

The Women in Chaucer's "Marriage Group"

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ALISON, THE WIFE OF BATH, stands at the center of Chaucer's "Marriage Group." The so-called Marriage Group is a heuristic which scholars have used to interpret those Canterbury tales most intimately concerned with the institution and gender politics of heterosexual union. As an idea, it indexes Chaucer's interest in the productivity and constraints of marriage and helps account for the stories of Ellesmere fragments three, four, and five. The Clerk's Griselda belongs in this group as do the Merchant's May and the Franklin's Dorigen. Over the years a number of other tales (and their female figures) have been suggested as additions. The Shipman's fabliau (generally thought to have once been assigned to the Wife of Bath) with its unnamed wife and the Nun's Priest's Tale's Pertelote have been said to belong to the Marriage Group. Prudence from Chaucer's own Tale of Melibee, the Man of Law's Constance, and even the Manciple's Tale's murdered wife of Pheobus can all lay some kind of claim to association. This essay treats yet another woman whom we should add—return, really—to Chaucer's Marriage Group: Eleanor Prescott Hammond.

If Chaucer's fictional women debate, exemplify, and travesty the proper role of women in marriage, Hammond is even more foundational to the Marriage Group. Unbeknownst to far too many Chaucerians, Hammond appears to have invented the idea of the Marriage Group; she was certainly the first scholar to put the term into print. But for most of the century since coining the term, Hammond has been left out of the Marriage Group, excluded from this intimate Chaucerian circle. For the past ninety-two years scholars have instead credited the eminent George Lyman Kittredge, Professor of English at Harvard, with inventing the Marriage Group. Citing his seminal 1912 essay, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," most critics of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* regard Kittredge

as the originator both of the phrase and the idea behind it, attaching the Marriage Group to his dramatic mode of reading the tales (a mode that also corresponds to the textual relation such a group posits between tales and fragments).¹

However, Kittredge is only mistakenly identified as the source for the Marriage Group. In 1908 Eleanor Prescott Hammond's book, *Chaucer: A Bibliographic Manual*, coined the phrase as a means of explaining the development (and, ultimately, order within the fragments) of the *Canterbury Tales*. She writes: "a third class of narratives in the *Canterbury Tales* is what I may term the Marriage Group, the mass of material suggested or enriched by Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum* and developed in the Wife of Bath's prologue, the Merchant's Tale, and the inserted passage in the Franklin's romance, lines 639ff."² Hammond clearly marks her coinage ("what I may term") in this passage and, coupled with the earlier publication date, she must be regarded as its originator. Kittredge's more lengthy "discussion" explores the thematic consequences of the argument about marriage in the *Canterbury Tales* initiated by the Wife of Bath. His internalizing focus on this discussion and self-reflection in the *Tales* contrasts with Hammond's outward attention to sources (Jerome) and influence, which seeks to explain the textual condition of the manuscripts as well as the chronology of the development of tales in terms of Chaucer's process of revision. Our attraction to Kittredge (at the apparent expense of Hammond) should be obvious. Kittredge performs a "reading" that ultimately offers Chaucer's own opinion on a subject that we still find worth debating,³ while Hammond proffers the opinion of a textual scholar looking to discern the order in which fragments were composed and compiled. Kittredge's dramatic version of critical activity is the one modern scholarship has largely followed (at least it is the one with which critics are more comfortable). This direction of modern critical activity, toward thematics and away from the study of manuscript exemplars (considered almost a separate field for textual scholars), has implicitly guided us away from Hammond as the source of the Marriage Group.⁴

Kittredge inaugurated an era of professional criticism. His thirty-three pages on the marriage "act" of the *Canterbury* drama were duly influential, arguing that "the Pilgrims are *dramatis personae*, and their

stories are only speeches [...] primarily significant, in each case, because they illustrate the speaker's character and opinions, or show the relations of the travelers to one another in the progressive action of the Pilgrimage."⁵ The Marriage Group has worked within Chaucer criticism as a principle explaining a particular dramatic episode of the *Canterbury Tales*, stretching minimally from the Wife's Prologue to the Clerk's, Merchant's, and Franklin's Tales. Although his ideas have been nuanced, sophisticated, and lately even much contested, they have been undeniably influential—hence the great number of citations to the "Discussion of Marriage" essay (even though few would still subscribe unqualifiedly to his dramatic and quasi-Shakespearean mode of reading). But these citations misattribute a term used fleetingly in Kittredge's closing paragraph, one he should have properly cited from Hammond's wide-ranging book. Indeed, a return to Kittredge's essay, still cited but little read today, makes the case for an alternate origin to the Marriage Group clearer, while it also—along with a number of essays that followed his in the pages of *Modern Philology*—sheds light upon the misattribution itself.

