The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale

Geoffrey Chaucer

The following entry presents criticism on Chaucer’s The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale (circa 1386-1400). For further information on Chaucer’s life and career, see Poetry Criticism, Volume 19.

INTRODUCTION

The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale from Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales contain, in the character Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, one of the most fully developed and discussed women in medieval literature. Bawdy, lusty, and strong willed, she refuses to allow men to control her existence and she takes measures to shape her own destiny. Although she is often viewed as an early precursor of feminist thought, some scholars argue that much of her Prologue can be viewed as anti-feminist rhetoric.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Chaucer was born in the 1340s into a family of London-based vintners. He spent most of his adult life as a civil servant, serving under three successive kings—Edward III, Richard II, and Henry IV—and much of what is known of his life is derived from various household records. In 1357 he served as a page to Elizabeth, the Countess of Ulster and wife of Prince Lionel, the third son of Edward III. In 1359, while serving in Edward’s army in France, Chaucer was captured during the unsuccessful siege of Rheims. The king contributed to his ransom, and Chaucer shortly thereafter entered the king’s service. By 1366 he had married Philippa Payne de Roet, a French noblewoman who had also been in the employment of the Countess of Ulster. Around this time Chaucer appears to have established a connection with John of Gaunt, Edward III’s fourth son, who may have become Chaucer’s patron; the fortunes of the two traced parallel courses over the next three decades, rising and falling in tandem. Chaucer traveled to Spain in 1366, on the first of a series of diplomatic missions throughout Europe. After a 1373 visit to Italy he returned to England and was appointed a customs official for the Port of London; he was given additional customs responsibilities in 1382. By 1385 he was living in Kent, where he was appointed a justice of the peace.

Although he became a member of Parliament in 1386, that year marked the beginning of a difficult period for Chaucer. He either resigned or was removed from his post as a customs official; additionally, he was not returned to Parliament. By 1387 his wife had died. Chaucer’s fortunes rose again when John of Gaunt returned from the Continent in 1389, and the young King Richard II regained control of the government from the aristocracy, which had for a time been the dominant political force in England. Chaucer was appointed a clerk of the king’s works but was removed from this office in 1391. Records suggest that by 1396 Chaucer had established a close relationship with John of Gaunt’s son, the Earl of Derby, who as King Henry IV later confirmed Chaucer’s grants from Richard and added an additional annuity in 1399. Chaucer then leased a house in the garden of Westminster Abbey where he lived for the rest of his life. He died on
October 25, 1400, and was buried in Westminster Abbey, an honor traditionally reserved for royalty. His tomb became the center of what is now known as Poet’s Corner.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Canterbury Tales, the work generally regarded as Chaucer’s masterpiece, was probably begun around 1386. The work is organized as a collection of stories told by a group of pilgrims on their way to the shrine of Thomas a Beckett in Canterbury. Within this overall framework are ten parts, which appear in different order in different manuscripts. Many critics therefore believe that Chaucer never realized his final plan for the work. The work opens with the General Prologue, introducing the pilgrims with short, vivid sketches. Twenty-four tales follow, interspersed with short dramatic “links” presenting lively exchanges among the pilgrims. The tales are highly diverse in style, subject matter, and theme; they include courtly romance, allegory, sermon, fable, and sometimes a mixture of genres. The Wife of Bath’s Tale is one of only three tales by women, and the only tale offering insight into the life and passions of a woman in the secular world. The Wife’s Prologue is layered with double entendres and witty wordplay, providing comic relief for the pilgrims and the readers.

In The Wife of Bath’s Tale Alisoun offers a story of a Knight who, while walking in a field, spies a young maiden and rapes her. The Knight is tried before King Arthur for his crime and is sentenced to death. Queen Guenevere pleads on the Knight’s behalf and King Arthur allows her to mete out the Knight’s punishment. The Queen gives the Knight twelve months and a day to discover what women truly want. He is required to report back to the Queen at the end of this time and provide an answer. He scour the land asking the question of each woman he meets. Women give him different opinions in return: money, clothing, sexual satisfaction, but none can offer the definitive answer. His allotted time draws to a close, and he has not found an answer to this question. As he realizes that he has failed, he comes upon an old and ugly crane and asks her the question of what women truly desire above all. She agrees to provide him with the answer in return for his pledge that he will grant her wish—a wish that will be told to him at a later time. He travels back to the castle with the crane, and delivers his answer to the Queen: “‘My lige lady, generally,’ quod he, ‘Wommen desyre to have sovereyneyee / As wel over his housbond as hir love, / And for to been in maistrie hym above. / This is youre mooste desir, thogh ye me kille. / Dooth as yow list; I am heer at youre willi.”’ (1037-42). The Queen allows the Knight to go free, but then the crane steps forward and claims the right to have the Knight fulfill his promise. The crane requires the Knight to marry her. The Knight is aghast but finally agrees. When they return to the crane’s house for their wedding night, the crane discusses true gentility and charity with the Knight. He sees the error of his ways and reconciles himself to the marriage. The crane then offers him a choice: she can either remain old and ugly but an ever-faithful and obedient wife, or she can become young and beautiful but cannot promise that she will be obedient and faithful. The Knight allows the crane to decide, offering her sovereignty. Because the Knight has learned true humbleness and respect for his wife, she transforms into a beautiful young maiden and vows to be an obedient and faithful wife.

MAJOR THEMES

In the The Wife of Bath’s Prologue, two themes are addressed. The first centers on marriage roles and power. Alisoun discusses her five marriages and her tactics for gaining power and financial independence through the use of her body. Her first marriage was at the age of twelve to a wealthy older man. With this husband and the next two, she was very pragmatic about the relationships. She used her body to control her husbands and to gain financial boons from them. She admitted that she had a healthy sexual appetite and alluded to the fact that she may quench those appetites outside of wedlock. Her fourth husband was young and lusty, and even kept a mistress. During this fourth marriage, Alisoun began courting Jankyn, a younger man without financial independence. After her fourth husband died (there has recently been speculation as to why this young man died and whether it was by natural causes), Alisoun broke her earlier rules of pragmatic marriage and wedded Jankyn for love. Ironically, now that the Wife was older and searching for love, Jankyn’s position was parallel to that of Alisoun’s with her first husbands—young Jankyn delighted in aggravating Alisoun and appeared to be in a position of power over her.

The second major theme in the Prologue is dissatisfaction with current religious thought. The Wife is a Christian and is undergoing a pilgrimage, but she doesn’t blindly trust the religious authorities’ interpretation of the Scriptures. Scholars in medieval Europe were seeking to understand the Bible more fully, and one common thought that was introduced during this time was that since the Bible depicts Jesus attending only one wedding, perhaps this is God’s message that people should only marry once. Alisoun defends her right to remarry after being widowed (four times) by
recounting the Biblical story of the Samaritan woman at the well who was living out of wedlock with a man after being widowed four times. Jesus commanded her to marry this fifth man. Alisoun uses this parable and the examples of Solomon, Abraham, and Jacob, all of whom had multiple wives. Alisoun also believes in God’s command to be fruitful and multiply. She disagrees with the Church’s teaching that chastity is preferable to second marriage; she believes that by sharing her bounty, she is closer to the real teachings of the Bible. Her bawdy description of the God-given tools used in this endeavor are thinly veiled double entendres, and she is interrupted by the Pardoner before she discusses the particulars of her five marriages. Throughout these descriptions the religious theme is intertwined with the marriage theme and Alisoun’s desire for autonomy. Although true autonomy for women in medieval Europe is an impossibility, she outlines her strategies for control of self and the situations around her.

In the Tale, the Wife of Bath softens her views of charity and love but continues the theme of autonomy and power. Alisoun reworks the traditional story of the “Loathly Lady” with a decidedly feminist spin, putting the hag in a position of control and demeaning the Knight to a position of subservience. Throughout the Tale, the Knight’s fate is decided by women, first by Guenevere, then by the crone. Alisoun suggests that a man’s true happiness can be realized when he allows his spouse to have some level of autonomy. Although the end of the Tale realigns the positions of power to more traditional gender roles, it is by the woman’s own choice finally to be an obedient wife; therefore the Tale provides a milestone for women’s quest for self-definition. The rehabilitation of the Knight is surprising, given the Tale’s beginning sentiment about the good nature of women in comparison to the base nature of men. Many commentators support the idea that in the Tale Alisoun is making a statement against prevailing beliefs that women are by nature base and sinful, yet men are capable of great nobility.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Much of the scholarly debate concerning The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale focuses on Alisoun’s role in feminist discourse. Many essayists address the misogynist views presented in The Canterbury Tales and attempt to determine whether Chaucer’s use of Alisoun is meant to overthrow these views or reinforce them. Discussion on this topic is divided between those, such as H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., who see Alisoun as an early feminist striving for autonomy in an oppressive patriarchal society, and those, including Susan Crane and Catherine S. Cox, who view her as destined to fail in her search for equality, partly because she is trying to gain acceptance by emulating men instead of embracing her femininity, but mainly because she is a fictional character, written by a man. Several critics have investigated the religious dimensions of the The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale. James W. Cook has analyzed Alisoun’s positions in relation to the sacraments, particularly marriage. Alcuin Blamires has explored the possibility that Chaucer uses Alisoun to challenge false teachings and wrongdoing by the clergy, comparing her views to those of the Lollards, a heretical sect that held the Bible as the sole authority on God’s word and questioned the moral right of the clergy. Among the numerous other approaches to The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale are David S. Reed’s examination of Alisoun’s comic aspects, D. W. Robertson, Jr.’s analysis of her concern with status and wealth, and Susan Signe Morrison’s and Elaine Yrneharte’s investigations into how Chaucer uses and manipulates language in these works.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Romaunt of the Rose [translator; from Guillaume de Lorris’s Roman de la Rose] c. 1360s
The Book of the Duchess c. 1368-69
The House of Fame c. 1378-81
The Parlement of Fowles c. 1378-81
Troylus and Criseyde [adaptor; from Boccaccio’s Il Filostrato] c. 1382-86
The Legend of Good Women c. 1386
The Canterbury Tales c. 1386-1400
Complaint of Mars; Complaint of Venus; Envoy to Bukton [printed by Julian Notary] 1499-1502

Other Major Works

Boecius de consolatione philosophiae [translator; from Boethius’s De consolatione philosophiae] (prose) c. 1380s
The Equatorie of the Planetis (prose) c. 1391-92
Treatise on the Astrolabe (prose) c. 1391-92
*The Workes of Geffray Chaucer newly printed, with dyuers works which were neuer in print before [edited by William Thynne] (poetry and prose) 1532
The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer. 7 vols. [edited by Walter W. Skeat] (poetry and prose) 1894-97
The Riverside Chaucer [general editor Larry D. Benson] (poetry and prose) 1987

*This volume represents the first publication of Rumaunt of the Rose, The Book of the Duchess, and The Legend of Good Women.

CRITICISM

David S. Reed (essay date 1970)


[In the following essay, Reed studies the negative characterization of the Wife of Bath and notes that her character is of low moral standards and amuses through her baseness and bad taste.]

I

It is odd that many have found the Wife of Bath life-like. If she is, it is not in a way that those who see her as a marvel of naturalistic invention would accept. In common sense human terms she is absurd and grotesque, a figment of that anti-feminist gallimaufry, the Prologue to her Tale. That many take her as a triumph of Chaucer’s mellow and humane art tells us more about the place of women in our tradition than about the words before us. True, Chaucer was civilized: he shared the enjoyment of his courtly, humanist civilization in bating women and the middle classes. But we are middle class, even if we think the middle classes ought to be bated; and women are not to be baited really, for their place has changed. In short our idea of civilization is different from Chaucer’s. So it can hardly be that those who talk of the mellowness and humanity that went into the Wife really mean they wholeheartedly enjoy Chaucer’s curmudgeonly and old-fashioned humor; or if they do, they are less than frank about it. It seems much more likely that they have found a way of misunderstanding Chaucer. And we have other ways as well, for our different ethos has not given us a detached view of the real nature of the Wife’s comedy. It has made her an embarrassment, so that, fearing for Chaucer’s good name, we misunderstand her elaborately.

Here are two ways of taking the Wife, both, to my mind, ways of mistaking her. The first is Walter C. Curry’s:

Though one may not be entirely prepared to accept the opinion that she “is one of the most amazing characters . . . the brain of man has ever conceived,” still she is so vividly feminine and human, so coarse and shameless in her discussion of the marital relations with her five husbands, and yet so imaginative and delicate in her story telling that one is fascinated against his will and beset with an irresistible impulse to analyze her dual personality with the view of locating, if possible, definite causes for the coexistence of more incongruent elements than are ordinarily found in human beings.

The second is Bernard F. Huppé’s:

In the Wife’s Prologue Chaucer has constructed a subtle, dramatic monologue, which presents not only a woman of such reality that time has not withered her, but also a frame of judgment, stern as it is sympathetic. The comedy of the Wife’s self-portrait has an underlying pathos because the reader understands—as she does not—that the vigor of her apology covers and contains the delusion which makes her life an empty lie.

Clearly the attitudes of the two critics differ. One dallies with her; the other censures. But both agree in granting her character, implicitly at least, the elusive literary status of individuality. For, the first, in appreciating her complex vitality, must pretend to entertain her in her own right, and the reproaches of the second require a moral agent. However, to speak of a character having the pathos of individuality suits the case of one, like Criseyde, in a tragedy or, like Cavalcante, in Hell. Accordingly Curry is led to suggest Chaucer might have considered the Wife “his most tragic figure,” and Huppé to see her unregenerate nature “confirmed on the way of damnation.”

But tragic or infernal subjectivity seem out of the question to me. I shall take the Wife as a stock figure in a varied sort of pantomime (I have no better word). And as for attitude or judgment, I shall not venture beyond the stock response such a figure and such comedy call for. This approach probably misses a lot, and it can scarcely be novel. I follow it to insist that what seems curiously antique, outworn, churlish even is the essence of the Wife’s humor.

II

The Wife is a stock figure and an absurdity. If (as neither Curry nor Huppé are) we were consistent and thorough in our attempt to see the Wife in terms of higher modes of fiction, she would appear a monstrosity. But she belongs to low comedy or to pantomime, and within those modes she is lifelike. Here it is hard to speak of verisimilitude. What gives her life is the liveliness of pantomime: the stock figure of the Wife and the burlesque comedy of her Prologue and Tale, the masquerade of the world on pilgrimage, in which these are set, the narrator as impresario or master of ceremonies, all these conspire in a vivid illusion or invite our make believe.
In terms of pantomime, a figure like the Wife owes her liveliness to her being a stock absurdity. Simply because they are stock figures, the pilgrims have a perennial vitality and always seem lifelike. As Dryden put it in his "Preface to the Fables," "their general characters are still remaining in mankind, and even in England, though they are called by other names than those of Monks and Friars, and Canons, and Lady Abbes, and Nuns; for mankind is ever the same, and nothing lost out of nature, though everything is altered." Certainly this seems true of comic mankind. Dryden is of course praising Chaucer's comprehensive soul, yet it sounds almost as if he were talking of the shuffling of a pack of cards. Nor is this accidental. Probably a character has to be drawn from a highly conservative pack or stock to be recognizably comic. One finds the same figures in Jonson's comedy of humors and in Anthony Powell's social comedy. Even tricks are stock. Like Chaucer's Wife, Byron's Donna Julia, caught by her husband, overwhelms him with the tirade he has not had time to utter and shames him with his jealous suspicions of the truth. However, the Wife's vitality is not simply a matter of jokes' and comic figures' having long lives. Her absurdity works upon us to make her seem real. Outside fiction, when we call someone a "real character," it is a type we recognize, humorous and rather a card simply because typical. Such people may, in fact, strike us as unreal because they make play of the normal and everyday, so that we do not know whether to call them larger than life or smaller. But their very unreality makes them lively. It inveigles us into playing up to them, conspiring with them to make them real and lifelike. They are animated by the game we play with them, though we may indeed feel their life is a hoax like that of the bladders of wine Apuleius slew for thieves. Similarly in fiction, what lends such cartoon figures as the Wife their vitality is our willingness to play with them and be taken in by them. Whether demonic or genial, it is their distortion, or oddity, or exaggeration lays hold of us and makes us recognize them and endow them with life. The Wife is not a demonic figure. What is unnatural about her binds us all together in witness to her common humanity. Perhaps it is that a long comic tradition has given her standing in a rude and archaic folk sense of reality. At any rate, she is a genial humor.

Because we are involved in a comic displacement, the response she elicits from us is equivocal, and the question of how to take her becomes rather crocodilian. On the one hand we enjoy her jolly, hearty nature. On the other we know her to be, like Falstaff and Long John Silver, common and villainous. And yet, just because she is low and cunning, we find her jolly and call her human. She gains a sympathy as heartless as herself. She appeals to the Miller, Summoner, and Pardoner in us. So we like to hear of jealous old men tormented by a lively girl like her. But it also pleases us to see her done in in turn by age and nearly beaten at her own game by her last two husbands. At the same time, we are delighted to see her get off with it triumphantly.

The sympathy we accord her nature is licence, and licence was in the nature of pilgrimages. The host resembles a sort of prudent lord of miseule, and the Wife's Prologue is in the carnival spirit of the outing. Falstaff was rejected by the court and Bottom laughed out of it, both dismissed with the audience's sneaking sympathy or gratitude for the dance they led. Now obviously, since the pilgrimage was a journey to a shrine as well as a holiday and, moreover, a figure of "Thilke parfit glorious pilgryme / That highte Jerusalem celestial" (I 50-51), it would be fitting if Chaucer had brought such figures as the Wife to a reckoning, followed by repentance or rejection, in a grand anti-masque, or rather anti-pilgrimage, design. But nothing of the kind happens as far as her Prologue and Tale are concerned. Indeed, their happy endings are the inversion of such a proper conclusion, and miseule is left unshaken in that topsy-turvy.

Yet, if one reason for the Wife's being lifelike is that she is good fun, another is that she is a figure of execration. As a scandal she is butt as well as joker. Along with mothers-in-law, she belongs to a vulgar and perennial fund of anti-feminist jocularity. Hence Justinus in the Merchant's Tale and Chaucer in his Envoi à Bukton cite her as a dreadful warning against wives. She is a compendious type of the sort of woman-evil Dunbar, following Chaucer, treated with such sardonic relish in his Tua Marit Wemen and the Wedo. Nor is she by any means a purely medieval literary sport: one finds the same sort of material brought together in Cleopatra, for instance, or Milton's Eve, or Molly Bloom. In short, the Wife is the "Archewyf," in the guise of comic shrew. She seems to have a superindividual lifeliness because a type figure is meant to represent a class. But the class in the Wife's case is a pseudo-class since no such woman ever trod. It is this that makes her a lively fiction. Caricature works like synecdoche. It singles out and abstracts features in such a way that the most heterogeneous individuals are categorized together, and the very absence of likeness calls forth the most vigorous and lively distortion. The Wife seems to comprise all womanhood in one person, and yet all that apparently manifold nature is shrewish and can be reduced to a single formula or humor. Her type may not be obvious in the General Prologue, but what is implied by five husbands, gat teeth, and so on is exhaustively amplified in the Prologue to her Tale. There, in the spirit of a burlesque encyclopaedia, matter drawn from clerical, Romance, and probably popular traditions is crammed into a shrew's confession. With the same perversive learning her horoscope is cast as a formula for a shrew. The formula operates by the rules of distortion or disfigurement in the unfair way that "machinery" characterizes Arnold's "Philistines." So one misses the
point if one imagines her case as a hard lot dealt her by fate. Because she is bourgeoise, everything can appear under the satirical aspect of botched and botching, and the wealth of a Venerean nature is disfigured under the influence of Mars to lecherousness, nagging, cheating, bickering, and misrule. The same formula covers her Tale. The romance is under Venus but Mars spoils it, as fits the teller. This is not tragedy but bathos. Part of what animates the Wife, then, is a sly and malicious elaboration of an idée fixe, which would indeed be an obsession if it were not a comic convention.

It is not her make-up that is subtle or complex but her presentation. It does not argue some complexity of fancy in the character of that other genial humor. Bottom, if Titania falls in love with him wearing an ass’s head. It is a stock incongruity of pantomime deftly handled. Similarly, the Wife’s character and the comic turns we expect of her are as conventionalized as the figure of a chessman and the sorts of moves it can make. It is to the play that is made of her and the wit and finesse with which she is handled we should look for any refinements of comedy.

The General Prologue is sophisticated pantomime, and it places the stock figure of the Wife on the kind of comic stage which gives her life. The pilimgame itself, though it is also a pregnant metaphor for human life and the wayfaring of the masks of God, seems so beguilingly festive that the scene and the occasion become, as it were, the life and soul of the Wife along with the other pilgrims. It is a masquerade of the world, for the type figures, the Wife among them, are representative of the Estates of the Realm and of Christian pilgrims. They are disguised as a crowd of people in the Inn at Southwark. I think it is this disguise we delight in when we stress the individuality of the pilgrims. Their incognito constitutes their individuality. For us this is especially true since we do not think of the world in terms of its Estates. And, therefore, it does not automatically come to us that a merchant, a lawyer, and a wife “of beside Bath” are in fact Lawyer, Merchant, and Wife. But, quite apart from this accidental shift of interest, the figures are presented to us as if they each had an individual identity. The narrator meets them as a crowd of pilgrims, and the fiction is supported circumstantially. We are told when they meet and where, and in the links between the Tales we are given a fairly detailed itinerary. Formally, we are asked to take them as living and individual. For this reason the descriptions in the General Prologue appear to individuate pilgrims. Actually most of the detail is drawn from such sources as homiletic satire and physiognomic handbooks, and so really characterizes types. Yet, as in a dream allegory, those clues to what the persons are confront us enigmatically or transparently in the form of a mask. So, at the very moment the Wife’s “hippes large” are meant to reveal her boisterous and masterful disposition, they disguise her with such particularity that she seems to stand before us in the flesh. And Chaucer has accentuated the particularity of the figures by an apparent disregard for the rules of description. The seemingly unordered and casual jotting down of detail invests the pilgrims with the singularity of the picturesque. By contrast, the Theophrastan “character” creates no such illusion. That genre sets out to draw a general type of humanity—virtue, or vice, or foible, or mixture—belonging to no particular time or place. So we take even the most lifelike or circumstantial traits as illustrating a species rather than as characterizing an individual. Unlike the portraits of the General Prologue, “character” drawing does not attempt to use individual existence as a disguise for the type.

The narrator gives the masquerade a courtly tone since his role is that of courteous master of ceremonies.7 In the discussion of pleasantry in the second book of Castiglione’s The Courtier Federico Fregoso speaks of “festivity” or “urbanity” which “we see in the case of certain men who so gracefully and entertainingly narrate and describe something that has happened to them or that they have seen or heard, that with gestures and words they put it before our eyes and almost bring us to touch it with our hand.” Urbanity the narrator certainly has. With gentle folk he is respectful, with middle class persons laudatory but patronizing, and with low characters more forthright. One finds similar gradations of tone according to class in nineteenth century novels (Scott’s for instance) and in the degrees of irony employed against “Barbarians,” “Philistines,” and “Populace” by Arnold. More than anything else, perhaps, it is such urbanity that satisfies us that the social scene is authentic, and one kind of observation that conjures up the reality of persons is the observation of the conventions of deference and condescension. In Langland’s description of the people in the field full of folk where such urbanity is lacking it seems that his world is unworlidy, though, in fact, many of his types are also Chaucer’s. The urbanity of the General Prologue, on the other hand, immediately suggests a sense of the world and of what people are like. It also privileges us to view the sorts and conditions of men as a spectacle or entertainment. This is the narrator’s “festivity”: the urbane observation of the world is a courtly game. So with the Wife of Bath, the Merchant, the Lawyer, it is their respectability he singles out for praise; through their substance and status in their various callings they are presented as if they were worthy representatives of the commons. Their respectability is of course pinchbeck: as wife, parishioner, and, perhaps, weaver the Wife is a rogue. Here the malice belongs as much to courtly satire on middle class hypocrisy as to sermons and moralities. It is made apparent only through innuendo. Granted Chaucer’s audience had no need to consult commentaries on what was implied by
costly headwear on Sunday or by West Country weaving, still it would have interfered with their enjoyment of their inferior’s vices if the point had been made in any other than a courteously bland manner.

Set in this higher pantomime is the comedy of the Wife’s Prologue to her Tale, which is farce. It is not surprising that she becomes a problematic and bafflingly complex creature if one looks for psychological or moral ironies, or for the sort of higher comedy one expects in a novel. She is manipulated with an entire disregard for naturalistic conventions or psychological probability. She makes sense only in terms of burlesque and knock-about comedy.

In her Prologue, the Wife is her own impresario. Since what is put into her mouth as illustration of the “wo that is in marriage” is a farrago of anti-feminist lore, one might expect the comedy to be at her expense and women’s. Yet, even if she exposed herself as a villain, she would gain the licence self-exposure gains. Her shrew’s confession is, in fact, so enormous and put with such verve that it receives a comic absolution in her listeners’ entertainment. Besides, the comedy is quite as much at the expense of husbands as of wives. By a sort of reflexive irony the Wife manages to be as much jester as jest. Her slippery womanhood is the bogey of the anti-feminist or “le jaloux,” so that, at the very moment she is the object of his jibes, she is the source of his chagrin. An example is the farcical scene she sketches by way of illustrating how “Baar I stilly myne olde housbondes in honde.” To forestall a jealous husband, she recites his abuse as her injury. The joke against her is that she exposes herself to her listeners as the monster in his thought. But this is also a joke on her side since her being that monster is what makes her husbands ridiculous. If she is false, her effrontery mocks them. There is a similar point to be made about her marriage to Jankin. The cruel laughter against the widow hungry for youth and served by it as she had served her old husbands cannot stand up against her final triumph. And the Wife’s getting the better of the mean and callow Jankin is a better joke than what he reads her from that boring misogynist’s anthology of his. So satire against women dissolves in the farce of marriage, of which she is the master spirit.

If her confession is a sermon, as the Pardoner suggests, then it is a burlesque sermon in the spirit of the “sermon joyeux.” In the first place, there is the joke about the preaching woman, on whom Dr. Johnson’s comment doubtless speaks with the weight of conservative opinion. Had she been, like Melibeus’ wife, a lady and an allegory, the case would have been different; but, since she is a low character, her learning is slapstick. Also belonging to the burlesque tradition of anti-order—like the women’s sex strike in the Lysistrata or the annual marriages the first wife proposes in Dunbar’s The Tua Marriit Wemen and the Wedo—is the Wife’s remedy for the woe in marriage, the rule of wives. Further, there are a number of pratfalls in the conduct of her sermon. Since her declared topic is “to spoke of wo that is in marriage,” one expects something of a “chanson de mal mariée” along the lines of “Oh the monotonous meanness of his lust . . . / It’s the injustice . . . he is so unjust.” But, though the Wife utters complaints of this kind, it is herself, rather than her husbands, she shows to be the source of woe. Indeed, she boasts that she has been their whip and tribulation.

In the section before the Pardoner’s interruption (D 1-162), she is made the mouthpiece of a clerical sort of buffoonery.” Whatever the excesses of the ascetic tradition in medieval Christianity, there was, of course, no question about the canonical status of marriage and remarriage. What the Wife does is simply to give Christian teaching a farcical twist. This is the reason for the inconsistency of the tone: sometimes a theologian seems to be speaking only to be overwhelmed by a cackle from the Wife. One need only consult I Cor. vii to see that her case is respectable in letter. But the ribald gloss she gives the letter subverts its spirit. Her treatment of her three main topics—remarriage, the states of marriage and virginity, love between husband and wife—parodies Christian edification. For, instead of rising soberly from the letter to the spirit, she gives the letter a gross and ludicrous interpretation. The result is a sort of sermon for carnival. Permission to remarry, for instance, has Paul’s authority behind it. But the Wife multiplies the permission inordinate. She moves from a reasonable puzzlement over how many times Scripture seems to allow one to marry to citing Solomon’s extravagant case:

Lo, heere the wise kynge, daun Salomon:
I trowe he hadde wyves mo than oon.
As wolde God it were leevell unto me
To be refresshed half so oft as he!

(D 35-38)

The allusions to Jerome’s “Epistola Adversus Jovinianum” add a rather pedantic irony. The epistle contends for a rigorously spiritual ideal of marriage. The Wife, however, converts its higher pleading into most unspiritual liberties. For instance, Jerome heaps sarcasm on those unspiritual enough to remarry; certainly remarriage is better than having more than one husband simultaneously, and, since even a repentant fornicator can be forgiven, octogamy is not damned. The Wife changes the grotesque word and sarcastic permission to a source of rejoicing. One cannot say that the Wife disagrees with Church teaching or Jerome; rather, she plays havoc with them. Again, in dealing with the exhortation to virginity and the permission to marry, her case is Pauline enough. Indeed, it seems that she is arguing with disarming modesty that, while virginity is
perfection, marriage is also a state with its own excellences even if they are inferior:

Virginitie is greet perfeccion,
And continence eek with devocion.
But Crist, that of perfeccion is welle,
Bad nat every wight he shold be go selle
Al that he hadde, and gyve it to the poore
And in swich wise folwe hym and his foore.
He spak to hem that wolde lyve parfitly. . .

(105-11)

Then the Wife adds her application of the teaching, and the edifying trend of her discussion collapses in the exuberance with which she embraces imperfection:

And lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I.
I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age
In the actes and in froot of mariagie.

(112-14)

In the same way, she gives Paul’s treatment of the love between husband and wife a preposterous gloss. Paul spoke of the marriage debt, and the Wife will have her pound of flesh. The burlesque is not of course an early expression, disguised by being put in a bad mouth, of “the great sexual insurrection of our Anglo-Teutonic race” or of any other protest. What is behind the play being made of church teaching is a sort of goliardic scholasticism.

The Wife’s Tale is also burlesque, though in a more subdued way. The opening broadside against the Friar makes it clear that a mock-romance is to follow. There are several points where the anti-feminist jocularity of her Prologue breaks in and romance lapses into bathos. Moreover, the Tale as a whole lends itself to a sly un-tuning. In skeleton it consists of two problems, the second being the consequence of solving the first. By promising to marry the beldame the knight learns the answer to the riddle the court of women have set him and saves his life. But fulfilling his promise means taking an undesirable wife, and that confronts him with a second problem. If one divides the story in two, each part containing a problem, then the second part is a mirror image of the first. In both parts there is a problem about women, and in both cases the solution is women’s rule. In other respects the second part inverts the first. Whereas the knight rapes the maiden in the first part, the hag makes advances upon him in the second; and the fatal success of his answer to the first riddle is righted by the happy outcome of his answer to the dilemma the hag puts to him. This pattern invites structural analysis: it is figured upon polarities of masculine dominance (crudely featured in the knight’s rape) and feminine (featured in the riddles as well as the beldame’s compelling the knight to wed and take her in his arms). Through the miraculous transformation of the beldame the Tale resolves the polarity in favour of women’s mastery, which is a rather equivocal combination of Mars and Venus, male and female. The transformation mediates between other polarities such as age and youth, ugliness and beauty, and, presumably, low birth and high, and poverty and plenty as well. But this beautiful impossibility is an equivocal solution to the knight’s dilemma.12 The romance is sphinxlike: to fail to solve the problems would be disastrous, but the correct answer brings with it an ambiguous good fortune. This equivocal nature of the Tale is apt for burlesque and, as the Wife tells it, one senses that she is in ambush behind the beautiful impossibilities of romance. In her mouth, what is Cinderellalike in her Tale is gargoyle.

