabliaux seems to endorse woman’s immoral nature which is ascribed to them by the antifeminist discourse, at the same time it gives women the power to challenge their subjection. In this respect, in this chapter, it is argued that women in Chaucer’s fabliaux, Alisoun, the miller’s wife, the daughter Malyne, May, the merchant’s wife can be considered as women who create their own meanings and take pleasure from their illicit sexual affairs.

Sex in the fabliaux is both disobedience and authority and “[t]he pursuit of sex, among the fabliau characters, expresses and sometimes replaces their pursuit of dominance or revenge” (White 192). In this respect, we can observe that women in Chaucer’s fabliaux

make their own sexuality serve for their desires rather than their husbands' lust. They utilize their sexuality as a means of achieving dominance and power.

Chaucer's fabliaux employing the "liberated [and] joly" (Karras "Sexuality" 280) attitude towards sex include extramarital sexual acts in their plots; and especially women's sexual pursuits play an important role in the action. Although the depictions of women as promiscuous and lecherous cause fabliau to be labelled as a misogynistic genre, women's sexuality in Chaucer's fabliaux plays a liberating role for the women because Chaucer's fabliaux foreground the fact that women are victims rather than victimizers of their old husbands.

We can identify the causes of women's victimisation in the medieval discourse of gender which affected almost every medieval institution. Marriage as one of these institutions plays a vital role in women's subordination to their husbands. Shulamith Shahar's seminal work *The Fourth Estate* provides valuable information on ecclesiastical theories about marriage. Shahar states that chastity was regarded as a more privileged status for women in the early years of Christianity; and marriage was only permitted "as a concession to the weakness of the flesh" (65). However, marriage changed into a sacrament by the Church in the eighth century; therefore, matrimonial issues, laws and customs were begun to be discussed and determined by the Church (Shahar 66). Although marriage was still regarded as an inferior concept to chastity, church fathers formed a positive theory on marriage (Shahar 66). Yet, such theories almost always subjugate women to men. St Paul, for example, mentions that the husband is the master of his wife (Ephesians 5:25). The sexual relations within marriage are also defined by the theologians (Richards *Sex* 23, Shahar 68). The main aim of sexuality is not pleasure but procreation. Sexual desire in marriage is forbidden (any sexual act outside marriage is already condemned) and sex is to be used for reproduction. As Shahar notes, sexual pleasure is condemned since chastity is regarded as a better status than marriage (68). As Richards also states, virginity (or celibacy in marriage) is perceived as the highest status, "the most desirable form of life but that marriage was an acceptable second best" (23). Nevertheless, celibacy is supported as a more preferable form of life only with the mutual consent of both partners (Shahar 70). Mutual consent of spouses is required because of conjugal debt, that is, "the notion that

both husband and wife had a duty to perform sexually at the request of their mate” (Makowski 1). In this respect, the Church equals woman and man by emphasizing the mutuality. St Paul further states that:

Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her body, but the husband and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. (I Corinthians 7:3-4)

As the concept of conjugal debt suggests, if one of the spouses demands sexuality and satisfies his/her lust, he/she will realize one of the obligations of marriage; thus, he/she will not be regarded as a sinner (Magnus qtd. in Shahar 70). Fabliau as a genre recognises conjugal debt as an important part of marriage; and this debt is frequently repeated and reminded in Chaucer’s fabliaux. However, husbands in the fabliaux usually ignore the mutual aspect of conjugal debt. Januarie in *The Merchant’s Tale*, for instance, wants to take a wife for he wants to lead a moral life rather than his past lecherous life (IV 1249-1265). He also does not want to abstain from his sexual desire (IV 1267-1273). Thus, marriage is the only way for Januarie to be able to both lead a moral life and to satisfy his lust since marriage requires the payment of conjugal debt:

If he ne may nat liven chaast his lyf,
Take hym a wyf with greet devocioun,
By cause of leveful procreacioun
Of children to th’ounour of God above,
And nat oonly for paramour or love;
And for they solde leccherye eschue,
And yelde hir dette whan that is the due. (IV 1446-1452)

Therefore, the husband Januarie has the right to demand the conjugal debt and he even builds an enclosed garden for his plans, albeit his plans are subverted by May in the denouement of the tale. Moreover, as Shahar notes, the notion of mutual obligation of marriage partners signals the recognition of women’s sexuality, which “is reflected directly and explicitly in the writing of churchmen” (70-71).

Evidently, the Church tried to control and regulate affairs of man and woman in marriage. However, the system favoured men, and medieval marriage was “a transaction organized by males to serve economic and political ends, with the woman

treated as a useful, childbearing appendage to the land or goods being exchanged” (Aers 143). Women did not have the right to reject the marriage offer because marriages were usually arranged (McCarthy 80). As mentioned above, according to the Church’s regulations, there were three stages required for a proper marriage, yet women’s choices were ignored or rejected in each stage. Later, the couple had the right (not) to give the consent; however, according to the registers in the fourteenth century young girls were forced into marriages which were rather financial transactions between families (Shahar 86). So, although the consent of the bride was required, usually consent was given by her protector, her father or brother (Shahar 82).

In marriage, woman’s subordination continued as a married woman who was under the guardianship of her husband; and she “was obliged to obey her husband in everything, as long as he did not order her to do something in violation of Divine Law” (Bracton qtd. in Shahar 89). Obedience is an important qualification of a medieval wife. We can see that in *The Merchant’s Tale* woman’s obedience to the husband is a must. Januarie defines his ideal bride as an obedient and meek woman (IV 1345-1346).

A medieval wife must be faithful to her husband. Actually, “the Church demanded mutual fidelity in marriage, and to the extent that the ecclesiastical courts imposed punishments for adultery, it punished men and women equally” (Shahar 106). However, women were associated with adultery more than the men were. Ecclesiastical courts punished the adulterers and adulteresses with “penitence by fasting, prayer and temporary celibacy, or fines, and even a period in the stocks” (Shahar 106). Likewise, secular courts also punished both adulterous men and women; however, the law was more lenient towards men (Shahar 107).

Ecclesiastical and secular courts defined adultery as a grave sin, yet in the fabliaux adultery is presented humorously. In the fabliaux, extramarital sexual acts of women are regarded as virtues and accordingly adulterous women are rewarded or they escape scot-free from the dangerous situation they are in (Farrell 773). In this sense, fabliau can be regarded as a subversive genre in which the adulterous woman is not punished while the husband or the father becomes “the object of mockery” (Shahar 110). Although adultery is not punished in the fabliau, women are still represented as promiscuous and

scheming. Yet, their active sexuality does not condemn them; on the contrary, their illicit sexual acts empower and liberate them.

Furthermore, in Chaucer's fabliaux, women's subjugation is at the centre of the fabliaux. For example, Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale* is wedded to old and gullible John the carpenter. Since she is young and beautiful, it is believed that she will eventually cuckold John. Therefore, her husband John is very jealous of her and "heeld hire narwe in cage" (I 3222). Likewise, May in *The Merchant's Tale* is married to Januarie who is much older than her and the inequality of their ages is emphasised:

And of the songes of the Muses songe!
To small is bothe thy penne, and eek thy tonge,
For to descryven of this marriage.
Whan tender youthe hat wedded stoupyng age,
Ther swich myrthe that may nat be written. (IV 1735-1739)

Both Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale* and May in the *Merchant's Tale* are wedded to old men and there is no mention of their consent. As stated above, in the early Middle Ages, there was no right of woman in terms of consent because her protector (the father, the brother or any male relative) was the one to determine the woman's husband. It is highly probable that May and Alisoun as medieval women are given by their parents to their husbands. Clearly, neither May nor Alisoun has independent lives.

The wife in *The Reeve's Tale* and the wife in *The Shipman's Tale* are also totally dependent on their husbands. They have no means to have freedom in the guardianship of their husbands. The concept of medieval marriage, in which the superiority of the husband and the inferiority of the wife are determined by the Church, is highly reflected in the dynamics of Chaucer's depiction of the marriage in his fabliaux. As already mentioned, the husband is regarded as the master of his wife and he has the right to apply any medium to reform his wife's any bad behaviour. In the *Shipman's Tale*, for instance, the merchant is angry with his wife about her secret with the monk and warns her. The wife makes her husband believe her innocence; and the merchant gives up his idea of beating her up (VII 1618-1621). Thus, the husband has the right to adopt any way (which includes beating) to reform his wife.

Symkyn's daughter Malyne, who is the only unmarried woman in Chaucer's the *Reeve's Tale*, is also subordinated to her father; and Symkyn assesses her as a commodity which will help him advance in society. Malyne's body is regarded as the property of her father, which is intended to be used as a means of social climbing (White 186). Other wives' bodies also serve as the possessions of their husbands. So, fabliaux, first of all, foreground women's subordination through marriage. It is their subordination that ironically enables the resistance to the dominant medieval discourse. Thus, Alisoun, the merchant's wife, Malyne, in the *Reeve's Tale*, May in the *Merchant's Tale* and the wife in the *Shipman's Tale*, form and circulate their own meanings and pleasures by means of their subordination. The process of creating meanings and pleasures is based upon a struggle of and a conflict between the powerful and the weak. These women in Chaucer's fabliaux position themselves within the dominant's space and react against it. Accordingly, they produce their own pleasure. Popular pleasure arises from the clash of this conflict. As Fiske suggests, pleasure can be categorized in two forms: evasion and productivity (Fiske *Understanding* 50, 56). Evasive pleasures focus on the body while productive pleasures center themselves around the social identity and relations (Fiske *Understanding* 50, 56). Evasive pleasures are likely to be offensive and scandalous, but productive pleasures generate meanings (Fiske *Understanding* 54). Moreover, popular pleasures are practiced and voiced through the body⁹; thus, both domination over and control of the meanings of the body turn out to be the main disciplinary apparatus (Fiske *Understanding* 81). Since the control over the body means power, the power struggles over the meanings of the body and the validation of its pleasures become important. The pleasure of the sexual body is also regarded important in maintaining the social order by the patriarchal power. As Foucault states, sexuality is a subject of the discursive formations and the power demands to control and discipline both the body and its pleasures (8). In this respect, women's sexual body is not permitted to go beyond the social rules. Because the pleasures of the body including sexuality are defined as a threat to the social order (Fiske *Understanding* 75).

The bodily pleasures provide women with 'evasion' and subversion of the power which defines their sexuality and oppresses them. Thus, the body is treated as a site where the

social control is to be regulated. Similarly, women in fabliaux and their bodies seem to be the sites where the medieval social order is experienced. Their sexual bodies are also the sites they use for resistance. For example, one of the power-blocs to which Chaucer's women in his fabliaux show resistance is the discourse of sexuality in the Middle Ages.

Ruth Mazo Karras, whose works provide invaluable information on medieval understanding of sexuality, states that the history of sexuality, made up of "the whole realm of human erotic experience[s]" (*Sexuality* 5), is important in understanding the relations between men and women since it covers a considerable part of the gender relations (*Sexuality* 5). Also, sexuality is a means of defining both masculinity and femininity (Karras *Common* 3). However, the history of sexuality particularly reveals much about the women's history because "women were more closely connected than men with the body and sexuality, and their sexual behaviour identified and defined them much more than was usually the case with men" (Karras *Common* 3). Nonetheless, medieval scholars, as Karras notes, argue that "there was no such 'thing' as sexuality in the Middle Ages" ("Sexuality" 279) because there was not a coterminous medieval term for sexuality that is equal to the modern usage. Yet, the lack of a term for sexuality does not indicate that medieval people did not have sexuality; on the contrary, they surely had "discourses of flesh and of desire" (Karras "Sexuality" 279). Accordingly, medieval attitudes towards sex provide significant information for understanding the medieval notion of sexuality.

Sex is a very complex subject in itself, but it becomes a more complicated issue in the Middle Ages because it includes "questions of religious morality, public order, and gender relations as well as the individual psyche" (Karras *Sexuality* 3). In the Middle Ages, sex creates a set of meanings and approaches which are quite different from today. Firstly, sex for medieval people does not mean something that two people do together, but "something that someone did to someone else" (Karras *Sexuality* 3). In fact, it is clear that medieval people understand sexual intercourse as not something two people do, but as something a man does. The Middle English 'swiven', meaning 'to have sexual intercourse', is an intransitive verb and the subjects of such intransitive verbs are almost always used with a masculine subject (Karras "Sexuality" 284). Thus,

man is considered to be the active participant while the woman is the passive one in the sexual intercourse.

Karras identifies two main theories about sex in the Middle Ages (Karras *Sexuality* 1, “Sexuality” 279). First is the repressive attitude demanded by the Church, which defies sex in general and regards any sexual act as profligate. Even the thought of any sexual act is considered a sin and requires penance (Karras *Sexuality* 1, Richards 23). Marital sex is permissible only if it is for procreation. If the participants take pleasure, it also becomes a sin (Payer 62, Richards 23). This negative attitude towards sex reinforces the idea of sex and sexual behaviour as impure and a gateway to damnation (Cartlidge 228).

Other than the repressive approach, there is also an earthlier approach, which is a “liberated [and] jolly attitude toward sex” (Karras “Sexuality” 280). This attitude renounces the repressive sanctions and forms a “jolly” approach to sex. However, neither of these views reflects the concept of sexuality in the Middle Ages as a whole. Nevertheless, both of them reflect the Church’s repressive view of sexuality and the earthly and funny approach which is particularly adopted in the literary works, especially in the fabliaux. On the other hand, women’s sexuality in both views is exclusively dealt with as something which should be controlled, if not feared. The fear of women’s sexuality takes its roots from two views of women’s sexuality in the ancient medical world (Salisbury 84). The Galenic view suggests that women produce seed and women’s sexual pleasure is essential for the seed to be released (Salisbury 84). However, in the Aristotelian view, women do not produce seed and the sexual pleasure plays no role in procreation (Salisbury 84-85). This contradictory view of women and sex is influential in the Middle Ages.

Although woman is generally regarded as a mere passive participant in sexuality, there is also a generally accepted belief that women are more lustful and voracious than men (Karras *Sexuality* 4, Salisbury 86). The view of women is obviously correlated with the antifeminist views of women which have culminated since the ancient times and continued in the Middle Ages. In accordance with the antifeminist discourse, women’s sexual activity is feared and defined as threatening to men’s power. For example, a medical tract in the Middle Ages states that,

[t]he more women have sexual intercourse, the stronger they become, because they are made hot by the motion that the man makes during coitus. Further, male sperm is hot because it is of the same nature as air and when it is received by the woman it warms her entire body, so women are strengthened by this heat. On the other hand, men who have sex frequently are weakened by this act because they become exceedingly dried out. (Leyman qtd. in Salisbury 127)

Therefore, women's sexual power –though reinforced by the men's heat – is considered as dangerously strong and dominating over the men's power. Such misogynistic views of women's sexuality are reflected in Chaucer's fabliaux in which women make most of their sexuality to serve their own ends.

As mentioned in the introduction, fabliau as a genre, which deals with women's sexuality, has an erotic content (Lacy 14). The erotic is generally treated in two ways. On the one hand, it is defined as "a sign of female inferiority" (Lorde 277). On the other hand, it is regarded as something dirty and despicable (Lorde 277). Nevertheless, it is clear that the erotic may offer freedom and power to women. As Audre Lorde notes, "the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough" (278). In this sense, Chaucer's women in his fabliaux avail themselves of the power of the erotic. Through mingling the erotic with the comic, these women utilize their sexuality as a subversive force to avoid and evade their subjugation.

Chaucer's women in his fabliaux avert the imposition on their bodies and achieve to use their bodies for their own pleasures. In this sense, they subvert the idea of the body as a "direct locus of social control" (Bordo 91) and construct themselves new meanings on their bodies, which offers partial freedom. In other words, these women attain freedom through displaying resistance, that is, by positioning themselves both in opposition to and also in alliance with the power. It is through their extramarital sexual affairs that they gain partial freedom of their body which is legally regarded as the commodity of the husband.

