

Unruly Woman



*Jeanne de Montbaston, a nun picking fruit from a penis tree in a 14th-
century manuscript of the 'Roman de la Rose'.
Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS. Fr. 25526, f. 106v.*

Storyteller: Daisy Black

Voice Coach: Jess Arrowsmith

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On Being Unruly

By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.

(Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*).

Chaucer's Wife of Bath, famous for her active sex life, red stockings, love of pilgrimages and impressive command of theology, astutely argues that the reason our stories are so full of women behaving badly is that most of them were first written by men.

Telling these tales in what is being increasingly referred to in the media as a 'post-#metoo' environment, generates some chilling parallels. Just as we still see court cases in which women are judged for their clothing, consumption of alcohol, or the career situation in which their assaults took place, medieval women did not have to do very much at all to be considered 'unruly'. If you were a lay townswoman like Margery Kempe, insisting on wearing white and crying in church was enough to raise the ire of everyone from archbishops to strangers on her pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Fiction doesn't treat women any better. Mrs Noah is depicted as foolish in medieval drama for – not unreasonably – wanting to rescue her female friends from God's flood. Popular courtly romances celebrate a knight's multiple sexual conquests while leaving the women involved un-named – often unceremoniously dropping them from the story. Meanwhile medieval comic fiction is full of women driven chiefly by sex. They concoct elaborate schemes to cheat on their jealous and controlling husbands, but these stories do little to suggest that they, and their unhappy marriages, might be taken seriously.

But while many of these stories were written down by men, the four stories we'll share today show how women's abilities, ambitions, skills, struggles and emotions are never far below the surface. Sometimes, as chillingly happens in Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale*, a woman's real feelings are best underlined by her silence. In other tales, women take charge of their own destinies, boldly refashioning the courtly love stories that dictate their behaviour. When women do tell stories, like the late twelfth-century poet Marie de France, they often rework and

challenge gender conventions, creating new, queer ways of conducting relationships between sexes.

Contrary to the all-male, all-white fantasy of medieval literature that still seems to persist in popular culture, we don't have to look very hard to find women's voices, and women's labour, at the heart of the canon. The penis tree above appears in a copy of medieval 'best-seller', *The Romance of the Rose*; a tale which celebrates the male gaze upon, and conquest over, the female body. Describing a courtier learning to woo his love with the kinds of techniques a modern audience would likely call out as harassment, penises in this story are rife, and usually wielded as weapons against women. This version was illuminated by husband-and-wife-team, Richard and Jeanne de Montbaston, and it's probable that this penis-picking nun was the work of Jeanne. If so, perhaps her little nun, carrying out her task with an expression of detached boredom, is working to mock the story she illuminates.

The stories

Guèrin, *De Béringier au lonc cul*, early 13th century (France)

Marie de France, *Chaitivel*, c. 1170 (France)

Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Merchant's Tale', from *The Canterbury Tales*, c. 1387-1400 (England)

Dietrichs von der Glezze, *The Belt*, c. 1270-90 (Germany)

About the Performer

Daisy is an academic, theatre director and storyteller. She specialises in medieval drama, and lectures in English at the University of Wolverhampton. Daisy has produced creative work for bodies as diverse as the Royal College of Physicians, Manchester Cathedral and the National Waterfront Museum, and is one of the BBC / AHRC's New Generation Thinkers. She is currently working on her next major storytelling project, 'The Bayeux Tapestry: The Full Yarn'.

Music

The songs making up the soundtrack of this show include:

The Widow and the Devil (Mick Ryan)

Sovay / The Female Highwayman (Trad., arr. Martin Carthy)

Twiddles (Janey Meneely)

Folk Song Woman (Daisy Black, tune 'Polly Vaughan').

She Persisted (Jenny Reid)

Three of these have great choruses. Do join in when you hear them!

1. The Widow and the Devil (Mick Ryan)

And the wind blew cold and lonely, across the widow's moor
And she never ever turned away a traveller from her door.

2. Twiddles (Janey Meneely)

And its twiddly-i-di-i-di-i, di-twiddly-i-di-ay,
Oh, there's lots of times a man will leave you broken in dismay,
And its twiddly-i-di-i-di-i, di-twiddly-i-di-ay,
Oh, there's others willing to twiddle when your man has gone away.

3. She Persisted (Jenny Reid)

Like those women at Versailles
We will sing and march and cry
And we'll know the day we die
We persisted.

Full lyrics for these songs can be found online or by emailing
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