Clearly the Tale is a courtly one. The sovereignty of women is an article of courtly love, and the transformation of the beldame into a beautiful young woman makes her eligible for the love of a knight. But the Wife is not courtly, and the courtly game is garbled because she is let loose on it. Possibly Chaucer envisaged in her a fourteenth century Emma Bovary, whose imagination courtly romance had excited. The point had, after all, been made in the tag about Rome’s being undone by romances. At any rate, it is clear from the portrait of the Prioress and from the Franklin’s Prologue and Tale that Chaucer knew how to adapt courtly matter to the sort of comedy of manners in which uncourtly people aspire to courtly fashions. However, the Wife’s imitation is closer to the kind of travesty one finds in Bottom’s play, “Pyramus and Thisbe,” and, as there, the courtly joke seems rather heartless. The burlesque intention would be clearer if some courtly version of the Wife’s Tale had been current. Possibly Gower’s “Tale of Florent” furnished the high analogue that the Wife brings to confusion. At any rate, the courtly doctrine of women’s sovereignty, which the Tale illustrates, is also the Wife’s peculiar concern. In her Prologue she made out that her supremacy was the law of love, and that under it her shrewishness was gentled. This might well be a domestic parody of the woman’s place according to the conventions of courtly love. Remembering this, one finds in the part played by women in her Tale more of the rule of wive’s than of ladies’ grace; and her marriage to Jankin returns a quizzical echo to the happy ending of her Tale. What excludes the Wife from romance is represented in the beldame. Both are base born. The Wife is neither young nor beautiful: the beldame is old and ugly. The Wife may be well off as a burgher’s widow, but surely she is not as rich as a lady; the beldame is poor. So it is hard not to spy the Wife behind the beldame’s lecture and miraculous transformation. Indeed the lecture reminds one of the exegetical mischief of the Wife’s Prologue. On “gentillesse,” for instance, the beldame’s argument is irrepresable. The theme “nobilitas sola est atque unica virtus” is a commonplace of the Romance tradition. And yet it is as if a game of croquet were being
played with flamingoes and hedgehogs. The fine sentiments were never intended as a plea for a Loathly Lady. On the three other points (poverty, old age, and ugliness) her lecture is, I think, to be taken as comic gatecrashing. Poverty, old age, and ugliness were banished from the garden of love, so arguments in favor of their admission, even the serious one on poverty, disconcert the rules. Finally, just as the Wife’s glossing of authorities in her Prologue gave sober matter a ludicrous twist, so the envoy to her Tale sends romance widdershins.

And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende
In parfit joye; and Jesu Crist us sende
Housbondes mecke, yonge, and fressh ashedde.
And grace t’overbye hem that we wedde... (1257-60)

III

Faced with antic comedy of the Wife’s sort, one usually looks for a didactic purpose, either critical or edifying, to justify one’s enjoyment. But I am at a loss to find any such moral strategy camouflaged in the Wife’s Prologue or Tale.

The Tale is not a criticism of the standards of courtly love. Courtly love was a high and fantastic game, quite conscious of its being so. The Wife belongs to the game by making an anti-game of it. Whether one thinks of the game as a love game or a social game, the Wife’s intrusion is confounding. But her parody is necessary to high manners, for they ask to be aped in order to establish their authority by laughing at the low imitation. And in the love game, itself a parody (of sacred love), played in scorn of marriage and in jeopardy of Reason and Nature, the Wife’s role is like that of the Duenna of Jean de Meun. It is to blow the gaff on the game, not by being the mouth-piece of Reason or Nature, but by being a spectre of rogue womanhood, and so a remedy of love.13

As for the Prologue to her Tale, which is farce, its end is topsy-turvy and bathos. As a satire on women it simply lacks moral weight. Juvenal’s “Sixth Satire,” by contrast, apart from its sheer invective splendor, is concerned with the superfluities of the age; and Pope’s “Epistle II” of the characters of women conveys a paradoxically generous recognition of their human nature. Further, the Wife’s comedy also lacks anything that would pass for a serious discussion of marriage in more recent literature. To my mind, this is true of the other Tales of the so called Marriage Group as well. The Franklin’s romance about “gentillesse” is really too slender to be a mirror for middle class marriages. Ethically, the Parson’s Tale doubtless says all there is to be said on the subject. But to discover in the Wife’s exposure of married vice an oblique lecture on married virtue goes against the decorum of farce. Besides, it sounds like cant. However, it does not follow that, because the Wife’s pantomime fails to be didactic or some high mode of imitation, it is anti-moral. A moral ethos is necessary if its inversions are to be funny. Similarly, like the Feasts of Fools and of Asses, the burlesque sermon depends on the decorum it overturns. It would be quite as absurd to find a heretic or immoral intention in such topsy-turvy as it would be to find an edifying one.

Comedy of the farcical mode, whose end is solely the preposterous conclusion, may leave one uneasy. The ridiculous as a form of imitation rather than of satire and the grotesque in which there is no allegory are attended by a kind of licence and by a primitive and undignified conviviality, which are disturbing. No doubt the study of literature is inherently priggish, but the Wife’s world is crooked, the comedy of her marriages is as cruel and banal as those of a Punch and Judy show, and Chaucer’s urbanity is a way of feasting upon the base and the ugly. And yet one cannot dismiss the Wife as unacceptable to modern taste, nor relegate her to the medieval world with the explanation that her pantomime belongs to an age of stricter hierarchies and more robust conventions. For one thing, if one rejects her in this way, one actually reinstates her as good fun, for the antic is only improved in the guise of the antique. For another, all comedy, in one form or another, involves the trite, the banal, and the indecorous; and, since the Wife incorporates these so generously, she can hardly go out of season. It is also simply in the nature of urbanity to play upon the gross, the distorted, and the cruel. Necessarily one’s attitude to such comedy is ambivalent; that is what tickles one.

The comedy of the Wife’s Prologue and Tale is a coarse joke and can and ought to be enjoyed on those terms. But is it nothing more? Antic comedy is, in fact, a mimetic mode in its own right, though one is used to finding it subservient to satire, or slander, or parable. In order to show one way in which it is an imitation, and not simply a revel or celebration of folly, I shall attempt to relate it to the courtly and religious ethos of Chaucer’s age. In the most general terms, given a Realist and aristocratic frame of mind, whether we care to characterize the Wife by flesh, or womanhood, or Third Estate, she confronts us with a mischievous reality, or rather with the abstraction of reality since she brings form to confusion. Like neoplatonic matter, which is mere privation of form or void stuff—the essentially grotesque as it were—antic comedy is naughty because it is naught, mischievous because envious of form and value, derisive because displaced. So the Wife’s comedy of parody, inversion, and bathos is a mode of imitating the intractable and base anti-reality of the world and experience. And our genial and creaturely involvement with that anti-reality is expressed in our ambivalent attitude,
and in the special licence antic comedy, like Erasmus' Folly, demands.

More specifically, one can relate the Wife's antic humor to religious attitudes. It is obvious from her Prologue that clerical satire had a share in shaping her bugbear womanhood. However, the scrurrility and ridicule of the tradition, like Lear's madness, took in more than women. The usury of her bed is an image of the precious bane that rewards love of the flesh, and her misrule looks like an emblem of the fate of those who love the world. "So Bromyard, comparing Worldly Fortune to a contrary wife, reminds his hearers how 'sometimes it is literally depicted thus upon the walls in the form of a woman turning a wheel with her hands, who, as most often happens, shifts the wheel contrary to the wishes of him who is propelled on it or sits upon the top.'" I do not, of course, wish to suggest Chaucer is contributing to De Contemptu Mundi satire, but he draws upon its pantomime possibilities. If the bouleverase of fortune, the illusions of the world, the decisionousness of the flesh are bathos and confusion, they can find expression in the farce of the "Archewyf."

At the same time, the material from clerical satire is placed in a context of courtly badinage against women and marriage. Here one can speak of the duplicity of tone that teases the earnest reader as part of courtly flying. Flying is part of courting, and, if the Wife is an image of the canker in the rose, she is also a kind of stalking horse."

The Wife's comedy also belongs to another tradition of courtly flying, in this case directed against the Third Estate. The Wife is both rogue and laughing stock because she is base; and the gross, the disgraceful, and the anarchic, unbound in the world of fabliaux and jigs, are courtly entertainment. I suppose this might be an expression of class antagonism and a way of putting the disorderly commons in their place. And yet it is also a form of courting, for it calls for a pawkie, bonhommaus stane and for ondosecnsion to be entertained. Even if she is anti-pastoral, the Wife still calls for a version of pastoral attitudes. This is not simply because the comedy of her Prologue is placed in the low life of an old and famous provincial town, but also because, like Skelton's Elinour Runnym, the figure of the Wife and her sort of low comedy belong to popular, as much as to Romance or clerical, tradition. In Sir David Lindesay's Ano Satyr of the Thrie Estatis, Solace relates of his mother Bonnie Besse,

Of twel thir auol sho lernit to swyle:  
Thankit be the great God on lyne,  
Scho maid me fatheris foure or fyue:  
But doun, this is na mowis.  
Quhen ane was deid, sho gat ane wther:  
Was never man had sic ane mother.

Of fatheris sho maid me ane futher,  
Of lawt men and leirit.  

(162-69)"

It is of course possible that both Chaucer and Lindesay drew on some folk heroine who began her career at twelve. But since Solace's lines closely resemble the Wife's

For, lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age,  
Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve,  
Housbondes at chyrche door I have had fyve.

(4-6)"

it looks as if Lindesay was indebted to Chaucer. In that case, what is relevant is how naturally Chaucer's invention passes into Lindesay's popular farce of evil counsellors and misrule. Again, if one turns to the "Carols of Marriage" in Richard L. Greene, The Early English Carols," one finds that all treat of the wo that is in marriage: of shrews, of widows, of wifely domination, expense, and unruly members. In particular 408 tells of an incident "at the townys end." Here it is the husband who is exasperated by the wife's tongue. He strikes her a blow on the ear of which, unlike Chaucer's Wife, she dies. Among the "Amorous Carols," 457 is possibly evidence of Chaucer's modifying popular tradition. At any rate, it seems to involve a Jankin and an Alysoun. The burden runs,

"Kyrie, so kyrie,"  
Jankyn synygt merie,  
With "aleyson."

Greene's note suggests that "aleyson" is probably a pun on the name of the girl. There is also a fleeting resemblance of situation to the Wife's admiring Jankin's pretty legs and feet at her fourth husband's funeral. In the carol the girl is at a Yule procession and there

Jankyn at the Angus beryt the paxbrede  
He twynkelid, but sayd nowt, and on myn fot he trede.

But it would be absurd to try to establish with a few such tenuous parallels that Chaucer actually drew on popular tradition for the Wife; nor is it important. What is important is that, as the comedy of shrews in farce, interlude, jig, ballad, and mystery play makes patent, the Wife's manifold comic femininity belongs to the humor of the people. In Chaucer the popular comedy becomes sophisticated. Part of that sophistication is simply that the comedy is seen as popular and so is attended by a courtly sense of distance from low life and low comedy, and by an urbane enjoyment of them.

There is a further reason for talking of the pastoral or popular nature of the Wife's Prologue and Tale, though it is a question, not of Chaucer's individual composition, but of the literary tradition in which it was formed.
That is the element of country matter, which, one might speculate, is a random survival of folk custom or of pagan belief. The provenance of the jealous husband and lusty wife, January and May, Winter’s flying with Summer is the May Game, and possibly the folk custom persisted in the comic tradition.\textsuperscript{19} The transformation of the Loathly Lady looks like the harvest figure of crane and maiden, or the rejuvenation of the year, or some other seal of health and wealth; and what is rejected as superstition might be allowed to be a source of Romance.\textsuperscript{20} Yet since both motifs crop up in inexhaustibly various shapes, the one for instance in George Eliot’s Casaubon and Dorothea, the other in Mozart’s Papagena, one might wonder if one can point to anything beyond their ubiquity. Still the medieval configurations of such matter are the grotesque and the marvellous, the farcical and the romantic. The anti-masque humor of the Tale, which makes a sophisticated play of the quaint that recalls The Golden Ass or The Rape of the Lock, in fact combines both. The Wife’s Prologue, on the other hand, is purely farcical. Either mode, farce or romance, is attended by the ironies of rejection and condescension since either distances or repudiates and, at the same time, licenses what it shows.

One might class the Wife’s comedy under the aspect of Hermes, the Trickster, in female garb, it is true. As agent of confusion and breaker of bounds herantic humor shares his sly buffoonery. The Trickster, like C. G. Jung’s “shadow,” is a type of the outcast and the base and, at the same time, “contains within it the seed of an enantiodromia, of a conversion into its opposite.”\textsuperscript{21} This paradox is latent in the Tale also, witness the comic reversals of her Prologue and the transformation in her Tale. Moreover, it is a hermetic cast in her nature that seems to ask for “transformation, through ‘finding and thief­ing . . . into riches, love, poetry, and all the ways of escape from the narrow confines of law, custom, circumstance, fate,’”\textsuperscript{22} for the Romantic transvaluation of all values, by which cupidity becomes the root of all morality, the eternal feminine draws us upwards, and the base is natural.

But, if one thing is clear about Chaucer’s Wife, it is that she is fool’s gold. So to say that she seems to ask for a hermetic transformation certainly does not mean one can talk about her as if her antic nature had been transformed. Nevertheless, it is only in terms of a historical revolution in literary values sympathetic to the sort of transformation she asks for that I can explain the surprising and elaborate judgments of the Wife and the enthusiastic press she has received in some post-Coleridgean criticism. I should say the transvaluation must be indeed hermetic if it can find redeeming, and more than redeeming, virtues in the Wife. Either it is an extravagant irony, or its values are somehow crooked. If irony, the account of the Wife must run in the following paradoxical way. She is a rogue, so she is spoken of as the incorrigibly vital. Except in her own terms, she is a scandal; therefore, she is extenuated as that epitome of the special case, the irremediably individual. Her being becomes secret, and, therefore, Chaucer could only have divined it by a godlike act of creative imagination; and we, who read, can only approach her baffled and amazed. So she is enfranchised. Obviously a squint-eyed appraisal like this is sheer critical waggishness. It is as if the Wife’s pantomime had invaded criticism and invested her with burlesque dignities. True, it is hard to speak of the Wife without duplicity, and some in the spirit of pantomime have written perceptively as well as entertainingly about her; nor would one wish to spoil the sport. But one should recognize the sport for what it is: a sort of condescending irony on the critics’ part. Otherwise it becomes imposture on the Wife’s, and her upside down world is taken seriously. To my mind, those values that so approve her rougery as fully human or find something excellent in her crookedness are askew.

To insist, on the other hand, on the penetration and seriousness of Chaucer’s moral insight misses the point about the Wife. Obviously Chaucer meant her for a bad lot, and obviously he saw to it she set everything running counter-clockwise; so obviously, in fact, that insight is not in question. The Wife is blatant enough, and it requires a very special stare to evade recognizing her for what she is: a fashioning of the rogue figure of wife from a more than well worked vein of low comedy. What Chaucer’s art added was range and suppleness of confusion. It is an urban art. That, of course, does not mean that it is pander’s art. Indeed, one can see the urbanity, amidst the festivity of the Pilgrimage, as a suspension of judgment against eternity. It does not presume to spy into that final unmasking of the masquerade of the world. But, since it is itself one of the masks, the urbanity expresses a sense of human finitude and of belonging to the pantomime of creaturely indignity. That, in a Christian as well as genial sense, is the human and worldly perspective of the Canterbury Tales.

Notes

1. Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences, 2nd ed. (New York, 1960), p. 91. Although I disagree with Professor Curry on the Wife’s character, I have found his information most helpful for my discussion of the Wife as a type figure.


3. Curry, p. 115.


5. Citations from Chaucer in my text are to The Complete Works, ed. Fred N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957).

7. I put this view, for what it is worth, against that expressed by E. Talbot Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," *MLA*, LXIX (1954), 928-36, that the narrator is a buffoon. The tone is often falsely naive, but so is Pandarus’, yet no one takes him for a simpleton. Buffoon and ironic man are akin, but the ironic man “lets you see all the while that he could enlighten you if he chose, and so makes a mock of you” (Francis M. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, ed. Theodore H. Gaster [New York, 1961], p. 120). One recognizes that the ironic man’s naïveté is put on; it is an affectation rather than an impersonation. Socrates’ enemies resented it as an air of superiority; in the case of the narrator one takes it as part of his festivity and urbanity.


12. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1963), pp. 206-31, esp. n. 6 (pp. 230-31) on the Sphinx and the observations (pp. 225-26) on Cinderella. I shall take up the trickster theme later in this paper.


15. See Francis L. Utey, *The Crooked Rib* (Columbus, 1944), pp. 30-34.


“King Henry” and “The Weddnyge of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell,” cited by G. H. Maynardier, *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* (London, 1901), pp. 9-16, is an echo of the Famine of the Farm (Frazer, p. 140). On the rejuvenation of the year, compare the marriage of Mars to Anna Perenna (Ovid, *Fasti*, III, 675-96) and see Frazer’s commentary in the *Fasti of Ovid* (London, 1929), III, pp. 121-27. See also Lévi-Strauss, pp. 230-31, n. 6 for another inviting line. This is, of course, the terrain of Shandyisms. What is important for my argument is that those elements should be recognized as “country.” It does not matter whether they originate in the fertility myth and ritual of the Cambridge school. Indeed, the theories of that school might well illustrate the perennial vitality of such country matter as a source of romance and fancy.


**James W. Cook (essay date summer 1978)**


[In the following essay, Cook uses religious doctrines of sacramental law to analyze the *Wife of Bath’s* failure to comply with the spirit of the sacrament of marriage. Because Alisoun prefers to control her spouse rather than form a true union with him, she is the opposite of the hag she describes in her Tale.]

In a provocative essay on Alice of Bath’s narrative posture, Gloria K. Shapiro recently requested a more adequate treatment of the religious dimensions of the *Wife of Bath’s* performance. In the course of her discussion, Professor Shapiro observed: “The perfection in virtue through . . . the grace of God is the larger subject of Dame Alice’s *Tale* . . . .” And so I also think it to be.

Professor Shapiro, however, goes on to reach the ingenious conclusion that Alice, prompted by an almost “pathological insecurity,” takes extraordinary pains to conceal her refined sensibilities and, with them, virtues so admirable and appreciative of purity that readers must henceforward regard the Wife as “partially beatiﬁed” by religious passion and as a more “convincing Christian” than is Chaucer’s Prioreiss.

In making this judgment, Professor Shapiro neither intends nor attempts to account systematically for the religious dimensions which interest her. In this essay,
therefore, I propose to provide an overview of the major theological dimensions of the Wife's performance, especially those relevant to the theology of grace and of the sacraments. I shall also consider the relevant positions of a selection of influential churchmen with respect to those dimensions and shall suggest that, though Alice no doubt reveals more of herself than she intends in her portrait of the hag, religiously this revelation arises more from contrast than from identity of attitude. Finally, I shall insist that Alice cannot be counted among the Christian blessed—even partly, and I propose to examine the Wife of Bath's Tale as a medieval consideration of the sacramental efficacy of marriage.

In the Summa Theologiae, St. Thomas teaches: "Now the whole rite of the Christian religion is derived from the priesthood of Christ. It is clear, then, that the sacramental character is specifically the character of Christ, to whose priesthood the faithful are configured according to the sacramental characters, which are nothing else but certain participations of the priesthood of Christ, which are derived from Christ himself."

Established by Christ for the good of the Church, the sacraments were deemed by Augustine, by Thomas, by their followers, and finally by the Council of Trent to be true causes (causa per se) of grace.

Though the Church considers matrimony least important among the sacraments, marriage is nevertheless Divinely ordained both to assist individuals in achieving spiritual perfection and to promulgate the growth of the Church. Accordingly, participation in each sacrament produces concomitant kinds and degrees of grace in the recipient and, also, certain observable benefits symptomatic of the grace which prepares human beings for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and for supernatural life.

St. Augustine specifies the sacramental benefits which flow from marriage. Among them, he lists the procreation of children, companionship between the sexes, the salubrious effect of matrimony in turning "carnal or youthful incontinence . . . to the honorable task of begetting children, so that marital intercourse makes something good out of the evil of lust," and finally, the benefit of parental affection for tempering the "concupiscence of the flesh."

To these benefits St. Ambrose adds harmony (armonia)—a couple's peaceful enjoyment of one another's company. Where one does not find this harmony, the Saint assures us, "There is strife and dis- sention, which is not from God, for 'God is love.'"

But this harmony, which in a wedded couple can be taken to signify the efficacy of the sacrament, is by no means the automatic outcome of having participated in the marriage ceremony. For any sacrament to confer its special grace on the participants, a number of conditions must first be fulfilled. Some of these conditions arise from the nature of the sacraments themselves. Sacraments are constituted by three elements: "things (res), as the matter (materia), words (verba) as the form (forma), and the person of the minister conferring the sacrament with the intention of doing what the church does." If all those elements are present, the church deems the sacrament valid. In the case of Alice's marriages, we have no reason to suppose the sacraments otherwise than valid in all respects.

Others of the conditions, however, depend upon the state of mind of the adult recipient. Thus the sacrament may be perfectly valid and yet prove productive of no grace for adults. This case obtains when the disposition of the recipient to receive the sacrament is marred either by an intention not to do what the church does, or by mortal sin. This view was fully developed by Chaucer's time and was later thus summarized by Bellarmine:

"Intention, faith and penitence are necessarily required in the adult recipient, not as active causes, for faith and penitence neither produce sacramental grace nor give the sacrament its efficacy, but rather they [can] only erect obstacles which indeed prevent the sacrament from being able to exercise its efficacy."

It seems clear that Alice evidences in her behavior, her narrative posture, and her autobiographical tour de force a good many obstacles that prevent the sacrament from producing consequent grace. One of them, however, is not the issue Chaucer has her raise concerning the validity of her five marriages. Theologically speaking, the doubts she expresses on that score constitute a red herring dragged through her narrative to throw her auditors off the scent of her real heterodoxy. Her arguments in support of serial marriage—though they seem to contradict Christ and however they may have offended prevailing lay and clerical notions of good taste and propriety—are nevertheless perfectly doctrinal. Though the church and the fathers strongly preferred widowhood to remarriage, they never dared to countermand the scriptural authority for the latter. Augustine remarked: "Men are wont to raise the question concerning third and fourth and even a greater number of marriages. To answer them in a few words, I do not have the audacity to condemn any of these marriages nor to minimize the shame of their frequency."

Alice's real heterodoxy appears, instead, in her obstinate refusal to subordinate her will to the Divine will as it is implicit in the marriage sacrament. This refusal reflects itself first in her defense of her sexual predilections, the willful origins of which she attempts to conceal under the guise of astrological compulsion:

For certes, I am al Venerien
In feelynge, and myn herte is Marcien.
Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,
And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse;
Myn ascendent was Taur, and Mars therinne.
Allas! allas! that evere love was synne!
I folwed ay myn inclinacioun
By vertu of my constellacioun;
That made me I koude noght withdrew
My chambre of Venus from a good felawe.

(D 609-18)

This essentially theatrical appeal for sympathy thinly disguises serious heresy. By citing her horoscope to excuse her behavior, Alice denies to her own will that degree of freedom which people require to be able to choose God’s intention for their lives—the highest good—over their own preferences, which, flawed by original sin, necessarily constitute the lesser good.

Moreover, Alice’s admission of her continuing concupiscence, one of the maladies sin causes, signifies the failure of the sacrament to prove efficacious and to produce, in her case, its consequent and curative grace. Had it done so, Alice would have displayed in her behavior the virtue of temperance—a sign of grace whose absence points directly to a defect in her will.

Alice’s willful heterodoxy also appears in the demand for mastery that she regularly imposes upon her husbands.

The church’s insistence upon the husband’s role as head of the family irks Alice—as it does some of her Tale’s critics. But in focusing argument on the pros and cons of the psychological justifications for Alice’s militancy—justifications that arise from misguided clerical, lay, and societal antifeminism—critical discussion sometimes obscures the theological imperative for a unique mutuality in marriage. This mutuality must express itself not only in the spouses’ physical union, but also and more importantly in the union of their wills and, beyond that, in the careful and caring maintenance of that union by cheerful, mutually supportive, and successful coping with the onerous round of daily tribulation which characterizes human life. According to St. Ambrose, the essence of marriage defines itself in the contract (pactio) which expresses the union of wills: “Thus when the marital union is begun, then the name of spouses is applied; for it is not the deflowering of virginity that makes the union, but the marital contract.”

As I shall argue below, in none of her marriages has Alice made a full commitment of her will to the sacrament, and from that reservation follow most unhappy religious consequences—sin, gracelessness, and loss of charity.

It seems, then, that critics who find in Alice of Bath the prototype of the twentieth century’s liberated woman and who can sympathize with her as the victim of an ages-old antifeminist conspiracy spring a snare that Chaucer set for Alice herself.

In preferring experience over authority and in raising and answering to her own satisfaction the question “what do women most want?” Alice universalizes her limited and limiting experience: she perceives herself as Everywoman.

To the church, and I think to Chaucer, she represents instead Everyman, facing the bar of God’s ultimate justice and stripped by her own tragic decisions of salvific grace and of true liberty.

The psychic stresses that appear in Chaucer’s characterization of Alice—her selective appeals to authority, her need for public approval despite private viciousness; her concern with appearances, her continual discomfort in her marriages, the tension created by the ongoing warfare between her refined sensibilities, on the one hand, and her shrewishness, lust, and coarseness, on the other—are in themselves symptomatic of the uneasy state of her soul and of her bondage to her appetites.

Commenting on the works of St. Augustine, Henri Rondet observes that therein “Liberating grace . . . appears as a principle of unification, capable of restoring harmony among the divergent tendencies which are in the sinner’s soul, which are the sinner himself precisely as sinner.” Thus the “pathological insecurity” to which Professor Shapiro has called our attention is itself indicative, not of beatitude, but of its opposite.

The theological universals that associate themselves with Alice’s experience do not do so exclusively or even principally as a result of her woes in marriage with five husbands—though these are certainly relevant. The universals, rather, have essentially to do with Alice’s self-selected misery as a human creature.

Thomas Aquinas offers elucidation here. Except for man, every creature has a divinely appointed end, a tendency to achieve it, and sufficient natural means to encompass it. Man, however, has been created a spirit for a spiritual end vastly disproportionate to his nature: “Although man is formed toward an ultimate end, he is unable to achieve that end naturally, but only through grace, and this is because of the eminence of that end.” Assisted by the gift of grace, man has the capacity actually to participate in the Divine nature—to achieve the beatific vision that is natural to no creature, but to the Creator only: “The gift of grace exceeds every faculty of the natural creature, for it is nothing other than a participation in the Divine nature . . . through participation in its likeness.”

But in this high distinction human misery originates. According to Thomas Aquinas and in the official view of the church, only God can make people fully happy, and people cannot reach God solely by their own ef-
forts. They require God’s freely offered help. Availing themselves of it, however, requires the exercise of will. People may accept God’s grace; they may refuse it.

“God is the sun that gives the light, the soul is the eye that opens to the light, and sin is the opaque screen that comes between the soul and God.”" Those who refuse grace blind themselves with sin and opt for the natural order at the expense of the beatific vision. The pragmatic consequence of that option is damnation, freely chosen."

And there stands Alice. Despite her astrological disclaimer, she makes choices and knows it, and her speeches emphasize the conscious operation of her will:

For sothe, I wol nat kepe me chaast in al.
Whan myn housbonde is fro the world ygon,
Som Cristen man shal wedde me anon. . . .

I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age
In the actes and in fruyt of mariaghe.

I nyl enve no virginitie.

I wol persevere; I nam nat precius.
In wythood I wol use myn instrument
As frely as my Makere hath it sent.

An housbonde I wol have, I wol nat lette,
Which shal be bothe my dectour and my thrall,
And have his tribulacion withal
Upon his flessh, whil that I am my wyf.

(D 46-48, 113-14, 142, 148-50, 154-57)

These expressions of will follow an instructive pattern. Except for the last of them, each proceeds from a consideration of the position for which Alice has not opted: widowhood, virginity, and self-denial. Each one also involves a self-conscious rejection of its alternative despite lip service paid explicitly to virginity as a purer mode of conduct and, by implication perhaps, to the other two as well.

Given this pattern, we observe a curious and significant lacuna as well as a nasty shift in tone when Alice sets forth her expectations for her husbands.

With characteristic selectivity in choosing her authorities according to her tastes, Alice cites Paul in support of her power over her husband’s body, but conveniently ignores that portion of the apostle’s “sentence” that liketh hir noght so weel: namely, that husbands also have power over wives’ bodies.22

As becomes abundantly clear in her account of her marriages, Alice reserves to herself authority over both bodies when she marries. Indeed, she reserves authority over her own body so that she can subsequently trade on it to gain opulent support and eventual control of her husbands’ goods. This defect of intention on Alice’s part both reveals her misunderstanding of the sacramental nature of Christian marriage and creates a serious obstacle to the sacrament’s efficacy in producing grace. Though she has often joined her body to another’s, she has intentionally and regularly avoided the requisite union of wills.

Moreover, Alice does not intend in her marriages to strive after harmony nor after perennial mutual affection which requires “a positive and definite effort on the part of the spouses.”20 Instead, she elects to become the “whippe.” Her success in that role needs no special citation.

Yet another indication that Alice has never submitted to the sacrament nor committed to a husband appears in the way she hedges her bets against the future. Still married to her fourth husband, she dangles with Jankin, promises to become his wife—contingent upon her first becoming a widow—and assures her pilgrim listeners:

Yet was I neveer withouten purveyance
Of mariaghe, n’of othere thynges eek.
I holde a mouses herte nat worth a leek
That hath but oon hole for to sterte to,
And if that faile, thanne is al ydo.

(570-74)

Theologically speaking, Alice’s reservations as she approaches the sacrament of matrimony and her commitment to enjoy what she perceives as her own good at the expense both of the harmony of her unions and of sacramental efficacy place her in a most precarious situation: “In the case of those who have reached the age of reason, the reception of grace must be voluntary . . . ; there must be nothing in the soul which is an obstacle to the entry of sanctifying grace. Sanctifying grace cannot enter if the will still cleaves to some grave sin and refuses to renounce it. If a man should receive a sacrament in such a frame of mind, not merely does he receive no grace, but he is guilty of the sin of sacrilege.”22

One is reluctant to pronounce with Huppré and Levy such a heavy judgment on Alice,20 but her very devotion to self is, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, symptomatic of the sinner. In the sinner “there is a kind of spontaneous preference for one’s own good in opposition to the universal good. The grace of God is necessary in order to correct this selfishness.”24

Alice is caught. Five times she has had the opportunity to avail herself of the grace of the sacrament. Five times she has interposed her will and opted for the private good. Each time she does so, in the eyes of the church she sins mortally, becomes more obdurate in her chosen evil and more blind to the possibilities that sacramental grace offers, not only for temporal happiness, but also for eternal salvation.
One other point remains to be made in this connection. Mortal sin is of course so called because it has the power of destroying supernatural life. Says theologian G. H. Joyce:

> A fully deliberate violation of God’s law in a grave matter involves the rejection of God as our last end. It is an act of formal rebellion against His authority. By such an act . . . the sinner of necessity forfeits the virtue of charity. Those who possess charity love God above all things; that is, they direct their lives to him as their last end. When a man shakes off the yoke of God’s authority, he thereby makes self-gratification his end instead of God, and in so doing deprives himself of charity.28

If the theological pity of her performance is that she is damning herself, the psychological pity is that thereby she has rendered herself incapable of caring, of loving in the sense of caritas and agape. Her avowed motives in marrying, her treatment of her husbands, her incapacity for moral growth as it is reflected in her failure to learn from her experience, and her final curse, calling down early death upon husbands who reject wives’ governance and invoking pestilence on those who spend too little, serve to confirm that view.

The pilgrim Chaucer gives us the key, after all, in the Wife’s General Prologue portrait when he comments on her character:

> In al the parisse wif ne was ther noon
That to the offrynge before hire sholde goo;
And if ther dide, cerseyn so wrooth was she,
That she was out of alle charitee.