In the *Miller's Tale*, Alisoun's resistance to the dominant power, that is, the marriage, which subjects her to her old husband, is through the love affair with a young clerk. The

tale stresses the age difference between Alisoun and John: “That bad man sholde wedde his similitude. / Men sholde wedden after hire estaat,/For youthe and elde is often at debaat” (I 3228-3230). This age difference, clearly, is not appreciated. It is suggested that their match is not a good one. John as an old man who has the economic means takes Alisoun as a wife to satisfy his lust. Alisoun has no means to reject the marriage. The passive role of the wife in the marriage is emphasised: “This carpenter hadde wedded newe a wyf,/Of eighteteene yeer she was of age.” (I 3221-3222). Alisoun’s silence and passivity in the marriage are stressed all through the tale because she “tends to be relegated to the second half of a line or the end of a sentence, as is she were tacked on as an afterthought” (Martin 42). Alisoun is obviously an attachment – an eighteen-year-old girl who is attached/wedded to an old man; however, she is equally uncontrollable: “[. . .] she was wylde and yong” (I 3224). John “[a] riche gnof” (I 3189) as an old husband is a silly and a lecherous man to wed a young wife, but he is also jealous of her and so he holds “hire narwe in a cage” (I 3224) because he knows he will be cuckolded (I 3226). Clearly, John’s fears are based on the idea that women are sexually insatiable and lecherous. Alisoun with her active sexuality seems to reinforce such an antifeminist view. However, as explained below in detail, it should be noted that Alisoun tries to claim her own desires and needs in the power struggle between John and herself because she has no other source than her sexuality to achieve her ends. Moreover, Alisoun’s motive in her sexual affair with Nicholas is the pleasure she gains. Also, her subordination and her attempts to evade and subvert it should be taken into consideration while regarding this antifeminist view on women’s sexually insatiable nature.

As a young woman, Alisoun is subordinated to her husband and her body seems to serve as a site on which John exercises his power. Alisoun has the responsibilities of a medieval wife, which are all strictly defined by the theological tracts. One of the most important of them is surely the total obedience to the husband. For example, the law lets a husband employ any means to change his wife’s bad behaviour. So, Alisoun is subjugated as a wife in medieval marriage. Accordingly, her reaction is one of the subordinate’s tactics. As Fiske argues, the subordinate uses the forces of the dominant and opportunities to be able to perform their needs and desires against the dominant. In

this respect, Alisoun the wife as the subordinate in the *Miller's Tale* makes do with what she has. Although she has limited power, she manipulates her situation to her own advantage and starts a “guerrilla attack” on John. She satisfies her own desires. Alisoun, thus, applies the ruses of everyday life – “the tactics of the weak” to create her own meanings; thus, Alisoun performs resistance and becomes a “guerrilla warrior” whose manoeuvres are trickery, intrigue and ruses:

the ruse is the art of the weak, like taking a trick in a card game, a momentary victory, a small triumph deriving from making do with the resources available that involves an understanding of the rules, of strategy of the powerful. (Fiske 38)

In this context, Alisoun's unfaithfulness is a form of resistance. Indeed, Chaucer never condemns Alisoun. On the contrary, Chaucer's Alisoun is described as the trickster ‘heroine’ who achieves her desires. Thus, her guileful ruses display “a kind of perverse strength” (Biscoglio 97). Moreover, it is important to note that Alisoun's tactics “emerge triumphant in the battle of wills they engage in with [her] husband, or else [she] achieve[s] [her] desired selfish ends without punishment or even without the knowledge of [her] husband” (Biscoglio 97).

Alisoun's body is an important agent in her attacks on the power and her body is glorified. For instance, her white forehead is described as beautiful in traditional terms: “Hir for heed shoon as bright as any day,/ So was it wasshen whan she leet hir wer. (I 3310-3311). She is “the queen of a sailor's dreams, if not quite a queen of curds and cream” (Pearsall 176). In other words, she is idealized. As Brewer states, “the vivid country images in which Aliso[u]n is described do full justice to her allure” (306). Her charm and attractive qualities are foregrounded, which she uses to generate her own meanings:

A ceynt she werede, barred al of silk,
A barmcloth as whit as morne milk
Upon hir lendes, ful of many a gore (I 3235-3237)
She was ful moore blissful on to see
Than is the newe pere-jonette tree,
And softer than the wolfe is of a wether. (I 3247-3249)

Alisoun is basically a lower class woman, “a wenche” (I 3254), “a popelote” (I 3254), accordingly, she is depicted as vulgar and “slyly seductive” (Pearsall 177). The size of the brooch on her collar, for instance, is an implication of her vulgarity: “A brooch she baar upon hir lowe coler,/As brood as is the boos of a bokeler” (I 3265-3266). She is clearly a down-to-earth woman. After all, Alisoun does not have a chance to be a fragile lady in a bawdy narrative; however, her vulgarity and tricks provide her with partial freedom to which a lady has no access. Her portrayal as a flesh-and-blood woman with her body is important in terms of introducing her means to resist the dominant power.

Since the female body is regarded as the property of the husband in the Middle Ages, Alisoun’s use of her body for her own pleasures is a radical and blasphemous action. In the description of her body, her active sexuality is emphasised. For example, Alisoun’s body is delicate and slender, which resembles her to a weasel: “Fair was this yonge wyf, and therwithal/As any wezele hir body gent and small” (I 3233-3234). Her breath has the scent of alcoholic drinks and the fragrance of apples: “Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth/Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heath” (I 3261-3262). She is pleasing like a early-ripe pear and she is softer than the sheep’s wool: “Than this is the newe pere-jonette tree,/And softer than the wolfe is of a wether” (I 3248-3249). She sings eagerly and lively like a swallow: “But of hir song, it was as loude and yerne/As any swalwe sittynge on a berne” (I 3257-3258). She plays like a calf: “Therto she koude skippe and make game,/As any kyde or calf folwynge his dame” (I 3259-3260). Surely, the description of Alisoun’s body with pastoral images emphasises her sexual power. As Helen Philips argues,

[h]er description combines natural details – with their implication that her sexuality is natural and blameless – aggressive similes – (‘as a bokeler’, ‘as a bolt’, ‘as any wezele’, ‘a wether’ etc. – this is the heartless girl that said ‘Tehee’ as she clapped the window to), and a strong sense of her body inside her clothes [. . .] The apples, stored up, symbolises her still under-appreciated sexual sweetness. It is not surprising this description ends by focusing on what men might do with her. (59)

Through this imagery, Alisoun is defined as an active and attainable woman. Her attire, too, is used to draw attention to her body, and, especially to her sexuality. Indeed,

Alisoun's body is glorified as accessible and her body seems to serve as an object of male desire:

Hir shoes were laced on hir legges hye.
 She was a prymerole, a piggesnye,
 For any lord to leggen in his bedde,
 Or yet for any good yeman to wedde. (I 3268- 3270)

It is significant that Alisoun's wildness is emphasised. Alisoun like a primrose is wild and young and she will manipulate the intended purposes of the male on herself to her own advantage. One of the mediums Alisoun employs to achieve this end is evidently her active nature, but certainly "with a hint of lasciviousness" (Pearsall 177). It is through her active sexuality that Alisoun takes an active role in her partial liberation of her body. Her sexuality helps her to defy the dominant. She uses sex as a means of "defiance and power" (White 192). Alisoun subverts her subordination to John through her sexual exploitations. Her sexual pursuits may be interpreted as the struggle for power and dominance.

As a matter of fact, Alisoun is conscious of what is going on around her and attains a "feminine awareness" – "consciousness of wom[a]n as wom[a]n" (Gies and Gies 9). She is aware of her situation as a married woman, but she also wants to go for her own pleasures. Alisoun's particular tricks and strategies are achieved through her alliance with Nicholas. Nicholas wants to be with Alisoun:

And prively he caught hire by the queynte
 And seyde, "Yvis, but if ich have my wille,
 For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille,"
 And heeld hire harde by the haunchebones. (I 3276 3279)

Although Alisoun initially rejects Nicholas, she later accepts his sexual advances. Alisoun further tells her lover Nicholas to be patient for her husband John is very jealous of her. She wisely warns him to be "privee" (I 3295) and gives her consent for the love of Nicholas. So, Nicholas's cry for the love of Alisoun – "Lemman, love me al atones" (I 3280) – is accepted only because Alisoun gives her consent:

“Myn housbounde is so ful of jalousie
 That but ye wayte wel and been privee,
 I woot right wel I nam but deed,” quod she.
 Ye moste been ful deerne, as in this cas.” (I 3294-3296)

Alisoun’s treatment of Absolon is different from that of Nicholas. Absolon’s advances are directly refused by Alisoun. He serenades Alisoun in a courtly manner, but his wooing does not persuade Alisoun, either. Absolon as a comic parody of a courtly lover is rejected since there is no place for such love cries in Alisoun’s vulgar world, and for her, love is enjoyed in physical terms. Moreover, for Absolon, who is the comic figure of the fabliau, Alisoun is a mouse, which is an extraordinary image for a woman in Absolon’s courtly world: “I dar wel seyn, if she hadde been a mous,/And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon. (I 336-3347). When Absolon realizes that Alisoun is not a mouse to be easily caught, he tries to find different ways to convince her. For instance, he offers money:

And, for she was of town, he profred meede;
 For som folk wol ben wonnen for richesse,
 And somme for strokes, and somme for gentillesse.
 Sometyme, to shewe his lightnesse and maistrye, (I 3380-3382)

Absolon evaluates Alisoun in terms of money and offers it. Yet, there is a more important thing for Alisoun, she wants to pursue her desires. It is clear that Alisoun is not interested in money. However, Absolon does not give up and continues wooing:

“What do ye, honey-comb, sweete Alisoun,
 My faire bryd, my sweete cynamome?”
 Awaketh, lemman myn, and speketh to me!
 Wel litel thynken ye upon my wo,
 That for youre love I swete ther I go. (I 3698-36701)

Such description of Alisoun is a biblical parody (Kendrick 109). Absolon’s serenade contains such words as ‘honeycomb’, ‘cinnamon’, ‘turtle-dove’, which can be interpreted allegorically “as an expression of the love between Christ and his church (or Christ and the Christian soul)” (Kendrick 109). Such biblical allusions and parody in the fabliau are generally used to raise laughter and achieve the comic climax. In the *Miller’s Tale*, it is also used as Alisoun’s means of empowerment. When Absolon interrupts Alisoun and Nicholas in bed, Alisoun threatens Absolon:

“Go fro the window, Jakke fool,” she sayde;
 As help me God, it wol nat be ‘com pa me.’
 Wel bet than thee, by Jhesu, Absolon.
 Go forth they wey, or I wol caste a ston. (I 3708-3710)

The traditional punishment for women taken in adultery is stone-throwing. Christ’s statement, that is, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her” (John 8:7) is subverted. Clearly, the absurd parody is that Alisoun who is in bed with her lover Nicholas threatens Absolon by saying she will cast a stone at him. Such a parody empowers Alisoun and glorifies her choice and desire. She chooses Nicholas among all three men because, in Philips’ words, because he is “clever, sexually attractive and wilfully successful” (56) while Absolon is “effeminate, sexually eager but nervous, and absurd” (56) and John the husband is a “prosperous oaf and [. . .] stupid” (56). Evidently, in the *Miller’s Tale*, Alisoun’s desires are foregrounded and her extramarital affair is not condemned.

Alisoun’s sexual plays are two-dimensional, which both free her from the restraints imposed on her and also enables her to get pleasure. In order to achieve pleasure, Alisoun should find ways to deceive her husband without his knowledge. Hence, Alisoun constructs tricks and ruses to beguile her husband. Alisoun and Nicholas make their plans:

That Nicholas shal shapen hym a wyle
 And this sely jealous housbounde to bigyle;
 And if so be the game wente aright,
 She sholde slepen in his arm al nyght,
 For this was his desire, hire also. (I 3402- 3407)

Alisoun’s desire is especially mentioned and their plan ostensibly works. However, Absolon interferes and insists on Alisoun for a mere kiss. Alisoun’s plan is interrupted by Absolon; however, Alisoun does not refuse his wish and grants his desire, but with a humiliating difference that Absolon gets to kiss Alisoun’s bottom. Hence, Alisoun in her night with Nicholas enjoys not only the pleasure of beguiling John, but also tricking Absolon:

This Absolon gan wye his mouth ful drie
 Derk was the nyght as pich, or as the cole,

And at the window out she putte hir hole,
 And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,
 But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers. (I 3730- 3735)

Absolon bitterly realizes how he is tricked and derided when “he felte a thing al rough and long yherd” (I 3738). His regret is evident in his cry: “Fy! allas! what have I do?” (I 3739). Yet, he vows that he will take his revenge: “I shal thee quyte” (I 3746), and when Nicholas farts in Absolon’s face, Absolon takes a hot coulter with which he burns Nicholas’s bottom. At the end, Alisoun escapes scot-free again while her lover Nicholas’s arse is badly burnt and Absolon becomes a puppet in the hands of Alisoun. Both scatological and farcical narratives of mis-directed kiss are tricks of Alisoun. Through these ruses, she averts the constraints on her as a young woman married to an old man; and then she takes pleasure. Hence, Alisoun makes subversive use of her subordination for pleasurable purposes.

Through her sexual body, Alisoun creates her own pleasures. Accordingly, Alisoun’s sexual pleasure is defined as harmonious:

Whan Nicholas had doon thus everideel,
 And thakked hire aboute the lendes weel,
 He kiste hire sweete and taketh his sawtrie,
 And playeth faste, and maketh melodie. (I 3303-3306)

Music plays an important role in the tale (Pearsall 174). Nicholas usually sings *Angelus ad virginem* in his chamber: “So sweetly that all the chamber rong;/And Angelus ad virginem he song;” (I 3225-3216). It is a song which foretells the happenings in the tale especially his part as the lover. Moreover, Absolon uses his ‘gyterne’ while he is wooing Alisoun. However, the most melodious one of all is absolutely the description of the lovemaking of Nicholas and Alisoun:

Ther was the revel and melodye;
 And thus lith Alison and Nicholas,
 In bisynesse of myrthe and of solas,
 Til that the belle of laudes gan to ryng,
 And freres in the chauncel gonne synge. (I 3652-3656)

The description of the moment of “revel and melodye” (I 3652) foregrounds Alisoun’s pleasure. The adulterous affair between Nicholas and Alisoun is treated as a “bisynesse

of myrthe” (I 3650); and sexual pleasure undoubtedly offers satisfaction for both Alisoun and Nicholas. The erotic climax is thus subversive as it allows Alisoun to win out among all the males in the denouement of the fabliau since “the sexual pleasure of the wife is attained at the cost of the husband’s humiliation” (Biscoglio 88). Moreover, as stated above, Alisoun escapes punishment while the male characters are punished somehow. The jealous and old husband John falls from the tub when he hears the cry of Nicholas – “Water, Water;” and suffers the derision. Nicholas’s bottom is badly burnt and Absolon is insulted. The ending of the *Miller’s Tale*, then, can be interpreted as a kind of poetic justice and Alisoun’s victory:

Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
For al his kepyng and his jalousie,
And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye,
And Nicholas is scalded in the towte
This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte! (I 3850-3855)

Although she is also involved in adultery, Alisoun sustains no harm; on the contrary, she gains pleasure from the meanings she creates. Alisoun knows the rules of the game and behaves as she is supposed to. She acts as a trickster. She follows her desires and satisfies them. Glenn Wright also suggests, “the fabliau world is thoroughly physical one, with physical pleasure as its central value” (484). Then, Alisoun pursues her sexual desires, though forbidden; and creates her own meanings out of the marriage which forbids her pleasure. Thus, the *Miller’s Tale*, which “present[s] illicit sexual urges in terms of youth, natural imagery and ‘melodie’, hilarity and ingenuity” (Philips 62), ends with a happy ending for Alisoun who is able to “come out on top” (Johnson 299).