Circumstances, far more than personal slight, played a part here. The publication of Kittredge's essay was followed almost immediately by a number of others citing the Marriage Group idea. Most directly, William Witherle Lawrence responded in 1913 by showing how the Marriage Group was indeed anticipated by the tale(s) that precede the Wife of Bath's.⁶ But more significantly, Lawrence canonized Kittredge's "delightful and illuminating" discussion by turning to the revered scholar's closing textual remark: "'The Wife of Bath,' says Professor Kittredge, 'begins a Group in the Canterbury Tales, or as one may say, a new act in the drama.'"⁷ Lawrence himself sought to extend the boundaries of the "Group" by showing, contra Kittredge, that while the Wife's Prologue may indeed begin *in medias res*, unconnected to any "transitional matter as regularly binds together the tales within a Group," her Prologue is tightly related to the Tale of Melibee and to the Nun's Priest's Tale, which precede it.⁸ Following a textual order now no longer widely used, Lawrence read Ellesmere's fragment seven (Shipman's-Prioress's-Thopas/Melibee-Monk's-Nun's Priest's Tales)

between the Man of Law's Tale and the Wife of Bath's Prologue as an erstwhile fragment B₂, and thus found the origins of the Marriage Group in these repositioned tales.

Such attributions and contributions to Kittredge's Marriage Group continued into the mid-1960s, and the thrust of such arguments was to add tales such as the Nun's Priest's, Manciple's, and even the Parson's to the thematic cluster. Ironically, one essay that cites Kittredge's piece seems to have preceded his into print. Samuel Moore's "The Date of Chaucer's Marriage Group" came out in the June 1911 issue of *Modern Language Notes*, months before Kittredge's own essay (in April of 1912); we might surmise that his relationship to Kittredge—both were employed by Harvard University—was responsible for his access to the material before its publication. Of course, the scholarly world was much smaller at the beginning of the twentieth century, and often there was less delay than there is today in seeing one's ideas in print. With most Chaucerian articles appearing in *Modern Philology*, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, *Modern Language Notes*, and *Anglia*, the scholarly world of that time seems also rather more intimate to us. All the more reason that the oversight of Hammond's work—or the slight toward her—appears so sharply. Whereas Kittredge was himself clear that others were both aware of and discussing the phenomenon,⁹ as early as 1938 the discovery and invention of the Marriage Group was being attributed to Kittredge alone. An essay arguing for the Parson's participation in the discussion calls Kittredge's essay, "the article which first called attention to the Marriage Group."¹⁰

The picture I have drawn in the preceding paragraph might read as something of a conspiracy rather than the casual (and probably casually sexist) neglect it most likely forms. But perhaps we should indulge such suspicions, if only momentarily. Hammond's work was not unknown to these men, including Kittredge. Indeed, Lawrence cites her, mentioning the very book in which she coins the term Marriage Group. (Her book is utilized in his larger endeavor to move B₂ forward while leaving fragments G and C alone—so as to have Wife of Bath follow Nun's Priest's Tale without another comic interlude of the Summoner-Friar variety that appears at the end of her tale.) Using "Miss E. P. Hammond" as

an authority for the method of scribal copying of *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts in discrete booklets, Lawrence refers to an earlier essay of hers in *Modern Philology* as well as to the *Bibliographic Manual* itself.¹¹ Perhaps even more scandalously, Moore's preemptory essay regarding the Marriage Group, "according to Professor Kittredge's definition, consist[ing] of Groups D, E, and F," cites Hammond's *Bibliographical Manual* as well, referring to the very page upon which she names the Group for the first time.¹² The nature of Hammond's *Manual* offers something of an explanation for the facility with which one might misremember what had been written there. In her preface, she outlines her book's use as a reference work; she hardly expects the volume to be read through: "The repetitions which occur have been permitted for the sake of lessening the great amount of reference from page to page, and also because of the probable use of the work for consultation rather than for continuous reading."¹³ But there is ample evidence, I think, that her volume was read through, at least on the point of the *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts, and that evidence comes from Kittredge himself.