(A 449-52)

Being first in the offertyre procesional suggests a kind of mastery, and failure to achieve it produces frustration, anger, and a concomitant loss of charity that parallels the events in her autobiographical discourse.

One wonders, then, how critics can argue for the moral identity of Alice and the morally beautiful hag of her Tale. Indeed, as John Ropollo noted years ago, the unregenerate knight of the early part of the story serves better than does the hag as Alice’s moral surrogate.29 The Wife’s willfulness, compulsive sexuality, disregard for others, and the recourse to the force she used to impose her will on Jankin all reappear in the knight’s rape of the peasant girl (D 886-88). Almost certainly Chaucer’s innovation,27 the rape underscores the moral similarity of the Wife and the knight of her Tale as a rapist, and Ropollo makes a convincing case for this identification and for the subsequent dissimilarity between Alice and her knight when, unlike her, he submits to discipline, receives his wife’s instruction, and reforms. Heretofore unremarked, however, is a parallel between the knight’s and Alice’s reservation of their wills.

This correspondence occurs when the knight fulfills his freely given promise to perform the Hag’s next request. Bound by his word, the chivalric code, the Queen’s justice, the hag’s determination, and the imperatives of the plot, the knight grudgingly marries the hag, thereby participating in the sacrament without the intention of doing what the church does. As Chaucer has Alice recount his demeanor:

> I seye ther nas no joye ne feeste at al;
Ther nas but heynynesse and muche sorwe.
For privelied he wedde hire on the morwe,
And al day after hidde hym as an owle.
So wo was hym, his wyf looked so foule.

(D 1078-82)

Just as the gentle persuasion of the pillow lecture on natural gentilesse overcomes the Knight’s central objection to the social mis-matching implicit in this union, so, it seems, does his recognition of her moral beauty lessen the knight’s objections to the hag’s physical loathliness.28 Thus the knight’s reluctance to choose between the hag’s proffered alternatives could mean one of two things. It could imply what Alice thinks it does—a choice between sensual gratification with the attendant risk of cuckoldry or secure reputation with sensual deprivation. For a more discriminating medieval person, however, it could also imply a fear that lost moral beauty was the price of improved physical appearance.

St. Ambrose raises the crucial question on this issue. In De institutione virginis, he asks husbands: “Why do you more require beauty of features in your spouse than moral beauty? Let a husband be pleased by integrity more than by pulchritude.”29 Elsewhere the Saint remarks: “For a woman’s beauty does not delight a man as do her virtue and gravity. Who seeks the blessings of marriage should desire [a woman] not more wealthy or well dressed but [one] adorned with morality.”29 The hag displays real concern for her moral health. Discerning that another has found fault with her, the hag of the Wife’s Tale immediately asks:

> What is my gilt? For Goddes love, tel me it,
And it shal been amended, if I may.

(D 1096-97)

Upon hearing the fault described, she proves by sweet reason that it is no fault at all, thereby keeping her word and amending it. Alice, however, displays no such concern for correcting her lapses. On the contrary, when Jankin attempts correction, he provokes immediate violent resistance, and the Wife’s later observation upon her recollection of it:

> Ne I wolde nat of hym correct be.
I hate hym that me vices telith me,
And so doo mo, God woot, of us than I.

(D 661-63)
Surely this is revelation through moral contrast rather than through identification.

In this connection, too, one must consider the Hag’s implicit defense of the necessity for the operation of human freedom as support for her argument against hereditary gentility:

Eek every wight woot this as wel as I,
If gentillesse were planted natureelly
Unto a certeyn lynage doun the lyne,
Pryvee and apert, thanne wolde they nevere fyne
To doon of gentillesse the faire office;
They myghte do no vileynye or vice.

(D 1133-38)

Neither the stars nor lineage determines gentility or viciousness; human beings choose good or evil for themselves. Again, Alice’s theology is faulted by contrast.

As the Wife’s Tale unravels, the sequence of events becomes important to the interpretation offered here. Convinced now by his wife’s argument, the knight emblematically joins his will to hers when, without knowing what the outcome of her choice will be he addresses her as “My lady and my love, and wyf so deere . . .” (D 1230). These words echo the Hag’s from lines 1091-92, “I am youre owene love and eek youre wyf; / I am she which that saved hath youre lyf. . . .”

The knight’s acknowledgment of the loathly lady as lady, love, and wife also signals that the moment has arrived when an already valid sacrament can also become efficacious. In his submission of his will to the sacrament, the knight becomes a full participant in the marriage and removes the obstacle to consequent grace.

The subsequent elation of the Hag on being granted the mastery that worldly women most prize is a joy in which the knight can fully participate because her choice corresponds precisely to that which he would have made had it been among the proposed alternatives.

In exercising the mastery her husband cedes her, in contrast to Alice, the loathly lady charitably opts to obey him in everything “That myghte doon hym plesance or likynge” (D 1256), thereby acknowledging the mutuality of the relationship. This mutual cession confirms the union of wills that removes the obstacle of the knight’s reservation and renders the sacrament efficacious and productive of grace.

The Hag’s transformation, no less miraculous than the knight’s regeneration, and his response to her metamorphosis—“His herte bathed in a bath of blisse” (1253)—symbolize the reception of grace as a result of sacramental efficacy.

Grace itself may be defined as adoption by God—as a state of divine sonship mutually exclusive with sin. Moreover, as children of God, men and women are equally called to grace and are co-heirs of the supernatural life. Arguing against the contrast of the sexes in moral matters, St. Ambrose says: “Each one therefore ought to know himself, whether man or woman, because each is in the image and likeness of God.”

In her care for her husband’s welfare, the Hag has not only saved the knight’s natural life, she has set him on the road to supernatural life as well. Indeed, the pillow lecture and the knight’s conversion provide a practical example of a husband and wife’s sharing together the life of grace. Along with mutual prayer and fasting, Dooley identifies mutual teaching and exhortation as signs of that life.

A natural outcome of that grace is regeneration, by which is not meant merely a moral amelioration in a person’s character—though certainly that occurs in the knight’s progress from a willful, heedless rapist, to a subject bound by honor to become an unwilling bridegroom, to a committed husband, to one beatified by bliss. Regeneration properly signifies “. . . That a new nature has been conferred on us: that the humanity we received from our parents by natural generation has been transformed into something better. . . . The moral change which regeneration involves is the result of this far more fundamental renewing of the soul.”

Renewed by grace, the soul’s faculties become elevated and receive appropriate gifts in the form of the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. When grace resides in the soul, charity resides in the will and is “the virtue by which we love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves for God’s sake.” Charity, which is thus symptomatic of the receipt of grace, seems clearly evident in the mutual affection with which the knight and his no longer loathsome or loathed lady regard each other at the end of Alice’s Tale.

Equally clearly, charity is absent from Alice’s final curse, which mirrors those attitudes and practices that Alice learned at her old mother’s knee, and which she has not modified in the course of five marriages. One finds neither moral growth nor regeneration in Alice.

Just as a loss of charity implies a lack of grace, so a lack of wisdom symptomizes a loss of charity, for wisdom is that gift of the Holy Spirit which complements charity in those blessed with grace.

A momentary digression will recall that at baptism each person, justified for the first time, receives in that moment the whole range of supernatural virtues, both moral and theological, which render souls susceptible to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
As I earlier noted, Thomas teaches that any mortal sin—like the knight’s rape of the peasant girl, or Alice’s infidelities and her reservations of her will in marriage—takes away charity. Sin does not, however, also destroy faith and hope—though without charity those virtues remain misdirected. Alice’s misdirected faith appears again and again in her discomfort with her own situation. It also appears in her occasional prayers, and, negatively, in her curses. Her hope reveals itself in her unending search for yet another husband.

Even awash in sin, however, faith and hope remain virtues still and, speaking theologically, account for a portion of the Wife of Bath’s unflagging attractive appetite for living and her optimism in spite of her experience of the woes of marriage. They account too, I think, for her concern about the opinions of others and for her theological rationalizing. Perhaps they also provide avenues for Alice’s eventual, though unlikely, reformation.

Viewed in the light of issues relevant to a consideration of sacramental theology, the Wife of Bath’s Tale raises and examines important questions which arise from the intersection of those issues with human life as it is lived in fact, in fantasy, and in feeling; in thought, in will, and in soul.¹

Notes


3. Shapiro, p. 131.

4. Shapiro, p. 140.

5. Shapiro, p. 141.


13. See St. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* 5.6.3: “Primo igitur ad integritatem perfectionis requiritur necessario perfectus recessus a malo, perfectus processus in bono et perfectus status in optimo. Quoniam autem malum aut procedit ex tumore superbiae, aut ex racore maliiae, aut ex linguare concupiscientiae.” (First, therefore, [to achieve] the wholeness of perfection a perfect retreat from evil, a perfect progress toward the good, and a perfect attitude with respect to the highest good are necessarily required. Otherwise [spiritual] ill health proceeds either from the swelling of pride, or from the rancour of ill will, or from the languor of concupiscence.) See also *Breviloquium* 6.13.1.

14. St. Ambrose, *De institutione virginis* 6, 41 (PL CCCXXXI, 41): “Cum enim initiatur coniugium tunct coniugii nomen adsiciscitur; non enim defloratio virginitatis facit coniugium, sed pacto coniugialis.” Not only does St. Ambrose insist on this point, the general practice of fourteenth-century ecclesiastical courts confirms that this doctrine was not an arcane theological nicety but a matter of popular consciousness. Karen A. Corsano in “Custom and Consent: A Study of Marriage in Fourteenth Century Paris and Normandy” (unpublished thesis, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto, 1971), examines several cases in which the union of wills was the crucial point in the court’s decisions concerning the validity of marriages. See also, William Joseph Dooley, *Marriage According to St. Ambrose* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1948), p. 38.

(New York: Newman Press, 1966), p. 97. Italics mine. See also St. Augustine, *Confessionem* 8.22 (*PL* XXXII, 759): “Nec plene volebam, nec plene nolebam. Ideo mecum contendebam, et dissipabar a me ipso.” (Neither was I fully willing nor fully not willing. For that reason I was contending with myself and was destroying myself.)


18. Rondet, *Grace*, p. 211. See also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.48.4; 1-2.79.3; 2-2.2.3; 1-2.2.8; *Contra gentes* 3.159; and *De malo* 2.11.

19. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1-2.5.2: “Peccatores autem qui non justificantur per gratiam non sunt electi culpam sed solum praescit quod non sinit gratiam habituri, sed sae naturae sint relinquenti.” (Sinners, however, who are not justified by grace are not elected to guilt by the preordained will of God but it is only foreknown [to God] that they will not long for grace but will forsake their natures.)


28. A tension worth noting arises between the primary emphasis the lady’s foul appearance receives in Alice’s interpolations, and the primary emphasis the knight places upon his own and his kin’s being “disparaged”—mismatched—by the union.


30. St. Ambrose, *De Abraham* 1,2,6 (CSEL XXXII, i, 506): “Non enim tam pulchritudo mulieris quam virtus eius et gravitas defectat virum. Qui suavitatem quaerit coniugii non superiorem censu ambit . . . non monilibus ornatum sed moribus.”

31. Bernard S. Levy in “Quenye Fantasey,” pp. 109-10, has called attention to the baptismal quality of this image and to its sacramental implications.


35. Joyce, p. 12. See also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1-2.110.4: “Gratia dicitur creari ex eo quod homines secundum ipsam creantur, id est in novo esse constituuntur ex nihil.”

36. Joyce, p. 82.

37. See *CT*, D 576.


40. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* 14.7; and *Summa Theologiae* 2-2.4.4. Without charity, directed or formed faith (fides formata) becomes formless and misdirected (fides informata).
41. I am grateful to the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies at the University of Toronto for the kind hospitality afforded me during my research on this paper.

D. W. Robertson, Jr. (essay date spring 1980)


[In the following essay, Robertson attempts to properly define the Wife of Bath's financial and occupational positions in regards to her landholdings, class standing, education, and marriageability.]

Embedded in the Wife's Prologue are various statements concerning transfers of land and wealth that may be indicative of her legal status. She is sometimes thought of as a freeholder under the common law, or, alternatively, as a borough tenant. I should like to suggest here that she was probably thought of in Chaucer's time as a rural clothier, and that her Prologue may indicate further that she was a bondwoman. Although the social distinction between freeholders and villeins was disappearing in the later fourteenth century when social status in rural communities depended on wealth rather than on legal distinctions, and when increasing numbers of villeins were more wealthy than some of their neighboring freeholders, unfree status would have been consistent with the iconographic overtones of the Wife's character. I believe that Chaucer was careful about such matters and hope to demonstrate further instances of this concern. Whether the conclusion concerning status is found acceptable or not, however, the following discussion should help to shed some light for Chaucerians on the character of the late medieval cloth industry, afford an explanation for the Wife's concern about land, and suggest a reasonable explanation for her obvious and even ostentatious wealth.

With reference to her first three "good" husbands, who were "riche and olde," she says, "They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor" (204), so that she held these husbands "hooily" in her hand, and pleased them only for her "profit" and "ese" (211-224). Nevertheless she complains, as if to all three of them in one person,

"why hydestow, with sower,
The keyes of thy chest away fro me?
It is my good as wel as thy, pardee!"

(308-310)

And she further asserts that her husband (sc. husbands) cannot be "maister of my body and of my good," and will forego one of them. Indeed, she charged for her services, demanding "raunson" for them (411), and endured their lust for "wynnyng" (406), thus converting her Pauline "marriage debt" (153) into a means of prostitution, apparently for the sake of ostentatious dress, a common target for moral censure both in prose and verse during the fourteenth century (cf. Parst T[Parson's Tale], 932-34). There is a seeming inconsistency here, for if her husbands had given her their land and wealth, why did she need access to their chests (used to keep cash and documents, since there were no banks)? Is her claim that the money is hers valid? Or is she simply reflecting the "Theophrastian" opinion that a wife will always claim "half part" of her husband's goods (Mercht[Merchant's Tale], 1299-1300)?

Before seeking to answer these questions, we might review very briefly a few points of English law. In the first place, no one "owned" land. He or she held it of someone else in some sort of tenure; and the person of whom it was held, traditionally a "lord," although in the complex tenurial relationships of the late Middle Ages not necessarily a person of higher status, in turn held it of someone else, the ultimate lord being the king. Those who held directly of the king were called "tenants in chief" of the crown. But the king did not "own" land either, so that we can say that there was no such thing as the "ownership" of land in medieval England. In France there were "lordless" or "alodial" lands, but not in England. An individual might be "seized" of land, which meant that he occupied it either in person or through someone else; or a manorial lord might be "seized" of land occupied by his tenants, the terms of whose occupancy and rights of inheritance were governed by local custom, or, at times, by special grant. Under the circumstances, unlike personal property such as beds, robes, drapes, cups, silverware, gold and silver, pots, pans, other kitchen utensils, kerchiefs, stocks of wood, etc., land could not be devised or willed to someone else. There were exceptions in burgage tenure in some towns, where land could be devised even to a person who was neither a direct nor a collateral heir, and among villeins on some manors.

In spite of this situation, land was the most secure and popular form of investment, and even merchants, after accumulating cash from trade, often exchanged it for land or purchased landed estates for retirement. Land was then evaluated not for features like pleasant views, flower gardens, proximity to beaches, schools, churches, or markets, but for the annual income that might be expected from it. That is, medieval documents do not ordinarily evaluate land in terms of sale price, but indicate that such and such land was worth so much a year. And when sale prices were determined, they were often awkwardly managed, although during the fifteenth century a purchase price amounting to twenty years' income became common. During the fourteenth century, tenants in need of cash might be expected to
make sacrifices, and there were land brokers in London, like Sir John Philpot, ready to arrange transactions.

Free land might be held in “fee simple,” like the land acquired by the Sergeant of the Law (GP [General Prologue] 319), and such land had the advantage of liquidity because, with some exceptions on certain manors, it was freely alienable. But it was not highly suitable for the formation of estates, since collateral heirs could claim an interest in it, so that some landholders in the late Middle Ages sought to convert tenures in fee simple into tenures in fee tail, usually tail male, so that a male heir could not alienate it but was forced to retain it for his own male heir.4 On the other hand, especially after the fifteenth century had begun to show its own economic peculiarities, there were those who sought to avoid the restrictions of entailments. Under the common law, primogeniture was the ordinary rule where male heirs were concerned except that in Kent and here and there elsewhere the custom of “gavelkind” prevailed, in accordance with which all sons shared equally in an inheritance. In some boroughs and in villein tenure on some manors “borough English” prevailed, in accordance with which the youngest son inherited.4 Under the common law, females might inherit in instances where there was no male heir; and if there were more than one, land, or even a manor house,2 and other tenurial rights, like the right to take the profits of a hundred courts,4 were divided equally among them. If the land given to the Wife by her “good” husbands was land subject to the common law, it must not have been encumbered by reversions, remainders, or entailments, for the marriages were without issue and she says that she retained it after they died (630-31), in effect buying her fifth husband with it, just as her good husbands had purchased her when they were old; and then, finally, she implies that she recovered it. All this would have been a little awkward.

Under the common law, a principle of “Baron et Femme” (not completely abolished until 1935) operated,4 in accordance with which all a wife’s holdings both in land and personal property, including cash, vested in her husband. A husband could not rightfully alienate his wife’s land without her consent, but he could dispose of personal property as he pleased. But the Wife of Bath must not have been subject to this rule, since the “tresoor” of her old husbands was attractive to her, and she managed, apparently without too much difficulty, to make extravagantly expensive pilgrimages (GP 463-67). That is, if their cash had vested in them immediately after their marriage, there would have been little point in their offering it to her in the first place. Moreover, she says that since they had given her their land she could govern them as she pleased, demanding “gaye thynge fro the fayre” (221) and chiding them unmercifully. Under the common law, she had no claim to any of the contents of any husband’s “chest.” To continue for a moment with matters of common law, if a husband survived his wife, he was entitled to only half of her land during his lifetime “by Courtsey of England” (abolished as to fee simple in 1925), provided, as the old authorities said, that “a cry was heard within four walls,” i.e., that a living child had been born of the union. It did not matter whether the child survived.4 A widow, regardless of the dower specified “at church door,” where in the Sarum Rite a husband endowed his wife with all his worldly goods, could claim only a third of her husband’s holdings in land during her lifetime.11 Meanwhile, under the common law a wife could incur debts only as an agent of her husband, not on her own behalf. The attitude of the royal courts was well expressed by Chief Justice Charleton of the Common Bench in 1388: “A wrait of account was never maintainable against a woman, because a man would not have such a writ ensealed in the chancery against any woman, and it is the folly of a man that he should deliver any money to a woman for her to account for it.”13 But widows in burgage tenure sometimes (but not in all boroughs) inherited all their husband’s holdings, including tenements, shops, and manufacturing facilities, and could be expected, with the aid of children, apprentices, and servants, to carry on the trade.13 And widows in customary (servile or villein) tenure often entered the holdings of their deceased husbands, sometimes even alienating them on their own behalf after they had remarried.14 In other words, there were some ways in which women in burgage or servile tenure enjoyed more freedom than their legal and (often but not always) social superiors. The evidence of the Wife’s Prologue so far adduced makes one of these alternatives almost a certainty.

To continue with the Prologue, however, there are no references to land in connection with the fourth husband, the “revelour.” Both he and the Wife were young, and their difficulties matters of jealousy rather than of tenure or of access to cash. We do know that she went on one of her costly pilgrimages to Jerusalem during this marriage, so that she must have had access to cash without selling her favors. In fact, her husband died at her return (495), an indication that he had managed the trade during her absence. She was happy to be rid of him and was niggardly with his funeral expenses, an indication, perhaps, that he had made no will or that he had little or nothing to dispose of in his own name. To her fifth husband, Jankyn, the Oxford student and parish clerk with legs and feet “clene and faire,” she gave, as we have seen, “al the lond and fée” she had accumulated. Here “fée” probably means “inheritable interest,” and not simply “wealth.” Under the common law, this gift would not have affected Jankyn’s rights during her lifetime except his right to alienate without her consent. In any event, having grown old and having under some kind of jurisdiction guaranteed his inheritance, she naturally becomes suspicious that he may be
awaiting her demise with some impatience in order to enjoy the profits of her land for himself and to attract a younger wife, perhaps with legs and feet like his own. Hence her complaint,

"And for my land thus hastow mordred me?"

(801)

But since Jankyn lost his benefit of clergy when he married a widow, her suspicions about his ultimate intentions if not of his murderous inclinations were probably correct. His clergy would not have protected him from being hanged or outlawed if he had indeed murdered her, and all his lands, held in any form of tenure, as well as his chattels, would have escheated to the crown, a fact that adds a certain sting to the complaint. He might have been able to purchase a royal pardon, but this procedure would have been risky unless he had an influential patron. However, the accusation worked, seasoned with a little sentimental appeal (802), and the Wife recovered her control over her land, presumably including the "fee," and wealth (814), as well as a kind of "maistrie" she had not quite succeeded in obtaining over her first four husbands, the first three of whom complained bitterly, while the fourth had a wandering eye. If the land was free land, or even if it was held in burgage tenure in some boroughs, Jankyn was left with the dubious prospect of "Curtesy of England," and this only if he was successful at literal "engendrefr".

In so far as "engendrefr" is concerned, there is no indication in her Prologue that the Wife had succeeded in literal obedience to the commandment to "wexe and multiply," having in mind as she did her own gloss on this text, as well as her own view of the nature of the "fruyt of mariage" (114). We may assume, therefore, that the Wife's recovery of her fee effectively removed any temptation Jankyn might have suffered. Perhaps a glance at the nature of land transfers under the common law will provide further clues as to the kind of tenure she enjoyed. Traditionally, seisin of land was transferred by a formal ceremony called "livery of seisin" in the presence of witnesses who could testify that the ceremony had been properly carried out. Since the testimony of witnesses was becoming subject to vicissitudes of one kind or another, livery was often supplemented by a written charter. Jankyn, a parish clerk like Absolon in the Miller's Tale, could probably make a "chartre of lond" (3327). Charters were more secure if they were indented; that is, two copies were made on either half of a skin that was cut apart on a jagged line and a copy given to each party. If the two parts fit, the charter was considered valid. But charters could be stolen or forged, and the most secure method of transfer was by "fine" that involved a fictitious lawsuit and the inscription of a triple indenture, the one at the bottom of the skin, or the "foot," being left as a court record. Surviving "feet of fines," as they are called, are important historical records. In view of the Wife's adversary relationship with her husbands, only the last of these methods would have been completely safe. But it is difficult to imagine her undertaking the necessary legal procedures to acquire seisin from her first three husbands, to transfer such seisin to Jankyn, and finally to recover it, for under the common law a husband could not transfer land directly to his wife, nor a wife to a husband, and neither could be the heir of the other, since in this matter they were "one person." But there were ways of circumventing these restrictions. Thus the establishment of joint tenure between husband and wife through a final concord would insure a life estate to the survivor, although the Wife speaks of "gifts" rather than joint tenancies.

Possible explanations are available for the gifts or transfers. The first three husbands might well have enfeoffed the Wife with land or tenements of one kind or another, perhaps as a pre-condition of marriage, although if they took part in the trade, as the Wife's pilgrimages suggest that they did, and as the fourth husband almost certainly did, it is difficult to see how they lost control over their monetary wealth or tangible goods. Again, the Wife may have enfeoffed Jankyn with her tenements through a third party, and then later persuaded him to re-enfeoff her, again through a third party, perhaps this time with a final concord for security. No such procedures are mentioned in the text, but Chaucer may have thought that his audience would assume them. The assumption, sometimes made, that Jankyn's loss of control was simply an informal or personal arrangement does not account for the implications of "lond and fee," and hardly removes the tempting prospect that young man once had before him. And in all of the above instances in which the husband took part in the trade, a kind of joint tenure would have been implied during life with a strong social bias in favor of the husband. Again, if charters or other documents were involved in any of the land transactions mentioned in the Prologue, why does Chaucer fail to mention them? In the Merchant's Tale, where free holdings were involved, Januarie urges May to make charters granting her all his heritage (2171-75).

Boroughs varied enormously in character, administration, and custom. The tenements in a borough might be partly or entirely under manorial, baronial, ecclesiastical, or royal jurisdiction, and customs might vary in different parts of a single borough. In some, alienation was restricted by retrait lignager, or by the right of a kinsman to a kind of option to purchase. Most boroughs contained adjacent arable lands that could be alienated separately, but ordinarily the most prosperous burgage tenants held little arable. Rents from burgage tenements could be traded in themselves, their value ranging from 6d. to £4, but on the average between 5s.
and 10s. Tenants held for life, by long lease, at will, remainder in fee, and "by Curtesy of England," the most common type of holding being by long lease. It is unlikely that in a town near Bath rents would fall in the upper range of the above figures, and if the Wife depended on holdings such as these for three pilgrimages to Jerusalem, not to mention lesser journeys hardly undertaken with much penitential abstinence, her holdings must have been so extensive as to strain credulity. Her complaint, moreover, mentions "land," not tenements, messuages, shops, stalls, or rents. There is a reference to "hous and lond" (814) suggesting a single residence and holdings in land.

Finally, it has become conventional to assume that the Wife’s place of origin “baside Bathe” implies the parish of St. Michael’s “juxta Bathon,” where there are said to have been weavers. But this is a conjecture, and Chaucer’s phrase could just as well imply any village near Bath or simply a birthplace, as does the name “Alicia Bathe” in the records of Castle Combe mentioned below. E. M. Carus-Wilson indicated over twenty years ago that the Wife of Bath should be thought of as a “west-country clothier,” participating in an industry that was expanding in the region using rural labor, mostly female, and creating substantial wealth for its “managerial” participants, the clothiers. One of the most striking features of the rising cloth industry was its rural character. Thus R. A. Donkin tells us that “the most significant development was the gradual shift in the distribution of cloth-making away from the old-established towns and towards a much larger number of smaller places, many in fact mere villages. The gilds of textile workers in the older centres naturally tried to monopolise manufacture, but in the end they failed.”

And R. E. Glasscock, writing specifically about the fourteenth century, says that “cloth-making was spreading rapidly in the rural areas made possible by the spread of the fulling mill, and encouraged by urban entrepreneurs who, free from the restrictions of town gilds, could produce cloth more cheaply in rural areas.” It should be added that gilds were becoming wary about women in the trade, and that they ordinarily enjoyed great power in town governments. It seems quite likely that Chaucer and his audience were well aware of these trends, and that most members of the audience would have concluded immediately that the Wife’s prosperity was the result of her participation in the thriving rural cloth industry, not as a mere weaver, a proper companion for haberdashers, carpenters, dyers, and makers of tapestries in parish fraternities, but as a clothier, and certainly not as the holder of a large portion of the tenements in a suburb of Bath. But is what we are told about land transactions in the Wife’s Prologue consistent with customary (unfree) tenure? Land in customary tenure, in which a holding did not involve seisin on the part of the tenant, was transferred in manorial courts, where each transfer or entry might involve a fine set by the court that was profitable for the lord. In many areas customary tenure had become in effect “copyhold” tenure, so named because the tenant kept a copy of the court record involving his land for himself. But copyhold tenure, which remained distinct from freehold tenure until 1925, did not alter the legal status of the copyholder in the Middle Ages. That is, a “native” or villein of his or her lord remained a native or villein. So long as the manorial steward, who presided over the court for his lord, maintained his rents, land transfers involving new entry fines were advantageous. An example will illustrate these principles more vividly than an abstract discussion.

Before we turn to the example, one more question that probably arose in the minds of Chaucer’s audience, at least momentarily, should be considered. Why were the good old husbands willing to give up all their land and wealth in order to marry Alisoun? It is true that older men often find the prospect of fresh young wives attractive, as the Tales of the Miller and the Merchant sufficiently indicate, just as older women sometimes long for “Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde.” Perhaps the first of her husbands succumbed to a lure of this kind. But to account for two more in succession in this way, especially in a society in which a woman’s treatment of her husband was likely to be well-known, and in which most persons were practical rather than romantic, is to strain the imagination. There were ways of satisfying “human needs,” as we now like to call them, that did not demand the kind of sacrifice contemplated by young Aurelius in the Franklin’s Tale. We should expect, therefore, that the Wife had something more profitable than her “propre yitte” (103, 608) to attract these old men, in spite of her obvious confidence in its powers. It did not, we notice, occupy the exclusive attention of her fourth husband, who “hadd a paramour” (454). But he married her nevertheless, probably to gain access to something else. That Chaucer does not tell us specifically what this “something else” was probably results from his very characteristic technique of indirection, allowing the audience just sufficient information to puzzle them a little before the answer dawns on them. The solution to this problem, as well as to the legal problems adduced above, may become apparent in our example.

The example in question is that of a native of her lord or bondwoman at Castle Combe in Wiltshire. First, by way of background, a rental of the manor in 1340 reveals the presence of a fulling mill on an acre of land held by a free tenant, John Daniel, who paid an annual rent of 20s. for it, but like all the other free tenants except one, a miller who held a virgate of land and a grain mill, he was a tenant "at the will of the lord," whose holding did not pass to his heirs. In 1352 the lord abandoned the cultivation of his demesne for his own use and commuted the obligations of the custom-
ary tenants (villeins, nates, bondmen) to money rents.\(^{27}\) In the seventies one Thomas Touker (a name meaning "fuller") took over the fulling mill and became one of the first clothiers in Castle Combe. The industry prospered in the area, and continued to do so in the fifteenth century.\(^{28}\)

Our bondwoman, Margery Haynes, appears together with a list of her holdings in a manorial extent of 1454.\(^{29}\) First, as the widow of Edward Walcote, known as Jones, she held a tenement and a virgate of land in customary tenure for which she owed a rent of 10s., the obligation to serve as reeve or other official (or to pay a fine for not serving when elected by the court), and heriot (an obligation to the lord at the tenant's death, usually consisting of his best horse in servile tenure or a horse with trappings in free tenure, or in either instance a fine agreed upon between the tenant and the steward). Several virgates on the manor were said in the extent to contain 24 acres, so that we may assume that Margery's was of about this size, allowing for some flexibility in the meaning of acre and remembering that virgates might vary in area on a single manor. Margery is also listed, as the widow of William Haynes, her first husband, among the servile cottagers. In this category, ordinarily the most humble of all on agricultural manors, she held a cottage in South Street where she resided for 2s. In addition she held a close with a dovecote (probably the old manorial dovecote) and an adjacent "solo" or workshed for 4s. 6d., a tenement in the gatehouse of the manor at the market with an adjacent curtilage or garden for 20d., and a larger cottage near the cemetery for 4s. 10d. But her most important holding, still as a servile cottager, was a plot of three acres serving as a "milling-place." It contained three mills: a grain mill, a fulling mill, and a mill called a "Gygemille" (a gig mill for teaseling cloth). As the extent puts it, "de eadem Margeria molendina sumptibus suis propriis sustentabit." Accompanying the mills was what must have been a large cottage in West Street, perhaps the original residence, valued at 5s. rent. For the mills and cottage together she paid 19s.10d., since a milling place was rated at 14s.10d., or about the equivalent of a virgate of land in accordance with manorial custom. In this respect manorial custom failed to account for industrial development, since the three mills, as we shall see, produced an income far greater than that from a virgate of agricultural land. It is of incidental interest that two other servile cottagers, both male, held fulling mills. One paid 20s. for a mill and a cottage; the other paid 21s. for his mill, a cottage, and a parcel of land.