Similarly, in the *Reeve’s Tale*, women are involved in acts of subversion through pleasure. The daughter Malyne and the wife are subjugated by Symkyn in the *Reeve’s Tale*; and they resist his oppressive treatment through their sexual affairs with the clerks Aleyn and John. The power struggle in the *Reeve’s Tale* is more multifaceted than the other tales because there are conflicts between Symkyn and the clerks as well as between Symkyn and his daughter Malyne and wife. In this struggle for power, Symkyn is the ultimate authority who subjugates women.

Symkyn's character is important in displaying his oppression on women. His tyrannical attitude towards women is displayed through the knife and sword imagery:

Ay by his belt he baar a long panade,
And of a swerd ful trenchant was the blade.
A joly popper baar he in his pouche;
There was no man, for peril, dorste hym touché.
A Sheffield thwitel baar he in his hose. (I 3931-3933)

Symkyn is armed with a sword, a dagger, and two knives. He is also depicted as very strong and threatening; that's why, "[t]her dorste no wight hand upon hym legge,/That he ne swoor he sholde anon abegge" (I 3937-3938). Sword and knife are evidently phallic symbols (Erol 63). This imagery reveals both his lecherous and oppressive nature. The "joly popper" (I 3931) he carries includes the adjective 'joly' which means not only 'pretty' but also 'amorous' and 'lustful' (Erol 63). His physical description is also useful to reveal his lusty nature. His round face, ape-like skull and 'camus' nose display his lustfulness. Moreover, he is resembled to an ape, an "animal of grimaces and tricks" (Rowland 32), which is a suitable definition for Symkyn who boasts about his talent in theft and imposture. Also, sensuality is another simile used for the ape (Richardson 95). Symkyn's lecherous, dominant and oppressive character is thus introduced. His wife is repressed under his oppression and the daughter is subjected to his power. However, as Cooke rightly argues the "rhetoric in the fabliaux is frequently the fall guy in comedy; he is set up only to be knocked down" (80). The husband in fabliaux is only characterized to be ridiculed. Still, the wife and the daughter Malyne are described as the miller's precious properties: "His name was hoote deynous Symkyn./ A wyf he hadde, ycomen of noble kyn;." (I 3942-3943):

She was yfostred in a nonnerye;
For Symkyn wolde no wyf, as he sayde,
But she were wel ynorissed and a mayde, staat of yomanrye.
And she was proud, and peert as is a pye. (I 3946-3950).

Symkyn, proud of having a wife who is above him on the social scale, makes an alliance with her family and settles a good dowry. He achieves to advance in society through an arranged marriage. He has similar plans for his daughter:

This person of the toun, for she was feir,
 In purpose was to maken hire his heir,
 Bothe of his catel and his mesuage,
 And straunge he made it of hir marriage. (I 3977-3982)

Malyne is considered as an object to be wedded and to be the heir of his property without her consent. In other words, the wife and Malyne are Symkyn's "best hopes for prestige and advancement" (White 186).

The power struggle between two women and the husband and the father Symkyn offers Malyne and the wife to contest their submission to the authoritative male figure and to create ways to be triumphant. To be able to evade their submission, they employ "the art of the weak" (Fiske *Understanding* 19); hence, they perform "guerrilla tactics" (Fiske *Understanding* 19) because they have to make do with what they have. Since what they have is limited, they make do with certain tricks and deceitful strategies to cope with the dominating power. Thus, Symkyn's wife and daughter Malyne utilize "guerrilla tactics" against the strategies of "hooite deynous Symkyn" (I 3942) and make "poaching attacks" upon his power which disempowers them. Through tactics, they subvert the masculine control on them and enjoy sexuality as well as partial authority over their own bodies.

Malyne, the daughter of a strong father, is actually strong herself. Her body is realistically depicted and her young age as well as her beauty is stressed (I 3973-3976). Yet, she is not idealized. She is rather praised for her realistic qualities and her portrayal includes elements which bring her sexual and physical awareness forward:

This wench thikke and wel ygrowen was,
 With kamus nose and eyen greye as glas,
 With buttokes nrode and brestes rounde and hye
 But right fair was hire heer, I wol nat lye. (I 3973-3976)

She is described as a sturdy girl; in Hopkins's words, she "is no shrinking violet" (10). Moreover, her body parts are obsessively featured in detail. The "kamus nose" (I 3974) she has symbolizes her rebellious lusty nature which is Symkyn's best chance to advance in society, but Malyne will disappoint him.

Malyne is unmarried and is expected to be a virgin although she may not be. Her father is eager to marry her to “som worthy blood of auncetrye” (I 3982) to advance in society. However, Malyne’s sexual intercourse with Aleyn spoils his plans:

And up he rist, and by the wenche he crepte.
 This wenche lay upright and faste slepte,
 Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie,
 That it had been to late for to crie,
 And shortly for to seyn, they were aton. (I 4193-4194)

Symkyn is very protective of Malyne’s body because he wants her body to help him in his plans of social climbing through marrying off Malyne to a rich man of a higher status than herself. Thus, Symkyn’s reaction to Malyne’s sexual affair with the clerk is an expectable one; he is furious at Malyne’s loss of virginity. However, his response is not because of his love of the daughter but of his future plans. In Symkyn’s words, “[w]ho dorste be so boold to disparage/My doghter, that is come of swich lineage?” (I 4271-4272). Helen Cooper assesses the furious response of Sykmyn not as “his care for his daughter nor outraged morality, but [. . .] [as] the affront to his social standing” (114). Likewise, Sheila Delany focuses on the economic reasons of Symkyn’s rage and she states that Symkyn anticipated “an advantageous match for his virginal Malkin [sic], until the goods are damaged by Aleyn the clerk” (74). “The goods,” which are his wife and his virginal daughter, are spoiled in the eyes of Symkyn. Therefore, it can be argued that the power struggle is performed through Malyne’s body, through which Malyne becomes the winner.

Malyne succeeds in attaining the authority over her ‘goods’ and subverts the oppression of the father through her sexuality and the pleasure. Although the sentence “it had been to late for to crie” creates disputes on Malyne’s sexual intercourse if it were a rape or not, the denouement of the fabliau proves otherwise. Malyne as a strong girl has the strength to stop Aleyn who is a poor clerk and is unlikely to be strong. The only thing she needs to cease the so-called rape is to scream because they all sleep in the same room. Yet, Malyne, remaining silent, makes use of a rare opportunity and enjoys the night. Aleyn tells John that he has “thries in this shorte nyght/Swyved the miller’s doghter” (I 4265-4266) and that he “wax wery in the dawenyng/For he had swonken

al the longe nyght” (I 4234-4235). Clearly, Malyne utilizes her sexuality as a means of subverting Symkyn’s authority on her and also derives pleasure from her affair.

Moreover, Malyne sees off Aleyn and calls him “deere lemman” (I 4315); and she tells him the place of the cake made from the flour Symkyn had stolen from the clerks: “Whan that thou wendest homeward by the melle,/Right at the entree of the dore bihynde/Thou shalt a cake of half a bushel fynde” (I 4237-4239). Hence, Malyne takes revenge from her father not only with her loss of virginity but also with the reward she gives the clerks. Clearly, the cake is a gift and perhaps a “payment for services” (Hopkins 11). Again calling the clerk “goode lemman” (I 4244), Malyne “gan to wepe” (I 4245). Hines rightly states, “it is Al[e]yn’s going, not his coming, that upsets her (127). Moreover, this farewell of Malyne to Aleyn is given in direct speech, which is quite significant because “women in medieval texts are frequently allowed no voice; often their feelings and opinions are not even reported” (Hopkins 11). Hence, Malyne’s farewell, which includes the information of the place of the cake she made from the flour that Symkyn had stolen from the clerks, clarifies that the night spent with Aleyn is the erotic rebellion of Malyne. Her poaching raid works well because she prevents her sexuality and body from being Symkyn’s commodity; and thus Malyne’s uses her virginity not to advance but rather abort her father’s plans.

Similarly, Symkyn’s wife does not miss the rare opportunity to enjoy sex, either. The wife’s sexual affair with John, the other clerk, is not voluntary. In fact, she confuses the bed because John changes the place of the cradle to lead her to his bed. However, although it is clear that sex is not initiated by the women in the *Reeve’s Tale*, it is clear that they do not turn down the opportunity, either. For example, wife had “myrie a fit” (I 4230) with John:

Withinne a while this John the clerk up leep,
And on this goode wyf he Leith on soore.
So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yore;
He priketh harde and depe as he were mad. (I 4228-4231)

Like her daughter, the wife enjoys the night of sex and calls off John the clerk at dawn. Hence, it can be stated that sex operates in the tale in an elaborate way. For Priscilla

Martin, sex in the *Reeve's Tale* is for revenge –the revenge of the clerks from Symkyn (78). However, it is also the revenge of women. Therefore, the sexual intercourse is equally important both for the clerks and women. Sex as an important way of attaining and/or affirming power provides the wife and Malyne with the power they lack. Through Malyne's and the wife's sexual tricks, the idea of women's body which was long considered "as the precondition for and guarantor of male intellectual, sexual, and chivalric prowess" (Burns 6) in the medieval misogynistic texts is subverted. Moreover, Symkyn's intellectual and sexual competence is proven false. He is beaten physically and financially by the clerks from whom he steals; and he is also beaten sexually by his wife who had "myrie a fit" with John, and by Malyne who lost her virginity, an important commodity for Symkyn for social climbing. Hence, women are not condemned in the tale for their sexual exploits but Symkyn who is described as "an evil character, dishonest, violent and even murderous" (Martin 76) is punished and literally beaten as the oppressive authority.

Similar to Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale* and Malyne and Symkyn's wife in the *Reeve's Tale*, May in the *Merchant's Tale* constructs her own meanings within and against the dominant structures, which subjugate her as she takes pleasure from her sexual tricks and manoeuvres. Like Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*, Malyne and the miller's wife in the *Reeve's Tale*, May's resistance provides her with the partial liberation of her own body which is the property of husband and with pleasure which is forbidden. May also follows similar strategies to the ones of other women in Chaucer's fabliaux and plays her part as the subordinate wife in the power struggle in the *Merchant's Tale*; and enjoys temporary freedom from her subjection by having an affair with Damyan while she is married to Januarie.

The *Merchant's Tale* begins with Januarie's depiction as an old man who is determined to have a wife and further goes on with the debate on marriage. Justinus and Placebo counsel Januarie about marriage and what kind of a wife he should take (IV 1476-1498, IV 1519-1531). In their debate, the position of woman as a wife and her responsibilities are clearly defined. For instance, Januarie desires an heir and he is also worried about his past life which is full of debauchery; and if he takes a wife, he will be able to "allay his lust in a manner sanctioned by the church" (Ruud 443). In their debate, Placebo, the

flatterer, states that the knight is right to take a wife while Justinus, the just one, disagrees and claims otherwise. In both cases of advice and the statements of the narrator, it is not important what May thinks or feels (IV 1693-1695); she is merely considered as an object of Januarie's desire. The statement 'take a wyf' also shows May's passive position:

To take a wyf it is glorious thing,
 And namely whan a man is oold and hoor;
 Thanne is a wyf the fruyt of his tresor.
 Thanne sholde he take a yong wyf and a feir,
 On which he myghte engendren hym an heir,
 And lede his lyf in joye and in solas, (IV 1269-1273)

May's helplessness is not overtly mentioned, but how the masculine power restricts her and gives her no chance to voice her thoughts is evident. Clearly, May's existence matters only if she serves well for the ends of Januarie. Her responsibilities are also well defined in advance: "A wyf is kepere of thyn housbondrye;/Wel maythe sike man biwaille and wepe," (IV 1380-1381). A wife should be the keeper - not the waster- of her husband's wealth; and, marriage also demands total obedience of the wife to the husband:

If he be povr, she helpeth hym to swynke;
 She kepeth his good, and wasteth never a deel;
 "Al that hire housbonde lust, hire liketh weel;
 She seith nat ones "nay," whan he seith "ye."
 "Do this," seith he; " Al redy, sire," seith she. (IV 1342-1345)

Wedlock requires the wife's passivity; she is allowed to be active only in achieving the husband's wishes. The wife should be Januarie's "paradys terrestre" (IV 1332) because the wife is "mannes helpe and his confort" (IV 1331). Such statements are obviously based on the Bible, which states that woman is the helper to man (Gen. 2:20). Thus, May is regarded as the helper of Januarie:

That woman is for mannes helpe ywroght.
 The hye God, whan he hadde Adam maked,
 And saugh him al alone, bely-naked,
 God of his grete goodnesse seyde than,
 "Lat us now make an helpe unto this man

Lyk himself”; and thanne he made him Eve (IV 1324-1329)

Hence, May’s subordination is clear in her marriage. She has no importance unless she becomes a procreation machine for Januarie, who considers childbearing is an important criterion of an ideal wife (IV 1445-1449).

Indeed, it seems that marriage is a market place where men purchase brides for themselves (Aers 152, Laskaya 82). Januarie who decides to marry a young wife with whom he can have an heir, through which his “heritage sholde [not] falle/In straunge hande” (IV 1439-1440). Justinus, who also perceives the notion of marriage as merely a transaction which regulates the property transferences and rights, confirms such a reduction of woman into a commodity. Just like Januarie, Justinus considers people in terms of the cattle and the land he/she has. He even quotes Seneca to make his statement more reliable:

Senek [Seneca] amonges othere words wyse,
Seith that a man oghte hym right wel avyse
To whom he yeveth his lond or his catel.
An syn I oghte avyse me right wel
To whom I yeve my good away fro me,
I warne yow wel, it is no childes pley
To take a wyf withouten avysement. (IV 1523-1531)

Justinus warns Januarie that marriage is not a “childes pley” (IV 1530) and advises Januarie to investigate May’s wealth. According to Justinus, the ideal wife should be “a good and safe investment for the man” (Aers 152) and she should not be a “wastour of thy good” (IV 1535). He does not mention love, care and responsibilities of the couple in the marriage but he considers financial benefits. So, Justinus only shares “the pragmatic wisdom of market-place” (Aers 152). Chaucer defines the action as a process of “[h]eigh fantasye and curious bisynesse” (IV 1577) in which Januarie tries to acquire himself a wife:

Many fair shap and many a fair visage
Ther passeth thurgh his herte nyght by nyght,
As whoso tooke a mirour, polished bright,
And sette it in a commune market-place,
Thanne sholde he see ful many a figure pace
By his mirour [. . .]. (IV 1580-1585)

The mercantile issues and Januarie's sexual fantasies are represented together and the market and the action of it are normalized. Accordingly, May is relegated to the status of a commodity which will eventually be bought by Januarie. Nevertheless, it was a socially acceptable practice in the Middle Ages as reflected in the *Merchant's Tale*, and it would be very unusual that the woman was represented as an individual who decided her own future in a market place which was organized by males. Accordingly, May is signed over to Januarie with her marriage:

They wroghten so, by sly and wys tretee,
That she, this mayden, which that Mayus highte,
As hastily as evere that she myghte,
Shal wedded unto this Januarie.
I trowe it were to longe yow to tarie,
If I yow tolde of every scrit and bond
By which that she was feffed in his lond. (IV 1692-1698)

After all this procedure in accordance with the market regulations, May is chosen as the appropriate bride for Januarie and it is the time for the sacramental union: "But finally ycomen is the day/That to the chirche bothe be they went/For to receive the hooly sacrament" (IV 1700-1702). Although it is stressed that the church seeks to turn "the exploitative and loveless purchase of a young person into a more than respectable union, a sacramental one" (Aers 155), the blessings of the church also position May as a desirable possession for Januarie's use. Consequently, May is treated as an object of masculine desire while Januarie becomes the legal owner of May. In other words, May is subordinated because she is given to Januarie. The treatment she will receive in her marriage is not different, either. With no power to refuse to marry Januarie, she becomes an object of male consumption. Januarie waits for the first night for which he makes plans:

This Januarie is ravysshed in a traunce
At every tyme he looked on hir face;
But in his herte he gan hire to manace
That he that nyght in armes wolde hire streyne
Harder than evere Parys dide Eleyne. (IV 1750-1754)

Januarie prepares himself for the first night. For Januarie, sexual power is an important medium to exercise his dominance over May:

[. . .] “Alla! O tender creature,
 Now wolde God ye myghte wel endure
 Al my corage, it is so sharp and keene!
 I am agast ye shul it nat susteene. (IV 1757- 1760)

He reads Constantinus Africanus, the author of *De Coitu* which provides recipes of aphrodisiacs in order to be sexually active in the night:

He drynketh yposcras, clarree, and vernage
 Of spices hoote t’ecreessen his corage;
 And many a letuarie hath he ful fyn,
 Swiche as the cursed monk, daun Constantyn,
 Hat written in his book *De Coitu*;
 To eten hem alle he has no thing eschu. (IV 1807-1812)

While Januarie’s preparations are presented in detail, only information given about May is mentioned in passive voice: “The bryde was broght abedde as astille as stoon” (IV 1818). As inferred, she is frozen with fear and lacks power to resist. She remains silent and motionless:

And Januarie hat faste in armes take
 His fresshe May, his paradys, his make.
 He lullteh hire; he kisseth hire ful ofte;
 With thikke brustles of his berd unsofte,
 Lyk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere
 For he was shave al newe in his manere-
 He rubbeth hire aboute hir tender face, (IV 1821-1827)

Januarie is depicted as full of voluptuousness and without care and affection. Masculine power is strengthened with the description of Januarie’s “thikke brustles of [. . .] berd unsofte” (IV 1824). Lovemaking almost exactly suits the definition of sex in the Middle Ages. It is through sex that Januarie confirms his power on May; he wants May to think of lovemaking as an offence. The kisses which are expected to be the expressions of love turn out to be “acts of male violence over the subordinate female” (Aers 156). Using the verb ‘rubbeth’ for caressing implicates that Januarie wants to hurt May and to show his power over her. He is only interested in satisfying his lust and exercising his power over her. Along with Januarie’s self-satisfying and violent attitude to May, he is presented as a repulsive old man:

The slake skyn aboute his nekke shaketh
 Whil that he sang, so chaunteth he and craketh.
 But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte,
 Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte
 In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene;
 She preyseth nat his pleyying worth a bene. (IV 1849-1854)

May's silence in their lovemaking shows how repellent the action is in her perspective: "God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte" (IV 1851). This is the only statement about May's possible thoughts about the situation she is coerced to be in. Otherwise, the statement may show that Januarie's lovemaking is not satisfactory for her. However, she has to comply with all these subjugating responsibilities as a woman and as a wife without any chance to change. Indeed, what women really want is not the concern for the authorities; however, Chaucer "leaves readers with no cause to make easy moralistic judgments about May which abstract her from the system which directly engenders the situation she must suffer" (Aers 157). Rather, the *Merchant's Tale* represents May as repressed in her marriage in which she has no individual space for herself while Januarie is depicted as May's oppressor who wishes to exploit her for his sexual fantasies.

An equally significant aspect of May's subordination in her marriage is presented as the age difference. Januarie wants to take a young wife because he thinks he can control and manage her. Also, Januarie's other reason for his choice of a young wife is that he can satisfy his lust on her young body. Moreover, according to the theory of old age in the Middle Ages, old age indicates a "reduction in sensual desire and an increase in wisdom" (Brown 96). Beginning of old age is determined as sixty (Biscoglio 79). According to this, Januarie is old as "He passed sixty yeer" (IV 1252). However, Januarie's old age signals an "increase in sensual desire and a reduction in wisdom." Januarie's intentional ignorance of this fact is not idiosyncratic to him, on the contrary, it is very common. Furthermore, it is widely considered as "wildly funny" (Hussey 149) because people in the Middle Ages believed that "[s]uch a man deceives himself [. . .] about his own ability to satisfy a young girl; it is a medieval conclusion that his frustrated wife will one day betray him with a younger and a more virile man" (Hussey 149). Chaucer in the *Merchant's Tale* uses allegorical names to emphasize the age

difference in the marriage of Januarie and May. Moreover, this discrepancy of ages is also important to give away Januarie's true nature as a lecherous man. Januarie, as a man who lived a life of debauchery for years, wants to resume a moral life with the sanction of the church, that is, marriage. However, he "wol noon oold wyf han in no manere" (IV 1416). His criteria for wife is clearly defined: "She shal nat passé twenty yeer, certain;/Oold fish and yong flesh wolde I have fayn" (IV 1417-1418). Accordingly, May's "fresshe beautee [and] [. . .] age tender" (IV 1601) haunts Januarie who presents a very detailed description of May:

He purtreyed in his herte and in his thought
 Hir fresshe beautee and hir age tender,
 Hir myddel small, hire armes longe and sklendre,
 Hir wise governaunce, hir gentillesse,
 Hir womanly berynge, and hire sadnesse.
 And whan that he on hire was condescended,
 Hym thought his choys myghte nat ben amended. (IV 1600-1606)

His lecherous intentions are clearly reflected in these lines. Moreover, he expects his future wife to be a servant with utter obedience, a housekeeper and a wife who will satisfy his lust and provide him with heirs (IV 1446-1455). In his eyes, May will meet all of his expectations. On the other hand, May's helpless passivity may easily be inferred from the grammatical structures used for her description as a passive and voiceless woman. The reader is not allowed to hear her thoughts and the male narrator presents May through Januarie's perspective. Despite her subjugation, some scholars regard May as a "willing prostitute" for she sells her sexual power (Kean 160, Burlin 212). However, marriages in the Middle Ages were rather arrangements that regulated people's lives in accordance with the dominant discourse. In this case, it is more reasonable, as David Aers notes, to "call medieval parents, guardians and those holding rights over wards coercive but respectable pimps than to call May, and the women she represents 'willing' prostitutes" (154).

The situation of May and her deeds should be assessed with the recognition of her subordination to January in the fabliau. In the *Merchant's Tale*, Januarie makes use of every means to achieve what he desires and realizes them by marrying May. Yet, May is represented as an addition to complete Januarie's wishes. Therefore, May should be

considered as a victim of the patriarchal values and norms and her extra-marital activities as her strategies of evasion.

May's resistance is positioned in the very place which subordinates her. As a married woman, she is under the guardianship of her husband. Although she is aware of her subordination, she has to comply with the dominance who/which disempowers her. Strictly kept by her legal owner, May at first yields to Januarie and the medieval discourse of patriarchy to be a part of the power. However, later she also partially resists this system through tactics – the tactics of the weak because she does not let Januarie be the master of her body and her love (Martin *Chaucer's Women* 105). Therefore, she makes use of the resources of the dominant to fulfil her own needs and desires. Januarie asks May to vow to be loyal to him:

For Goddes sake, then how I thee chees,
 Noght for no coveitise, doutelees,
 But oonly for the love I had to thee.
 And though that I be oold and may nat see,
 Beth to me trewe, and I wol telle yow why.
 Thre thynges, certes, shal ye wyne therby:
 First, love of Crist, and to yourself honour,
 And Al myn heritage, toun and tour. (IV 2165-2172)

She vows to Januarie to be loyal and guarantees the property and the money she will receive. May performs her desires, too. Therefore, it can be stated that May's resistance is her acting upon her desires. Accordingly, she decides to be with Damyan:

“Certeyn,” thoghte she, “whom that this thing displease
 I rekke noght, for here I hym assure
 To love hym best of any creature,
 Though he namore hadde than his sherte.” (IV 1983-1986)

She subverts Januarie's plans of using her body for his own purposes. In fact, May's use of the resources of the dominant for her own ends is best observed in her use of the garden. She turns the garden, which was built by Januarie for his sexual pursuits, into a garden where she enjoys sex with her lover Damyan. This garden is resembled to the Garden of Eden: Januarie talks about Adam and Eve (IV 1324-1329), the wife is defined as a paradise (IV 1332). Such biblical allusions to the Garden of Eden, however,

do not suggest that the fabliau represents “Januarie’s [sic] [f]all from virtue to sin” (Philips 124). Indeed, Januarie’s reasons for building a garden are related to conjugal debt:

And whan he wolde paye his wyf hir dete
In sommer seson, thider wolde he go,
And May his wyf, and no wight but they two;
And thynges whiche that were nat doon abedde, (IV 2048-2051)

It is clear that his demand of marital debt accords with marriage rules. However, marriage for Januarie is only a tool that allows him to continue following “his bodily delyt/On wommen,” (IV 1249-1250). Thus, the garden he built is an agent through which he can achieve his sexual ends and exercise his power on May’s body. He thus wants to visit the garden particularly in spring.

In June, Januarie invites May to the garden, which is an allusion to the Song of Songs of Solomon:

“Rys up, my wyf, my love, my lady free!
The turtles voys is herd, my dowye sweete;
The wynter is goon with alle his reynes weete.
Com forth now, with thyne eyen columbyn!
How fairer been thy brestes than is wyn!
The gardyn is enclosed al aboute;
Com forth, my white spouse! Out of doute
Though hast me wounded in myn herte, O wyf!
No spot of thee ne knew I al my lyf.
Com forth, and lat us taken oure disport;
I chees thee for my wyf and my comfort.” (IV 2138-2148)

Januarie’s invitation of May to the garden in the *Merchant’s Tale* includes sensual love. Moreover, it may symbolize both the lechery of Januarie and also the love affair between May and Damyan which will be consummated on the pear tree. Such a quotation may be used functionally to foreshadow the sexual relationship between Damyan and May.

In the garden, May deceitfully vows her love is true and tells Januarie that she wants to taste the green pears because she wants to be with Damyan on the tree: “I telle yow wel, a woman in my plit /May han to fruyt so greet an appetit/That she may dyen but she of it have.” (IV 2335-2337). Yet, Januarie cannot help her “[f]or [he is] blynd!” (IV 2350).

Told to climb up the tree in advance, Damyan waits for May until she climbs on Januarie's back and up the tree. Then, the "governing scene" (Kolve 93) of the fabliau takes place:

He stoupeth down, and on his bak she stood,
And caught hire by a twiste, and up she gooth –
Ladyes, I prey yow that ye be nat wroth;
I kan nat glose, I am a rude man –
And sodeynly anon this Damyan
Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng. (IV 2348-2353)

Upon seeing the betrayal, Pluto restores the sight of Januarie who "saugh that Damyan his wyf had dressed/In swiche manere it may nay been expressed" (IV 2361-2362). The verbal fight between Pluto and Proserpina continues and interferes into the relationship of May and Januarie. Proserpina even tells Pluto that she will have an answer and May vindicates herself stating that she has been told his sight will be restored if she "struggles with a man in a tree" (Brewer 323). Although what Januarie sees is more than struggling, he ends up believing his wife. Nothing is mentioned about Damyan or May's further feelings. Although May's unfaithfulness is revealed, she avoids punishment and her marriage survives the betrayal.

May certainly performs resistance through her sexual tricks. She subverts the idea of the woman as the sex object for male use. She utilizes her sexual power to create her own meanings and gains popular pleasure. In this context, she regains control over her body. Januarie's garden, in this sense, may be the symbol of May's body as only Januarie has the key to the garden. Aware of the fact that the only way to achieve her ends is to adopt the tricks of the subordinate, May like other women in Chaucer's fabliaux makes do with what she has and creates "guileful ruses" to resist her husband. Evidently, May by using the garden for her sexual exploits turns it into her own garden of pleasure. Hence, the garden, the place which Januarie intends to use for his sexual pleasure, is usurped temporarily and used subversively by May. Thus, it is clear that although Januarie tries to control the meanings that can be generated against him, he cannot totally manage them. For instance, he attempts to gain the fidelity of May through vowing his heritage will be May's, he cannot totally keep May in a cage. May exploits and forms herself

popular pleasures and meanings since Januarie as the power is overorganized and open to “poaching attacks.”

Similar to the *Miller's Tale*, the *Reeve's Tale*, and the *Merchant's Tale*, the *Shipman's Tale* also presents the power struggle between the subordinate wife and the dominant husband. Merchant's wife in the *Shipman's Tale* contests her subjection through her sexual body, but with a difference: She barter her sexuality unlike Alisoun, Malyne, the miller's wife, and May in Chaucer's fabliaux. So, in the *Shipman's Tale*, the plot turns around the power conflict between the merchant and his wife and it ends with a temporary victory of the wife.

In the *Shipman's Tale*, the husband is a rich merchant who is obsessed with money and he has a wife with extraordinary beauty. The financial plot is tightly interrelated with the sexual plot of the fabliau in which the exchange of these is highly common (Phillips 158). In both plots, the wife is represented as a scheming and lecherous woman as well as an extravagant one. In other words, the wife is portrayed according to medieval antifeminist tradition. Saint Jerome, for example, notes that “[m]arried women want many things, costly clothes, gold, jewels, expensive items, maidservants, all kinds of furniture, litters and gilded coaches” (qtd. in Blamires 70). Likewise, the merchant's “revelous” (VII 1189) wife spends much on dress but “nat on wast, bistowed everydeel” (VII 1605). So, the husband is regarded as the winner while the wife is the waster (Martin 85). Yet, the merchant's wife has her reasons for this. She claims that she dresses elegantly for her husband's honour:

For by my trouthe, I have on myn array,
And nat on wast, bistowed every deel;
And for I have bistowed it so weel
For youre honour, for Goddes sake, I seye, (VII 1604-1607)

Although she uses the idea supported by medieval marriage, that is, she wants to uphold her husband's honour and she claims that she does it not for herself but for her husband as a part of her wifely duties, she uses her responsibilities imposed on her in a subversive manner; and uses the husband's resources for herself. Moreover, the wife of the merchant reinforces the antifeminist topos, that is, women are extravagant. Such

antifeminist topoi as extravagance of woman and the immoral nature of women can also be observed in the *Shipman's Tale*.

Similarly, the merchant's wife betrays her husband for the sake of money and accordingly supports these antifeminist views on women. Moreover, her disloyalty is perceived as treachery in the fabliau. The wife is resembled to Ganelon, the traitor in *Chanson de Roland*, because she is involved in "marital treachery" (Philips 161): "And but I do, God take on me vengeance/As foul as evere hadde Genylon of France" (VII 1379-1380). Thus, the wife in the *Shipman's Tale* seems to perfectly answer the descriptions of women in the antifeminist literary tradition. However, the fact that she can gain the money she needs only in an immoral way shows that the husband has the total authority on the economy of the home. Moreover, since the fabliau presents a physical world in which the characters' desires are favoured (Farrell 773), every medium the woman may use should be fair and permissible. If her husband does not meet her needs and pleasures, the wife in the *Shipman's Tale* creates her own ways to achieve her desires. Supply and demand equilibrium works efficiently in the fabliau; and when the wife demands, her wishes are accomplished though the supplier changes. The wife adopts certain tactics and tricks to be able to resist the norms which subordinate her in an economic way, and eventually manipulates the chaotic situation to her own advantage. Like the other wives in the fabliaux, the merchant's wife utilizes what she has or makes do with what she has. Her medium is her sexuality, through which she defies the oppressive agents, pays her dress bill and enjoys the pleasure of her manoeuvres.

In the *Shipman's Tale*, the wife's sexual activities, the merchant's trade and the mercantile exchanges are all correlated; and, sex and money are equated and exchanged. Convertibility of these designates, as Philips suggests, "a chain of exchanges, and the trick hinges on the fact that one of the objects is an invisible object that has to be kept secret from the husband: the sexual favour which is exchanged for a loan or pledge" (159). In its analogues, the woman falls on her sword and accepts she is defeated (Philips 159). However, it is only Chaucer's version that presents the merchant's wife fighting back. Her resistance is the battle of the subordinate. The merchant's wife, as Fiske maintains in a different context, "never challenge[s] the powerful in open warfare,

for that would be to invite defeat, but maintain[s] [her] own position within and against the social order dominated by the powerful” (*Understanding* 19). The wife is aware of her subordination to her husband and her responsibilities as a wife. In her dialogue with John, she states:

Myn housbonde is to me the worste man
That evere was sith that the world bigan
But sith I am a wyf, it sit nat me
To tellen no wight of oure privetee. (VII 1351-1354)

She knows that a good wife should not tell anyone their private life, but only should obey her husband. She is also aware of the dangers of any defiance to her husband; therefore, she does not prefer open warfare. She poaches upon the powerful and forms strategies through trading her sexuality: “For I wol brynge yow an hundred frankes/And with that word he caughte hire by the flankes,” (VII 1387-1388).