Universally acknowledged as the source of the concept of the Marriage Group, Kittredge alludes to another source that he does not name. In the first footnote to his famous essay, which he attaches to its title, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," Kittredge writes:

The Marriage Group of the *Canterbury Tales* has been much studied, and with good results. Hitherto, however, scholars have been concerned with the order of the tales, or with their several dates, not with Chaucer's development of the theme (see especially a paper by Mr. George Shipley in *Modern Language Notes*, X, 273-76).¹⁴

It is almost a scandal that he here cites Shipley, whose essay puzzles the logical arrangement of tales by geographical references, in place of the manuscript evidence that Hammond presented.¹⁵ Indeed, the "order of the tales" and "their several dates" rather than "theme" is precisely Hammond's "concern" in her *Bibliographic Manual*. With this glance at Hammond's *métier*, Kittredge suggests the origin of the term Marriage Group in some ongoing conversation, presumably in public lecture or conference form. Indeed his footnote here emphasizes the

term “discussion” to suggest marriage as theme, rather than textual grouping, as responsible for the arrangement of tales. The essays that followed Kittredge’s, however, did not distinguish textual from thematic argument in the same way, and they conflated what he markedly separated so as to develop further his ideas of dramatic presentation in Chaucer’s poem. By 1960 Donald Howard could open an essay with this conflation as a basic assumption: “Kittredge, in 1912, first defined the Marriage Group as a dramatically integrated unit within the *Canterbury Tales*.”¹⁶ It is unfortunate that, when Kittredge acknowledged the work of other “scholars” regarding the Marriage Group, he failed to mention Hammond.

Ironically, where Kittredge’s “dramatic” reading of the *Canterbury Tales* has been all but abandoned by scholars as the primary critical mode by which to read the tales, the idea of a Marriage Group survives, and it survives attached firmly to Kittredge’s name. He is still recognized in contemporary Chaucer scholarship for an idea that is not his own and that should have been better documented as the work of another. The details laid down in the present essay bring an ironic truth to the claim of A. S. G. Edwards, who, in a recent biographical essay on Hammond, notes that her researches “were never likely to bring her wide scholarly acclaim. Apart from her two great books, such research found its expression most frequently in the scholarly note, dealing with some aspect of bibliographical, paleographical, and editorial scholarship. Such forms of academic research are more likely to be gratefully used than fulsomely acknowledged.”¹⁷ This brief essay suggests, however, that scholars might now offer Hammond both gratitude and acknowledgment for her idea of Chaucer’s Marriage Group, thus restoring her to a proper place within the development of that gendered debate.

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END NOTES

1. George Lyman Kittredge, “Chaucer’s Discussion of Marriage,” *Modern Philology* 9 (1912): 435–67.
2. Eleanor Prescott Hammond, *Chaucer: A Bibliographic Manual* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), p. 256.

3. Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion," p. 467.
4. Derek Pearsall has previously noted Hammond's unacknowledged invention of the concept of the Marriage Group, but few Chaucerians have taken note of this correction (Derek Pearsall, "Eleanor Prescott Hammond," *Medieval Feminist Forum* no. 31 [2001]: 29–36, p. 30).
5. Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion," p. 435.
6. William Witherle Lawrence, "The Marriage Group in the *Canterbury Tales*," *Modern Philology* 11 (1913): 247–58.
7. Lawrence, "The Marriage Group," p. 247.
8. Lawrence, "The Marriage Group," p. 247. This order operates according to the then popular "Bradshaw shift," as adapted by Frederick James Furnivall, *A Temporary Preface to the Six-Text Edition of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, Pt. 1 (London, 1868), p. 92.
9. Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion," p. 435 n. 1.
10. Sister Mariella OSB, "The Parson's Tale and the Marriage Group," *Modern Language Notes* 53 (1938): 251–56.
11. Lawrence, "The Marriage Group," p. 257 n. 4.
12. Samuel Moore, "The Date of Chaucer's Marriage Group," *Modern Language Notes* 26 (1911), 172–74; p. 172.
13. Hammond, *Chaucer*, pp. vii–viii.
14. Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion," p. 435 n. 1.
15. George Shipley, "Arrangement of the *Canterbury Tales*," *Modern Language Notes* 10 (1895): 130–34. Ironically, Shipley's geographic argument here replicates the kind of argument Henry Bradshaw made to move Ellesmere's fragment seven forward to follow the Man of Law's Tale. In both cases thematic content is given precedence over the more difficult and reliable evidence of manuscript exemplars and textual status. Scholars eventually realized that, in many cases, the messiest or less neatly handwritten manuscripts have superior textual status. The correlation of aesthetic to authoritative copy cannot be maintained.
16. Donald Howard, "The Conclusion of the Marriage Group: Chaucer and the Human Condition," *Modern Philology* 57 (1960), 223–32; p. 223.
17. A. S. G. Edwards, "Eleanor Prescott Hammond (1866–1933): Pioneer Scholar of Middle English Manuscript Study," in *Women Medievalists and the Academy*, ed. Jane Chance (Madison: U Wisconsin P, 2005), pp. 91–98; p. 96.