Margery's first husband died in 1435, leaving at his death chattels valued by his friends and relatives appointed by the court to make an inquest at the enormous sum of 3,000 marks (£2,000), or twice what Aurelius in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* was worth. But the homage of the manor (the men obliged to attend court)—as Scrope, the historian of Castle Combe and editor of its documents, suggests—"liable to similar imposts and naturally desirous to mitigate their rigour,"\(^{30}\) testified that after debts, funeral expenses, and charitable bequests (like that of £20 for the fabric of the church and bell tower of Castle Combe) had been paid, the remainder would amount to only 200 marks. In any event, in 1436 the court imposed an entry fine of £40 so that Margery could retain the remainder of her husband's goods. Her son Thomas, apparently of age, was granted £43 12s. 4d. for his own use, £26 for his father's burial and anniversaries, and 60s. for the repair of a mill. This last grant suggests that he may have been associated with his mother in the trade. But it is noteworthy that the widow, not the son, was regarded as the heir to the business. Shortly thereafter Margery married Edward Jones, who brought his virgate and tenement with him, and she was fined what looks like a wildly extravagant merchet (fee for permission to marry, only 6s. 8d. elsewhere in the court rolls of Castle Combe, and often much less than this on agricultural manors in the fourteenth century), combined with an entrance fee, amounting altogether to £100. Scrope observes sagely that, in spite of these fines, "she appears to have offered a tempting prize." Indeed, Jones became fairly prosperous, for in 1439 we find him paying £10 5s. 7d. for some of the goods left in the confiscated estate of a deceased rector, including a silver girt goblet, two silver cups, a dozen spoons, a silver belt, a feather bed, and other less luxurious items.\(^{31}\)

However that may be, Jones did not gain immediate control of his new wife's holdings. In fact, he found it necessary to pay a fine of £60 in 1442 for a part of Margery's holdings, one of the cottages now being called a "shopa." And by this time the holdings included fishing rights at Gatecombe and Longbridge. Scrope and E. M. Carus-Wilson disagree on the nature of this fine, the latter stating that it was an addition to the £40 already paid to make up the £100 demanded at the time of the marriage.\(^{32}\) But this is still a very large sum. The relationship between Margery and her husband was apparently satisfactory for a time, and the records suggest a form of joint tenancy. But in the following year we find Margery again paying £60 in the manorial court "ut possideat bona sua mobilia, pannis laneos, lanum [sic], mader pro tincturis, ac tenementa et molendina sua quae reputantur valere die obitus sui mille marcas."\(^{33}\) Jones may have died, although his name appears in a court record of 1453.\(^{34}\) It is noteworthy that the steward and his court had the usual difficulty in placing an evaluation on the holdings, but they were now once more firmly in Margery's hands, where they remained, as we have seen, in the manorial extent of 1454. To conclude our story, Margery died in 1455. Her holdings passed to her son, Thomas Haynes, a reliable man who served as bailiff in 1457-58, for an entry fee of only £4.
Perhaps the court felt that the substantial fines already charged were almost enough. Happily, Thomas was manumitted in 1463 for £20.

Looking back over these events, we can see that Margery was a singularly wealthy woman, in spite of being a bondswoman. Her mills undoubtedly supplied a generous income, and the fulling mill and gig mill must have been especially profitable, since they would serve the needs of some of her fellow clothiers as well as her own. The documents indicate, as we have seen, that she had facilities for dyeing as well as for fulling and teaseling, and the further fact that she owned a stock of wool suggests that some of the tenements listed among her holdings were occupied by servants, mostly female, in addition to her two French man-servants, working at the various steps in cloth manufacture. One can almost visualize the fulled red and white broadcloths, colors favored by her lord, Sir John Fastolf, who supplied cloth for uniforms, stretched out in strips four-and-a-half or six feet wide and seventy-two feet long on frames equipped with tenterhooks near the stream that ran through the village, which was situated in a narrow valley, awaiting their turn at the gig mill and the finishing ministrations of the shearsers. Or we may imagine Margery standing before her cottage with one of her French servants chatting with the royal ulnar (an inspector of cloths) as carloads of cloths folded and tacked by women make their way laboriously out of the village toward the highroad. The cloths of the Wife of Bath (at least in the imaginations of Chaucer’s audience) would have been destined for Bristol, a thriving cloth port in the late fourteenth century. Chaucer, who was not a “realist,” affords us no descriptions of the Wife’s daily business concerns, but it is likely that most members of his audience needed no reminders and were thoroughly familiar with the sight of women sorting, carding, and spinning. They had seen weavers at their looms, heard the clatter of fulling mills, and experienced the unpleasant odors of dye vats. Through open doorways they had seen the look of concentration on the faces of shearsers poising their long blades over cloths laid out on tables as they labored to create an even nap. To return to Castle Combe, it is likely that some of the women listed as cottagers in the manorial extent who were less fortunate than Margery, although one held a dyehouse, worked for Margery and other clothiers to pay their rents and sustain themselves. One of them, amusingly enough, called herself “Alicia Bathe.” The dovecote probably provided food for Margery’s table as well as profits substantially beyond its rent of 4s. 6d. And the fishing rights, much coveted in the Middle Ages when fish was an extremely popular food, not merely Lenten fare, had similar advantages. Castle Combe boasted good trout.

The example of Margery thus clarifies the probable nature of the Wife’s land transactions and demonstrates the peculiar attractiveness of her land to her husbands. We are not told what facilities she had as a clothier. But the basic holding that made prosperity in cloth-making possible was ordinarily a fulling mill. Chaucer’s audience might well have envisaged a dyehouse and other facilities, including work-sheds, but they may have spontaneously imagined also poor cottagers laboring at home, or even more substantial persons who preferred the daily wages of industry to the smaller and less certain monetary rewards of agricultural labor. A “milling-place” might be small in area, but the cash flow to be expected from it would have been far greater than that from many acres of agricultural land, or from a large number of borough tenements. It was probably this, rather than that other busy “milling-place” she mentions, that attracted her old husbands whose desire to increase their wealth made them willing to give their land and treasure to have access to it, and, where Jankyn was concerned, to fortify his patience with an elderly wife who was, to borrow a phrase, “ful of hoker and of bisearme.” Whether the first husband brought her the cloth business or whether she inherited it we do not know, and the question is not important. The fact that the first three husbands were rich by country standards need not surprise us. Many villeins, especially those experienced as reeves, were able to take up holdings left vacant by the series of pestilences after 1349 and to manage them well, or to take over desmesnes or parts of desmesnes abandoned for rents by their lords. Throughout most of England, individual peasant holdings were growing larger. Thus there were bondmen who had more to offer than Edward Jones brought to Margery, and the general regard for land as an investment would have made these holdings tempting to the Wife. Finally, if the Wife’s pilgrimages puzzle us, chevage, or the fine paid by a villein to leave the manor, was often light. It amounted to 20d. at the most at Castle Combe, where it was often less, and this would have been a very small preliminary expense for a trip to Cologne, Rome, or Jerusalem. Chaucer’s picture of Alisoun’s wealth, wandering, and intense interest in fleshly satisfaction is a caricature designed to exemplify certain concomitant trends in his society. In so far as wealth is concerned, the trend indicated is accurate, for by the early sixteenth century a clothier, like Thomas Spring of Lavenham, might be many times wealthier than either Margery Haynes or the fictitious Wife of Bath.

It is probably quite safe to conclude that Chaucer meant his audience to think of the Wife of Bath as a rural clothier from the west country and quite possibly as a bondswoman. The assumption that she was a free tenant either under the common law or under borough custom offers legal difficulties in explaining her land transactions and her ability to control her holdings after marriage. However, when we think of the Wife of Bath, we must resist the temptation that so often presents itself to literary historians to locate her in space and time rather
than as something in the minds of Chaucer’s audience. She is in effect a series of clues whose significance depends on the experience, the attitudes, the expectations, and the ideals of those who heard them. There is no real reason to think that either Chaucer or the members of his audience had any special prejudice against unfree tenants,7 but in view of the nature of the Wife’s Prologue, the first part of which is a kind of mock Lollard “lay sermon” in which she elevates the flesh and deprecates the spirit at the expense of the New Law and of St. Paul especially, the implication that she was a bondwoman would have been singularly appropriate in the light of Gal. 4, 22ff., where it is said, “But he who was of the bondwoman, was born according to the flesh,” and “we are not the children of the bondwoman, but of the free: by the freedom wherewith Christ has made us free.” This commonplace distinction, which would have been familiar to even the most unlettered among Chaucer’s listeners, may indeed be the basis for the Clerk’s figure of the “sect” of the Wife of Bath, whose adherents in avid pursuit of fleshly satisfactions flourish because the “gold” or wisdom in them is corrupted by the “brass” of Venus, so that they cannot like Griselda (originally a poor cottager) sustain the “sharpe scourges of adversite” with which Christians were said to be providentially tested. Chaucer’s portrait probably represents, as I have sought to show elsewhere,8 a satire on the acquisitiveness of some of his contemporaries, the disruption of traditional hierarchies, the breakdown of established communities, and a concomitant decline in mores, all attributable in part, and especially in certain areas, to the rise of the cloth industry. In this connection, it may not be irrelevant to point out that the court at Castle Combe discovered bordellos in the village in 1416, 1419, and 1424,9 a surprising multiplicity of such facilities in a small community, where some apparently shared the general outlook of the Wife of Bath. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that, although Chaucer’s humorous satire is basically moral9 and displays a learned use of traditional materials from a wide variety of sources, it is directed toward specific conditions and problems of his own time and place. Unless we come to understand more about these conditions, we can hardly appreciate the “relevance” of what he had to say to the immediate interests and concerns of his audience. We shall miss also the skill and agility with which he wields his satiric weapons.

Notes
1. I am grateful to Professor J. R. Strayer for reading this paper in an earlier form and making useful suggestions about legal matters. Any errors remaining are, however, my own. My colleague Gail Gibson also furnished valuable references and criticisms. Robinson’s text of Chaucer is used in this article (The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957]).

2. For some of these overtones, see the present author’s A Preface to Chaucer (Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 317-31, and the further observations in “Simple Signs from Everyday Life in Chaucer,” to appear in Signs and Symbols in Chaucer’s Poetry, ed. John P. Hermann and John J. Burke (Univ. of Alabama Press).


4. Barbara Harvey, Westminster Abbey and its Estates in the Middle Ages (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 197-98. Appendix IV of this work contains a record of the Abbey’s purchases. During the second half of the fourteenth century, the price £66 13s. 4d. or 100 marks seems to have been curiously appropriate for a wide variety of holdings. See nos. 19, 20, 26, 27, 28, 30, 33, 36, 40, 43, 44. It was a convenient round sum, but it could purchase over 100 acres or a mill. Cf. the evaluations placed on the holdings of Margery Haynes, below. These, however, included chattels.


7. For a description of a manor house made necessary by the fact that it was to be divided equally between two daughters who inherited it, see
Marion K. Dale, Court Rolls of Chalgrave Manor 1278-1313, Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 28 (1950), xxxi-xxxi. The house with its grounds and outbuildings to which Sir Nigel de Loring retired after many campaigns in the field still sounds attractive.

8. For a striking example, see Helen M. Cam, Liberties and Communities in Medieval England (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963), p. 127.


10. Simpson, Introduction, p. 66. Professor Donald W. Sutherland, who generously read and commented on this article after it had been submitted, informs me that Simpson is here misleading, since husbands usually enjoyed all holdings of their deceased wives for life “by Curtesy.”

11. Ibid., p. 65, and Baker, Introduction, pp. 146-47. However, a widow received half in Kent and in the boroughs of Ipswich, Nottingham, and Torksey. The general limitation to a third makes the argument advanced by Cecile Margulies, MS (1962), 210-16, concerning the Wife’s acquisitions from her first husbands, questionable. The Sarum ceremony is now conveniently available in R. P. Miller, Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 374-84.


19. Hemmeeon, “Burgage Tenure,” LQR, 26 (1910), 344. This article appears in two sections of Vol. 26 and in one section of Vol. 27 of the Review.


21. “Trends in the Export of English Woolens in the Fourteenth Century,” EcHR, 2, ser. 3 (1950-51), 177. This is an extremely important article by the foremost authority on the late-medieval English cloth industry.

22. A good literary example of an ordinary worker from another region and a later period is afforded by Mak’s wife in the Wakefield Second Shepherd’s Play. The same play contains in the complaint of the Second Shepherd (ed. Cawley, lines 55-108) a picture of hierarchical inversion under the Old Law as it perennially manifests itself similar to that so strongly recommended by the Wife. The solution, implicit in the Wife’s Scriptural citations and explicit in the play lines 710ff.) is the same in both instances.


25. The observation of Thornton, Clare, p. 108, that “a great part of the business of the manorial court was in witnessing the transfer of unfree land” reflects a common situation, although on many manors minor temporary land transactions among servile tenants were often not recorded or even brought before the court if they did not interfere with rents and services.

26. For the rental, see G. Poulet. Scrope, History of the Manor and Ancient Barony of Castle Combe in the County of Wilts (London, 1852), pp. 146-51. Oddly, one of the free tenants, a miller (p. 147), owed light agricultural services and a rooster and three hens on the Feast of St. Martin (11 Nov.) if he had a wife, or one rooster and one hen if he had no wife. He was also obliged to serve as reeve if elected, although this obligation, like the agricultural services and the chickens, was usually a viellein obligation. But see Harvey, Westminster Abbey, p. 108.

27. Scrope, Castle Combe, pp. 81-82. For the benefit of students of literature unfamiliar with agricultural manors, it may be appropriate to explain that such
manors were frequently, but not always, divided into demesne lands cultivated for the benefit of the lord of the manor (who might be resident, resident occasionally, or non-resident), who might consume or sell their produce, or do both, and the lands of his tenants, free or servile, or both. Villein tenants traditionally owed "customary" services (determined by local manorial custom) on the lord's demesne, such as plowing, harrowing, sowing, weeding, reaping, harvesting, stacking hay, etc. Such services were usually divided into "works," each work consisting of one-half a day's labor, the number of works owed in a year being determined roughly by the size of the tenant's holding, although other factors might intervene. Tenants with large holdings sometimes employed workers, who might be local cottagers or itinerant laborers, to perform their works. Villeins also paid rents, ordinarily less than those paid by free tenants but ordinarily about the same if the value placed on their works was added to them. In addition to their work on demesne lands, villeins might be required to perform a variety of miscellaneous services, like carting, carrying messages, spreading straw in manor houses, providing horse shoes or plow irons (if they were smiths), etc. They paid for agistment (pasturing pigs in the lord's park), repaired roads, and took their grain to the lord's mill. Some owed gifts of eggs, chickens, honey, fish, rushes, or other produce at specified times of the year. They might be required to attend the manorial court (which met traditionally "from three weeks to three weeks," but often less frequently in practice) and to act, if elected by the court, as one of the manorial servants: as reeve, messor (an office that varied depending on the character of the manor), plowman, miller, butcher, ponder, baker, dairy maid, etc. The number and nature of such offices varied from place to place. Those from more prosperous families might serve as jurors or ale-tasters. The extent and nature of villein obligations depended on a number of factors: the difference in area between demesne land and customary land, climate, soil, proximity to the sea, to marshes, or to rivers, etc. Some free tenants owed minor services like mending park fences or supervising villein workers. The salient feature of late-medieval England was its diversity, and, after the middle of the fourteenth century, its propensity for change. It is very difficult to generalize about "the medieval English peasant" during the years of Chaucer's maturity.

Diversity extended to land measurements. The following observations are suggestive rather than definitive. A knight's fee contained four, five, or, at times, eight hides or carucates of anywhere from 120 to 160 acres. In the north, a bovate was one-eighth of a hide; in the south, a yardland or virgate was one-fourth of a hide. One-fourth of a yardland was called a ferling. The word acre originally meant almost any strip of arable land. A traditional acre (except in Cornwall) is four perches wide and forty perches long (or a strip of similar area but of different dimensions), but perches varied locally from the King's perch of sixteen-and-a-half feet. A quarter of an acre is a rood. On many manors the virgate, which actually ranged in size from ten to sixty-eight acres, was the standard by which holdings were measured; that is, tenants were said to hold one or more virgates, a half virgate, a quarter virgate, or a cotland consisting of five acres more or less, or combinations of these units. There is thus no way of "defining" a virgate, for even if we are told that on a certain manor it consisted of thirty acres (a common measurement), unless measured acres are specified we still do not know its size. Moreover, English soils varied in friability, productivity, and suitability for various crops, sometimes on a single manor and very markedly in different parts of the country.

After the Black Death, there was an increasing tendency on the part of many lords to abandon the cultivation of their demesne lands for their own use, leasing those lands and substituting money rents for customary services and obligations. There was a general desire, both on the part of lords and on the part of agricultural workers, for ready cash. Hence, the leasing of demesnes by the lords and the demand for wages by the day and better food allowances on the part of agricultural workers, who were stimulated by opportunities for day work in industries, like the cutlery trade at Thaxed in Essex, or, above all, by the cloth industry generally, but especially in the west country around Bristol, in Suffolk, in Essex, and in various towns like High Wycombe (Bucks) on the road between London and Oxford. For the last, see L. J. Ashford, The History of the Borough of High Wycombe (London, 1960), pp. 40-41. The results were a breakdown of traditional manorial communities, many of which had been closely knit cooperative groups, with a consequent decline in mores, rising wages and prices, and a largely unsuccessful effort to control them on the part of the government through the justices of the peace. Meanwhile, after about 1360, on many manors families whose ancestors had occupied the same land for many generations disappeared, replaced by new tenants with larger holdings, interested chiefly in profit, a development that hardly cemented community solidarity. It is probably impossible to understand Chaucer's characters very well without keeping these general trends in
mind, as well as their specific consequences, which are still being explored by historians.


30. Ibid., p. 223.


32. Loc. cit.


34. Ibid., pp. 245-46. It is possible that this may have been the son of the original Edward Jones.

35. For the French manservants, see Carus-Wilson, Essays, II, 163. The process of cloth manufacture is described in her classic article, “The Woolen Industry,” in The Cambridge Economic History of Europe, II (1952), 379-81.

36. McClenaghan, Springs, pp. 49, 73-78, 86-88. Thomas was lord of many manors in Suffolk and Norfolk, two in Essex, and one in Cambridgeshire. He also held other lands and tenants. His tomb still stands in Lavenham Church, and one may visit the Lady Chapel he provided and see the tower to which he made generous contributions.


39. Castle Combe, pp. 235, 236, 237. The first of these is said to have been in operation for five years “ad grave nocentum.” The proprietor was fined only 20d., but he was ordered to desist or pay a much larger fine.

40. Moral analysis of what we should call psychological, social, political, and economic problems is characteristic of the late Middle Ages, and is a Classical inheritance modified by specifically Christian ideals. I believe that a failure to recognize this fact and to face its implications has led to distortions and to stubborn misunderstandings, not to mention a neglect of much of Chaucer’s humor, for the perception of the ridiculous depends on departures from accepted values. An illustration of the general principle is afforded by the list of books recommended to Charles VI by Philippe de Mézières. It emphasized the Scriptures and service books first, the Ethics and Politics of Aristotle, the De regimine principum of Aegidius Romanus, which was very popular in England, and included Augustine’s City of God and the Politicraticus of John of Salisbury, with which Chaucer was familiar and which stresses the need for community integrity based on virtue. It is very probable that Chaucer’s audience was spontaneously responsive to concepts like the distinction between spiritual servitude among “sons of the bondwoman” and what they regarded as true freedom. Cf. Chaucer, ParsT, 149: “. . . wel ogthe man have desdayn of synne, sith that thugh synne, ther as he was free, now is he maked bonde.” The Wife is appropriately followed in the Tales by the Friar and the Summoner, who, far from furnishing a mere interlude in “the marriage group,” illustrate the corruption of the administration of God’s mercy and justice through a literal-minded desire for wealth and fleshly satisfaction of exactly the kind advocated with inadvertent ludicrousness by the Wife. Philippe’s Order of the Passion, based firmly on moral grounds, was very influential at the English court. See J. J. N. Palmer, England, France and Christendom (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1972), pp. 187-90. Chaucer’s own admiration for one of Philippe’s “evangelists,” Otto de Granson, is obvious and needs no comment.

H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. (essay date 1984)


[In the following essay, Leicester develops a theory of the outward feminism of The Wife of Bath’s Tale and the private, insecure aspects of Alisoun’s psyche that are unconsciously included in her female-empowered Tale. Leicester also asserts that Alisoun’s Tale represents Chaucer’s growing appreciation of feminist ideas.]

The Wife of Bath’s Tale is not only a text concerned with the position of women, it is a text whose speaker is a woman and a feminist—at least that is the fiction the text offers—and the body of this essay will concentrate on the Wife herself as the speaker of her Tale. While my own prejudices, for better or for worse, will no doubt be evident from what follows, I do not claim here to define feminism or to say what women “are” or ought to do. My interest is in the Wife’s feminism as it is evidenced in Chaucer’s text, and I attempt to discriminate between two versions of feminism—two possible stances women may, in their own
interest, adopt in the world—that the Wife seems to embody in the telling of her Tale. The first of these I call "public," and identify with a polemical, reactive, and necessarily "illiberal" position that women may take toward the male world and its institutions. The second, "private," form is less easy to classify in the nature of the case, but at least in Chaucer's practice here it is at once more humanist (in the sense of being interested in what individuals can make, positively, of the culture and institutions that precede and surround them) and more humane—or at any rate "nicer." This second form, because it is always dependent on individual situations, choices, and responses, always remains problematical and open to reinterpretation. It should be clear from the outset, however, that my aim is not, or not merely, to denigrate the first kind of feminism at the expense of the second. I am concerned to show that there is a difference between the two kinds, but also to show that these forms or modes are complementary as well as opposed, that there is a dialectical relationship at work in the Wife’s situation and her responses.

Though the method I adopt here is largely a version of the time-honored one of "dramatic" analysis, I am aware that “the Wife of Bath” is a fiction, a construction made from the language of the Tale, and that that fiction is a male poet’s impersonation of a female speaker. It appears that there is some relation for Chaucer between taking a position on women—about who they are, what they want, and how they should proceed—and taking a woman’s position. Though I must insist that we take the fact of impersonation seriously (and therefore refrain from too hasty an ascription to “Chaucer” of features in the Tale that properly belong to the narrating Wife), I do not wish to lose sight, as I think Chaucer does not, of the issue of the poet’s relation to his character, and if I begin with an examination of the Wife’s feminism, I will end with some suggestions about Chaucer’s.1

There is something to be said for an interpretation of this sort. It is not so much wrong as incomplete, a place to start in thinking about the Tale rather than the last word. In fact, a version of this interpretation is the place where the Wife of Bath starts, in the sense that it seems to be her advance plan for the Tale. We can assume, I think, that the Wife knows before she begins the story what she intends to do with it, and that she has already decided on the changes in the plot of the traditional version that will produce the polemical feminist moral she draws at the end. This moral and the feminist ideology that goes with it are what might be called the public meaning of the Tale—her word is “apert”—and this public meaning is backed, as public meanings always are, by Authority. In this case the authority in question is that of the Wife herself. One way of looking at her Prologue—and one way she herself presents it—is to see it as a process whereby the Wife’s account of her own experiences in marriage leads to her thesis about marriage in general. In this reading, her experiences allow her to say “The necessity of feminine ‘maistrey’ is what my life proves, and so does the story I am about to tell.” Such a reading constitutes the Wife’s past as past, as something that is over and done with and therefore something that can be summed up, generalized from. Her life adds up to a final meaning which the Tale merely confirms. This reading is at least in accord with the Wife’s explicit or public project in both the Prologue and the Tale. Not liking the examples that are offered to her by the male world in the guise of “auctoritee,” she turns to her own experience with the intention of becoming an authority herself. Like the Pardoner, she sets out to make an example of herself. Once this is accomplished, she offers the Tale as a counter-example to set in opposition to those in Janekyn’s book of wicked wives and the male misogynist tradition. The tale of the Loathly Lady is itself traditional, which is to say that it is public property, and to tell it is to go public, to move beyond a local and idiosyncratic personal history and take one’s place in a larger world.

The public world, the past, and authority are thus the determinants of the “apert” project of the Tale, which is conceived by the Wife as a statement of counter-ideology, that is, a statement in opposition to the structures of male domination she has encountered and continues to encounter in her life. The form her counterattack takes is that of appropriating the instruments or institutions of masculine power. Both the public world of storytelling and the story itself are by definition male-dominated, and the Wife, as we know, has strong feelings about that. Combative and competitive as ever, she takes an aggressively feminist public position in structuring the world of the Tale and pointing its moral. She may be said to womanhandle the traditional story, which, as a chivalric romance, is in its original form an instrument of the dominant ideology.
and its values, such as loyalty and courtesy, that demonstrate male superiority. E. T. Donaldson's succinct summary of the analogues brings out this ideological bias—and the Wife's subversion of it—clearly:

In the analogues the story is handled in a different style, its real point being to demonstrate the courtesy of the hero, who weds the hag uncomplainingly and treats her as if she were the fairest lady in the land; in two versions the knight is Sir Gawain, the most courteous of Arthur's followers, who promises to marry her not in order to save his own life but his king's. The lady's transformation is thus a reward of virtue. In Chaucer the polite knight becomes a convicted rapist who keeps his vow only under duress and in the sulkiest possible manner.

As I have intimated, I take the differences between Chaucer's version of the tale and its analogues as evidence of the speaker's agency, evidence that the Wife knows the traditional version and deliberately alters it in a way that makes the feminist message more pointed and polemical. The fact that only in her version is the knight a rapist means that only in her version is the quest for what women most desire linked specifically and logically to the knight's character and to the question of male-female relations. Clearly this particular knight, as a surrogate for men in general, needs to learn more about women, and the plot becomes a device for forcing him to do so, putting him in a position more familiar to women, who have to cater to male desires, and giving power to women from the beginning of the Tale. This is one example of appropriation, of using what are normally masculine forms for feminine ends. Another example is the "gentlesse" speech, a form of argument that aims at breaking down the external hierarchies of power constituted by birth and possessions—"temporal thyng that man may hurt and mayme"—in favor of equality before God and individual responsibility for establishing worth and achieving salvation. This argument is traditionally egalitarian, but scarcely feminist. It is sometimes used to urge the right of lowborn men to love and woo noble ladies, but I do not recall it being used before the Wife to argue that ugly old women are good enough not only to go to the same heaven as knights but to marry them. Since in no other version of the tale does anything like this speech occur, its function as additional feminist propaganda in the altered tale is clear. Finally, of course, the sovereignty argument that is the point of the story, affirmed in open court halfway through and supplying the twist at the conclusion, is obviously a reversal of ordinary male-female power relations and an aggressively polemical appropriation of all those dreary (and nervous?) arguments about the proper hierarchical subordination of women to men in medieval discussions of the subject.

This reading I call the Straw Man version of the tale, both because as a critical interpretation it makes the tale easy to summarize and dismiss, and because I think the phrase describes the Wife's open public project in telling it. She makes a straw man of the traditional tale and its hero, sets up the knight and the old story as images of masculine pretension in order to knock them over, and obviously she carries out this project. Along the way she takes advantage of the power of her temporary position as narrator or straw-stuffer to enjoy her work. She enjoys, no doubt about it, the satisfaction in fiction and fantasy of dominating the ill-bred knight and all his kind, and the pleasure of imagining herself, in the form of her surrogate the hag, magically young and beautiful again, though these pleasures are clearly marginal and incidental to the public message.

So far, I think, there will be little disagreement about the general character of the Tale and its "appropriateness" to the Wife. The problem, obviously, is what to do with the more anomalous features of it that do not seem to fit the public project, and that raise questions about the character of the speaker. It is very common to see such features, especially perhaps the "gentilesse" speech, as revealing things about the Wife of which she herself is unaware, and to use these slips or contradictions as a way of pinning down her character. Such a proceeding puts the reader in possession of "facts" about the Wife that allow the assumption of a position superior to her from which she can be fixed and placed, understood and dismissed. We know "who she is" and can proceed to construct from that an account of her past and the probabilities of her future, though it is perhaps a matter for uneasiness that such characterizations and careers range in the literature from sociopathic murderess to tragic heroine to comic embodiment of the Life Force.

It seems to me, however, that if the Wife does have a public feminist agenda in the Tale, she may also have conscious attitudes about the role she plays in order to carry it out, and that these attitudes are to be elicited precisely from her voicing of the message, from the ways she comments on, revises, ignores, or otherwise deploys the elements of the Tale. The matter of what else the Wife gets out of telling the story, whether fantasies of rejuvenation or of power, begins to touch on a set of themes and ideas that are at work in both the Prologue and the Tale in dialectical tension with their "apert" public and authoritative ones. I have so far reserved these issues, but it is obvious what they are, since the categories are those of the Wife herself: the private ("privy") world and Experience. The Straw Man version of the tale, with its doctrinaire feminism and oppositional stance, has something a little too static and structural about it, something other critics besides myself have found a little uncomfortable. My real point, however, is that the Wife does too. Her public project does not really do justice to the complex and dynamic character of the now of speaking in both Prologue and
**Tale**, the sense of ongoing life and discovery that cannot be totally reduced to an order or an argument, cannot be shut up in forms or completely subjected to authority, even the Wife's own. In the **Tale** this set of concerns is registered first by the Wife's relative lack of interest in polemical closure: having set up the straw man, she is oddly dilatory in knocking him over, in getting on with the demonstration. She spends the first hundred and twenty lines, a good quarter of the **Tale**, not telling it. Instead she pursues what we might call her private interests.

The most famous example of this tendency is the Midas exemplum, in which the tale of the Loathly Lady vanishes utterly for thirty lines—more if you count the introductory matter—and we find ourselves in the middle of a completely different story about Midas's ass's ears and his wife's inability to keep them secret. The occasion of this digression is the knight's quest to discover what women most desire, and as the Wife lists the variety of opinions he encounters we can feel her losing interest in the quest—whose outcome is a foregone conclusion—and getting interested in the question. The old story and its old-time Arthurian world are simply dropped in favor of matters of more immediate interest. Just as it is more fun for the Wife at the beginning of the **Tale** to take a shot at the Friar's virility in retaliation for his disparagement of her **Prologue** than to linger over the romantic world of “fayerie,” here it is more interesting to her to consider the variety of possible answers to the question than to give the “right” one. Her voice moves into the present tense, she includes herself among the women whose opinions are being solicited, she indicates that she finds some of them better than others: “Somme seye thatoure hertes been moost esed / Whan that we been yflatered and ypleised. / He gooth ful ny the sothe, I wol nat lye.”

The Midas exemplum itself, though superficially unflattering to women and apparently totally unconnected to the story, is actually a reflection of the Wife’s impatience with masculine foolishness, and it has a certain relevance to the development of the romance. It is, after all, not just any secret that the wife of Midas finds herself unable to contain, but one that a great many women, including the Wife of Bath, have had occasion to notice: “Myn housbonde hath longe asses erys two!” Pope, who borrowed the Wife’s revision of Ovid for the *Epistle to Arbuthnot*, saw quite clearly what the message was:

Out with it Dunciad! let the secret pass,
That secret to each fool, that he’s an ass;
The truth once told (and wherefore should we lie?)
The queen of Midas slept, and so may I.

This is a secret women have to conceal all the time, especially about their nearest and dearest. The exemplum focuses strongly on the genuine anguish of Midas’s queen. She is a woman bound by ties of trust and affection—ties she herself acknowledges—to a man who loves her, and with whom her own reputation is involved. But he is still a fool:

He loved hire moost, and trusted hire also;
He preyede hire that to no creature
She shold telle of his disfigure.
She swoor him, "Nay," for all this world to wynne.
She nodle do that vileynye or synne,
To make hir housbonde han so foul a name.
She nodle nat telle it for hir owene shame.
But nathelesse, hir thoughte that she dyde,
That she so longe sholde a conseil hyde.