Her sexual tricks provide her with both the freedom of her body and money. The words used for describing sexuality belong to “the language of bargaining” (Philips 160). Such business terms as ‘dette’, ‘tally’, ‘score’ are employed for sex (Philips 159). The rhyme of ‘frankes’ and ‘flankes’ exemplifies the parallelism between sex and money (Philips 161). The wife also uses a business term for sex in the denouement of the fabliau: “I am youre wyf; score it upon my taille,/And I shal paye as soone as ever I may” (VII 1602-1603).

She uses the notion of debt for the money she owes her husband and also for the sex she owes as a part of the conjugal debt. ‘Taille’, tally or tail, is another sexual and financial pun, which both means the private parts and also the account book (Cooke 173). Hence, she will use her tail as tally and will pay her debt to her husband through her sexuality. Her sexually active position gives her the chance to subvert “the traditional role of woman as an object of exchange between two men” and employs sex as “merchandise, currency or credit” (Martin *Chaucer’s Women* 89). That is, she works through channels and maintains a position herself in a mercantile society. She both internalises the rules of the market and creates herself meanings and pleasures that oppose the market (Evans and Johnson 19). Sheila Delany’s words for the Wife of Bath is also valid for the

merchant's wife: "she is both merchant and commodity: her youth and beauty the initial capital investment" (73). Therefore, it can be argued that she uses the commercial attitude to marriage to her own advantage as she like the males treats her marriage and particularly sex as commodity. Then, the wife in the *Shipman's Tale* opposes the oppressive norms of the medieval society through strategies of trade and sexuality. Ironically, she barter her sexuality and she gains the autonomy of her body through ways similar to the dominant.

In conclusion, the women characters in the *Miller's Tale*, the *Reeve's Tale*, the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale* form their own popular culture. They adopt similar strategies to evade the dominant power and to gain popular pleasure. John's wife Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale* uses her body to evade her subjugation. Through her tricks, she gains the autonomy of her own body and thus subverts the medieval discourse of sexuality, which strictly subordinates and marginalizes women.

Likewise, May, in the *Merchant's Tale*, is subjugated to her husband in their marriage; however, she does not yield to subservience and makes "guerrilla attacks" on the system disempowering her. May, like Alisoun, makes her sexuality and body serve her own desires not her husband Januarie. Hence, she avoids her subjection and challenges the discourse of medieval patriarchy. Both Alisoun and May pursue their own desires through Nicholas and Damyan, respectively. Through their "artful strategems," they create their own meanings and show popular resistance; and enjoy popular pleasure. The conflict or power struggle between May and her husband Januarie, (the subordinate and the power), brings about popular pleasure.

Symkyn's wife and Malyne also elude the power structures through their sexual bodies and sexual affairs. Malyne, who Symkyn considers as a possession to be used as an agent to advance in society, both takes pleasure from her sexual exploits and also takes revenge on Symkyn. Malyne and the miller's wife, thus, become women of resistance who perform their own desires and satisfy their needs through the resources provided by the dominant.

Similarly, the merchant's wife in the *Shipman's Tale* displays resistance to her husband, who is the epitome of power in the tale; and generates her own meanings and enjoys popular pleasure like the other women in Chaucer's fabliau. It is clear that "[w]ommen [in fabliaux] desiren to have some sovereynetee" ("The Wife of Bath" III 1038) and they construct creative ways to attain it through their sexuality. They incessantly make "poaching attacks" upon the system subjugating them; "they win small, fleeting victories, keep the enemy constantly on the alert" (Fiske *Understanding* 19).

CHAPTER II

“I SHALL THEE QUYTE”: WOMEN’S SUBVERSIVE USE OF DOMESTIC SPACE IN THE FABLIAUX

Everywhere you shut me in. Always you assign a place to me. [. . .]. You set limits even to events that could happen with others [. . .]. You mark out boundaries, draw lines, surround, enclose. Excising, cutting out. What is your fear? That you might lose your property.

- Luce Irigaray

Despite many more centuries of patriarchy, women [. . .] in their everyday lives, constantly make guerrilla raids upon patriarchy, win small, fleeting victories, keep the enemy constantly on the alert, and gain, and sometimes hold, pieces of territory (however small) for themselves.

- John Fiske

In the first chapter, it is argued that in Chaucer’s fabliaux, women’s resistance to the dominant medieval discourse of gender is through their sexuality. In this respect, Alisoun in the *Miller’s Tale*, miller’s wife and Malyne in the *Reeve’s Tale*, May in the *Merchant’s Tale* and merchant’s wife in the *Shipman’s Tale* position themselves both within and against the dominant discourse and thus attain liberation from power structures disempowering them by using their sexual body for their own purposes. Hence, they gain partial and temporary authority of their bodies.

This chapter analyses the resistance performed by Chaucer’s women in his fabliaux against the dominant marriage system in the Middle Ages through the control and manipulation of spaces allocated to them in marriage. In this respect, it is argued that Alisoun in the *Miller’s Tale*, the wife and daughter in the *Reeve’s Tale*, May in the *Merchant’s Tale*, and the wife in the *Shipman’s Tale* perform spatial resistance to their oppressors.

Women in Chaucer's fabliaux are confined to certain spaces. For example, Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale* is kept in John's house and she is only allowed to go to church and her mobility is limited. John frames her allotted space and she is not allowed to go beyond the boundaries set by John. Similarly, the wife and Malynne in the *Reeve's Tale* dwell in Symkyn's mill where he dominates them and intends to use his daughter for social climbing. May in the *Merchant's Tale* is no exception – her space is rigidly defined by her husband Januarie. She is enclosed in the house and in the garden which is Januarie's space where she is supposed to act out the role of a medieval wife. The merchant's wife in the *Shipman's Tale* is also limited in term of space/place to which she belongs. She is also identified with the house – a private space in which she is only allowed to serve her husband's desires. In other words, women in Chaucer's fabliaux are limited in terms of space and/or they are assimilated into the spaces of which the husbands have the ultimate control and use these spaces and women in these spaces for their own use. However, these women gradually have the control of the fabliau places/spaces and manipulate them to their own advantage through adopting the tricks and strategies of the weak. In fact, Chaucer's women's spatial practices and resistance can be explained through space theories¹⁰. However, since women's position within and against the power implicates space as a territory in which there is power struggle between the weak and the powerful, the notion of space is mostly used in the context of John Fiske's popular culture theory.

As Fiske and de Certeau suggest, there is not a distinctive definition for both 'place' and 'space' and they are mostly used as synonyms although they differ from each other in terms of meaning. Place, for example, is an "instantaneous configuration of positions" [and] [i]t implies an indication of stability" (de Certeau 117). However, space only "exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables" (117). As de Certeau suggests, space implies mobility not stability (117). Compared to place, space

is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of a present (or of a time), and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts. (de Certeau 117)

Therefore, space unlike place does not suggest univocity or stability (Lefebvre 117) and space does not only imply its physical features. It can be stated that space loses its strict geometrical definition and acquires a new use and attributes (Bachelard 1). Moreover, space as a trialectic concept, which consists of mental, physical and social space, includes three layers of space – the perceived space of everyday spatial action, conceived representation of space which “embod[ies] complex symbolisms” (Lefebvre 33) and the representational space that is very akin to the term “the practiced space” coined by de Certeau.

In both notions of space, de Certeau and Lefebvre put emphasis on “embodied experience as well as on the material and discursive production of space” (Ganser 59). Hence, space can be considered as “a site and a means of cultural power, informed by a set of historically and culturally specific notions that are loaded in terms of gender, ethnicity, and class” (Ganser 61). In this respect, space becomes a discursive construction, which carries and circulates meanings. As Lefebvre also suggests space is a cultural construction imbued with discourses (34). Thus, everyday spaces and places such as the home, the city and the country mirror social relations and produce them. Lefebvre contends that, space is an effective agency for hegemonic powers:

Is it conceivable that the exercise of hegemony might leave space untouched? Could space be nothing more than the passive locus of social relations [. . .]? The answer must be no. [. . .] I shall demonstrate the active – the operational or instrumental – role of space, as knowledge and action, in the existing mode of production. I shall show how space serves, and how hegemony makes use of it, in the establishment, on the basis of and underlying logic and with the help of knowledge and technical expertise, of a ‘system’. (*Production* 1-2)

As stated, such relation of hegemony to space is also relevant to analysis of fabliaux spaces. Fabliaux employ private/domestic space extensively. For instance, women in fabliaux are almost always at home or in places where the husband can watch over them. So, it can be stated that husbands in the fabliaux as the hegemony or the authority make use of the spaces they control. They encode their own meanings into the spaces and thereby women are hailed into these spaces to serve their husbands. Women, thus, are meant to be enclosed and subjected to their husbands. However, women in the fabliaux subvert the idea of patriarchy that is encoded in the spaces and utilize the

spaces for their own uses. In addition, they generate their own meanings and gain pleasure through these subversions and meanings.

Space studies provide the scholars with a new perspective in medieval studies and lead them to a re-assessment of medieval people's lives. As Hanawalt and Kobialka argue, "the practice of space in the Middle Ages was never homogenous, but always in flux, and depended on how its attributes were defined at the time and disseminated by the historical agents" (Hanawalt and Kobialka x). Since spaces are imbued with meanings, meanings of gender in this case, such division between public and private are positioned to men and women respectively. Therefore, it would not be wrong to state, "space [in the Middle Ages] carried meanings" (Hanawalt and Kobialka x). In other words, space and spatial practices in the Middle Ages and their representations in Chaucer's fabliaux can be regarded as discursive constructions which are built by the power. Therefore, the meanings, which are encoded into the medieval spaces, which emplace people and is emplaced by people, can be considered in terms of power relations between the subordinate and the dominant.

John Fiske's definition of popular culture as "a site of struggle" (*Understanding* 20) emphasises specifically the struggle between the power and the weak. This struggle can be observed in spatial practices, too. For Fiske, "the powerful construct "places" where they can exercise their power – cities, shopping malls, schools, workplaces and houses" (*Understanding* 32). The weak, however, create their own "spaces" within the powerful's places; "they make the places temporarily theirs as they move through them, occupying them for as long as they need or have to" (*Understanding* 32).

As mentioned above, Fiske's definition of place and space is principally based on de Certeau's theory. For Fiske, "place is where strategy operates" and "space is practiced place" (*Understanding* 32-33). Accordingly, the powerful have the strategy to control and dominate the places through controlling the spatial activities. The powerful construct places, however, the weak dwell within them and consume them for their wishes – not for the power's intentions. They make their own spaces within these places and they turn the space into their own because the practices of dwelling or consuming the place are theirs, not the powerful's.

As mentioned above, the houses and gardens in the fabliaux are designed for husbands' intentions; however, Chaucer's women in his fabliaux dwell within these places and turn them into their own spaces. Since husbands cannot totally control the spatial activities in the places they build, women evade the male intentions encoded in the places and invest their own meanings into these places where they can enjoy their oppositional meanings. Therefore, the strategy of the power (the husbands in the fabliaux) is both avoided and subverted. However, as Fiske states, "there is a huge paradox here" (*Understanding* 41) because "power can achieve its ends only by offering up its underbelly to the attacker; only by displaying its vulnerabilities to the guerrillas can the occupying army hold its terrain, however tenuously" (*Understanding* 41). Thus, however the husbands try to oppress their wives through different methods, the popular tactics and tricks provide women with a strategic plan – a way of liberation. Chaucer's women in his fabliaux, then, as the women of resistance form their own culture in which they are not

helpless subjects of an irresistible ideological system, but neither are they free-willed, biologically determined individuals; they are a shifting set of social allegiances formed by social agents within a social terrain that is theirs only by virtue or their constant refusal to cede it to the imperialism of the powerful. Any space won by the weak is hard won and hard kept, but it is won and it is kept. (Fiske *Understanding* 45)

Although the spaces which are won and kept by women are temporary, these spaces still assume a liberating role for them because they conform to the power structures which subjugate them through their control over the power's places within which they position themselves as "tricksters and guerrillas." These women as the tricksters make use of the tricks of everyday life which "is constituted by the practices of popular culture, and is characterized by the creativity of the weak in using the resources provided by a disempowering system while refusing finally to submit that power" (Fiske *Understanding* 47). Everyday life can also be described through the metaphors of antagonism: "strategies opposed by tactics, [. . .], hegemony met by resistance, ideology countered or evaded; top-down power opposed by bottom-up power, social discipline faded with disorder" (Fiske *Understanding* 47). The focal point of all these antagonisms is pleasure – "the pleasure of producing one's own meanings of social experience and the pleasure of avoiding the social discipline of the power-bloc" (Fiske *Understanding*

47). Therefore, women in Chaucer's fabliaux adopt the practicality of everyday life, and accordingly enjoy the pleasure which arise from such antagonisms. Hence, these women evade and subvert oppressive meanings and generate their own meanings and pleasure from the antagonisms of everyday life and of popular culture.

Medieval practices of space can be analysed in relation to gender relations although medieval society does not have distinct gender divisions in domestic spaces (Hanawalt and Kobialka ix, Hanawalt 19). Women may occupy "rooms, houses, quarters in the cities and villages" (Hanawalt and Kobialka ix), depending upon their economic status and social standing. On the other hand, men's spaces they may occupy are more varied; for example, "streets, highways, fields, cities, oceans, battles and council tables" (Hanawalt and Kobialka ix). Women do not have the chance to have total access to all spaces since the power of the dominant "control[s] the ordering of space for subservient groups" (Hanawalt 19). As Martine Segalen asserts, "there was a "female *house*" and a "male *outside*" in the Middle Ages (205). Women's acceptable space was the house while the men's space was the fields (Hanawalt 19). Yet, it does not mean that men had nothing to do with the house and women with the fields; women worked in the fields and men lived in the houses (Hanawalt 20). However, it is woman who is associated with the house and is meant to be there since the house is regarded as the secure space/place where women may shelter from possible dangers. All in all, the spaces women may occupy with freedom of mobility are the home, the village and the city quarter (Hanawalt 26). If they went beyond that space, they were supposed to do it with proper demeanor, dress and escort; otherwise, "they risked impingement on their hono[u]r or on their persons" (Hanawalt 26). Therefore, such limitation in their freedom of movement in gendered spaces implies women's subordination. Moreover, Gillian Rose argues that,

Women of all kinds are expected to look right, and to look right for a gaze which is masculine [. . .]. The threatening masculine look materially inscribes its power onto women's bodies by constituting feminine subjects through an intense self-awareness about being seen and about taking up space [. . .]. Women's sense of embodiment can make space feel like thousand piercing eyes; [. . .] it is space which constitutes women as embodied objects to be looked at. (145-146)

Anna Mehta and Liz Bondi further discuss, “women embody discourses that construct them as [. . .] vulnerable and physically powerless, particularly in the face of male violence, and as the object of aggressive, male sexuality” (77). Hence, private/public binary opposition is important in interpreting power relations in the fabliaux, which determine the proper place/space for each sex. As stated, women’s confinement to the domestic realm implies the spatial control as well as a social control on women (Massey *Space* 179).

In Chaucer’s fabliaux, women are especially identified with the home; and confined to it, which limits their mobility. It seems, as Domosh and Saeger state, “[i]t is hard to maintain patriarchal control over women if they have unfettered freedom of movement through space” (115-116). Then, women’s enclosure through the “social forces that keep women in their place” (Ganser 69) signals their subordination because “spaces they inhabit are seen as a part of patriarchal power” (Rose 146). As Trinh Minh-Ha also asserts, women in male spaces feel exiled:

The general cliché by which [women] feel exiled [...] is the common consensus (in patriarchal societies) that streets and public places belong to men. Women are not supposed to circulate freely in these male domains, especially after dark (the time propitious to desire, the drive, the unamenable and the unknown), for should anything happen to them to violate their physical well-being, they are immediately said to have ‘asked for it’ as they have singularly ‘exposed’ themselves by turning away from the Father’s refuge (15)

However, clearly in Chaucer’s fabliaux, the power of patriarchy also offers ways of resistance to the “poachers” (women in this case). In this aspect, a way of resistance to power structures for women is to break their coerced immobility and to use spaces effectively and (also to their own interest). Hence, clear-cut definitions of private/public and male/female spaces can be disturbed and subverted through using the spaces for their own advantage.