(III 958-66)

This is not the sort of secret the Wife herself is used to concealing, as she points out in her **Prologue** (III 534-42), and we have only to replace Midas’s wife with the Wife of Bath, and Midas himself with, say, husband number four, or with Janeckyn at a moment when he is grinning at her over the top of his book of wicked wives (III 672), to see how graphically the exemplum records a realistic frustration and tension that the Wife knows well as a daily component of real marriages, even, or especially, good ones.* But it is equally interesting to replace the queen of Midas with the queen of Arthur, who has to proceed so tactfully to rescue the young rapist from vengeful masculine justice so she can set him on the right track. The Wife puts great stress on the careful courtesy, a style appropriate to a chivalric setting, with which the queen works to get her way. The line “The quene thankeith the kyng with al hir myght” (III 899), in particular, seems deliberately to overstress her courtesy in order to call attention to it. It seems to me that in the Midas exemplum the Wife evokes the real strains involved in feminine submission to and manipulation of masculine egos that the earlier scene leaves out, while reminding us that she herself is considerably less patient than either queen. She reacts to something she feels is missing in her original and supplies it, but she does so only outside the framework of the story.

Something similar happens with the issue of the quest itself. If the Wife gets involved in the question of what women most desire, and drops the story in order to pursue it, this suggests that the question is hardly settled for her except for polemical purposes. The “right” answer is always hedged. The hag remarks that there is no woman, however proud, “That dar seye Nay of that I shal thee teche” (III 1019, emphasis added), and when the knight announces the answer the ladies who judge him are similarly cagey. They do not say he is right, they just don’t say he is wrong: “In al the court ne was ther wyf, ne mayde. / Ne wydde, that contraired that he sayde, / But sayden he was worthy han his lyf” (III 1043-45, emphasis added). In fact, the queen gets exactly what she asks for, “An answere suffisant in this
materere” (III 910), that is, an answer that suffices, one that will do rather than one that is definitive. The reason for this is, as the Wife knows and demonstrates by her digressive interest in the “wrong” answer, that the question is an impossible one and the quest for a single answer is a fool’s errand anywhere outside a story. In reality—in experience—different women want different things, and the same woman, like the Wife herself, may want different things at different times.

What we are seeing here is a developing tension between the public and authoritative functions of the Tale as polemical feminist propaganda and a more complex set of experiential interests that do not seem to fit the public plot very comfortably. The doctrinaire feminist argument of the Tale is acceptable as a position for women in general, and the Wife certainly does not disagree with it, but it is not very responsive to the detail and nuance of her own situation, and therefore it does not interest her very much. When she introduces herself into the Tale in the figure of the hag, she does so in a way that, while never losing sight of the public message and her status as an authority, focuses increasingly on a set of “privy” and experiential concerns of her own that come to constitute a subtext running underneath and in some tension with the “apert” surface.

The description that accompanies the entrance of the hag into the Tale is a compact portrayal of the Wife’s sense of her own career as she has developed it in the Prologue, and makes most sense when it is read in reference to that development:

And in his wey it happed hym to ryde,
In al this care, under a forest syde,
Whe as he saugh upon a daunce go
Of ladys foure and twenty, and yet mo;
Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,
In hope that som wysdom shoilde he lerne.
But certeynly, er he cam fully there,
Vanished was this daunce, he myste where.
No creature saugh be that bar lyf,
Save on the grene he saugh sitiynge a wyf—
A fouler wight ther may no man dewyse.

(III 989-99)

As I have already suggested, in order to constitute herself as an authority the Wife has to give her experience a definitive shape and meaning from which she can generalize, and this means that her past is behind her, over and done with. It disappears as experience in a way that makes her feel that her life is finished. Her famous lines on her youth, “But, Lord Christ! whan that it remembreth me,” leading to the reflection “That I have had my world as in my tyme” (III 469-73), are followed immediately by a meditation that conveys her sharp awareness of the sad difference between now and then:

But age, alas! that al wole envenyme,
Hath me biraft my beastee and my pith.

Lat go, farewell! the devel go therwith!
The flour is goon, ther is namoore to telle;
The bren, as I best kan, now mosite I selle.

(III 474-78)

This pattern, this set of feelings, is recapitulated in the description of the hag. The four and twenty dancing ladies are connected with the dance of feminine freedom from the “limitaicon” of friars and other masculine trammels, a freedom associated with the elf-queen and her “joly compagnye” at the dawn of time and the beginning of the Tale. But they are also associated with the Wife’s youth—“How koude I daunce to an harpe smale” (III 457)—and with her richly variegated experience of life and love, the “olde daunce.” Her memory swirls and dances with all the women she has been until they vanish away, she knows not where, and leave her all alone as she has become, as she is now. The analogues often spend time having fun with the comically grotesque ugliness of the hag: “Then there as shold haue stood her mouth, / then there was sett her eye,” and so forth. The Wife’s more reserved refusal to describe her is also more inward, suggesting not what can be seen but what is felt. I think her words here will bear the inflection: “A fouler wight ther may no man dewyse,” that is, “If you, the men who look at me as I speak, think that I am decayed, what must I feel, who know what I was—no mere description will do justice to that.” It is no wonder that the hag tells the knight, “Sire knyght, heer forth ne lieth no wey” (III 1001).

Now in public terms this is a range of experience with which courtly romance does not deal, and the only answer the form has to the problems of the passing of the “flour,” especially in a woman, is magic, that is, fantasy, like the transformation at the end of this story. Those problems are relegated to what happens after stories like this one are over, when, as we know, they lived happily ever after. The Wife does not believe in magic of this sort, any more than she believes that real men deal with the prospect of marrying old and ugly women with the courtesy and equanimity of a Sir Gawain, and part of what she is doing in her description of the wedding and the wedding night is to confront a genre that has no room for her and other women in her situation with the fact of herself. One can feel the glee with which she appropriates the rhetoric of courtesy, “smylyng everemo” (III 1086), and baiting the knight (and the self-gratulatory masculine conventions he stands for so shakily) with a blank-eyed rehearsal of official ideals:

“Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures hous?
Is every knyght of his so dangerous?
I am youre owene love and eek youre wyf;
I am she which that saved hath youre lyf,
And, certes, yet te dide I yow neveur unright;
Why fare ye thus with me this firste nyght?
Ye faren lyk a man had lost his wit.

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What is my gill? For Goddes love, tel me it,  
And it shal been amended, if I may.”

(III 1089-97)

The knight’s heartfelt response shows how much the Wife thinks such chivalric courtesy is worth in the face of real-life decay: “‘Amended?’ quod this knyght, ‘al-  
las! nay, nay! . . . / Thou art so lothly, and so oold also”” (III 1098-1100).

The hag replies that she could amend all this, and in the story she can, since she has magical powers. If that were all the Wife was interested in, the Tale might now proceed to its conclusion in the assertion of mastery and the pleasures of fantasy. But because she does not believe in magic, the Wife refuses the temptation to fantasy that the Tale offers, puts it off to a brief moment at the very end, and proceeds to digress, that is, to take over the Tale and turn it forcibly toward what I see as a more tough-minded examination of her own situation and its potentialities. The speech on “gentilese,” “poverty,” and “elde” is notable for the diminished image of human possibility it presents throughout, for its constant stress on the inadequacy of earthly hopes and earthly power:

Ful selde up riseth by his branches smale  
Prowesse of man, for God, of his goodnesse.  
Wole that of hym we clayme oure gentilese;  
For of oure elders may we no thyng clayme  
But temporel thynge, that man may hurte and mayme.  

(III 1128-32)

In the face of all this human weakness, the speech consistently urges a stoic position. Boethius and Seneca are prominent in it. The burden especially of the account of poverty is “Stop striving for impossible goals and the fulfillment of petty human desires.” “He that coveith is a povere wight, / For he wolde han that is  
nat in his myght” (III 1187-8). Instead, embrace your weakness, understand it, and make of it an occasion of virtue. True “gentilese” lies not in human glory but in gentle deeds, and the hateful good of poverty leads a man to know his God. The Wife of Bath uses the mask of the hag, as an image of her own diminished powers and vanished “flour,” to try out this rhetoric, to see what the bran is worth. As a version of herself, the hag functions as a kind of worst-case scenario for the Wife: “Suppose I never get married again, suppose I am old and ugly and my life is essentially over; suppose that the energy of my youth is gone forever and that there is nothing left from now on but the downward slope to death. What resources of self-respect and dignity remain to me?” If all she has left is her wisdom, she can at least use it to guide her into old age, where it may be necessary for her to adopt a more conventional style of life and attend to the needs of her soul.

If it feels like there is something a little disingenuous about this position, and if a less respectful paraphrase of it might be “Well, I can always get religion,” this is probably because we know the Wife too well by now to be entirely convinced by the more pious version. My real point, again, is that the same is true of her, and that the inadequacies for her of this passive, static, and renunciatory position are part of what she discovers in the very act of trying it out. The best evidence of this is the emergence of a counter-message in the “gentilese” digression itself, a “privy” subtext that affirms something very different from its “apert” argument, and in fact subverts it. This first shows up in what I call the torchbearer simile, the rhetorical treatment of a formal argument that is in itself clear and easy to make. Boethius does it in a brief sentence: If “gentilese” were a gift of nature it would always be the same everywhere, “sicut ignis ubique terrarum numquam tamen calere desistit,” as fire is always and everywhere hot.” This is the Wife of Bath’s version:

If gentilese were planted naturely  
Unto a certeyn lymage doun the lyne.  
Pryvee and aperit, thanne wolde they nevere fyne  
To doon of gentilese the faire office;  
They myghte do no viseynye or vice.  
Taak fyr, and ber it in the derkest hous  
Bitwix this and the mount of Kaukassous,  
And lat men shette the dores and go theenne;  
Yet wolte the fyr as faire lye and brene  
As twenty thousand men myghte it biholde;  
His office natureel ay wol it holde,  
Up peril of my lyf, til that it dye.  
Heere may ye se wel how that genterye  
Is nat annexed to possessioun,  
Sith folk ne doon hir operacioun  
Alwey, as dooth the fyr, lo. in his kynde.  

(III 1134-49)

The point to notice here is how the image of the fire is detached from the argument, slightly displaced from logical sequence, and foregrounded in a way that makes the argument itself hard to follow because the image is so detailed and so compelling, so much more developed than what surrounds it (or, I might add, than it is in any of its sources). This foregrounding makes the voice seem fascinated by the image of the fire flaming out in isolation and darkness, and this effect of fascination is independent of the place of the image in the argument. Its bright energy is affirmed over against all the conventional rhetoric of human weakness that surrounds it, and this is one key to its source and meaning.

Another key is the associations that fire has taken on in the Wife’s Prologue and elsewhere in the Tale, which find their way into this image:

For peril is bothe fyr and tow t’assemble:  
Ye knowe what this ensample may resembe.  

(III. 89-90)

If fire is initially and fundamentally associated with sexuality for the Wife, it also acquires an aggressive
dimension in the intimations of sexual threat that her free use of her sex sometimes takes on:

He is to greet a naynd that wolde werne
A man to lighte a candle at his lanterne;
He shal have never the lasse light, pardree.
Have thou ynoth, thee thar nat pleyne thee.

(III 333-36)

Thou liknest [women's love] also to wilde fyr;
The moore it brennethe, the moore it hath desir
To consume every thyng that bren wol be.

(III 373-375)

As the second example here suggests, fire comes to be associated with what is uncontrotrable, especially by masculine limits and standards. It is something that breaks through and consumes the oppressions of male decorum, as in the case of Midas's wife:

Hir thoughte it swal so soore aboute hir herte
That nedely som word hire moste asterte;
And sith she dorste telle it to no man,
Down to a mareys feste by she ran—
Til she cam there, hir herte was a-fyre.

(III 967-71)

Fire has, then, for the Wife, far more than conventional connotations of inexhaustible energy, linked not only with sexuality but also with her self-assertion and sense of independence, with everything at the core of her that makes her aware of her own vitality. If that vitality is presented in more negative and destructive terms earlier in the poem, presented more as men see it when they try to smother it, here in its more inward manifestations it takes on a more positive sense as an image of the Wife's freedom even in the midst of constraint. Her private attraction to the image of the torch is an index of her resistance to the darkness, to the message of human weakness and decay that surrounds the fire and the woman. What is important about this upsurge of inner fire is that it happens spontaneously, and it happens now, in the act of speaking. The Wife rediscovers as she speaks that her resistance, her energy, her fire, is not gone at all, and has lasted beyond the decay of her youth and beauty. It is this awareness that lies behind the reservations she expresses when she comes to draw the moral consequences of the "gentlesse" argument:

Yet may the hye God, and so hope I,
Grante me grace to lyven vertuously.
Thanne am I gentil, whan that I bigyme
To lyven vertuously, and weyeve synne.

(III 1173-76)

The conditional mood in which this statement is cast calls attention to the fact that the speaker withholds herself from complete identification with the position expressed: "I hope God grants me the grace to live virtuously when I decide to begin" carries the implication that that time is not yet."

There is thus little point to the sort of critical objection that notes how the Wife of Bath cannot qualify as "gentil" under her own definition in the speech, and takes this circumstance as an "irony" of which she is unaware, since this is precisely the point the Wife is affirming triumphantly in her handling of the speech. The content or doctrine here is neither "out of character" nor in it for the Wife. Rather, it is something that culture (masculine culture) makes available, and which the Wife is using for her own purposes—here perhaps as a kind of potential remedia amoris or "remedye of love." What the Wife reaps in this section of the Tale are the real fruits of her experience. External youth and beauty are and were, she discovers, just as deceptive as the traditional wisdom has always maintained them to be, because they worked to conceal from her the real inner sources of her vitality, the capacity for the enjoyment of life and the indomitable spirit that are still with her now that their conventional physical signs have passed. The external deprivation, the "poerty," is the condition that makes possible the discovery of inner richness. It is indeed a bringer-out of busyness and an amender of sapience, precisely because it "maketh [a man] his God and eek hymself to knowe."

By the time she gets to "elde," the hag is speaking out clearly for the Wife, in words we have heard before:

Now, sire, of elde ye repreve me;
And certes, sire, thoug noon auctoritee
Were in no book, ye gentils of honour
Seyn that men sholde an oold wight doon favour. . .
And auctours shal I fynden, as I gesse.

(III 1207-12, emphasis added)

Elde is essentially dismissed, left for the future, because it is not yet time in the Wife's life—and that time may never come—for her to lapse into decorum, piety, and silence. No more than Janekyn with his book can those Church fathers and stoic philosophers—men, every Jack of them—tame her. As she moves into the ending of the Tale, the Wife asserts her vitality and her resistance to the deadening pressure of conventional proprieties in her treatment of the conclusion of the story. She does this, for instance, in the riddle, whose form in the analogues is a choice between having the hag fair by day and foul by night or vice-versa. The Wife of Bath’s version—fool and obedient or fair and take your chances—reaffirms the sense of her own energy, independence, and impenitence that has been growing in her during the latter part of the Tale: “I’d do it all again, and I will if I get the chance.”

Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,
And take youre aventure of the repair
That shall be to your hous by cause of me,
Or in som oother place, may wel be.

(III 1223-26)

The extent to which the concerns and the mood generated in the subtext of the "gentlesse" speech dominate the more conventional aspects of the story is further pointed up by the Wife's handling of the final lines of the Tale, in which she drops the happy ending in the middle of a line and goes out swinging:

And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende
In parl joye; and Jhesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meek, yonge, and fresch abedde.
And grace t'overbye hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
That wol not be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nygares of dispence.
God sende hem soone verray pestilence!

(III 1257-64)

This concluding speech is a return to the public occasion of the Tale in the sense that it presents the Wife in the polemical and oppositional role that is appropriate to the general feminist message and her original battle plan for the Tale. But that public role, and even that message, are qualified by the private experience of the telling. The shrew of the end of the Tale is a straw woman, a role the Wife plays for tactical reasons that have to do precisely with the inadequacies of the public situation in which she speaks, with respect to the complexities of experience. It is clear from both the Prologue and the Tale that for the Wife "maistrye" is not really a simple mechanical reversal of male domination. In both cases, once the woman has been granted sovereignty she refrains from exercising it, and this suggests that it is primarily a tool for achieving feminine independence within marriage so that more satisfactory relations between the sexes can have a chance to develop. 16

"Maistrye" is a way of making room for the possibility of love in the patriarchal world by giving women space to be responsible partners in a relationship. As only an "answere suffisaunt," it is where everything that is important about marriage begins, not where it ends. If anyone knows that "they lived happily ever after" is no way to talk about the experience of marriage, it is the Wife. Marriage is where things get harder, though potentially richer and more satisfying, not easier. But this aspect of marriage, the potential it offers for private fulfillment, is not really appropriate to the situation in which the Wife is performing. In the first place, the experience of real relationships is not something that can be conveyed in a story like this, and the Wife makes no effort to present the knight as someone who really learns something or changes his mind; he is simply coerced throughout the Tale. 17 In the second place, and more especially, the experience of real relationships is not something that can be or that needs to be conveyed to a casually assembled group of strangers encountered on a pilgrimage, most of them males, with whom there is little likelihood of, and little reason for, intimacy. The man-eating monster of the end of the Tale and elsewhere may be a caricature of the real Wife of Bath, but as a role it is also a way of making sure that no one will try to take advantage of her—it asserts her independence and keeps it firmly in view, and it is in this sense that "maistrye" and the polemical feminism associated with it is dialectically necessary in the world as a woman finds it, as a precondition for the mutuality she might prefer. The conditions of the male-dominated public world may be said to force this position on the Wife, and its necessity shows just how unsatisfactory the public situation of women is in human terms. To make the male world into a straw man—to be forced to do so in order to fight its ubiquitous and dehumanizing public pressures—is to accept a logic of opposition and appropriation that can only drive one to constitute oneself as a straw woman. 18

"But lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I." Beyond and behind the public, necessarily caricatured feminism of the "apert" narration, there is a set of "privy" experiences that constitute, for Chaucer in the person of the Wife, a deeper and more existentially responsible feminism and a more searching critique of male domination. At this level, what the Wife responds to intuitively about the story is less what it includes than what it leaves out. One of the most notably sexist things about this particular story and the courtly romance genre of which it is a part is the assumption that women have no other consequential interests beyond courtship and marriage. Men may do battle and have adventures, but the stories of the women in romance are all love stories. As we have seen, such a story has no way of handling an ugly old woman—or even an attractive but not classically beautiful middle-aged one—except by magic, and no place at all for issues like a woman's experience of age and the prospect of death. Too narrowly feminist a reading of The Wife of Bath's Tale—or perhaps I should say, a reading of the Wife as too narrow, too exclusively polemical, a feminist—runs the danger of being itself anti-feminist because, like the masculine-conditioned romance, it confines the Wife of Bath too exclusively to issues of gender and sexual relations. These issues are very important to the Wife herself; they have dominated much of her life, and they are fully represented in her Tale. But to hold her exclusively to them, or for her to do so herself, does not allow her all the other things in her life and experience, including her personhood before age and death. In fact, in her Tale we see the speaker as a woman exercising her "purveyaunce," considering her options in line with her own philosophy: "I holde a mouses herte nat worth a leek / That hath but oon hole for to sterte to" (III 572-73). She may find her way back into marriage and the
dance of relationship that has occupied and engaged her for so long, but she may not. In this open situation, she herself remains open. By the end of her Tale she has evoked her own energies in the face of what those energies have to contend with, and enacted a variety of possible responses to her situation and her unknown future. What she finds is that her experience has provided her with extensive resources for continuing to woman-handel with the authorities—with God the father, with the masculine world, and with Old Man Death—and that she need not commit or confine herself to any particular role or position except as a tactical move in whatever game she may have occasion to play. She does not need to define herself once and for all.

This lack of closure in the Wife’s life and personality is, finally, an aspect of Chaucer’s feminism, since of course there is no Wife of Bath. What there is is an impersonation, a man’s attempt to think himself inside a woman’s head and to speak from her point of view and with her voice. While I think from the evidence that Chaucer knew a lot about women, I am not in a position to speak with authority on this topic since, like the poet, I lack certain essential experiences. But I do see that in imagining what it might be like to be a woman, Chaucer felt it important to imagine one who remained in a final sense provisional and a mystery to herself—one who had not settled her own fate, and whose inability to predict for certain what would happen to her and who she might become kept her alive to herself and to him. This is still, no doubt, a masculine projection, since I do not think he knew these things about himself either, but in allowing the Wife of Bath to be as genuinely uncertain about these matters as he was himself, I think Chaucer was trying to sustain her mystery, her possibility and her independence—I think he was trying to respect her privacy.

Notes
1. For a more extended and theoretical account of some of these issues, see my “The Art of Impersonation: A General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales,” PMLA, 95 (1980), 213-24.


4. This point has not been altogether lost on critics, though they seldom seem to give the Wife much credit for seeing it too. John P. McCall, Chaucer Among the Gods (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979), uses the phrase “straw men” of the Wife’s exempla, p. 139. Ellen Schauber and Ellen Spolsky, “The Consolation of Alison: The Speech Acts of the Wife of Bath,” Centrum, 5 (1977), 20-34, have shown how the basis of all four of what they identify as the Wife’s most common speech acts is the setting up of a proposition which is subsequently denied.

5. See, e.g., Lumiansky, Sondry Folk, pp. 126-29.


7. So far as I can tell, the distinction between the public and private functions of the Tale was first made in Charles A. Owen’s pioneering and still fundamental study, “The Crucial Passages in Five of the Canterbury Tales, A Study in Irony and Symbol,” JEGP, 52 (1953), 294-311, rpt. in Edward Wagenknecht, ed., Chaucer, Modern Essays in Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 260. Owen is also one of the first to identify the element of fantasy or wish-fulfillment in the Tale, a perception that has become so common in discussions of it as to make specific citation pointless.


9. Since I do not have space or occasion here for an analysis of the Wife’s Prologue, I ought perhaps to say that I consider her fifth marriage a good one. The Wife’s remark “And yet in bacon hadde I nevere delit” (III 418) refers not only to her dislike of old meat in a sexual sense but also to the
fact that she is not much interested in conventional marital harmony of the sort for which the Dunmow Flitch was awarded (see III 217-23). From this point of view, Janekyn and the Wife are a remarkably compatible couple: they both like to talk, they both like to fight, and they both like to make love.


12. See P. Verdonk, “‘Sire Knyght, Heer Forth Ne Lith No Wey’: A Reading of Chaucer’s The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” Neophilologus, 60 (1976), 305-07.


16. Once again a number of commentators have recognized the provisional and preliminary—what I would call the public—character of the idea of “maistre,” though once again the Wife herself has not been given much credit for understanding it. Owen, “Crucial Passages,” was the first to note the importance of the hag’s refusal to exercise domination. Of the several critics who have developed this perception and seen that what the Wife wants—what women want—is some form of mutuality in relationships, particularly fine accounts are given by Donald R. Howard, The Idea of the Canterbury Tales (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 254-55, and T. L. Burton, “The Wife of Bath’s Fourth and Fifth Husbands and Her Ideal Sixth: The Growth of a Marital Philosophy,” Chaucer, 13 (1978), 34-50, esp. 46-47.


Mary Carruthers (essay date March 1985)


[In the following essay, Carruthers refutes many commonly held assertions about the nature of the Wife of Bath’s relationship with Jankyn. By analyzing fourteenth-century English usage, Carruthers identifies Jankyn as the relative of a close friend (one who is godparent to one of Alisoun’s children), not as a stranger who merely boards in town. Through this interpretation, Carruthers argues, the Wife’s change from manipulating spouse to manipulated spouse has richer irony.]

In her fond description of past jolite, the Wife of Bath recalls with particular pleasure her young fifth husband:

He som tyme was a clerk of Oxenford,
And hadde left scote, and wente at hom to bord
With my gossip, dwellynge in oure toun;
God have hir soule! hir name was Alisoun.

(D. 527-530)

Interpretive consensus concerning the circumstances of Jankyn’s return would indicate that, having gone to Oxford for a few years, he came back to the region where he had raised and boarded a local lady, who was also Alisoun’s dear friend and aide in idle talk and sexual exploits. The general misapprehension is reflected even by the editors of the Middle English Dictionary, who cite this particular use of the phrase at hom to illustrate the meaning “in or to one’s native town” (s.v. hom. 3a [c]). Unfortunately, this paraphrase is based upon the modern meanings of the nouns in lines 528-9; full and thoughtful consideration of the lexicographical content of this description, and its historical context, will not support this interpretation of Chaucer’s text, nor the meaning now commonly assigned to the clause “wente at hom to bord / With my gossip.”

The Wife of Bath, we are told in The General Prologue, is not from Bath, but “of biside Bathe,” that is from near (but not in) Bath. Bath itself was a small town even by medieval standards; only forty-four acres were enclosed by the city walls, although a larger area around the city (known as Bath forinsecum or forum) was included in the revenue farm granted to the Bishop of Bath and Wells from the time of Edward I. It is difficult, given the localization of the Wife’s dwelling in
the Prologue portrait, to account for the presence of a boarding-house or inn where Jankyn may be supposed to have been a boarder. We recall that the two clerks in The Reeve's Tale when marooned for the night in the village of Trumpington were unable to lodge at an inn and stayed (for payment) with the miller and his family, even though Trumpington was near (bidente) Cambridge. Trumpington is of the order of magnitude of villages “bidente Bathe.” But the probable interpretation of this line does not depend (nor could it) upon speculation concerning the magnitude of Chaucer’s fictional village. Better comprehension of what the words used in this phrase mean will clarify it; their mimetic status is directly reflective of lexicographical evidence.

In trying to determine historically the meaning of any word there is an inevitably large area of uncertainty involved, a philologial variant of the Heisenberg principle, for in the very act of semantic reconstruction one must also partly misconstrue. We are forced to determine what most words meant in the past chiefly by a process of determining what they did not mean, with the attendant problems which such a method entails. And when we have delimited an area of possible meaning, we are then able only to map out a range of probability and likelihood within that often broad area, derived from a word’s occurrences in evidence whose existence is due to the accidents of its transmission. As uncertain a process as historical philology is, however, the range of meaning which it restores is real, in the sense that one cannot simply disregard those probabilities in interpreting a text. The essay which follows seeks to restore a tiny fragment of the Wife of Bath’s Prologue from too many readings which have done just that. What the clause under examination most probably means is that clerk Jankyn came back to his own house (not just his home-town) and ate his meals (i.e. lived) at home with his family, a member of which was a close friend of the Wife’s and a baptismal sponsor for one of her children. This paraphrase expresses the commonest meanings in the fourteenth century of the three nouns I wish to examine in this essay: hom, bord, and godsib (gossib).

The phrase at hom means “at or to one’s native house” as Chaucer uses it. Häm in Old English always means a dwelling, a particular place, best translated by Latin domus, domicilium, villa, mansio, praedium (Bosworth-Toller, A Dictionary of Old English and Supplement, s.v. hâm; cf. s.v.—hâm, ham). The gradual extension of the word’s meaning from “one’s native dwelling” to “native region” vaguely and generally conceived, and then to pure metaphor (as in “Home is where the heart is”) is difficult to pinpoint within any period, as a note in the Oxford English Dictionary warns (OED, s.v. home). The phrase at hom is the Middle English development of the Old English adverbal accusative hâm with verbs of motion. Perhaps especially in this conservative phrase, therefore, ME. hom continued to carry its restricted, original meaning of “one’s own house” (to which one was going).

Chaucer rarely uses the word hom in a context where it may refer to something besides one’s native dwelling. The one apparent instance is in Truth: “Her is non hoom, her nis but wildernesse” (17). But the use of hâm to refer to the dwellings of spirits has several precedents in Old English—indeed, the idea that both Heaven and Hell contain dwellings for souls is Biblical. The use of hom to establish the Christian teaching that one belongs in Heaven is well attested from Old English as a particular use in a strictly limited context. Indeed, such a paradoxical usage of the word depends upon and thus emphasizes its primary meaning of “one’s native (earthly) house.”

Two other occurrences in Chaucer are perhaps ambiguous. The Parson is praised in The General Prologue for not seeking advancement; he “dwelte at hoom, and keppe wel his fold” (A.512). Here the phrase probably refers to his whole native parish rather than simply his own house, although even in this instance the more restricted meaning is certainly included. Similarly, Crisseyde praises Troilus because he “bereth hym here at hom so gentilly” (Troilus and Crisseyde, 2.187), including surely the whole area of Troy city, not just Troilus’ own house, although her words also include that. It is interesting to note in this regard that -hâm as a place-name element in Old English probably referred to a whole group of dwellings in an area, whereas ham (with a short vowel) referred to a single ‘home.’ To the extent that such a distinction existed in Old English, however, and the evidence, as Bosworth-Toller suggests, is not overwhelming, it was certainly lost by the Norman Conquest. But the conflation of these two meanings may be residually reflected in Chaucer’s use of hom in these instances to refer both to a particular house and to it and those around it in a limited area (Troy, the Parson’s parish).

Other than these instances, the one specialized, the other ambiguous, when Chaucer uses the word hom in the prepositional phrase at hom, he means “native dwelling.” Three examples will suffice to make this point, although many others could be adduced. In The Clerk’s Tale, Griselda vows to see the procession of the marquise, but first “wol I fonde / To doon at hoom” (E.283-284); in Troilus and Crisseyde, Calchas bemoans his loss of “a dauchtar that I lefte, alias! / Slepyng at hom” (4.92-93); and earlier in the Wife’s Prologue, she complains to her niggardly old husband, “I sitte at hoom, I have no thrifty clooth” (D.238).

But more trouble, I suspect, has been given to modern readers by the phrase to bord than by at hom. Bord is a word that has become restricted in its meaning in this
type of context since Chaucer’s time, even as hom has been extended. In the fourteenth century, bord was a noun meaning “meals,” as in the phrase “bed and board,” a transfer of the original meaning, “table,” itself extended from “wooden plank (used as a table).” The meaning “pay money for meals at a fixed rate” had not yet arisen, nor had the word developed a verb form. OED’s earliest citations for this meaning (and for the verb) are from the sixteenth century. Such phrases as maken bord or gon to bord mean simply “to eat meals,” as in this sentence from The Book of Margery Kempe: “he led hem wyth hym to be place her he went to boorde” (102/31), or this from a fourteenth-century Ancrene Riwle (ms. Pepys 2498, Magdalene College, Cambridge): “Summe ancrez maken her boord wip her gestes” (183/7-8), both cited by MED (s.v. bord, 5[c]). John, the carpenter in The Miller’s Tale “that gestes heeld to bord” (A.3188), probably collected money from them but that implication is made by the word gestes (and confirmed by the use fifteen lines later of hostelrye to refer to John’s house) not by the word bord. Chaucer uses geste(s) here in its original meaning of “stranger,” as he does in Troilus and Criseye 2.1111: “Ther is right now come into town a geste, / A Greek espie.” That gestes also customarily paid is implied in the following lines from The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale concerning the priest who was “so servysable / Unto the wyf, where as he was at table, / That she wolde suffre hym no thynge for to paye / For bord ne clothynge” (G.1014-1017). But that one can bord in one’s own house (at hom) is indicated by many examples in Chaucer, among them this line from the Wife’s Prologue: “I wolde nat spare hem at hir owene bord” (D.421). When Jankyn is said to have gone to bord at hom, the words meant that he lived with his family.

The least understood of the three nouns in the phrases used by Chaucer to place clerk Jankyn is godisb, perhaps just because it seems so evident. Every Chaucerian knows that the noun godisb (gossib) originally referred to some sort of relationship like that denoted now by godparent or godchild, but altered its meaning to what the OED defines as “a person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk” (s.v. gossip, 3), via the transitional meaning of “familiar acquaintance, friend, chum” (s.v. gossip, 2). But it is important to realize that the earliest citations in OED for the word’s fully debased meanings are from the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During the fourteenth century, the ordinary reference of godisb was still to a baptismal sponsor.