In the struggle for power in the fabliaux, women are the subordinate ones in spatial terms. One of the reasons for women’s subordination is their limited mobility. As suggested above, space and ideology are interrelated; and space carries meanings. Clearly, women’s confinement to domestic spaces in the fabliaux is a part of

domination through space. Institution of marriage as a medium of controlling and shaping women's activities in accordance with discourse of the patriarchy advises women to be at their proper place (home) and warn/threaten them about the risks if they exceed the borders of their acceptable space (Hanawalt 1).

Women in the fabliaux in *The Canterbury Tales* are all married except Symkyn's daughter Malyne in the *Reeve's Tale* and they are subject to such rules of marriage and medieval societal codes. Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*, for example, as the young wife of John inhabits the same house with their lodger Nicholas. She is presented as the woman of the house and the wife's proper place is the house. Her situation as a married young woman, hence, restricts her space and spatial activities. For her husband, Alisoun's proper place is again the house since he can control her and prevent her from betraying him: "Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage/ For she was wylde and yong, and he was old/And demed himself been lik a cokewold" (I 3224-3226). She is enclosed in the house and the only place she can go to is the church: "Thanne fil it thus, that to paryssh chirche,/Cristes owene werkes for to wirche,/This goode wyf went on an haliday" (I 3307-3309). Appropriate places for her are only the house and the church.

Symkyn's wife and his daughter Malyne in the *Reeve's Tale* are not different from Alisoun in terms of their legitimate space. They live in Symkyn's mill in which there is only one room. Any privacy is denied to the wife and Malyne; and their spatial actions are tightly controlled by Symkyn.

Similarly, May's space is restricted in the *Merchant's Tale*. As a married woman, her space is limited with the house and the walled-garden built by her husband Januarie for his sexual pleasures. Like May, the merchant's wife in the *Shipman's Tale* is also spatially restricted. She is oppressed by her husband and the places she inhabits are the house and the garden. Women in the fabliaux, then, are emplaced into private spaces. Indeed, fabliau settings are almost always private. As Woods states,

fabliaux belong in or among the buildings of a town. Their significant space is inside or outside the walls of a house, a shop, a garden. It is a world of interiors, where entrances and exists, and ownership, are centrally

important, a world, where material things are prominent, people's bodies count, small-town savvy can dominate space. (134)

Hence, fabliau as a genre presents "a private universe" and so the characteristic setting is private which is constituted of "tubs, closets, rafters, chests, cupboards, nooks [. . .] and of course beds" (Farrell 773). Thomas J. Farrell, further, suggests that,

[t]he typical setting is [. . .] private, since fabliau plots repeatedly demand small hiding places [. . .]. These loci circumscribe or limit the action, and also dictate that the typical larger settings be relatively crowded middle-class houses rather than the spacious halls and wide forests of romance. (773)

Etymologically, the word privacy is identified with household as a private space (Farrell 773). Fabliau with its "private universe" (Farrell 773) makes its characters (especially women) very capable to manoeuvre the private spaces to their own advantage (Farrell 773). Thus, the private setting the fabliaux present restricts the action, but it should be stated that the private setting is specially meant to limit women's actions and is designed to have ultimate control over women's activities. However, Chaucer's women in his fabliaux "are fully empowered to manipulate [this] private space to their own advantage" (Farrell 773). Spatially constricted, Alisoun, Symkyn's wife and daughter Malyne, May and the merchant's wife in the *Shipman's Tale* are spatially subordinate in the fabliau dynamics. Consequently, they assume the role of "the trickster" and "poacher", and make poaching raids upon the system disempowering them. Accordingly, they evade and subvert the spaces and its encoded discourses; and gradually manipulate spaces to their own interest.

Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*, Malyne and the wife in the *Reeve's Tale*, May in the *Merchant's Tale*, and the wife in the *Shipman's Tale* are all constricted in the spaces which are designed to serve well men's desires. John in the *Miller's Tale* tries to frame Alisoun's space where she cannot act without the consent of her husband. Therefore, John as both the husband and the householder has the power of the house. John is the one – the power who determines the space of the inhabitants, Nicholas and Alisoun. Moreover, it is important to note that John's house and the spatial setting of the *Miller's Tale* are concentric (Woods 37). John's house is in Oxford, surrounded by the

countryside and within which there is Alisoun and their lodger Nicholas. Their emplacement is significant to the dynamics of fabliau, as each character is the key figure in the action of the tale. However, the relations of the characters and the tensions in their ‘pryvetees’ are told through their emplacement in the house (Woods 37). John’s house has three main spaces where the action happens: Nicholas’s room where he predicts the so-called flood, the middle floor within which is the room where Alisoun is notoriously active with Nicholas and John; and the outside or street scene before Alisoun’s window where Absolon kisses Alisoun’s bottom. John’s house with three levels contains the actions and also mirrors the relationship between the powerful and the weak. Each man tries to create themselves a private space to emplace Alisoun. John’s house is already his house where he keeps Alisoun. Each man practices a kind of privacy to reach Alisoun. Alisoun, spatially restricted, pursues a different and more multi-layered plan. She both tries to evade her spatially constricted position and also attempts to subvert the spaces designed to subordinate her. That is, she assumes the role of a trickster as well as a poacher and employs “artful ruses” to be able to react against the dominant’s spatial activities disempowering her.

In the *Miller’s Tale*, the key figure of the action taking place inside and outside John’s house is definitely Alisoun because all the men in the tale – John, Nicholas and Absolon, presume to achieve a private universe with Alisoun in itself. However, her placement into the center of the tale does not amplify her spaces; on the contrary, it makes her more oppressed. Alisoun is depicted as an object which originally belongs to the bedroom. In her bedroom, both Nicholas and John sleep with her and “they are safe from harm, more accurately, from harming themselves” (Woods 46) while Absolon remains outside the house. However, all these men are somehow related to the house and/or Alisoun. As Woods rightly asserts, “John by the authority of his marriage and money, Nicholas by his fitness for ‘derne love,’ and Abs[o]lo[n] by way of his fantastical imagination” (46) are related to her and her private space. Thus, for all men, the house is identified with Alisoun and is regarded as a space to belong to and to be entered. The entrance to Alisoun’s private space, however, is only possible with her will; and her will is only activated in ‘privee’. When Nicholas propositions Aliso[u]n, she responds to his advances, though not immediately:

“I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey!
 Why, lat be!” quod she. “Lat be, Nicholas,
 Or I wol crie ‘out, harrow’ and ‘allas’!
 Do wey youre hands, for youre curteisye. (I 3284-3287)

Alisoun’s awareness of her situation explicitly lays bare her restricted space as well as limitation in her mobility. Nevertheless, her spatial boundaries trigger her to “enjoy her narrow confinement with enthusiastic aid of the young scholar” (Woods 39). Hence, she uses the place where she is guarded. In other words, she exploits the private space of her husband John for her own purposes. She sleeps in John’s bedroom with Nicholas; and it is the private space where she is supposed to be safe and secure from other males, yet it is also the space where she betrays her husband. Her manipulation of private space empowers her and provides her with temporary relief from the dominant’s oppressive use of space.

Therefore, like other women in the fabliaux, Alisoun’s sexuality and her spatial identity are interrelated. When Alisoun has the control over the private spaces, she finds the chance to practice sexuality. Similarly, her control of her own body through sexuality provides her with the manipulation of the spaces to her own interest. Therefore, in *The Miller’s Tale*, Alisoun defies the dominant through spatial and sexual practices together. Since sexual practices are analysed thoroughly in the first chapter, spatial practices are the main focus of this chapter though sexuality and its practices will be touched upon when it is related to spatiality.

The *Miller’s Tale* includes John’s house as space where he lives with her wife Alisoun and lodger Nicholas. There is also the bedroom which is John’s private space where he sleeps with Alisoun; and Alisoun betrays John. Moreover, the *Miller’s Tale*’s interest in space and characters’ spatialities reveal itself in the frequent repetition of the word “pryvetee” (I 3164) and its derivatives such as “privee” (I 3295) and “pryvely”¹¹ (I 3802) (Bullon-Fernandez 141-142). Almost all characters keep secrets and create action in private spaces. John’s attempt to keep Alisoun in cage, Nicholas’s yearning for reaching Alisoun in private, Alison’s scheming plan with Nicholas, Absolon’s secretive plan of revenging “the misdirected kiss” all constitute the private actions in private spaces in the tale. Also, it can be inferred that these privacies and the private spaces in

the *Miller's Tale* are unstable. So, the tale supports the idea of the private spaces and practicing privacy as fragile and vulnerable to violation. That is, “as soon as something is defined as “privee,” that very definition opens up the possibility of its violation: if the space were not “privee,” it would not be susceptible (Bullon-Fernandez 146, Lochrie 164). However, Alisoun uses her ‘privetees’ differently and her private spaces serve Alisoun’s own benefits although they are interrupted. When her privacy is interrupted in her private space, the interrupter is punished. Miller’s prologue foreshadows Alisoun’s subversive use of the domestic space and the miller warns the audience about the outcomes of intervening her space: “An housbonde shal nat been inquisitive/Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf” (I 3163-3164). Along with knowing God’s secrets, knowing a wife’s secrets is described as destructive. The word ‘pryvetee’ in this context has double meanings. One of the meanings of the word ‘privetee’ may be the wife herself if ‘privetee’ is used in bodily sense. Hence, a wife’s ‘pryvetees’ may refer to her desires and secretive plans as well as her body. Alisoun’s body is an important agent in terms of her subversive private spatial practices. Since body and space are also interconnected, Alisoun’s body provides Alisoun with a powerful agent, her sexuality, to gain authority in domestic spaces she inhabits. Alisoun’s body as a space has already been analysed in the first chapter, so it is not discussed in this chapter although body can also be regarded as a private space (Grosz 242).

Alisoun knows how to have the control of the private space and organizes the action in this space according to her desires. In this case, her gender matters. As already mentioned above, the power structures create spaces and want to control these spaces where they can exercise their power while the weak try to gain a territory both within and against the power’s space. Medieval discourse of gender, that marginalizes and weakens women, hence, constructs its own spaces which disempower women. Accordingly, Alisoun is enclosed in a male space – John’s house and is expected to serve his desires and to act out the role of a wife. Since women are traditionally associated with privacy and private space (Helly and Reverby x-xi), Alisoun is also identified with the house (Lochrie 164, Bullon-Fernandez 164). The house is John’s private space and he wants to have supreme control of the house to be able to use it to control Alisoun. He keeps her in cage since he is jealous and old while Alisoun is young

(I 3122). Therefore, John's concern about Alisoun's 'privetee' intersects with all private practices in the house since both Nicholas and Absolon are interested in being in privacy with Alisoun in her space.

All male characters are obsessed with reaching Alisoun's space, which causes a debate among critics about Alisoun's situation in the tale. Some critics regard Alisoun "as an independent agent with her own desires" while others consider her as an object for male desire (Bullon-Fernandez 164). Indeed, she is both an agent with her own desires due to her subversive use of the spaces and an object for male use (Bullon-Fernandez 165). As Maria Bullon-Fernandez further mentions,

Aliso[u]n is at the same time an agent to the extent that [. . .] one can adopt practices strategically, which she does, but she is an object to the extent that she is conditioned by existing practices that try to do away with woman's agency and treat her as the "privee" space, indeed the very material "privee" body, to be invaded. (165)

In this point, Alisoun appears as a poacher. She is subordinate to and an object of male desire. She is described as a caged bird, whose proper space is defined by her husband: "Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage/ For she was wylde and yong, and he was old" (I 3224-3225). Her space is limited to be able to manage her by her husband John. However, she does not yield to such subordination. Instead, Alisoun as a "guerrilla fighter" adopts "artful stratagems" to elude her spatial restriction. So, she both becomes a part of John's house where he can enter whenever he wishes, and also she gradually evades her subjection and even subverts it through getting the control of John's space or uses the house to her own advantage. She has a sexual affair with Nicholas in John's bedroom. Although John designs his bedroom for consummation of his marriage, Alisoun uses it subversively for her own ends.

As already mentioned above, Alisoun's control over the private space positions herself as "a guerrilla attacker" and accordingly provides her with the control of her body and her 'pryvetees.' For example, when John leaves the house, she creates a sense of authority over the space and her initial rejection of Nicholas's advances turn out to be a lustful collaboration with him:

And hende Nicholas and Alisoun
 Acorded been to this conclusioun,
 That Nicholas shal shapen hym a wyle
 And this sely jealous housbounde to bigyle. (I 3401-3404)

As a poacher, Alisoun “shal shapen [. . .] a wyle” (I 3403). She is the active agent and triggerer of the action in this part of the tale. She constructs John’s private space into her own space through tricks. By her alliance with Nicholas, Alisoun usurps John’s bedroom though it is temporary. Moreover, through her use of private space in a subversive manner, she creates herself the right to choose between lovers –Absolon and Nicholas: “And if so be the game wente aright,/She sholde slepen in his arm al nyght,/For this was his desire, hire also” (I 3405-3407).

Her choice also reveals her sense of control of the private space. She chooses Nicholas rather than Absolon because he is the one who has privacy in a private space in John’s house although he loses it in the denouement of the tale. Her awareness of the spatiality also helps her to control the actions in the spaces for all men lose control of their private spaces or they are enclosed in them. However, nothing happens to Alisoun’s space; and she can use the bedroom and the house for her needs and desires. The reason for her authority on her private spaces (bedroom and the house) also suggests that she is aware of the limitations imposed on her in terms of space because she cannot go out of these spaces without the knowledge of her husband. Moreover, she also knows that private spaces are inclined to be violated (Bullon-Fernandez 166). Men’s lack of awareness lead them to failure while Alisoun, the only woman in the tale, does not fail and achieves victory. Therefore, the biter is bit. John’s, Nicholas’s and Absolon’s spaces end up being conquered and violated. For instance, John loses the control of his own space and Alisoun uses his bedroom with Nicholas. Although John aims to regulate the spatial activities of Alisoun in his division of his house through enclosing her in the private spaces, particularly the bedroom, he does not consider Nicholas as a possible threat. In a way, John as the power both takes measures to confine Alisoun to his spaces, but cannot totally manage his wife’s spatial activities because of her practical tactics. Therefore, in the denouement of the tale, he is the one who is enclosed in the tub waiting for the so-called flood while Alisoun and Nicholas are making love in his own bedroom:

Doun of the ladder stalketh Nicholay,
 And Alisoun ful softe adoun she spedde;
 Withouten words mo they goon to bedde,
 Ther as the carperter is wont lye. (I 3648-3651)

Alisoun and Nicholas's "bisynesse of myrthe and of solas" takes place in John's bed which is actually designed by John for his own sexual life. Hence, Alisoun's control on spatiality both encloses John to a private space and also results in Alisoun's spatial triumph. Through restricting John's space and mobility, Alisoun amplifies her space through stealing John's available space. After all, John who is the powerful figure in the beginning of the tale becomes "a public joke" (Bullon-Fernandez 166) in the end and he is labelled mad:

The folk gan laughen at his fantasye;
 Into the roof they kiken and they cape,
 And turned al his harm unto a jape.
 [.....]
 With othes grete he was so sworn adoun
 That he was holde wood in al the toun;
 For every clerk anonright heeld with oother. (I 3840-3847)

Therefore, Alisoun's "poaching attacks" on John through employing tricks and ruses provide her with partial liberation in terms of private spaces. She evades the limits on her freedom through space and subverts the private sphere to produce her own meanings and pleasures.

Women in the *Reeve's Tale* resist their spatial subordination and limitation in their mobility though they are subjugated by their oppressor Symkyn and confined to the house which is the private space that is their traditionally defined space. They contest their confinement to the domestic and private space through managing and controlling the spaces which are designated to oppress them. Like Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*, they construct tricks and gain the control of the spaces and subvert the power's intentions on these spaces through their mobility in their restricted space.

Privacy and private spaces are functionally important agents for women in the *Reeve's Tale* because women utilize them for their own benefit. Their restraint in private spaces helps and triggers them to form a spatial awareness as well as a confrontation to their

keeper, Symkyn. Symkyn tries to have the ultimate authority in the private and public spaces in the tale and he has a careful watch over his wife and Malyne's spatial activities in his mill. To be able to be the authority in the spaces, he thoroughly rules the activities in his house/mill. His attentive spatial activities can be categorized in two groups, one of which is fraud (Bullon-Fernandez 169): "A theef he was for soothe of corn and mele,/And that a sly, and usaunt for to stele./His name was hoote deynous Symkyn." (I 3939-3940). The other private activity of Symkyn is absolutely oppressive protectiveness of his wife and Malyne.

Symkyn's meticulous protectiveness of his wife and daughter Malyne makes these women in the tale oppressed in terms of space. Symkyn as the ultimate authority controls every action in his mill and house, and tries to manipulate all other actions to serve for his two main private activities: – fraud and protectiveness of his wife and daughter. The mill is the central locus where Symkyn deceives and steals from the clerks. Thus, the mill is Symkyn's main medium of fraud. In other words, the mill "is the overt means of his [Symkyn's] predation" (Woods 51); however, the mill/house is also the main setting where women challenge Symkyn's authority through their subversive usage of spaces. The power struggle between women and Symkyn is also evident in Symkyn's wearing swords:

But if he wolde be slayn of Symkyn
With panade, or with knyf, or boidekyn.
For jalous folk ben perilous everemo –
Algate they wolde hire wyves wenden so. (I 3959-3962)

The mill as an important space in the tale is itself a weapon for Symkyn and his aims (Woods 51) while it is the place where women are initially enclosed though later they subvert the mill/house to their own weapon to be used against Symkyn. Moreover, the mill is "Symkyn's means of putting a bite on his neigbo[u]rs" (Woods 51) and it provides Symkyn with the power since milling is an economical act. The mill, however, may also be regarded as a spatial instrument for Symkyn to oppress his wife and Malyne. Along with its sexual connotations, the mill is also spatially important in the way it keeps women out of the action. They are enclosed in the house. The house is

even more important as a space in the context of women's resistance because women in fabliaux are seen in action in the house.

Symkyn's effort to control women's space activities in his places requires his supreme authority of spatial activities. So, he also tries to limit the clerks' activities who already pose as challenge and violators for Symkyn with their swords: "Forth goth Aleyn the clerk, and also John,/With good swerd and with bokeler by hir side." (I 4018-4019). However, Symkyn manages to cheat them. After Symkyn achieves to cheat the clerks, they have nothing to do but find a place to stay. They propose to stay at Symkyn's house, of course, in return for money: "But for the love of God they hym bisoght/Of herberwe and of ese, as for hir peny" (I 4118-4119). Symkyn's lack of practicality in practicing privacy shows itself again in his greedy invitation. His awkwardness in spatial awareness will lead him to his own reduction because, as Symkyn mentions, his house is very small and he is not aware that he should define clear boundaries in the interior of the house:

Myn hous is streit, ye han lerned art;
Ye konne by arguments make a place
A myle brood of twenty foot of space.
Lat se now if this place may suffise,
Or make it rown with speche, as it is youre gise. (I 4122-4126)

In this aspect, his offer of "herberwe" (I 4118) creates a practical space for the clerks to avenge themselves. Miller's wife and Malyne avail themselves of the clerks' revenge of Symkyn. Although the clerks do not "make it rown with speche" (I 4122), they devise another trick for Symkyn, which also provides women with a chance to evade the oppressive control on themselves and even create their own meanings and pleasures through manipulating the spatial limitations to their mobility and liberation. In other words, the wife and the daughter Malyne form a social alliance with the clerks to react against Symkyn and create their own meanings and pleasures. So, the clerks' entrance into Symkyn's private house presents women a chance to perform their desires through using Symkyn's space in accordance with their own wishes rather than Symkyn's. In this case, too, privacy calls in its violation (Bullon-Fernandez 146); and the clerks do violate this privacy. Symkyn's important privacies, his wife and daughter are both violated since Symkyn cannot totally control the spatial activities in his privacy. Aleyn

is first to use the advantage of sleeping in the same room with Symkyn's daughter Malyne: "He [Aleyne] has the milleris doghter in his arm,/He [Aleyne] auntred hym, and has his nedes sped" (I 4204-4205); and Malyne enjoys sex: "And shortly for to seyn, they were aton" (I 4194).

Aleyne's "wikked jape" (I 4201) both threatens and encourages John not to be "a draf-sak in [his] bed" (I 4202) because

[. . .] when this jape is tald another day,
I sal been halde a daf, a cokenay!
I will arise and auntre it, by my faith!
'Unhardy is unseemly,' thus men sayth." (I 4201-4208)

Therefore, John also uses the limited space to his own advantage and changes the cradle's place to mislead the wife to his bed: "And up he roos, and softely he wente/Unto the cradle, and in his hand it hente,/And baar it softe unto his beddes feet" (I 4211-4213).

On the other hand, Symkyn's wife and Malyne benefit from the clerks' spatial activities because they both get pleasure and take their revenge from Symkyn. Though they are confined to the private spaces, they avail of this limitation in space and manipulate it to their own advantage through their ruses. For example, Symkyn's wife seems to be beguiled by the clerk who changes the place of the cradle, but she does not withstand his advances and enjoys sexual intercourse with John in her husband Symkyn's house.

The cradle is also significant because it is the symbol of "Symkyn's domestic kingdom" (Woods 54). The baby is supposed to continue his lineage, however, the baby is treated as an instrument of ridicule of Symkyn and his wife's confusing the bed because of the cradle's place (Woods 54). After all, both John and Aleyne violate Symkyn's daughter Malyne's and the wife's bodies in Symkyn's private space. However, this violation is manipulated by women as a chance to evade the subjection imposed on them. They also take their revenge from Symkyn, who restricts his wife and daughter in his spaces, by making alliances with the clerks. Malyne even sees off Aleyne who is now regarded as "deere lemman" (I 4235) and tells him the place of the cake which is made with the flour that Symkyn steals.

But er thow go, o thing I wol thee telle:
 Whan that thou wendest homeward by the melle,
 Right at the entree of the dore bihynde
 Thou shalt a cake of half a bushel fynde
 That was ymaked of thyn owene mele,
 Which that I help my sire for to stele. (I 4235-4243)

Women in the *Reeve's Tale* are active participants in the action and they use spaces they inhabit as well as the spatial activities. Thereby, they assume the role of the poacher as Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale* does despite subtle differences. They cooperate with the clerks to use the private space for forbidden activities. Hence, their spatial activities in Symkyn's space bring Symkyn's own end. Malyne and the wife are merely treated as means of social climbing by Symkyn. Furthermore, Symkyn as the landlord and the authority in the tale can only achieve his aims through offering gaps and/or opportunities to the attackers who are the clerks and the women. He attempts to control the meanings and spatial activities in his mill/house; however, he also has spatial vulnerabilities the clerks and women use and violate. Hence, firstly, the clerks, then, the wife and Malyne, make use of the opportunities which Symkyn cannot manage and has to offer. Therefore, although Symkyn as the landlord seems to be the only authority in relation to spatial activities in the tale, he cannot totally regulate the meanings which are generated by the lodgers John and Aleyn and later his women.

The house and the mill may be the property of Symkyn, however, his women with the help of the clerks, fashion Symkyn's spaces as they wish. Symkyn cannot interfere in the social allegiances of the women and the clerks; and he cannot control the spatial activities in his own space. Thereby, his women assimilate Symkyn's oppressive spaces into their own space where they can generate their own meanings and pleasures. Through their use of spatial opportunities, they steal from Symkyn's spaces for their own pleasure. Thus, they achieve transitory relief from subjection.

A similar reconstruction of private space by woman is a central issue in the *Merchant's Tale*. Similar to Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale* and Malyne and Symkyn's wife in the *Reeve's Tale*, May, too, is pushed to private spaces in Januarie's house where she is exposed to his oppressive protectiveness of her spatial activities. However, May's subordination and resistance in terms of spatial practices are slightly different from

Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale* and the miller's wife in the *Reeve's Tale*. Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale* and the miller's wife in the *Reeve's Tale* are introduced as already married women; however, May's entrance to John's space as a bride and previous process can be observed in the *Merchant's Tale*. Hence, May's spatial subordination is emphasized from the beginning to the end.

Traditionally, as a wife May is identified with the house: "A wyf is kepere of thyn housbondrye;/Wel maythe sike man biwaille and wepe,/Ther as ther nys no wyf the hous to kepe" (IV 1380-1382).

Januarie does not consider his wife as an individual being with her own desires and needs, but identifies her with his house. The house is Januarie's space where he can exert his power to emplace May into his space and to control her activities by limiting her mobility. As Olson argues, "the desire to possess a woman and the desire to possess any other purely physical object proceeded from the same root" (106). Similarly, Januarie's treatment of May not only marginalizes her but also trivializes her as "a thing" in his space (Olson 106). Januarie defines her as his possession: "And namely whan a man is oold and hoor;/Thanne is a wyf the fruyt of his tresor" (IV 1270-1271). She is "the fruyt" (IV 1270), the "tender veel" (IV 1420) to be purchased and the land to be "feffed" (IV 1698). May's objectification is highly related to her enclosure in the house as a male space.

To be able to maintain his power on May, Januarie attempts to rule over the spaces she inhabits such as the bedroom. May's first entrance to the bedroom is described as a shocking experience for her: "The bryde was broght abedde as stille as stoon" (IV 1818). May's first entrance to the house as a bride can also be interpreted as defining her spatial boundaries, and her place is his house, more specifically his bedroom. He imprisons her in his bedroom. Indeed, Januarie as the authority creates his spaces for her own needs and puts May as his wife within his spaces, of course, with his watch over her spatial activities.

May as a medieval wife is supposed to be in the house because the house is regarded as a woman's secure place where she is safe from possible dangers. She is expected to

yield to her spatial subjugation. Nevertheless, she subverts her spatial subjection through manipulation of the spatial practices in her spaces; and she organizes male spaces for her own benefit. In the end, she succeeds in subverting the power through her use of spaces for her own ends. To accomplish her end, she makes an alliance with Damyan.

Damyan's wishful collaboration with her tricks and stratagems surely helps May's spatial resistance. Yet, it is obviously in the house and the garden that May's subversive use of space takes place. For example, he designs the garden as his own private space where May can pay him marital debt: "He made a gardyn, walled al with stoon;/So fair a gardyn woot I nowher noon" (IV 2029-2030). Januarie organizes a high-walled garden for private use: "And May his wyf, and no wight but they two;/And thynges whiche that were nat doon abedde" (IV 2050-2051).

Evidently, Januarie builds this high-walled garden to make love with May. So, he assumes and expects no threat in his private space. Yet, May secretly gives the copy of the key to Damyan. The key is an important symbol. It may symbolize the authority – the power who has the access to the garden as well as May's body. That's why, only Januarie has it. Then, Januarie invites May to the garden: "The gardyn is enclosed al aboute;/Com forth, my white spouse! Out of doute/Thou hast me wounded in myn herte, O wyf!" (IV 2143-2145). When they arrive in the garden, Damyan is already there, who

[. . .] [s]at in the bussh, and coughen she [May] bigan,
And with hir finger signes made she
That Damayn sholde clymbe upon a tree
That charged was with fruyt, and up he wente" (IV 2208-2211).

Therefore, May violates Januarie's private space through using his blindness and inserts her own meanings into it. Although Januarie designs the garden for his pleasure and means to enclose May, his private space turns out to be May's private space where she performs her desires with Damyan.

May's practicality and ability in their ploy with Damyan make their promiscuous plan run its course. May's spatial activities in privacy increase her mobility and she gains

more space for her tricks. Their plan works well because May tells Damyan to be in the garden:

For verrailly he knew al hire entente,
And every signe that she koude make,
Wel bet than Januarie, hir owene make,
For in a letter she hadde toold hym al
Of this matere, how he werchen shal. (IV 2212-2216)

In fact, it can be stated that “May’s use of the private space of the walled garden as her own space is a subversive use of the means of dominant power” (Reis “Chaucer’s Fabliau Women” 132). Consequently, Januarie’s garden turns to May’s garden of pleasure where she derives pleasure out of her extramarital affair with Damyan. Thus, May’s reconstruction of Januarie’s garden as her own space positions her as a “poacher and a guerrilla fighter” who adopts the weak’s stratagems. In Lefebvre’s words, these ruses include,

the adaptation of the body, time, space, desire: environment and the home [. . .] creation from recurrent gestures of a world of sensory experience; the coincidence of need with satisfaction, and, more rarely, with pleasure: work and works of art; the ability to create the terms of everyday life from its solids and its spaces. (35)

Therefore, May as the guerrilla uses the practical spatial ruses of everyday life such as adaptation, manipulation and trickery. Since May’s space is limited to Januarie’s house and garden, she has nothing to do but to “make do with what [she] ha[s]” (Fiske *Understanding* 34). Therefore, her tricks and strategies provide her with a partial spatial liberation from limitations imposed on her. May’s poaching attacks on Januarie through her control of and activeness in the spaces let May gain herself more space where she can practice her own needs rather than serving for the husband’s desires. Eventually, John’s oppressive spaces become her empowering spaces where she can practice her needs and desires.

The merchant’s wife’s use of space for subversive purposes in the *Shipman’s Tale* provides her with partial freedom from her spatial limitations in her husband’s spaces. Like Alisoun, Malyne, Symkyn’s wife and May, the wife in the *Shipman’s Tale* is limited in terms of her space and mobility. Her space and activities in the tale are restricted by her husband, who is a merchant of Seint-Denyse. The wife is only

identified with the house while the merchant is depicted not only in the house but also in the market place. Since he is a merchant, his space is ample; however, the wife's proper place is the house. Thus, the merchant's wife is confined to the house. However, she has the control of the spatial practices in the house because her husband is mostly away from the house.

As stated, the *Shipman's Tale* deals with merchandise business, yet the merchant's wife is excluded from her husband's business and also the market place. Although she is excluded from the business world, she creates her own market place in the house. With the help of her alliance with the monk John, "she too becomes a merchant of sorts, bargaining for loans in a garden that serves as her domestic marketplace and counting her gain in the bedroom" (Woods 105). She fashions her house, in which she is enclosed, with new meanings which liberate her rather than confine her. In the beginning of the tale, she does not have the authority to enter her husband's counting house, but she changes the merchant's bedroom into "her own private mercantile space where she tallies her domestic transactions and maintains the balance of her mercantile marriage" (Woods 105).

Indeed, her actions and spatial practices begin and/or improve when she learns that the merchant will go to Brugges to buy some goods:

But so bifel, this marchant on a day
Shoop hym to make redy his array
Toward the toun of Brugges for to ware;
To byen there a porcioun of ware. (VII 53-56)

When he leaves, the only authority to have control on the house is, of course, the wife. Moreover, before going away from home for business, the merchant invites John to his house to stay for a few days. In the merchant's aspect, it emphasises his generosity and power. As William Woods explains, "[through] inviting guests and exercising his generosity for a day or two, [. . .] he can issue forth with confidence, glowing with the reminder of his worldly status and the successful trading that underlies it" (107). Nevertheless, the merchant means that he goes Brugges to merchandise and thus suggests he is powerful in terms of money and spatiality. So, his invitation is a kind of

challenge to John. However, the more important thing than his invitation and its possible interpretations is that he leaves his wife alone in his house. The house is the private space and the only space where the wife is free. However, the merchant's wife is supposed to accomplish her wifely responsibilities such as cooking and cleaning even in her husband's absence. Nevertheless, the merchant's wife does not miss the advantage of being the only authority in the house and uses the house subversively. Hence, she forms a social alliance with John in the garden when the merchant is busy with making financial plans in his counting room, his private space. Through John's and the wife's collaboration, the wife practices her own privacy and she becomes a merchant. Hence, she signs her first business transaction with John in the garden.