Moreover, Middle English godisb meant not “one’s own godparent,” but “the godparent of one’s child.” In the Middle English Lai le Fraine, two knights who are great friends each marry, and the lady of one gives birth to twin boys, whereupon her husband sends a messenger to his best friend to “say he schal mi gossibbe be” (42). Chaucer’s Parson, defining the types of lechery, says that “certes, parentele is in two maneres, outher goostly or flesshly goostly, as for to deelen with his godisb. For right so as he that engendreth a child is his flesshly fader, right so is his godfader his fader espirituel. For which a woman may in no lasse synne assemblen with hire godisb than with hire owene flesshly brother” (I.907-908). The comparison adduced by the Parson to a “flesshly brother” makes clear what variety of spiritual relationship is being referred to; a godisb is one’s contemporary, the generational relationship denoted by the element -sib, (OED, s.v. sib). Dame Alice has at least one male godisb as well:

> And if I have a gossib or a freend,\n> Withoute gilt, thou chistest as a freend,\n> If that I walke or pleye unto his hous!\n>
>
> (D.243-245)

It is interesting that although the Middle English Dictionaries gives “one’s sponsor at baptism or confirmation, a godparent” (s.v. godisb, 1[a]) as a distinctive meaning of godisb, none of the citations given by the editors unambiguously supports this meaning. Indeed in several, including the lines we are studying from the Wife’s Prologue, the reference is clearly to a contemporary person, rather than an elder or a child. Alisoun’s “gossib” is not her own godmother, nor even just a friend, but a friend who is (as the lines cited from Lai le Fraine and The Parson’s Tale indicate) a sponsor of her child.* The clue given by this word should at least give pause to those who confidently build interpretations based upon the Wife’s “evident” childlessness. I have argued the danger of assuming this view before,* since Chaucer’s text neither makes nor should be expected to make any statement one way or the other on the matter, but the lexicographical evidence of godisb adds cogent force to my earlier warning.

Sponsorship was defined doctrinally as a kind of binding kinship ritually granted through the sacrament of baptism, but as genuine as the kinship of blood. The medieval Church had severe strictures against marriage between individuals related in this way, extending, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, as far as marriage between children of godfathers and godmothers.* Canonically, however, only the sponsor and the person officiating contract the bond with the baptized person which constitutes an invalidating (diriment) impediment to marriage. Thus, godisb, like godparent, was considered to be a real form of kinship, regarded seriously as such by the Church, and serving to bind ties among medieval families. The relation of godisb could be used to cement profitable alliances as well as personal friendships (as in Lai le Fraine), and godisbs served a variety of useful functions performed also by blood-kin, including helping to arrange marriages. The Paston Letters reflect a careful choice and use of godisbs in a variety
of matters. Part of the irony in Alisoun’s courtship of Jankyn “for love and no richesse,” depends on our perceiving the expectation her neighbors would have had for Jankyn’s future when his family became allied through the tie of godsid to the village’s wealthiest widow. Alice implies that she had to use her wiles and snares to land Jankyn all by herself, but her godsid’s function during their meetings was more than just that of chaperone. Jankyn’s family could hardly have hoped for a better result from their spiritual kinship; indeed the Wife’s situation with respect to Jankyn, an ironic reversal of her earlier family-arranged marriages, makes all the more poignant and absurd her initial romantic hopes for this fifth alliance.

Thus, the relationship denoted by godsid in the fourteenth century, is an adult one, between friends of the same generation, who sponsor each others’ children, a coparenting of spirit as well as blood. A godfather or godmother, by contrast, is called just that. The MED cites another manual of sins like The Parson’s Tale, the fifteenth century allegorical treatise called Jacob’s Well, which cautious against what it describes vividly as the seventh depth of the slime-pit (wose) of lechery, “between a man & his goosbye or between godfadyr & goddau 3ter or be[ten] a chyldren of godfadyr & godmodyr” (Jacob’s Well, 162/6). The Middle English Dictionary editors use this quotation as evidence for godsid meaning “godparent,” but the relationship of “co-parent (in a spiritual bond)” is denoted, distinguished clearly in the quoted text from a “godparent/godchild” relationship.

The fact that close friends were often chosen to be one’s children’s sponsors is reflected by a secondary meaning of godsid in later Middle English, that of ‘friend, pal,’ especially as a word of address. Thus, Gluttony in Piers Plowman is greeted by Betty the brewster as “gossib” (B.5.302), and one of the cautionary tales in The Book of the Knight of Latour-Landry turns on the ability of a roper’s deceitful wife to enlist her reliable “gossip” in duping her husband.” But neither of these instances clearly excludes the use of the word godsid to mean “baptismal sponsor for one’s children.” The best description of the role of gossip at a medieval baptism remains that of H. S. Bennett in The Pastons and Their England. Basing his account upon the conventionalized witnesses found in post-mortem inquests, Bennett describes how the midwife took the baby to church for christening, the godparents having been summoned, accompanied by the usual crowd of neighbors (like marriages and all processions, baptisms formed a standard part of parish entertainment), how the ceremony was described afterwards to the mother by the midwife and gossips upon their return from church, and how the remainder of the day was spent in feasting the gossips and neighbors. The post-mortem inquests reflect the conventions of the landed classes, since they were held to determine the age of an heir to a tenant-in-chief. The majority from this period which I have examined and which name the baptismal sponsors, name three: two men (usually including a religious who is often the officiating cleric) and a woman in the case of a male child; and two women and a man in the case of a female. The sacrament itself encouraged one sponsor, and allowed two, although several of the age-proofs mention only the priest who did the baptism (his spiritual kinship to the child was conferred by the sacrament). In a small village, the network of kinship formed through the godsid tie could have been quite extensive.

Let me summarize what lines 527-530 of the Wife’s Prologue tell us about clerk Jankyn: he is from a local family “of biside Bathe,” sent off to Oxford for a short time but now returned home to live with his family (and work for little reward as parish clerk). The Wife of Bath is closely connected through the tie of godsid with one of Jankyn’s close female relatives, most likely his mother, since she is the female relative commonly found at hom. Furthermore, the mothers of medieval families customarily had charge of arranging the marriages for their offspring (with the father’s final approval), and Alisoun’s wealth, once the impediment of her fourth husband is removed, would make her a most attractive candidate. The very coziness and familiarity of the arrangements implied in lines 527-530 help to set up Alisoun’s eventual comic fall when Jankyn proves to be less tractable than he at first seems. Our understanding of these arrangements is essential to our ability to interpret with some correctness what the text suggests the circumstances of Alisoun’s fifth marriage to be, and the rich social context evoked by the experience recounted in her Prologue.

Notes
1. All textual references are to F. N. Robinson, ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd edition (Boston, 1957)
2. On the significance of this crucial detail of her portrait, see my article, “The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions,” PMLA 94 (1979), 209-222.
3. J. Byrchmore, “Mediaeval and Elizabethan Bath,” The Book of Bath (Bath, 1925), p. 59; see also Austin J. King and B. H. Watts, The Municipal Records of Bath, 1189-1604 (London 1885), especially pp. 12-27, for an account of earliest charters and other records of the town. They note (p. 27) that Bath “was a very considerable centre of the West of England woolen trade,” a weaver’s shuttle forming part of the arms of the priory.
6. John’s house is called both an *hostelry* (A.3203) and an *in* (A.3622).


8. The case of *godsib* affords a particularly clear instance of the philological uncertainty principle at work. Even after ruling out its evidently unmedieval meanings, as I have just done, there is still the uncertainty left in the fact that while the word *godsib* denotes a relationship of sponsorship among individuals of the same generation, it does not seem to refine further whether the relationship referred to in a given context is that of (a) two godparents of the same child; (b) the parent of a child one is sponsor to; or (c) the sponsor of one’s own child. All three refinements are possible instances of *godsib*-hood. In glossing Alisoun’s casual reference to “my gossib” as ‘the sponsor of her child,’ I give the most probable meaning of the word as used in the surviving evidence of the fourteenth century in contexts like this one, for while there are several instances of individuals addressing as *mi godsib* a person who is certainly a sponsor for one of their own children, there are none I have found in which either of the other two varieties of *godsib* is as certainly intended.


16. Of one representative group of 18 such proofs of age, fourteen list the heir’s baptismal sponsors. All fourteen give three names; in the case of the thirteen males, the pattern is invariably two men and one woman, whereas in the case of the one female heir two women and a man are listed: William D. Cooper, ed., “Proofs of Age of Sussex Families, temp. Edw. II to Edw. IV.” *Sussex Archaeological Collections* (Sussex Archaeological Society) 12 (1860), pp. 23-44. The form of these proofs was quite conventional in nature—see the separate notes by R. C. Fowler and M. T. Martin, *English Historical Review* 22 (1907), 101-103, 526-527; certainly the number of sponsors, their gender and social class would seem to have become conventional among the gentry subjects of the recorded inquests by the fifteenth century, for the earlier proofs display greater variation. The extent to which this change reflects the growth of a social convention or the development of an official formula cannot, of course, be exactly determined; undoubtedly some combination of the two factors is involved. A translation of most such proofs is to be found, passim., in the *Calendar of Inquisitions Post-Mortem (Henry III-Richard II)*, 15 vols. (London: H.M.S.O., 1904-70); by no means all list the baptismal sponsors, but of those which do, the pattern shown in the Sussex proofs prevails, although it is by no means universal. In about half the proofs from the early years of Edward III’s reign, the fact of baptism is recorded with no sponsors’ names given besides that of the priest; in several proofs for male heirs the two godfathers only are recorded, one being the officiating cleric who was always godfather (and thus *godsib* to the parents). In general, the later the date, the more apt one is to find the names of a full set of godparents listed in addition to the priest. Very few of these proofs from any period are for female children; fewer still list the names of their sponsors, but when they do the names are usually those of women. One can deduce from this pattern of evidence a custom of naming male sponsors for male children, females for females, and on occasion, the naming of a full set of godparents for children of both sexes, this last practice becoming more frequent in the documents as one moves into the fifteenth century.

**Works Cited**


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Susan Crane (essay date January 1987)


[In the following essay, Crane investigates the Wife of Bath’s attempts to define her autonomy, and she observes that many of Alison's ideas conflict with one another, and her quest for women's independence is unsustainable.]

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* so closely illustrates the concerns of its *Prologue* that critics agree it can only be understood in relation to its assertive, female, marriage-minded narrator. But why does Alison’s *Tale* resemble an Arthurian romance? Her *Prologue* is based on antifeminist tracts, marital satire, biblical exegesis—a clerical mixture from which Alison draws life and departs like the Eve of amphibians leaving the sea while carrying its salt in her veins. It would seem beyond this creature’s ken to speak of ladies’ gracious mercy, of quests and fairy knowledge. Only the Wife’s idealizing nostalgia for her happily-ever-after with Jankyn anticipates the generic character of her *Tale*.

I argue that we can better understand the disjunction between the Wife’s *Prologue* and *Tale*, and the peculiar generic makeup of the tale itself, by appealing to the works’ historical situation. I am not referring to the recent critical trend that analyzes Alison as if she were a real, fully developed personality. So treated, she appears to be a “sociopath,” homicidal, nymphomaniacal, a mass of bizarre symptoms (see, e.g., Rowland; Palomo; Sands). A second historicizing trend associates her trade and station with medieval land tenure laws, dower practices, and legal records, but these efforts, while valuable contextually, remove us from confronting Alison as she exists in her own language (see, e.g., Margulies; Colmer; Robertson, “‘And’”). She is neither an individual (if she were, she would indeed be monstrous) nor a mirror for historical conditions but a fiction who tells a fiction.

Yet the history of cultural beliefs can contribute to an understanding of these fictions. Ideologies inform genres more directly than do economic and social conditions, and they can mediate for us between a literary text and its historical moment.1 Romances, for example, shape ideals of chivalry and courtesy into narratives about how to interpret and assess those ideals. This is more fully what romances do than is representing the daily life of courts. Similarly, antifeminist satire tells us little about what actual marriages were like but much about how the clergy conceived of sexuality and femininity.

The *Wife of Bath’s Tale* draws heavily on romance and antifeminist satire. Alison has no existence independent of her words, but her words in their generic formations allude to social and religious convictions that have extraliterary importance. Attending to those convictions can help us see why Alison draws on romance, why she draws on it imperfectly, and what the discourse on gentillesse has to do with the rest of her performance.

Two issues in particular—gender and sovereignty—are of concern to Alison. Both issues have intertextual subtleties of some depth, and both also have practical influence in the world. The Wife’s *Tale* confronts the social belief that feminine power should be strictly limited, and it attempts to establish a defense of secular women’s sovereignty that opposes the conventions available to Alison. She revels in the attractions of power and argues that her active desire for it is justified by the benefits she wins from it and the peace and happiness that yielding to it will bring to men. Yet her vaunted abilities as a “wys wyf” (D 231) are precisely those the satirists condemn, while her happy endings are patently illusory. The illogicalities and confusions in her narrative are commonly attributed to her error: she is a parodic or comic figure who inverts accepted morality, or a sinful one who denies Christian teaching, and therefore she cannot argue cogently. But whether or not she is comical or morally wrong, she is of substantial interest from other perspectives. Her attempt to redefine women’s sovereignty is rhetorically and culturally significant, and from these perspectives Alison’s apparent confusions propel her convictions beyond traditional discourses toward a realm of expression where there is as yet no language. In her narrative and logical ruptures themselves, in her destabilizations of genre, gender, gentillesse, and sovereignty, we can perceive something of what “wommen moost desiren” (D 905) as well as how inexpressible that desire is.

The kinds of power Alison designates as “sovereignty” vacillate contradictorily, in part because she confronts generic and ideological differences on the issue. Her *Tale* analyzes a belief that informs both antifeminist satire and romance: that gender sets limits on personal capability and social power. Both literatures develop conventions about feminine abilities, women’s special
knowledge in affairs of the heart and hearth, and the ways women exercise their capacity in those affairs. Chaucer’s works often venture far from generic norms, but his poetry can still illustrate the conventions of these two genres regarding feminine power.

Heroines of romance tend to be more delicate emotionally and less capable intellectually than men (Dorigen’s laments, Crisyege’s fear, Theseus’s subjection of Femenye), but their exceptional beauty inspires love and adumbrates a fineness of character that may not quite be fulfilled (Dorigen’s rash promise, Crisyege’s falseness). For men they are the arbiters of love, courtesy, and high sentiment. Their excellence in these matters reproduces in the emotional sphere the hierarchy of feudal relations, leading to a sublimation and refinement of passion that are metaphorically elevating (Arveragus’s and Aurelius’s courtships of Dorigen, the Man in Black’s courtship of fair White). But the demanding standards of nobles ladies, after inspiring men to improve, are complemented by the ultimate compliance that brings courtship to fruition. From the romance tradition at large it is clear that resourcefulness, sharp wit, and magical power are located in minor female figures or dangerous ones more than in heroines (La Vieille, Lunete, Morgan le Fay, Chaucer’s Cassandra). The admirable women of romance wield their emotional sovereignty in ways beneficial to men and pleasurable to audiences, deferring stasis for a time but finally yielding in harmonious accord with male desire.

In contrast, antifeminist satire is nonnarrative, organized instead by an authoritative voice that rigidifies and fragments femaleness into a set of discrete exempla and negative topos on nagging, mercenary dependence, overbearing sexuality, and so on:

And if that she be foul, thou seist that she
Coveiteth every man that she may se,

Thou liknest [wommenes love] also to wilde fyr;
The moore it brenneth, the moore it hath desir
To consume every thynyg that bren wolde be.

“Bet is,” quod he, “thyn habitacioun
Be with a leon or a foul dragon
Than with a woman usynge for to chyde.”

(D 265-66, 373-75, 775-77)

Seeking to discourage clerics from cohabitation and sexual relations, the satirists mount an all-out attack on feminine emotional and domestic power. Significantly, romance poets and satirists agree in according women a potential for excellence in domesticity and love, but satirists make the failure of that potential a chief argument for avoiding women: contrary to what the suitor expects, a woman will not delight or comfort him. Moreover, the qualities that in romance contribute to women’s emotional excellence define their unworthiness in satire. Their greater fragility manifests itself in weeping and clinging, their capacity for love leads to torments of jealousy and sexual conflict, and their irrationality tyrannizes men like a child’s or a badly trained animal’s: “For as an hors I koude byte and whyne. / I koude pleyne, and yit was in the gilt, / Or elles often tymhe hadde I been spilt” (D 386-88). Antifeminists thus argue that women’s emotional sovereignty is harmful, aggressive, and falsely exercised instead of imagining with the romance poets that women’s sovereignty derives from native feminine virtues.

Initially, the Wife of Bath addresses the issues of gender and power as they are formulated in anti-feminist satire. As readers have long noted with pleasure, her own origin in the very texts she disputes forces her to shadowbox with herself, receiving almost as many blows as she delivers. However cleverly Alison attempts to parody satiric convictions—by celebrating the less-than-perfect life rather than accepting admonishments to perfection, by claiming that the rational male should yield reasonably to the less rational female—still the notion that women’s claims to sovereignty are unjustified is inextricably woven into the generic fabric of her Prologue. Alison’s shift to romance is thus a strategic one, challenging antifeminist versions of the issue by confronting them with a genre that celebrates women’s emotive power instead of undermining it. Romance is the “profeminist” literature, it would appear, that can combat the negative formulations of Theophrastus and Jerome.

But her tactic comes as a surprise in view of her own textual origins and of conventional rebuttals of the antifeminist version of women’s sovereignty. The Wife’s character is drawn from the gender conceptions of estates literature as well as from satire, and neither of these points of origin prepares us for her romance.

Alison’s “Venerien” (D 609) femaleness is more firmly rooted, as Jill Mann has shown, in her estate than in her horoscope (see also Shahar; Monfrin). Estates literature distinguishes not only among ways of life (workers, nobles, clergy) but also between men and women. Secular women are assigned to a separate female estate. This fourth estate is subdivided according to women’s social status in their relations to men rather than according to professions or work in the world: women are maidens or spouses or widows; they tempt, bear children, and so on. This formulation of social identity obviously makes women’s significance dependent on their relations to men, providing little justification for Alison’s claims to supremacy. Nor does the presentation of her trade offer her any better justification. Ali-
son's cloth making, mentioned only in her *General Prologue* portrait, turns out to have no importance in her life. Little more than a version of the spinning proverbially assigned to women along with deceit and weeping (D 401-02) as secondary sex characteristics, cloth making is not what gives Alison some measure of dominance during and beyond her marriages. Rather, her "sexual economics" extract wealth from her husbands in exchange for domestic peace (Delany). The effacement of the Wife's trade from her *Prologue* and *Tale* is a disenfranchising move that underlines her functional dependence. In keeping with estates ideology, her social identity is restricted to her wifehood, while her defense of "Marcien" hardiness and dominance (D 610) inverts antifeminist condemnations of the marital estate.

What history can show us about the Wife of Bath is less the daily working and living conditions of women than the ways men and women conceived their situations. The strong presence of antifeminist and estates ideology in the Wife's portrait and *Prologue* renders her claim to sovereignty intensely problematic, and a wider context of women's voices demonstrates her isolation even from her own fictive sex. It is not only male writers who persuasively assert that women's sexuality defines their situation and that men should be sovereign over women. Heloise, who is anthropologized in Jankyn's "book of wikked wyves" (D 685), portrays herself in her letters as the source and, from birth, nothing but the source of Abelard's misfortune: "What misery for me—born as I was to be the cause of such a crime! Is it the general lot of women to bring total ruin on great men? Hence the warning about women in *Proverbs*." Submissiveness offers her a way to minimize her sex's power to do harm, so Heloise represents her love's merits to have been the extraordinary sacrifices by which "I have carried out all your orders so implicitly that when I was powerless to oppose you in anything, I found strength at your command to destroy myself. . . . I believed that the more I humbled myself on your account, the more gratitude I should win from you" (*Letters* 130, 113). Margery Kempe, who like Heloise takes uneasy refuge from marriage in celibacy and religious self-castigation, likens Mary and Joseph's wedding to her own spiritual marriage to God, praying that like a perfect wife she "myth han grace to obey hym, louyn & dreydn hym, worschepyn & presyn hym, & no-thyng to louyn but hat he louyth, ne no-thyng to welyn but hat he wolde, & euyr to be redy to fulflyn hys wil bothyn nyght & day wyth-owtn grutchynge er heuynes" (199).

That Margery speaks through two male amanuenses and that Heloise was educated in clerical orthodoxy by Abelard himself only begin to indicate the constraints on their self-presentation. Yet they concur, while Chaucer's Alison does not, that women should value submission and sacrifice and should watch vigilantly over their explosive sexuality. Christine de Pizan also chooses obedience as her touchstone when refuting the antimatrimonial satirists of Jankyn's book. Despite her argument in the *City of Ladies* that women are capable of independence, Christine counters the claims of Valerius and Theophrastus that women are domineering and unloving with examples of wives supreme in servitude—they follow their husbands to battle and exile, eat their cremated husbands' ashes or kiss the rotting corpses; they treat unfaithful husbands with love and respect; they are as constant as Griselda (117-34, 170-76). From the unlettered Margery to the highly educated and original Christine, women writers defend their sex partly by accepting cultural models of female submission.

A story of Griselda, then, would be the widely expected rebuttal to the antifeminist challenge of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*. But the *Clerk's Tale* comes later (and differently); the Wife's *Tale* is another kind of rebuttal altogether.

Initially, romance provides Alison with an argument to use against the satirists. In that her *Tale* lacks chivalric or military adventures and features a crucially knowledgeable and capable female character, it is not a standard romance. But it does answer to the phrase Chaucer uses, according to Donald Howard (52-53n), to designate his romances, "storial thyng that toucheh gentillesse" (A 3179). True to the genre are the setting in "th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthur" (D 857) and the educative knowledge by which women direct men's emotional development. Arthur's justice is tempered by Guinevere's mercy as is Theseus's by the "verray womanychede" of weeping ladies who plead for Palamon and Arcite (A 1748-61). The old hag, like other romance heroines, has special insight in matters of love and morality that leads the knight to change for the better and to achieve happiness in love.

Alison manipulates her romance with an eye to antifeminist assertions, using her new genre to attract validity to the version of women's sovereignty condemned by antifeminist writers. For that sovereignty is not identical in romance and in satire. Wives of satire seize tangible economic and physical terrain by force and subterfuge: "I have the power duryntg al my lyf / Upon his propre body, and noght he"; "Atte ende I hadde the bettre in ech degre / By sleigghte, or force, or by som maner thyng" (D 158-59, 404-05). Ladies of romance control men's devotion not by force or even by their own volition but by reason of their excellence (Dorigen, Criseyde). The Wife's *Tale*, in referring to romance conventions, implies an equivalence between the unjustified tyranny of satiré's wives and the meritorious supremacy of romance heroines. Clearly, there is no Dorigen or Criseyde in her story. The hag is aggressive, manipulative, and sexually demanding in
the best satiric vein, but her high and magical attributes—as queen of fairies, as goal of a quest for life, as moral guide, and finally as love object of the knightly hero—obscure her antifeminist connections and work to validate her active exercise of power.

But while romance dignifies the claim to women's sovereignty in this Tale, frequent antifeminist touches paradoxically vitiates the romantic elevation Alison seems to desire. The answers proposed to Guinevere's question catalog feminine weaknesses, from "Somme seyde wommen loven best richesse" to "we kan no conseil hyde" (D 925, 980). The violence of sexual relations through Alison's Tale and the animal metaphors for women (timed like birds, kicking like galled horses, booming like bitterns) answer to the satiric conviction that women are profoundly irrational, sensual creatures.

One explanation of this difficulty in the narration is that the Wife is incapable of sustaining the romance mode; she cannot help slipping back into the antifeminist attitudes from which she herself was drawn. For other critics, the "restrained idiom of the Tale proper..." suggests that a courtly narrator has replaced the Wife" or that Chaucer speaks directly in some passages (Winney 23). These explanations place Alison's Tale beyond her control and make its antifeminist elements no more than inopportune and debilitating interruptions of a standard romance. We would do better to accept that the Wife of Bath is the voice Chaucer assigns to Prologue and Tale alike and to hear her out. Alison is not a person constrained by plausibility but a fictional voice that knows and can perform whatever is useful to dramatizing the interests attributed to it. Her tendency to slip from the realm of satire into romance and back again is worth considering as her move, one suited to her concern with women's sovereignty.

Alison's transitions between satire and romance betray the incongruity of the two generic visions and, consequently, their shared inadequacy to her argument. The knight's trial culminates this process of recognition. Several shifts that may have seemed involuntary, from queenly power to proverbial foibles, from fairy illusion to all-too-solid flesh, are here recuperated in a full return to romantic sensibility. The hierarchical display of Guinevere's assembly of judgment evokes fictional love courts, with the "queene himself sittynge as a justise" (D 1028), and the answer she and her ladies accept from the knight seems to tally with courtly conventions about women's superiority in matters of the heart. Yet the hag anticipates that the ladies will not gladly admit the knight's answer; even "the proudest" will simply not "dar seye nay" (D 1017-19). Echoing her suspicion, the knight concludes his answer insistently: "This is your mooste desir, thoogh ye me kille" (D 1041). The implication of resistance marks a disparity between satiric sovereignty, actively claimed and energetically wielded, and the passive, apparently unwilling sovereignty of women in romance. To force the queen's ladies into accepting that "Wommen desirn to have soveryntee" (D 1038) is to confront the romance vision that has dignified women's power with Alison's fiercer vision that women consciously seek and enjoy it.

The Wife's return to a satiric conviction at this point underlines the insufficiency of either conventional discourse for dramatizing a worthy sovereignty of secular women. Satire denies their worth. Romance seems a genre in which women's excellence brings power, but the appearance proves false. A heroine's strength lasts only for the temporal and fantastic space that delays her submission and demonstrates the capabilities of her suitor. Her mercy and compliance are the necessary closure to her aloof independence and her ability to command devotion. In a historical study of marriage practices, Georges Duby concludes that the Old French poetry of adultery and love service is based on a "fundamentally mysogenous" conception of woman as merely a means to male self-advancement: "Woman was an object and, as such, contemptible" (Medieval 14, 108). Eugene Vance corroborates Duby's historical analysis by connecting early lyrics of adultery to romances of proud ladies: throughout, love's poetic expression is typically "le combat érotique," an aesthetic of antithesis recognizing the violence that is veiled by the mystified perfection of fine amor (548; see also Bloch 153-56).

These researches suggest that the violent sexual relations of the Wife of Bath's Tale do not depart from romance tradition so much as exaggerate it, while the Tale's presentation from the knight's point of view, its evasion of punishment for the knight, and the queen's merely contingent authority (for which she "thanketh the kyng with al hir myght" [D 899]) offer a recognizably romantic, masculine imagining. The hag's power over her "walwing" knight is anomalous, more like the power of Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight than like that of a conventional heroine. But even the hag surrenders in the end. The joyful and thoroughly fanciful resolution that fulfills the knight's "worldly appetit" (D 1218) illustrates the most romance can render. Here, as in Alison's Prologue, "her very verbalizations remain unavoidably dependent, feminine respeaking of a resolutely masculine idiom" (Patterson 682; see also Aers 143-51).

Heloise, Christine, and Margery Kempe similarly reiterate clerical wisdom about the failings and duties of their sex. One further female voice, taking a noble rather than a clerical perspective, demonstrates that modern critics are not the first to find misogyny and male violence in courtly conventions. Toward the end of his book of instruction for his daughters, Geoffroy de la Tour Landry writes at some length of his wife's opposi-
tion to his belief “that a lady or damoyselle myght loure peramours in certayne caas.” According to Geoffroy, his wife objected that men’s assertions about the value of love service “are but sport and esbatment of lordes and of felawes in a langage moche comyn.” Men’s conventional language (drawn from courtly tradition) has no relation to their feelings, says this wife, so their declarations of love should not be trusted. Her understanding that courtly speaking is masculine rather than feminine presages modern analyses of romance. Men use this discourse against women, to make conquests: “these wordes coste to them but lytll to say for to gete the better and sooner the grace and good wylle of theyr peramours.” Nor do they undertake tasks for love but “only for to enbaunce them self, and for to droue vnto them the grace and vayne glory of the world” (Book 163, 164; Livre 246-48). In her view, then, male power does not surrender to female excellence in courtly interaction. Consequently, her arguments on the subject support Geoffroy’s instructions to their daughters to restrain their sexuality and to be humbly obedient in their relations with men.

If the elevation of women in romance was understood to be chimerical and if even noble writers concur with clerical ones on the importance of female submissiveness, how is the Wife of Bath to formulate (even fictionally) an argument in defense of women’s desire for sovereignty? In many ways her Tale does not manage to transcend the categories of her age, and her argument remains partial, awkward, and illogical. For example, the curtain lecture urges the knight to rise above the worldly indulgences of wealth and station, but the lecturer then fulfills his sensual desires. She rejects the social hierarchy and nobility of blood in the same speech, yet she appeals to “my sovereign lady quene” (D 1048) for the knight’s hand and promises him to become as beautiful “As any lady, emperice, or quene” (D 1246; see Haller; Murtagh; Bolton).

There are many such confusions in the Wife’s Prologue and Tale; perhaps most elusive is what Alison means by sovereignty in the first place. The power it signifies seems constantly to vacillate, but three major contradictions can be distinguished. Alison sometimes associates sovereignty with economic gain, “wynnyng” (D 416), yet she seems to win nothing from her fourth husband, gives up her gains to Jankyn, and makes the hag speak eloquently against the significance of wealth. At other points, coercion, including physical domination, renders Alison’s metaphor “myselfe have been the whippe” (D 175) very nearly literal, but she moves easily from coercion to accommodation with Jankyn as does the hag with her knight. And finally, her conception of sovereignty seems to demand the trust or the high opinion of her husbands. “Thou sholdst seye, ‘Wyf, go wher thee liste . . . / I knowe yow for a trewe wyf, dame Alys’” (D 318-20), she instructs her old husbands, and Jankyn fulfills her desire in acceding, “Myn owene trewe wyf, / Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf” (D 819-20). Nonetheless, the Wife cheerfully undermines her demand for trust and respect by asserting and demonstrating that women are untrustworthy: “half so boldly kan ther no man / Swere and lyen, as a womman kan” (D 227-28).

Why does Alison constantly alter and even cancel each of her versions of sovereignty? The solution is not that women’s desire for power is nothing but a desire for love. Love is a relatively simple matter for her, something she often gets from men. In contrast, sovereignty vacillates confusingly even in love’s presence: with the “daunngorous” Jankyn and knight (D 514, 1090), it works to perpetuate love, as if it were analogous to integrity or merit, but in her four earlier marriages it tyrannizes or substitutes for love, as if it were mere self-interest. The Wife’s casual manipulation of her old husbands’ devotion—“They loved me so wel, by God above, / That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love” (D 207-08)—suggests that the question of power precedes and subsumes the question of men’s love: it is sovereignty that “worldly women loven best” (D 1033). The object of this fundamental love is elusive, and its elusiveness partly accounts for its desirability, in accordance with Alison’s psychological principle “Forbede us thyng, and that desiren we” (D 519). Female power, in any form, is the most heretical of her desires (Howard 252; Aers 143-46). unsustained in any of the conventional discourses on which she draws. Looking beyond those discourses necessarily leaves the Wife inarticulate, even about the meaning of the sovereignty she imagines. She desires to validate the forbidden but can hardly formulate what it is.

Still, her very failures of articulation make gestures that indicate what the worth of female power might be. Alison signals the direction of her desire through a series of poetic transformations. The hag’s physical metamorphosis is only the most dazzling of many mutations demonstrating that genres, genders, and words themselves are not fixed phenomena but fluid media through which new potential can be realized.