The garden in the *Shipman's Tale* is the wife's private space and/or at least it is free of the control mechanism – the merchant; and she becomes the ultimate authority there only due to her husband's absence. Thus, despite the fact that the garden in the *Shipman's Tale* like in the *Merchant's Tale* initially operates as a locus which denotes male domination (Howes 83), the merchant's wife turns it to her own space for her own desires. Moreover, the garden is generally regarded as feminine space (Griffiths 138, Bleeth 107, Koster 91, Woods 108) because the garden appears as a space where women act freely. Merchant's wife, unlike May in the *Merchant's Tale*, affirms the notion of garden as a feminine space in which women practice their own desires because the garden is the space where she first positions herself as “a guerrilla fighter” in the guise of a merchant. However, her resistance is quite different from other women in Chaucer's fabliaux because her aim is financial gain. Her aim starts

a chain of mercantile contracts—the borrowing, buying, and paying off of loans that the wife and monk carry out in the house — while the merchant (always a little later) goes through a similar series of transactions in the real marketplaces of Brugges and Paris. (Woods 110)

Her tricks consist of business strategies. For example, she barter her body to John for hundred francs to create a space in the market place. In a mercantile atmosphere where only mercantile meanings and mores are taken seriously, everything is in the market-place as a commodity to be bought and sold (Delany 72). Then, the wife first accepts the rules of the market-place and then initiates “poaching attacks” upon the system to

negotiate and resist her oppression. Then, she makes a deal with John in the garden, through which she will gain money:

I wol delyvere yow out of this care;
 For I wol brynge yow an hundred frankes.”
 And with that word he caught hire by the flankes,
 And hire embraceth harde, and kiste hire ofte.
 “Gooth now youre wey,” quod he, “al stille and softe,
 And lat us dyne as soone as that ye may;
 For by my children it is pryme of the day. (VII 200-2006)

Here, the merchant’s wife manipulates the garden as her own space to use it for her own purposes. She uses her husband’s bedroom for her own desires as well. She forms the merchant’s garden as her market-place where she signs a business contract in which she barter her body. Interestingly, she thus claims the garden and the house as her own market place. Consequently, it can be stated that the merchant’s wife uses her husband’s resources for her own desires and needs because she adopts the ruses of the weak. Thus, the subordinate wife utilizes “the art of the poacher”, who is in between:

Using their products for our own purposes is the art of being in between production and consumption, speaking is the art of being in between their language system and our material experience, cooking is the art of being in between their supermarket and our unique meal. (Fiske *Understanding* 36)

Indeed, she enjoys the meanings she creates through constructing her own market place. However, her career as a merchant does not continue for long. The monk beguiles her and tells her husband that he has already paid his debt to his wife. She cannot reveal her actions to her husband, but she has the capacity to manipulate this dangerous situation to her own advantage again. She uses his bedroom to her own benefit:

I am youre wyf; score it upon my taille,
 And I shal paye as soone as ever I may.
 For by my trouthe, I have on myn array,
 And nat on wast, bestowed it every deel. (VII 416-419)

The wife’s use of spaces in the *Shipman’s Tale*, thus, creates a liberating role for her to generate her own meanings and pleasures though it is temporary.

In conclusion, Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*, Malyne and the wife in the *Reeve's Tale*, May in the *Merchant's Tale*, and the merchant's wife in the *Shipman's Tale* evade and accordingly subvert their subjection through using the private spaces, which are constructed for their exclusion and protection from other men, to their own and gain partial freedom and pleasure consequently.

Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale* takes control of John's spaces that are the house and specifically the bedroom; and utilizes these spaces as subversive agents for her own pleasures. Therefore, she uses the resources provided by the dominant to meet her own needs.

Similarly, the wife and the daughter Malyne in the *Reeve's Tale* evade Symkyn's watchful protectiveness on their already limited space, and even organize his space as their own space. Accordingly, both Malyne and his wife violate Symkyn's space and insert their own meanings and pleasures into it. Hence, their use of space and their spatial activities empower them against the dominant Symkyn since they construct dissident meanings out of manipulative use of the private spaces, provided by Symkyn.

Enclosed both in Januarie's bedroom and garden, May in the *Merchant's Tale* is a woman of resistance as she generates oppositional meanings and pleasures against Januarie. Through rebellious use of private spaces in the tale, May fulfils her desires and satisfies her needs in the very space of her husband. Thus, she challenges the oppressive norms governing her spatial activities as a wife.

Similar to May, the wife in the *Shipman's Tale* is restricted in her merchant husband's house and garden. However, she manipulates her subjugation to her partial liberation through managing and exploiting the spaces, which are constructed by her husband for his desires. She employs these private spaces as her medium of resistance and forms her own space which is both within and against the dominant. Thus, she gains partial relief from her husband's oppressive attitude and also finds the advantage to satisfy her needs and to fulfil her desires.

CONCLUSION

Chaucer's fabliaux, the *Miller's Tale*, the *Reeve's Tale*, the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale* include a power struggle between the subordinate wives and the dominant husbands. The *Reeve's Tale* exceptionally also presents this struggle between the daughter Malyne and the father Symkyn.

Women in Chaucer's fabliaux are figures of resistance and pleasure as they are involved in an eternal power struggle between the weak and the powerful, as Fiske defines the relationship between the dominant and the subordinate (*Understanding* 19, *Reading* 2). Chaucer's women in his fabliaux as figures of subordination resist the power. Initially, they employ "the hit-and-run tactics of the weak" to be able to evade their subjugation and gradually subvert the power's meanings, which disempower them. They generally adopt similar tactics although their ploys may differ.

Chaucer's women's illicit sexuality is an agent of their resistance. Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*, Malyne and the miller's wife in the *Reeve's Tale*, May in the *Merchant's Tale* and the merchant's wife in the *Shipman's Tale* resist their oppressors through pursuing their illicit sexual affairs. Through their sexual exploits, they defy repressive structures and gain the authority of their bodies, which are legally regarded as the husbands' property. Women's sexual bodies empower them and partially liberate them from the impositions of the power. In this respect, Chaucer's women in the fabliaux create their own culture, in which they gain control of their bodies and construct their own meanings and pleasures.

Alisoun, the young wife in the *Miller's Tale*, is married to an old gullible man, John. The age difference is clearly not approved in the tale. Because of their incompatible ages, John is very watchful of Alisoun and especially her body; and treats her as a cage bird (I 3223) so that he can avoid being betrayed. John also restricts Alisoun's space and she is not allowed to go beyond his house. The only place she is depicted in except the house is the church (I 1384). However, Alisoun contests her subjection and reacts against her husband through using her husband's resources. Alisoun's body, which is considered John's commodity sanctioned by both the Church and marital law, is meant

to serve for her husband's desires. Nevertheless, Alisoun as the subordinate in her marriage makes do with what she has and creates oppositional meanings out of this situation. She has limited means to challenge her husband. One of her accessible means to oppose oppressive structures is her body and her sexuality. Thus, she employs her body as an agent to renounce her subjection and to manipulate it to her empowerment. As Fiske states for popular culture, Alisoun devises tricks and ruses to start "a guerrilla fight" against John and collaborates with her lover Nicholas to pursue her sexual desires, and she utilizes John's house and bedroom for her own pleasure.

Similarly, the daughter Malyne and the wife in the *Reeve's Tale* are women of subjugation, but they turn their subjection into temporary victories against the power. Symkyn is very protective of Malyne's body because he wants to use her body as a commodity to advance in society. However, her sexual affair with the clerk spoils Symkyn's plans of social climbing. Malyne's subversive use of her sexual body provides her with popular pleasure as well as a temporary relief from her father's oppressive protectiveness. Symkyn's wife, too, makes use of her sexual body and takes pleasure, which she cannot achieve with Symkyn (I 4228-4231). Thus, women both avoid and then subvert Symkyn's plans on their bodies; and generate their own pleasure through their resistance.

In the *Merchant's Tale*, May the young wife is engaged in a power struggle with her old husband Januarie. May, like other women in Chaucer's fabliaux, negates her inferiority through adopting sexual tricks and stratagems. First, she internalises the rules of the dominant and yields to Januarie; thus, she assumes the role of a guerrilla fighter. She poaches upon the oppressive norms through her sexual body. She subverts Januarie's desires on her body and uses her body for pleasure through her alliance with Damyan. Her extramarital sexual affair with Damyan empowers her and temporarily releases her from Januarie's meticulous watch on her body. Therefore, she uses her sexual power to generate her popular meanings and pleasures.

Similarly, the merchant's nameless wife is a subordinate woman in the power relations in the *Shipman's Tale*. Like Alisoun, Malyne, the miller's wife and May, the merchant's wife attains the autonomy of her body through her sexual acts. Even, she gains

financially by bartering her sexual power. She employs the strategies of trade and sexuality, and finally achieves a brief release from the constraints that her husband imposes.

Moreover, Chaucer's women in his fabliaux resist the oppressive power relations through their subversive use of private space. These private spaces are the house and bedroom in the *Miller's Tale*, the mill and the house in the *Reeve's Tale*, the house and the garden in both the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale*. Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*, Malyne and the miller's wife in the *Reeve's Tale*, May in the *Merchant's Tale* and the merchant's nameless wife in the *Shipman's Tale* are imprisoned in these spaces by their male keepers. Nevertheless, by using the house and the garden for their own interests, these women challenge the discourses which define women's proper place as the house. Through their "guerrilla attacks," they rupture domestic spaces and assert their own needs and desires in these spaces. Hence, they circumvent the oppressive norms encoded in spaces in the fabliaux and achieve spatial freedom though it is only temporary.

As we see in the *Miller's Tale*, space can be both oppressive and liberating. Alisoun's medium to generate defiant meanings to the system, which subordinates her, is her subversive use of domestic spaces in which she is actually enclosed to perform John's desires and to satisfy his needs. She is enclosed in the house, which is traditionally regarded as woman's proper place and hence her mobility is limited by John. However, she manoeuvres her limited space to her advantage and she violates John's space for her own use. Alisoun even (mis)uses John's bed for her "bisynesse of myrthe and solas" (I 3648) with Nicholas. Her rupture of domestic sphere provides her with more space where she can exercise her needs and a chance to produce her own meanings and pleasure.

Malyne and her mother also subvert their spatial subjugation and limitation in mobility to their own advantage. Their confinement to the house/the mill by Symkyn does not prevent them from opposing to and challenging the power. Indeed, their constraint in the domestic spaces stimulates them to create a spatial confrontation to Symkyn. Through their collaboration with the clerks, Symkyn's women violate his own space to

fulfil their own desires. Their manipulation of spaces to their own ends positions Malyn and her mother as poachers and provides them with partial freedom from Symkyn's attentive control of their spaces.

Similarly, May in the *Merchant's Tale* definitely performs resistance through her control and manipulation of spaces to her own ends. May makes subversive use of the garden built by Januarie, where he can exercise his sexual fantasies with May. However, May satisfies her desires and meets her needs in this garden with some help from Januarie. So, she makes love with Damyan in the very place of Januarie. Although Januarie attempts to control the meanings, he cannot totally organize them. Yet, May as the weak fashions the garden with her own meanings and pleasures through taking the advantage of Januarie's blindness. Thus, May utilizes the garden as a medium of spatial resistance to Januarie and ruptures his space through investing there with her own pleasure.

Spatially restricted, the merchant's wife also displays resistance to her husband's authority in the spaces. She betrays her husband in the spaces built for her protection from outside world. During the merchant's absence, the woman becomes the supreme authority in the spaces and begins to perform her desires. She turns the merchant's bedroom and garden to her own space. In the garden, she signs business contracts with John, in which she sells her sexuality for money. In the merchant's bedroom, she makes love with John. So, her use of her husband's spaces for her own benefit provides her with money and a partial spatial freedom.

In conclusion, women in Chaucer's fabliaux are temporarily and partially empowered by their use of the resources of the dominant and the powerful in the power struggle between the wives and the husbands. As the active agents in fabliaux, women pursue extramarital sexual affairs and they do not accept their subordination. Also, they attempt to evade their subjection through adopting "the tactics of the weak" and utilizing the resources of their oppressive husbands. Their resistance takes two forms. First, they use their sexual bodies as agents to resist the system which positions them as inferior. Secondly, their subversive use of domestic space also empowers them as poachers and provides them with oppositional meanings and pleasures. Although "it is not possible to

state that [Chaucer's women in his fabliaux] as the young wives of old husbands pursued for their bodies by amorous young men, are agents of total freedom from the dominant power" (Reis "Chaucer's Fabliau Women" 134), their evasion of the dominant and their subversive use of the dominant's resources evidently provide them with partial relief from the dominant's impositions.

ENDNOTES

¹ Barbara A. Hanawalt, a specialist in medieval social history, in her article entitled “Medieval English Women in Rural and Urban Domestic Space” examines the spaces which women traditionally hold, how literature teaches women to be in the proper space, and the probable repercussions of women’s going beyond their well-defined spaces (1).

² Huriye Reis’s *Adem’in Bilmediği, Havva’nın Gör Dediği: Ortaçağda Türk ve İngiliz Kadın Yazarlar* is only available in Turkish. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from this book are my own.

³ Fabliau is borrowed from French and since no English word replaces it, the word fabliau loses its italics.

⁴ There is an ongoing generic debate on the other tales such as the *Friar’s* and the *Summoner’s*; however, this thesis analyses the *Miller’s Tale*, the *Reeve’s Tale*, the *Merchant’s Tale* and the *Shipman’s Tale*.

⁵ Mary Jane Schenk designates ten major functions, which constitute the important action of the narratives, which are “Arrival, Departure, Interrogation, Communication, Deception, Complicity, Misdeed, Recognition, Retaliation and Resolution” (23).

⁶ Fabliaux do not necessarily reflect either real or fictitious situations. However, they express, “if not actual events and social relations, at least the concerns and preoccupations of the time” (Karras 89).

⁷ Indeed, there were also working women in the medieval England. Eileen Power even states that, “they [the working women] played an equal part with men in the economic life” (Power 53). However, since these women did not have “the feminine awareness” (Gies and Gies 9), in other words, “consciousness of women as women” (Gies and Gies 9), they defined themselves as the wives or mothers instead of working women.

⁸ Excorporation process is “the process by which the subordinate make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system” (Fiske *Understanding* 15).

⁹ Body and the bodily pleasures have been a debatable research area. On the one hand, some theorists and philosophers such as Bakhtin and Barthes praise the pleasures of the body; on the other hand, Schopenhauer and Kant denigrate them and regard the body as the source of inferior pleasure (Fiske *Understanding* 50).

¹⁰ Space theories had not attracted academic attention until Michael Bakthin's, Michel Foucault's, Henri Lefebvre's, Gaston Bachelard's, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's writings on space. Their works on space assume a spatial turn – "a turn toward theorizing and critically rethinking space" (Ganser 58).

¹¹ The word 'Pryvetee' and its derivatives are proportionately used more in the *Miller's Tale* than in any other of Chaucer's works. 'Pryvetee' and its derivatives are used thirteen times in *The Miller's Tale* (Bullon-Fernandez 141-142).

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1. ““Fantasye and Curious Bisynesse”: Sexual Economics in Chaucer’s the *Merchant’s Tale* and the *Shipman’s Tale*.” 7th International IDEA Conference: Studies in English. April 2013, Denizli, Turkey. Unpublished conference paper.
2. ““Regne of Femenye” Silenced: Marginalisation and Trivialisation of the Feminine Space in the *Knight’s Tale*.” Çankaya University Postgraduate Student Conference on Translation Studies and Literatures in English. May 2012, Ankara, Turkey. Unpublished conference paper.

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