Romance is the appropriate form for confronting an unknowable desire. Its “strategy of delay” holds narrative “on the threshold before the promised end, still in the wilderness of wandering, ‘error,’ or ‘trial’” (Parker 5, 4). This fantastic space permits traditional medieval romance to imagine, however contingently, a kind of female sovereignty that Alison manipulates, as we have seen, to justify the willed power condemned in antifeminist satire. But in that very manipulation, she recognizes the illusoriness of women’s power in romance and cracks the Tale’s generic frame. Neither romance nor satire can answer Alison’s longing, and her vacillation expresses her desire to pass beyond their limits.
Women also cross gender lines in the Wife's Tale. The barber in Midas's story becomes a wife; the ladies' court of judgment replaces Arthur's; and the hag comes to speak like a cleric, while her husband submits with wifely meekness to her "wise governance" (D 1231). These substitutions make women the active movers of plot, as they are not in conventional romance, where they may inspire chivalric activity but where that activity is itself the source of change and growth. Gender displacements extend to the fairy realm, as the "elf-queene with hir joly compaignye" (D 860), who are all feminine when the knight encounters them (D 992), seem to metamorphose during Alison's introduction from "joly" dancers to potent incubi threatening women in the Arthurian countryside. The knight-rapist and the king both move from having power to surrendering it, while women throughout the Tale move themselves into male purviews. Does this plot's exclusion of chivalric adventures echo and reverse the Prologue's effacement of Alison's cloth-making profession, emphasizing the dependence of men on women in the Tale? Even the comic victory of friars over fairies in the Tale's first lines is vitiated when the fairy-wife's pillow sermon demonstrates her intimate knowledge of religious texts. Reassigning women to positions of authority traces the path of their transgression in the narrative itself. The power they exercise is not always benign or even admirable, since worthy female sovereignty is a concept Alison cannot fully articulate, but the gender shifts themselves loosen the bond between maleness and power that makes female sovereignty inconceivable.

In the lecture on gentillesse and poverte, we are taught that even words are unfixed, because the categories they designate can be reconceived from changed perspectives. Gentillesse is not, as the knight thinks, a question of "nacioun" and "kynde" (D 1068, 1101), of merit determined by blood alone. Rather, "he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis" (D 1170). This familiar clerical topos restricts and relativizes the second estate's claim to superiority by emphasizing the disjunction between supremacy of birth and the moral supremacy over which the church has special authority (see Duby, Three). So alien does this argument seem to Alison's views on female sovereignty that some critics treat it as a mere interruption: "it is in fact addressed to the audience. Chaucer apparently wished to include such a discourse at this point" (Jordan 89). But in that it challenges fixed categories, the speech on gentillesse and poverte is of a piece with the Tale's other instances of transformation and is appropriate to an old hag who can so easily redefine herself as beautiful and young.

Beginning with the words themselves, the hag's speech subverts the conventional meanings of gentillesse and poverte, using paradox and oxymoron to emphasize the process of reversal: the sinner "nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl; / For vileyns synful dedes make a cherl" (D 1157-58); "Poivte is hateful good" (D 1195). The direction of these reversals moves away from the concept of nobility and poverty as objective states beyond individual control, asserting instead that conscious choices determine them: "Thanne am I gentil whan that I bigyne / To lyven vertuously" (D 1175-76); "he that nought hath, ne coveleth have, / Is riche, although ye holde him but a knife" (D 1189-90). The two processes, the semantic destabilization and the assertion that individuals can define their situations, connect this speech to Alison's wider preoccupation with sovereignty: that is the most unstable of her terms and the one she seeks most persistently to reconceive. Without a culturally authoritative recourse for her half-imagined redefinition, Alison displaces the achievement to the hag's analogous transformations of gentillesse and poverte. Perfectly in consonance with recognized authorities, yet grounded in arguments for self-determination, the hag's definitions imply that sovereynetee may also be open to new and freely chosen meanings. Emphasizing the possibility, the hag's mutation into an authoritative expert enacts the claim that women can deserve power, and her husband recognizes that when he surrenders marital sovereignty to her on the basis of her moral excellence. Like the elevation of romance, the morality of clerical exhortation is here appropriated (partially and not altogether fairly) to support Alison's defense of female sovereignty.

The hag's self-transformations culminate the various shifts and changes surrounding gender and power in the Wife of Bath's Tale. Perhaps we have not attended sufficiently to these instabilities because of Alison's air of tenacious assurance. She tackles her issue with such conviction that we expect her account to make sense, and so we resolve her inconsistencies by deciding that she is driven by nymphomania, or represents fallen willfulness, or conversely that she rises to philosophical wisdom through the experience of her Tale. Critical conclusions about what Alison "wants" proliferate, yet it is meaningful that she does not provide a consistently readable answer. If I were attempting to wrest coherence from the Wife's preoccupation with women's sovereignty, I would argue that sovereignty's associations with and dissociations from financial gain, domestic control, sexual aggressiveness, and love are all informed by a conviction that women should not strive for equality in marriage but should, rather, refuse to wield power that they have securely won. This tactic appears to resolve the battle of the sexes into blissful reciprocity, but the Wife's envoy reveals a still-polarized confrontiveness that denies transcendence.

But when we make the Wife of Bath coherent, she becomes too easy to dismiss. She inscribes something more complex in her inconsistencies themselves, and it is important to consider how they too comment on gender and power. They stress that the Wife's justifica-
tion of sovereignty is inexpressible in that it cannot be sustained by any conventional discourse. Whatever is compelling in her self-defense does not finally come from the language of satire or romance or moral philosophy, all of which she misappropriates. The inadequacy of her arguments, the mutability of gentillesse and sovereynete, the shifting genders, and the flow of genres in her Tale record the impossibility of Alison’s undertaking. Her own restless metamorphoses, from antifeminist creation to romancer to clerical scholar and back to militant wife in her envoy, emphasize that each tradition on which she draws denies women sovereignty. In this context, that she and her old hag do not exercise their hardwon power intriguingly contradicts their persistent desire to win it. Is this a surrender to male fantasy? Or is Alison incapable of representing the full achievement of women’s power? Or is sovereignty here again to be construed as trust, rather than as economic security or coercive domination? Can her envoy sustain any of these explanations?

More important than Alison’s failure to resolve such dilemmas is the elusive longing her many transformations betray. Her insatiable desire is more forceful and preoccupying than any of her illusory conclusions. Sovereignty’s redefinitions are all provisional, each canceling another, because the most Alison can tell us about her ideal of female power is that it is not present. In her present, she can only tear the inert texts that have determined her, and wish for more.

Notes

1. I use the term ideology not to disparage but, rather, to describe a set of interrelated beliefs that informs a particular way of life and works to validate that way of life in its attempts to win and maintain a place for itself in the world. On relations between history, ideology, and romance see Jameson; Shahrar; Crane.

2. Robinson’s notes list the connections between such passages and the works of Theophrastus, Jean de Meun, Matheolus, Jerome, and others. In this discussion I am claiming a “clerical” and “satiric” sensibility for these writers and their works, even for those who were not themselves clerics (e.g., Ovid) and for works that are not satires in the full generic sense, because anti-feminist writing was so fully integrated into the medieval tradition of clerical satire. Some scholars prefer the term antimatrimonial to antifeminist, but the strategy of the tradition is to speak against marriage by speaking against women. On the WBP [Wife of Bath’s Prologue] and another kind of clerical satire, the sermon joyeux, see Patterson.

3. Many critics have noted Alison’s conflation of sex and gain in her marriages. It is also important that, in the dynamic of these marriages, Alison does not herself produce the wealth she deploys. Wealth is something inert that she wins from men by subterfuge and force, not something she generates by cloth making.

4. Her distance from models of womanhood may contribute to exegetical interpretations that her Prologue and Tale are not so much about femininity as about “the problem of willfulness” or “carnality”: see Koban; Robertson, Preface 317-31. If the text has a tropological level on which the interactions of pure moral qualities can be analyzed, it nonetheless also makes literal statements with which I am concerned.

5. The ideas of Heloise anthologized in Jankyn’s book are probably those against marriage that Abelard reports in the Historia calamitatum (Letters 70-74), adapted in Jean de Meun’s Roman de la rose (vol. 2, lines 8729-58; Romance, pp. 177-78).

6. See also Margery’s account of her own marriage to God (87).

7. For editions of Christine’s French text in preparation, see Richards’s introd. xxv.


9. See also The Legend of Good Women G 317-444 (Alceste, “so charytable and trewe” [G 434], rescues Chaucer from the God of Love’s punishment) and Ruggiers 208. In the following discussion I assume that Arthur’s queen in WBT [Wife of Bath’s Tale] may be called Guinevere and that the old hag is the “elf-queene” of line 860.

10. According to Malone, “If the tale befits her, it does so by contrast, not by likeness” (489). My argument owes much to Leicester. “Art.”

11. See also 12-15, 105-10. Green draws a similar conclusion on the social implications of later courtly poetry.

12. Mary Carruthers proposes that WBT opposes “courtesy-books” like Geoffroy’s.

13. Some scholars relate the speech on gentillesse to Alison’s “social class, the new rich, resentful of the claims of the old rich” (Colmer 329; see also Carruthers; Howard 105-06), but her class and professional origins are suppressed so markedly in favor of her estate and sex that the latter categories should have more to do with the speech than the former. Nor is the topos “he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis” to my knowledge ever a bourgeois one for medieval writers; rather, when it appears outside clerical contexts, its use is to sustain the nobility’s separateness by adding moral criteria to those of birth: see Vale 14-32; Specht 104-08.
14. According to Koban, the speech is one of the CT's "crystallizing utterances" in which Chaucer educates us in "humanizing truths" (227-28; see also Winney 24).

15. Only by accepting that the knight has listened to his wife and been changed by her words can we explain the difference between "My love? . . . nay, my damncioun!" (D 1067) and "My lady and my love, and wyf so deere, / I put me in youre wise governance" (D 1230-31). Unless he is "glosing" her like Jankyn (D 509), which is unlikely in view of his thoughtful sigh (D 1228), the hag has talked him into loving and respecting her.

16. See Gallacher; see also Rowland; Palomo; Sands; and n. 4 above.

17. Chaucer's dramatization of an undecided Alison is remarkable not least in refraining from authorial judgment, a gesture Leicester attributes to Chaucer's own character: "This lack of closure in the Wife's life and personality is, finally, an aspect of Chaucer's feminism" ("Of a Fire" 175).

Susan Crane (essay date March 1988)


[In the following essay, Crane provides a tongue-in-cheek look at the mysterious death of Alisoun's fourth husband and defends the Wife against the charge of murder.]

"Professional scholars," said Sherlock Holmes, "like professional detectives, are not reasoning animals. If the murder in the Wife of Bath's Prologue has not been discovered before, it is because I had never read that part of the Canterbury Tales until a fortnight ago." Holmes would not find it surprising that his case against Alison, as reported by Vernon Hall in the third volume of The Baker Street Journal, has failed to convince most of our unreasoning profession. However, the academic brief on the revolting convenye death has grown fatter over the years, and it is now time to clear Alison's name and return her to those halcyon days when she stood accused of nothing worse than being an icon of fallen willfulness.

It would be an easy task to acquit Alison on the ground that the evidence against her is insubstantial and ambiguous. I could argue that Alison is proud of her flirtation with Jankyn because it illustrates her acquisitive "purveiance" (D 566, 570). "I holde a mouses herte nat worth a leek / That hath but oon hole for to sterte to" (D 572-73): far from plotting to get rid of a husband, she boasts that she is lining up Jankyn behind number four, doubling rather than changing her options. Further, when Alison lets slip the narrative thread—"now, sire, lat me se what I shal seyn" (D 585)—her accusers hear a sinister evasion of just how "blood bitokened gold" (D 581) in this case. The argument cannot be accepted without complementary evidence on what crimes are being suppressed at the five other points when Alison's narrative restarts from a dead stop (D 480-81, 563, 627, 666-68, 711-12). Has she poisoned all the men "short, or long, or blak, or whit" (D 624) that she abandons with the sudden "What sholde I seye" (D 627)? Has she bludgeoned the old clerks whose habits she is describing just before her abrupt "But now to purpos" (D 711)? A much fatter brief than we see before us would be required to validate the charge that Alison's casual narration betrays a felonious nature. Finally, I could argue that while Jankyn does taunt Alison with examples of husband murder, it is not that but the book's testimony on women's chiding and sensuality that finally moves Alison to action. Alison recognizes the validity of those charges, and she has left us a vigorous defense of her ability to scold and to seduce. But there is little to suggest that either Jankyn or his wife perceives murder to be the most pertinent and painful of his book's antifeminist accusations.

Thus Alison could be acquitted simply for lack of evidence, but that would not satisfy her accusers, whose case is one of those instances of argument from absence: what is not there is crucial. I would like to make two observations about how these gaps are glossed by those who think the Wife of Bath murdered number four. First, critics sustain this accusation by assuming that Alison is not a literary character, a text, but rather a person who has a complete life that we can recover by conjecture. Second, the accusers refer their charge to antifeminist tracts such as Jankyn's book of wicked wives, in which the worst of the accusations against women is that they may be expected to murder their husbands. This Wife exemplifies fully what the satirical tradition tells us about wives.

Both of these components of the case against Alison are fraught with difficulties. To begin with her ontological status, imagining Alison to be capable of murder entails a naive confusion of the textual and the organic that has nothing to do with the ordinary recognition that literature strives to imitate life. Of course literary characters resemble living people, but the reality of fictional characters is enclosed in and determined by their texts. This seems so evident that I would hesitate to mention it, were it not a principle so frequently ignored in discussions of Alison of Bath: "We can easily imagine her when young. . . . In her formative years she read romantic stories of the Arthurian knights. . . . [But] the twelve year old bride, anticipat-
ing the realization of her girlish romantic dreams, finds herself bound in holy wedlock to an old man barely capable of making love. This fabrication is launched from details in the text but soars rapidly into the ozone of readerly imagination. Why should we connect romances with Alison's formative years; why with private reading? Because the dreamy susceptibility we might then attribute to her might lead to a disappointment so great that she might later feel murderous. Such inventions derive from the tradition that brought us The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines and conjectures about what Hamlet ate for breakfast. Or in Alison's case, "Why she married her fourth husband is not clear. Can it be that she was drunk at the time?" In a court of law this would amount to inadmissible insinuation. In critical circles the work of Marshall Leicester, David Benson, and many others encourages us to acknowledge the textuality of literary characters by respecting the limits of their representation. Alison does look lifelike, but to invent more of her life than Chaucer has already given us is to take ourselves for poets.

Yet Alison's accusers explain her crime by inventing for her an extratextual history and psychopathology whose slender relations to the text are attributed to Alison's guilty self-concealment. For Beryl Rowland, even the Wife's abrupt narrative transitions "suggest a pathological state"; concerning the "oother compaignye in youte" (A 461), Rowland notes that "precocius sexual experience may create in a woman a trauma which makes her hate all men... Hence the obvious satisfaction that Alys expresses at her winnings, and the contempt which she shows for men's desires." Donald Sands, analyzing the Wife as a "psychiatric case," discovers that she suffers from "a disorder which recent psychiatric texts label a sociopathic personality disturbance, an illness characterized by antisocial reaction, dyssocial reaction, and usually addiction (in Alys's case, probably to alcohol)." If the Wife of Bath were a living creature, she would indeed look bizarre, but the work of psychiatrists would not help us to handle her. Could we galvanize her into life, she would appear, like Frankenstein's monster, an alien being horrifically different from ourselves? Refusing to notice the irreducible Otherness of art, Sands aligns Alison with Charles Manson while Rowland diagnoses her as a nymphomaniac. Taking Alison to be a real woman thus sustains an argument that she is disturbed enough to commit murder, just as can inventing for her a tragically disappoinited girlhood. But these moves misapprehend the kind of reality that fictional characters enjoy. Alison does not have a complete existence "before" or "behind" the poetry. She exists as her spoken text calls her into being. However lifelike the poetry makes her, we should not imagine that she has a still deeper life that we can recover by any stretch of critical ingenuity.

Indeed, and ironically, taking the Wife of Bath's Prologue as an instance of "the human psyche responding to circumstance" leads Alison's accusers to assessments as negative and extreme as those of the exegetical critics against whom they often define their endeavor. For D. W. Robertson and his followers, Alison has little or no relation to living women; she is instead an "iconographic figure" of carnality, "the mouthpiece of a clerical sort of buffoonery," "an allegorical figure representing human carnality." The exegetical critics believe that Chaucer draws an iconic Alison to further a philosophical argument, whereas the critics who accuse her of murder believe we should think of her as a disturbed woman—"the emasculating bitch, the frigid nymphomaniac, the Sadistic swinger." I would argue that presssing her into an iconic frame and inflating her to fully human proportions distort alike her fictional identity and deprive her of her true existence as a literary character.

This hidden affinity between exegetical critics and those who accuse Alison of murder raises my second objection to the accusation: It necessitates an impoverished account of what Chaucer is doing in the Wife of Bath's Prologue. As one who could countenance the murder of her husband, Alison would be not just guilty of a great crime, she would embody the worst of the antifeminist charges detailed in Jankyn's book. Her accusers share this conviction with those who call her an icon. Rowland defines Alison in terms of medieval commonplaces and asserts that Chaucer's task is to make the commonplace "credible." Sherlock Holmes assures us that it is "obvious that the Wife is one of Chaucer's contributions to those satires against women beloved of the Middle Ages... If, then, Chaucer was holding the Wife up as an example of what a woman should not be, it should not surprise us if he made her willing to cause the death of a husband." If D. W. Robertson's theory of iconographic figures did not forbid the invention of a romantic girlhood or a criminal psychopathology for Alison, he might well have agreed that she shares homicide with her sisters in the tradition of clerical satire. For both sets of critics, the Wife is another exemplum for Jankyn's book, a wicked wife indeed.

Is the Wife of Bath's Prologue a remotivation of medieval commonplaces, a contribution to the antifeminist canon? I believe this is a partial and distorted version of the text. On this point I would like to call to the bar two character witnesses, both disarmingly affable and both more subtle than they care to appear. Dr. Watson and Geoffrey Chaucer. Watson suggests with some delicacy that Holmes suspects Alison due to his "imperfect sympathy for the opposite sex," and that Alison expresses concern for Jankyn's soul not because he was her partner in crime but "because she loved him." Watson's observation of affective states provides more reliable data than all the circumstantial evidence.
gathered by Alison’s accusers. It is not important to my case, though it does provide evidence of a circumstantial kind, that neither Chaucer’s Clerk, nor the Merchant, nor the “Envoy to Bukton” expresses the least suspicion that Alison is homicidal. It is important that Alison’s accusers identify her fully with the misogynist tradition of clerical satire: she is “woman as her own worst enemy”; “an example of what a woman should not be.”10 Chaucer’s presentation of Alison, I submit, is more subtle than that.

To close this case, Chaucer might well testify that he does not aspire to be anthropologized in Jankyn’s book. Rather, he has dramatized that book’s inertness, pastness, and univocal flatness, by placing it in the home of a still-fictional but comparatively reflective character who responds to its assertions about marriage. Alison’s argument is notoriously illogical; she is constructed from the very tradition she opposes, and must assemble her defense of women from the clerical case against them. Chaucer seems to be asking: How would antifeminist literature sound, if the wives it describes could listen? How would the clerical authors look from the viewpoint of their own targets? At first Chaucer may have conceived the Wife of Bath’s Prologue as a literary joke in which the women of satire simply talk back to their authors, but as he worked through the Prologue, Chaucer seems to have reached for more: Alison acquires emotions and reflections that have no place in the tradition, detaching her from clerical discourse and allowing her a critical perspective on it. The reflective awareness with which she speaks of the antifeminist tradition makes her Prologue far more than a mere rerun of the clerical case against women. Her searching contradictoriness does not come to rest in a final auctorial judgment, and according to Leicester, “this lack of closure in the Wife’s life and personality is, finally, an aspect of Chaucer’s feminism.”11 Any reading that collapses the Wife of Bath’s Prologue back into the antifeminist vision of “what a woman should not be” is crucially reductive—yet the move is inherent to arguing that Alison should be suspected of murdering her ravellour.

Women and men of the jury: The case against Alison rests on two false apprehensions about her Prologue. First, her accusers claim that she is essentially human in the dimensions of her life and the constitution of her psyche, so that we may conjecture about her childhood and measure her by the standards of clinical psychology. The evidence so collected is inadmissible. A second misapprehension is that Alison merely fulfills antifeminist expectations rather than reassessing the tradition. This reading is critically disingenuous. Chaucer here investigates the limits of a tradition in which “no woman of no clerk is preyed” (D 706). Let us not imitate those clerks whose first premise is that “womman was the los of al mankynde” (D 720), a homicide from the start. Let us rather listen to how Alison shake the foundations of that belief, questioning its origins in celibacy and contrasting its simplicity to her own complexity. Let us now conclude our deliberations with a resounding “case dismissed.”

Notes
2. Palomo, pp. 304-05; see also pp. 311-12 on the conjectural identification of Jankyn the clerk with Jankyn the apprentice: “Once a puppy trailing at [Alison’s] heels with that stupified adoration of the boy just discovering the stirrings of sexuality and the excitement of beauty in woman, Jankyn at twenty has become a not very scrupulous college graduate looking for an easy way to get ahead in the world, willing to exploit the aging woman he once idolized.” C. David Benson discusses the methodological problems of what he calls the “dramatic theory” in Chaucer’s Drama of Style: Poetic Variation and Contrast in the “Canterbury Tales” (Chapel Hill, 1986), pp. 3-19.

10. Sands, p. 173, connecting Rowland’s articles and his own.


13. Palomo, p. 318; Hall, p. 90. Chaucer’s references to the Wife of Bath are in the Clerk’s Tale (E 1170-73), Merchant’s Tale (E 1685-87), and “Lenvo de Chaucer a Bukton” (lines 29-30).


Elaine Tuttle Hansen (essay date 1988)


[In the following essay, Hansen argues against viewing The Wife of Bath’s Tale and Prologue as early feminist writing, but proposes that the texts permit scholars to study the role of women in the fourteenth century and their attempts to claim a type of self-definition within the limitations of language and society.]

The wyf of Bathe take I for auctrice
pat womman han no ioie ne deyntee
pat men sholde vp-on hem putte any vice.

(Hoccleve, Dialogus cum Amico, c. 1422) 4

From the early fifteenth century to the late twentieth, at least one fact about the elusive Wife of Bath has never been disputed: where they agree on nothing else, her numerous commentators, like Hoccleve, take the Wife “for auctrice,” as “a woman whose opinion is accepted as authoritative.” Controversy over the precise meaning and value of the Wife’s opinion effectively ensures her authoritative status, and now perhaps more than ever before she is a figure to be reckoned with by anyone interested in the history, both factual and literary, of women. Faced with the problem of women’s absence and silence in the past, recent feminist historians and literary critics turn with enthusiasm to the Wife as a rare instance of woman as agent, speaker, and (most recently) reader. More than any other well-known literary character, she is frequently compared with historically real personages, from Christine de Pisan to Simone de Beauvoir. Where treated as a fictive character, she is often read in a sociological and historical context, as a sign of Chaucer’s empathy with real women, and as a realistic, historically plausible foil to the idealized views of femininity found in prescriptive texts of the period, possibly even “a truly practicing feminist,” and indubitably a survivor and a spokeswoman. 5 A few protests have been lodged against the seemingly incurable tendency to overly lifelike readings of the Wife of Bath, as well as the related assessments of her power, autonomy, and energy as a woman. 6 But if the Wife of Bath is merely a fictional female character, and not an attractive or “free” or even representative woman, then what more does the twentieth-century feminist critic have to say about her?

I want to answer to clearly rhetorical question in two phases here, as I reaffirm the importance of the Wife of Bath to feminist criticism and theory at the same time that I argue that we must not so readily take her as “auctrice,” as a female speaker or subject or as a straightforward mimetic representation of any arguably “real” female experience. In the first phase of this argument, I offer a relatively conventional close reading of the poem, treating the Wife and other characters as if they were psychologically verisimilar human beings from whose reported speech and actions the audience of this text identifies and interprets a living self in a social context. I read this self, however, in a way that emphasizes its powerlessness, self-destructiveness, and silencing, and I argue that the Wife’s discourse in Prologue and Tale belies her apparent garrulity, autonomy, and dominance. Even at this level of interpretation she paradoxically represents, I conclude, not the full and remarkable presence we have normally invested her with, but a dramatic and important instance of woman’s silence and suppression in history and in language. In the second phase of my argument, I consider the implications of my insistence on the Wife’s negation for our understanding of the literary inscription of prominent cultural myths about male authors and about women, in fiction and in fact.

PART I

“But she was somdele deef, and that was scathe.”

It is hardly necessary to rehearse the reasons why the Wife of Bath might well be read as a woman who defies the stereotype of the passive, submissive, and fundamentally silent female, particularly as this ideal is celebrated in the antifeminist heroines who bracket her own performance, the Man of Law’s long-suffering Constance and the Clerk’s patient Griselda. Against the background they figure, the Wife stands out even more prominently as the chatterbox, the gossip, the obsessive prattler, a type prominent in medieval literature and
given mythical stature in another of the *Canterbury Tales*, the Merchant's, when Proserpina debates the woman question with her husband Pluto and is made to proclaim: "I am a womman, nedes moot I speke. / Or elles swelle til myn herte breke" (IV. 2305-06). The Wife may also be viewed as the female storyteller, overtly challenging and at the same time emulating both male authority and the male author, and presenting us with one of our earliest literary images of the female as verbal artist. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's description of the wicked Queen in *Snow White* might serve equally well to characterize the Wife: "a plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty, wily, and self-absorbed as all artists traditionally are."* In her *Prologue*, moreover, which is twice as long as her *Tale*, the Wife lays claim to the power of language to control the behavior of others. Through verbal attack, as she alleges and demonstrates, she gained and kept the upper hand in her first three marriages. She views words, like sex and money, as strategic weapons in the war between the sexes, and she presents her verbal tactics as repayment in kind against the men in her life: "I quite hem word for word . . . I ne owe hem nat a word that it nys quit" (III. 422-25). One might well argue that she successfully frees herself and repays the whole antifeminist tradition by turning the tables on male authority, parodying its rhetorical strategies and thus revealing its prejudice and absurdity by impersonating the male voice.

But this view of the Wife as triumphant and powerful, often accompanied by the assumption that Chaucer intends to criticize or at least poke fun at antifeminist arguments, is only partially accurate, and needs to be qualified, as other readers have suggested, by a recognition of the Wife's limitations, which the *Prologue* and *Tale* make equally clear. Despite her ability and eagerness to speak, the Wife of Bath is not essentially more free or self-determined or able to "communicate" than the good, silent woman, like Griselda or Constance, and her own words help us to understand that this is so.

Throughout her *Prologue*, the Wife's language reflects precisely the power differential overtly dramatized in other of the *Tales*, especially the Clerk's. The first 170 lines of the *Prologue* consist mostly of direct and indirect quotation from both biblical and patristic texts, and so they are punctuated with tags that taken together underscore the gender of official speakers and critics: "quod he," "thus seyde he," "he speketh," "th'apostel seith," "Mark telle kan," etc. Although she begins to speak of her own "experience"—she has "had" five husbands—only nine lines into her speech she cites her first authority, and the terms in which she does are so particularly salient. "But me was toold, certeyn, nat longe agoon is . . ." (III. 9), she says, that biblical injunction forbids multiple marriage. The sudden appearance of the adversative at the beginning of line 9 immediately signals the oppugnant stance she takes throughout the rest of the *Prologue*. The use of the passive transformation, "me was told," puts the Wife first in the surface structure of the sentence; she is indeed self-absorbed and attempts to use her words, like her church offering, to affirm her preeminence. But in the deep structure of the sentence, "Someone told me," the Wife is the object of the verb, or in case grammar terms the "patient." Magically transformed, like the Old Hag in her *Tale*, the Wife takes a place in the surface structure of the sentence that disguises her fundamental status, seen only in the base sentence, as a person acted upon rather than acting, a human being whose behavior is subject to the criticism and correction of some higher authority. Furthermore, although later in the *Prologue* the Wife repeatedly identifies the "auctoritees" against whom she argues, the subject in the deep structure of this sentence remains unexpressed. As the audience would presumably know, the antifeminist argument that follows in the succeeding "that" clause comes from St. Jerome; but it is not clear whether the Wife has it directly from his writings or, as is more likely, from some male reader of Jerome like her fifth husband. All we learn from the *Prologue* is that someone, at some unspecified time in the relatively recent past ("nat longe agoon is"), told the Wife that her behavior was immoral, and she does not say who—perhaps she has forgotten or does not wish to identify a living critic, or perhaps she does not know exactly who, just as she cannot say quite when: no one told her, and everyone told her. The authority against which she rebels is not that of any single person; there is no tyrannical lord in her life as there is in Griselda's. The Wife is defending herself against a much vaguer and more mysterious force of social disapproval, powerfully unnamed and unnameable, and her later attempts to meet specific arguments are self-defeating efforts to pin down and triumph over that generalized, mystifying, and hence invincible hostility that she meets from all sides.

This crucial vagueness and uncertainty, this Orwellian mystification of the power behind language, is further reflected in the opening lines as the Wife claims that she does not fully understand the meaning, although she understands the hostility and disapproval, of the arguments against her. She goes on to cite the highest authority of "Jhesus, God and man": tellingly, the story of Jesus she relates is one that reveals not his loving-kindness, but his apparently gratuitous reproof of the Samaritan woman. The Wife's professed inability to understand the meaning of his rebuke serves both to challenge its authority and to reveal her own nebulous insecurity:

What that he ments thereby, I kan nat seyn; But that I axe, why that the fiffhe man Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?
How manye myghte she have in mariage?

(III. 20-23)

Note that she asks her bold questions of no one in particular, and of everyone. We see again that generalized feeling that someone out there knows more than she does. Immediately afterwards, instead of rejecting authority that she does not understand or that conflicts with her own experience (whatever that may be), she proceeds to choose another "gentil" text to support her argument: "God bad us for to waxe and multiplye" (III. 28). This is all, of course, strategic on her part and very funny. It also underlines a serious truth about the nature of power in her world: God's characteristic speech act is a command; created in His image, all men, even Christ, speak sharp words to women, for reasons that are purposefully obscure and obscured; and the Wife, along with all women, is "told" by received opinion that her behavior is wrong. She struggles to understand why, she seems to want both to subvert and to be right and "good," and so she asks questions and tries to find or make authorities that speak on her side, and those of us who are not horrified by her blasphemy will admire her resilience and persistence and courage. We also see, however, that as long as she accepts (or, what amounts to the same thing, attempts to invert) the basic power differential and the obfuscation of power reflected and supported by the language she uses, her struggles are in vain. This protofeminist, this "archeywyf" and "auctriche" is not even as critical of her true masters, as awake to her less obvious but equally fundamental subjection, as patient Griselda.

The rest of the Prologue provides evidence that supports this reading. In telling us about her first three old husbands, the Wife quotes herself, demonstrating how she verbally attacked them and always won; but ironically, since her method was to accuse her husbands of standard antifeminist attitudes, for yet another 150 lines we are subjected (as she was) to a further deafening stream of misogynist platitudes, here from folk rather than learned tradition. The repeated "thou seist" tag again necessitated by the quotation within quotation emphasizes the fact that she is fighting against, and at some level knows she is fighting against, the power of male voices to control her own behavior. Again ironically, of course, all is false; her first three husbands were not bright enough to talk this much, but she is trying to pin down that invisible and omnipresent power that she knows will control her if she gives it a chance. And with her fifth husband the Wife herself is aptly repaid for all her earlier deceptics. She undergoes a perverse version of wish-fulfillment—an experience she uses and revises when she tells her Tale—when the story she invented to control her first three husbands comes true. Jankyn really does attack her, that is, with antifeminist doctrine, this time of a learned and hence even more authoritative variety. In the final section of her Prologue, as she describes the contents of his antifeminist miscellany by quoting from it at great length, the Wife again gives the stronger voice in the text, as in reality, to the opposition.

One might argue that all this quotation merely shows us what a woman is up against and therefore highlights the Wife’s victory over it. but it is also essential to remember that throughout her performance the Wife, both consciously and unconsciously, endorses the antifeminist stereotypes she cites, proving again that, as Fredric Jameson claims, “transgressions, presupposing the laws or norms or taboos against which they function, thereby end up precisely reconfirming those laws.” She boasts, for instance, of her feminine powers to lie and deceive and manipulate men, and this unwitting self-deprecation, I suggest, is not very different from the idealized statements of victimization that “good” women, like Constance or Griselda, are willing and even eager to utter. Both the dumb woman and the wily, witty, creative woman live in a world where protest against received opinion is normally silenced and dialogue precluded; and so the patient and the impatient woman—the norm and the transgression—are two sides of the same coin, able to see themselves and speak for themselves only in terms provided by the dominant language and mythology of their culture. The Wife’s loss of hearing is caused, or so we are told at the end of her Prologue, by her one silent action, her violent attempt to destroy Jankyn’s book, the written word that has made her what she is. This cryptic, unsettling, and foreshortened drama of role reversal, mock murder, and humiliation discloses the mutual degradation that marital relations entail in her world; and the Wife’s mutilation serves as a climactic symbol of the simultaneously dumbing and deafening effect of the dominant discourse and the social structure it enforces.

The Wife’s Tale has been seen as an antidote to the use of male authority and endless quotation in the Prologue, but on closer examination things are not really very different. For a while, the tables do seem genuinely turned: the Tale begins with a casual rape, but the rapist is sentenced to death and the queen (thanks to the “grace” of the king) is granted power over his life. She gives him a twelve-month and a day to find out what women want most, and now the story sounds like the pronouns have been reversed. The Knight can save his neck if he finds out what the opposite sex really desires; the price he is asked to pay for the correct answer is one more often exacted from women: he is required to satisfy the lawful sexual appetites of someone old and physically repulsive to his suddenly refined sensibilities. The heroine of the Tale, an Elf Queen disguised as an Old Hag, is a powerful artist, able to transform herself and gain mastery over her husband through her wise and “gentil” (and thoroughly orthodox) speech. But the ending of the Tale safely returns us to a more familiar plot.
and a more suitable alignment of the sexes. The rapist not only saves his life but is rewarded by the promise of an unfaillingly beautiful, faithful, and obedient wife, as the Hag who gave him the answer, who had all the power, gives it up, and transforms herself into a Constance or Griselda. The denouement reveals that the Wife herself, at some level, has little confidence in the female's powers of speech. Although the Hag/Elf Queen, like the Queen in Snow White, has the creative drive of an artist, it is thwarted and used self-destructively to transform herself into what every man wants most, a woman “bothe fair and good” (III. 1241) who “obeyed hym in every thynge / That myghte doon hym plesaunce or likyinge” (III. 1255-56). The Hag chooses that silent beauty which only in a fairy tale is anything but fleeting and dangerous, and with the “happy ending” the heroine relinquishes her power and dissolves into literal silence and alleged submission, the archetypal feminine transformation.

The Wife, of course, does not; she has the last word, and I think we can begin to see why that word must be a curse on men:

> And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
> That wol nat be governed by hir wyves;
> And olde and angryngares of dispence,
> God sende hem soone verray pestilence!

(III. 1261-64)

The speaker who utters a curse assumes, as the Wife always does, the power of language, in a literal rather than a metaphorical sense. She wishes to injure the addressee, or the person or persons cursed, and reduces the object of her imprecation to linguistic powerlessness: there is nothing you should or can say in response to a curse, no way to ward it off, and in fact you do not even have to hear or know about it for it to be effective. Its efficaciousness depends not, however, on the speaker’s power, but on the power of some external, presumably divine or supernatural force whose aid is invoked for the purposes of simply destroying the opposition and closing off communication. The curse, at once vague and all encompassing, is only a response in kind, then, to the hostility the Wife meets on all sides, and an application of the repressive training a patriarchal culture has given her in the power of language. It is by the same token not a response, but an involuntary, extraverbal cry of anger that implicitly denies the autonomy of both speaker and addressee and undercuts the Wife’s putative attempt to speak of and for herself.¹²

PART II

Who payntede the leon, tel me who?
By God! if wommen hadde written stories
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han written of men moore wikkednesse
Than at the mark of Adam may redresse.

(III. 692-96)

In any discussion of the Wife of Bath as a speaking subject, the Wife’s intriguing question—who painted the lion? from whose point of view is this story being told?—requires close attention. Here the character is made to allude self-reflexively to the problem that I have been arguing is most central to feminist interpretations of this text, to the actual silence and absence of the Wife and “woman.” If women had ever authored stories, she points out, they would be very different ones (although actually, as she imagines it here, they would also be much the same—equally determined, that is, by the anxieties of gender difference and the resultant competition between men and women). We thus have a female character indirectly but unequivocally reminding us at the very center of her fictional narrative not only that an author’s gender always colors the written (and spoken) word, but also that this text affords no exception to the rule that women have not written the story. A male author created the Wife, and “her” teasing, playful, characteristically hostile and arguably unconscious reference to this fact mirrors and confirms what we have seen in both the Prologue and the Tale: a feminine monstrosity who is the product of the patriarchal authority she ineffectively and only superficially rebels against. It is an apparently paradoxical but finally explicable and revealing fact that the one woman in the Canterbury Tales who is so often viewed, for good or bad, as a survivor is the one who reminds the attentive listener that “she,” like every female character in the male-authored text, never existed at all; in an important sense the Wife is not only just as powerless and silent, but also just as unreal, just as unrepresentable, as a saintly Constance or a patient Griselda.

The passage on the painting of lions reminds us, in other words, that the Wife’s actual failure to speak of and for herself or “woman” is a symptom of the imposibility of her doing so, by virtue of her gendered exclusion from the role of storyteller. This reminder ensures at every level the Wife’s and woman’s negation, as even the most wordy and verisimilar of female characters is (de)constructed by the text as that which is not actually speaking and not actually being represented, that which stands outside the bounds of language and literary convention altogether. And it is precisely this fact, I contend, that makes the Wife of Bath an important figure for feminist analysis. Understood as a construction of the text, the fact that, as Marshall Leicester has put it, “there is no Wife of Bath”¹³ need not lead us to conclude that this character is another instance of woman’s power or powerlessness, in history or in literature, or of the author’s feminism or antifeminism. Instead, it can help us to read this complicated, convoluted text for the insights it affords us into the ways and means by which the literary tradition has maneuvered within, accounted for, and profited from the socio-gender system as we know it. In particular, I would stress the way in which my reading challenges
two cultural myths: the myth of “Chaucer”’s special sympathy or empathy with women, and the myth of gender difference itself, to which Chaucer’s works give such prominence.

To address the first point, the vexed question of Chaucer’s apparent fellow-feeling for women, I want to consider two arguments that seem to support the notion that Chaucer sympathizes not merely with his female characters, but with the particular insights of late twentieth-century feminist criticism into the social construction of “woman.” First, the position of the feminine exemplified by the Wife—a position finally outside the bounds, as we have seen, of the representable—may be viewed, like all marginal positions, as a potentially subversive one. Above all, the enforced silence of women and the impossibility of representing a “real” female speaker threatens both the author’s control and the audience’s ability to understand the character and the poem: the evanescence of the Wife and “woman”’s position marks the limits, in other words, of both representation and interpretation. To argue that we can never know “who she is” because she is “not anyone” seems to state the obvious and beg the question, but it also calls into question the effectuality of precisely the kind of reading—or its opposite—that I have offered in the first part of this essay. Viewing the Wife as a psychologically verisimilar, speaking self, such readings allow us to assume a momentary, illusory power over the character and the world, to situate ourselves, as Leicester again puts it, in “a position superior to her from which she can be fixed and placed, understood and dismissed.” And it may be argued that the text itself, by inscribing the silence of the Wife as / and “woman” in the many ways I have suggested, refuses to let us rest securely and comfortably in that dominant position, and hence that Chaucer at least tacitly advocates an anti-authoritarian stance that the modern feminist reader must value.

A case might be made for Chaucer’s allegedly feminist leanings, moreover, based on a related issue: the similarities between the position of women and the apparent position of the poet himself. As all readers of this poem know, the Canterbury Tales as a whole seems structured to highlight and even exaggerate a situation common to all (literary) texts: stories both reveal and create tellers; no tale can be interpreted except as the product of a human speaker, and yet that same human speaker behind each tale is also firmly identified as the fictional creation of yet another speaker. There is a possibility of infinite regression, a dramatization of the mise en abyme, and hence a fundamental and threatening absence of identifiable authority again in this situation that leads to a well-known interpretive problem: how do we know where “Chaucer the poet” (not to speak of “Chaucer the man”) is at any moment? Or who, at any point, is speaking? The voice of the poet creates, at best, a slippery, ironic persona who offers us—like the Wife of Bath—someone who is not really there, only “the traces of a presence that asserts its simultaneous absence.”

Like the Wife: the figure of the poet and the woman, then, are alike in many ways. At the level of historical realism, they may seem particularly homologous in their (in)subordinate position. Recent scholars have suggested that the medieval poet may well be understood in terms of the ambivalent, insecure, and inferior position that he held in the fourteenth-century court; as marginalized and subordinated figures, poets and women alike may be simultaneously complicitous with and suspicious of both the ideology that tries but fails to define them and of the audience to and for whom they speak. Both the Wife and “Chaucer” tell lies that subvert the authority of the word to speak any truth at all, stories that threaten any correspondence between utterance and meaning and that undermine orthodox assumptions about the nature of intention and identity. In their silence and absence, both poet and woman stand together, by this reading, in the position of the limit of that which can be represented. And again as verisimilar selves they seem to share an ideologically sanctioned fantasy of silent submission and wordless transformation that their excessive fluency covers and belies: the “happy ending” of the Wife’s Tale, although qualified by both her Prologue and her curse, seems oddly analogous to the poet’s famous Retraction, problematized by its uncomfortable relation to all of the work that precedes it.

But here the provocative analogy between poet and “woman,” “Chaucer” and Wife, may break down in a way I find particularly interesting, and the case for Chaucer’s sympathy or empathy with women becomes at best moot. The Wife’s curse once more is telling: it functions as a commentary on her own fantasy for which we find no counterpart following the Retraction. Chaucer’s strategy in the Canterbury Tales seems to involve the displacement of the commitment that speaking entails onto other voices in an attempt to remain as free of the constraints of language, as powerful yet muted and unnamed and unspoken as possible. The poet does exercise (to this day, one might argue) the power of silence, and the Retraction in a sense simply reinforces that silence without deconstructing the work it ostensibly “retracts.” The figure of the male poet constructed by the text as a whole, then, can only caution us against thinking we can know anything at all about the author—including his sexual politics.

The Wife’s curse, on the other hand, reveals that the female character created by Chaucer retains a paradoxical and fatal faith in language itself that is in practice self-destructive: invoking the power of language to destroy rather than create, she at once discloses and betrays her own commitment to speaking, validates the
patriarchal authority she seeks to resist, and renounces the power of silence that the poet seems more able to exploit. From this perspective, the Wife's performance demonstrates that Chaucer's "woman" suffers from a delusion that the implied author does not reproduce. Her curse in particular serves to distinguish her quite dramatically from the figure of the male poet, and more importantly to defuse the very threat of women's silence and unrepresentability that the poet both acknowledges and strategically counters. The lesson of the poem seems to be that a naive faith in language does not serve women well because language is, according to the Canterbury Tales, an instrument for reproducing the conventions that constrain and deny both the experience of women and the representation of that experience. But this is just the lesson that the Wife, unlike the poet, is not allowed to learn or profit from: as learned in "scole-materes" (III. 1272) as any clerk, she cannot escape the convention of the happy ending that legitimizes the knight's originally illicit and violent desire by subordinating and silencing the Hag/Elf Queen, any more than she can escape the need to transgress and thus reinforce the laws of language and the myths of culture that at once condemn her to speak and silence her.

Like the more local myth of this male author's special sympathy with women, the larger (and apparently contradictory) myth of woman's difference, I suggest, is promoted by the Canterbury Tales and Chaucer's other works in order to counter another threat to the male poet and his male audience: the threat that men too may be constrained and even constituted by the socio-gender system and by their sexuality, the aspect of experience most overtly affected by notions of gender. Through the creation of female caricatures like the Wife of Bath or her foils, Constance and Griselida, the text confirms women's difference from men and defines "woman" as a question, an issue, a conundrum. Women in Chaucer's poems, in other words, by virtue of the complexity and exaggeration of their culturally feminine traits, stand out as problems for the male characters, and for the audience interpreting the text. The chief difference I have focused on here, because it is so prominent in the text, is the constraint imposed by women's gendered position on speech itself: the fact that she is woman precedes and invalidates the possibility that the Wife or any other female character might be, like a man, a speaker. But closer inspection of the male characters in the poem reveals that they do not in fact have "free" access to speech, that they too are troubled by the issue of gender; and in fact the Tales as a whole dramatize the impossibility of constructing any self, female or male, prior to or apart from considerations of gender. I cannot begin to suggest in any detail how this claim is supported and amplified in specific cases, how it opens up, as I believe it does, interpretive space at the very center of every tale and its teller. But I ask you to think of the ways in which, for figures like the clerk, the Knight, the Monk, the Nun's Priest, and the Pardoner, for example, the broad concept of gender serves as a locus of formative and irresolvable conflict: between the individual and the group, between wife and husband, self and other, private and public, freedom and imprisonment, tyranny and servitude, experience and authority. The pilgrims (and the characters in their tales) all reveal, I submit, what is more usually presented in western culture as a specifically feminine pathology. The Wife of Bath and "woman"'s foregrounded difference, a result of gender, gives way to a subgroup of sameness, as all of the speakers in the poem are constrained by their gender roles, suffer the anxiety of sexual difference, and have (or present) only an unstable sense of "self," riddled with contradiction. The varieties of maistrice that these fragmentary and elusive selves seek cover (more and less successfully) their unilateral and ideologically sanctioned desire to submit to someone or something that will define and recognize them and console them for their mortality.

And what I am calling, for the sake of this argument, the pilgrim's femininity is manifest, above all, in their problematic relation to language. Real and fictive women, this poem finally may suggest, are not excluded from some power of language to which men have access. As a donnee of the literary form of the Tales, pilgrims of either sex are both "speaker" and "spoken to," all human beings in the world of this text are, as a precondition of their existence, the "kind of fiction" usually associated in western culture with women "in that they are defined by others as components of the language and thought of others." If the garrulous woman and the silent woman are, as I have argued, two sides of the same coin, it is the common medium of exchange in the pilgrim economy. Like the Wife, all of the pilgrims exhibit at some level an aggressive refusal to be silenced at the same time that they act out their communal fantasy of mute submission. From the outset, this essential contradiction in the human relation to language underlies the whole enterprise of the poem in ways that have not been adequately examined. Note, for example, how the Host's initial proposal of the story-telling game appeals to the pilgrims on two apparently incompatible counts: he offers relief for the life-threatening dis-ease of silence—"confort ne myrthe is noon / To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon" (L. 773-74; remember Constance, "doumb . . . as a tree," II. 1055); and at the same time his assumption of authority simultaneously delivers them from the burden of self-expression or self-determination and robs them of their voices. "Hoold up youre hondes, withouten moore speche" (I. 783), he commands, and they silently obey.

The Wife of Bath thus tells us a great deal about the power and tenacity of the myth of feminine difference, where this myth is successfully aligned with radical
instability, indeterminacy, and internal contradiction, and above all with the impossibility of becoming a speaking subject who is not also spoken. Through the text’s construction of this notorious female character, these essentially human problems and anxieties are effectively displaced onto “woman,” and the feminine gender is what we may usefully term “marked,” in various senses of the word. In the language of linguistics, “markedness” refers to the fact that one of a minimal pair may be more specifically characterized or delimited in its usage than the other; in the minimal pair constituted by masculine and feminine in our culture, the latter, in the text as in the world, bears an identifying “mark,” a visible sign and even a predestined character, it seems, of sexual difference. This markedness by virtue of gender is inscribed in English in the prominent fact of the generic masculine, and linguists deduce from their study of this and other features of the language precisely what we have found in the Wife’s characterization and its subsequent interpretations: “a tendency, on the one hand, to equate humanity with the male sex and, on the other hand, to assume that female- ness defines women, whose individuality becomes submerged in categorizing principles that treat all women as identical.” “Femaleness defines women”: so too females, marked by their gender in ways that males in western culture seem not to be, are kept within “marks,” limits and boundaries that define and contain their “individuality,” and the Wife turns out to be a reflection of “categorizing principles” rather than a speaking subject. Wearing and reproducing the “mark,” the brand, the inscription, of the gender system as we know it, she, like any female, moreover, becomes the “mark” at which hostile forces aim, the object, the target of antifeminist attack.

An awareness of both the overt markedness and the covert universalization of the feminine in the Canterbury Tales may be helpful in explaining the obstacles that impede any search for what Arlyn Diamond aptly calls “Chaucer’s Women and Women’s Chaucer.” On the one hand, as I have suggested, Chaucer’s essentially anti-romantic conception of the engendered self and his understanding of the tyranny of linguistic and literary conventions may readily appear, especially when we are focusing on his portraits of women, like sympathy or even identification with the female characters and the feminine bind. So too the form of the Canterbury Tales (as “pluralized discourse”) may seem to undermine a masculine teleology and even suggest the open-ended, plural, anti-authoritarian, “irrational” qualities of what in the late twentieth century has been called écriture féminine. And the poet’s own self-dramatized and self-defensive refusal to take an authoritative stance (or any stance at all) may seem to subvert “the orthodoxies of literary and sexual authority,” as Lee Patterson has recently argued, so that traditional criticism can continue to read Chaucer’s invisibility, as Virginia Woolf read Shakespeare’s, as a sign of the great artist’s “incandescence,” his aloofness from polemic and prejudice: “his grudges and snares and antipathies are hidden from us . . . Therefore his poetry flows from him free and unimpeded.”

But what is “hidden” is precisely what still exists, and may be found; and a feminist perspective enables us to perceive that sympathy or identification with the position of women, in the case of the Canterbury Tales, need in no way actually depose or disrupt the unimpeded flow of a powerful misogynistic code. The complex and contradictory myths about women in western culture, enacted so prominently and successfully by the female characters in the poem, simultaneously manage and account for the suppression of the principle worked out by the position of the feminine and thus the “individuality” and humanity of any female. We cannot expect to find a woman speaking in the poem; how could she? Why would we? “There is no Wife of Bath,” and a feminist criticism that seeks no more and no less than the “authoritative” voices of women will find itself excluded from a poem by, about, and for men. As Patterson again reminds us, “the manner and mode of the Wife of Bath’s appearance is the crucial move in a self-reflexive examination that occupies the poet in Fragments II and III [and I would add IV, which includes the Clerk’s Tale], a scrutiny that is directed towards precisely the maleness of his imagination—towards, that is, his career as a poet of women.” Women (the fact and the fiction) are central, indeed indispensable to the careers of male poets and their “efforts at poetic self-definition”: this is not news. But when we focus on the centrality of the thematic of the feminine and interpret its textual manifestations as evidence of the female character’s authoritative status or of the male poet’s feminism or wise humanism, dispersion, or incandescence, we miss or dismiss too quickly what a feminist analysis of the Canterbury Tales discloses about the structures of antifeminism, about the displacement and usurpation of female silence, and about the hidden “mark of Adam,” the fact that males are also constrained and constituted by gender.

Notes


2. Middle English Dictionary, B. 1, p. 515.


7. “General Prologue,” 446; all subsequent quotations from the Canterbury Tales are taken from F. N. Robinson, ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), and cited parenthetically by part and line.


9. For this view see Marjorie M. Malvern, “‘Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?’ Rhetorical and Didactic Roles Played by an Aesopic Fable in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” Studies in Philology, 80 (1983), 238-52; Barry Sanders, “Chaucer’s Dependence on Sermon Structure in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale,” Studies in Medieval Culture, 4 (1974), 437-45; and James Spisak, “Antifemi-


12. See Margaret Homans, “‘Her Very Own Howl’: The Ambiguities of Representation in Recent Women’s Fiction,” Signs, 9 (1983), 186-205, for an analogous discussion in a very different historical period of the question of women’s relation to language and the specific issue of what happens (in literary texts, at least) when women fail or destroy themselves in their attempts to appropriate the dominant discourse and are left to utter a ‘referentless’ cry of rage that takes them outside discourse.


14. Compare Shoshana Felman’s discussion of Balzac’s “The Girl with the Golden Eyes,” in “Rereading Femininity,” Yale French Studies, 62 (1981), 19-44: “It is thus not only the conventional authority of sovereign masculinity that Paquita’s femininity threatens but the authority of any representative code as such, the smooth functioning of the very institution of representation” (32).

15. This is Marshall Leicester’s reading of Chaucer’s sexual politics in “Of a fire in the dark”; the quotation in the preceding sentence is found on pp. 161-62.


20. Thus Myra Jehlen describes the situation that women writers must deal with as a “precondition” to their writing, in “Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism.” *Signs*, 6 (1981), 575-601.


22. Lee Patterson, “For the Wyves Love of Bathe”: Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the *Roman de la Rose* and the *Canterbury Tales,* *Speculum*, 58 (1983), 656-95.


24. Patterson, p. 687.

**Alcuin Blamires (essay date 1989)**


[In the following essay, Blamires probes the similar themes in the anti-authority tirade in The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Lollardy, a religious movement that was often seen as anti-church and heretical.]

I

‘Re-readings’ of Chaucer conducted according to radical socio-historical principles will characteristically maintain that *The Canterbury Tales* represents (as Stephen Knight puts it) ‘a continuing and tense engagement with its period’, and that individual tales are ‘potent realizers’ of conflicts within late fourteenth-century society.¹ However, in view of Chaucer’s ostensible reluctance to offer direct comment on such upheavals as the Peasants’ Revolt, interpretations offered by critics of that persuasion frequently strain credulity: they betray a programmatic urge to recruit both local detail and larger narrative as witnesses to an ideological preoccupation ascribed a priori to the poet.

Knight’s own contention (drawing on an incidental remark by Robertson) that attitudes developed in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* bear some relationship to those cultivated by the heretical movement known as Lollardy, may seem at first sight an example of ideological wish-fulfilment founded on nothing more concrete than sweepingly defined ‘convergence’. Knight claims that since the Wife attacks clerical authority and makes ‘a stand against an oppressive church with learning and vigour’, her approach is therefore ‘convergent with a major force of innovation [i.e. Lollardy], one that was not in the period readily distinguished from civil dissent’. From this alleged convergence we get quickly to the stirring—if indigestible—proposition that she is a ‘dissenting female industrialist quasi-Lollard’.

I take it that if Knight could have aligned the Wife with Lollardy less loosely than that, he would certainly have done so. Since such an alignment will be explored in this article, it is as well to acknowledge immediately that there are good reasons why she could never be supposed a comprehensive representative of Lollardy. For example she seems to approve of pilgrimages, which the sect condemned; and she is given to swearing, which Lollards also abhorred, as Chaucer reminds us in the tale-link known as the *Epilogue of the Man of Law’s Tale*: here the Host smells a Lollard in the wind as soon as the Parson ventures to condemn one of his hearty oaths (II 1166-73). Incidentally this is Chaucer’s only overt reference to Lollardy, though it has sometimes been held to confirm a hypothesis that the Parson is represented in the *General Prologue* as an adherent of the movement. It is prudent to recall the *Epilogue’s* uncertain status. Since it appears neither in the Hengwrt nor in the Ellesmere MS, it is conceivably spurious. Among more plausible possibilities, it may represent a draft link which Chaucer abandoned—perhaps because, with the passage of time, outright jests concerning Lollardy no longer seemed to him amusing or prudent.

Despite the Wife’s counter-Lollard traits, the justification for locating key parts of her monologue in the context of Lollardy is by no means insubstantial. This can be asserted notwithstanding also the difficulty of establishing precisely what that context was during the period 1387/8-1400 to which the composition of the *Tales* is generally assigned.¹ The full rigour of ecclesiastical machinery against Lollard suspects was not geared up until the years following 1400: consequently recorded proceedings disclosing the extent and the tenets of the movement before then are patchy in comparison with those from the first thirty years of the fifteenth century. There are certain risks, sometimes necessarily taken during the present discussion, in attempting to supplement the incomplete picture of Lollardy in Chaucer’s time by resorting to the subsequent evidence. For example, we should make allowance for ways in which the eventual campaign of repression resulted in a sharper definition of the movement’s features, and made it less feasible for uncommitted people to associate themselves with principles espoused by Lollards, than would have been the case before the turn of the century.⁴ Nevertheless it is safe to assert that by the time Wyclif died in 1384 he had stirred up a hornets’ nest in the interlocking spheres of theology.

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and politics; that his popularizing Lollard followers were causing profound official alarm during that decade and the next; and that the publication of their 'manifesto' in London in 1395 implies that these dissenters were by then a self-conscious force to be reckoned with.*

These remarks must suffice for the moment to indicate that what Gower called 'this newe secte of Lollardie' was a live public issue in the 1390s. A Southwark tavern-keeper's knowledge of it, however reductive, would not be aberrant in that decade. Chaucer himself—even more than Gower—had reason to be sensitive to the controversy, given his connections both with John of Gaunt (a notable patron of Wyclif at first, and reputedly a champion of the Wyclifite call for a vernacular Bible) and with a group of men in Richard II's service nowadays dubbed 'the Lollard knights'.† But, what has the Wife of Bath to do with these considerations?

II

We might begin by noting some circumstantial factors which support, or are at least not inconsistent with, the arguments to be mooted here. These factors are the Wife's stated occupation and provenance. As an individual in the 'clooth-makynge' trade (I 447) and as a resident of the environs of Bath, she epitomizes the social background as well as one of the particular regions in which Lollardy flourished. In the words of one historian, Lollards initially 'found supporters among the trades-people of large towns'. Their movement became increasingly artisan, taking root 'in both rural and urban districts in the various branches of the woollen industry', though perhaps more because that industry was so predominant than because of any predisposition among its participants. Although records of heretical activity at Bath itself (not then a very large town) are lacking, nearby Bristol was an early centre of Lollardy. Wyclif's associate John Purvey is said to have preached Lollard 'errors' in Bristol in the late 1380s. McFarlane claims that prosperous artisans in the hinterland of small cloth-weaving towns [such as Bath] to which Bristol served as port proved 'sympathetic to the new ideas'.‡

Of course these circumstances in themselves establish no case that the prospect of a Bath clothmaker would have put Chaucer's readers or auditors on the edge of their seats in tense expectation of heretical discourse. What they do establish is that if the Wife may otherwise be found to display some Lollard characteristics, Chaucer has provided her with a 'corroborative' background. The Lollard characteristic on which we shall first concentrate arises from her insistence, in the first part of her Prologue, on appealing directly to the Bible—and particularly from her use of one significant word as she does so.

The word in question is expres, which occurs three times in the text. First, when she observes that no manner how men may 'glosen' the Almighty's injunction, 'wel I woot, expres, withoute lye, / God bad us for to wex and multiply' (III 27-8); again, in her challenge

Wher can ye seye, in any manere age,
That lyse God defended marrie
By expres word?

(III 59-62)

and once more when, summarizing Jankyn's nightly anti-feminist readings to her, she (I suppose, rather than he) says of Eve's responsibility for the Fall; 'Lo, heere expres of womman may ye fynde / That womman was the los of al mankynde' (III 719-20).§

Now, although scrupulous analysis of what St Paul or Christ said and did not say concerning celibacy and marriage is ubiquitous in the treatise Adversus Jovinianum by St Jerome, from which the first two of these three observations are adapted, it is less clear that Jerome's phraseology explicitly prompts the Wife's intensifier, expres. Perhaps this intensifier carries through the implications of debating-points which the Wife has borrowed (III 24-5, 61-7) from Jovinian. We are led to recall how Jerome grudgingly conceded Jovinian's point that Scripture does not 'define' the allowable quota of remarriages, and how he laconically observed that the Lord's natural reluctance to 'prescribe' virginity sent Jovinian wild with exultation. Her use of expres also sustains the illusion that she has scoured Scripture for statements and silences on these matters which provoke a campaigning instinct in her. However, there may be lodged within the Wife's diction the clue to a specifically Lollard cast of mind. Not only did the sect persistently justify its beliefs by recourse to what Scripture explicitly authorized and did not authorize: there is also evidence for supposing that expres and its cognates featured within a 'sectarian' vocabulary. Let us consider these points in turn.

Characteristic statements about the primacy of scriptural authority were made by two notable Lollard defendants. One was an educated layman named Walter Brut, tried before the Bishop of Hereford in 1393. In the language of an official record, Brut stated that he would accept any refutations 'ex auctoritate scripture sacre aut probabili racione in scriptura sacra fundata'. He was therefore adopting essentially the same Wyclifite criteria that we encounter in the case of the priest William Thorpe, who wrote an account of his own interrogation by Archbishop Arundel which took place in 1407. Thorpe tells us of his initial prayer: 'what euer þat I schulde speke, þat I myte haue þerto trewe auctorite of scripture or open resoun' (f. 19). Accordingly he parries his interrogators' arguments again and again by reference to Scripture. For example, in response to a test question, whether those who withhold tithes might be 'acursid' by the Church, he ventures
surprise ‘pat ony preest dar seie men to be acursid, wi-
pouten grononde of goddis word’ and challenges any
clerk to demonstrate ‘where þis sentence, cursing hem
þat tþen not now, is wriwen in goddis lawe’ (f. 59r, my
emphasis).

Thorpe is addressing topics other than the Wife’s, with
more elaborate logic, but he strikes a similar chord in
his fundamentalist approach to Scripture—one which he
had apparently practised for at least twenty years, that
is, from the 1380s.19 He is closest to the Wife’s idiom
when, citing the gospels, he protests that since ‘bi þe
word of crist speciali, þat is his voice, prestis ben co-
maundid to preche’, they must do so, regardless of
episcopal licensing procedures (f. 37v, my emphasis).
Moreover, Thorpe finds himself provoking in acute form
the kind of expostulations, from an actual jury of
ecclesiastical authorities, that the Wife expects her own
fundamentalism to provoke in an imaginary one (‘So
that the clerkes be nat with me wrothe . . . .’, III 125).
The Archbishop turns to three other clerks present and
exclaims, according to Thorpe: ‘Lo, seres, þis is þe
businesse and þe maner of þis losel and siche oþer, to
pike out scharpe sentencis of holy writ and of doctours
for to maynteyne her sect and her loore aþens þe orde-
naunce of holë chirche’ (f. 38r).

So far we have seen several expressions by which Loll-
ards articulated their adherence to what Thorpe at
another point calls the ‘pleyne tixt’ of the Bible (f. 64v).
Among these expressions, ‘wiþouten grononde of goddis
word’ is one that particularly leads us into what Anne
Hudson has identified as a ‘sect vocabulary’.18 She
shows how the Lollards’ predilection for grounded, ungrounded etc., arises from their ‘belief that
the only true ground is scripture’. Her argument
could be massively strengthened from Reginald Pecock’s
exhaustive syllogistic discussion of precisely this
terminology (including an element of semantic
discrimination) in the opening part of his anti-Lollard
Repressor of Over Much Blaming of the Clergy (c.
1450). For our purposes it is admittedly a somewhat
late text. But it was written by a man apparently
intimate with Lollard discourse, which no doubt
preserved for some considerable time that uniformity
and distinctiveness which seemed so remarkable to
Knighton at an earlier date.17

Since Pecock is a reliable witness to habitual Lollard
diction in the elaborate attention he pays to the expres-
sion ‘grounded in Holë Scripture’, then it is likely also
that he is reflecting another piece of recognized Lollard
terminology when he engages at some length with the
significance of ‘express’ scriptural injunction.18 He does
so because he is about to defend church images and
pilgrimages from the condemnations heaped upon them
by Lollards on the usual narrow basis of what the Bible
categorically prescribed or failed to prescribe. Pecock’s
first ‘suppositioiun’ in this passage immediately reveals
the greater latitude that he would wish to be exercised
in the interpretation of scriptural precept. He asserts
that whoever ‘expresseli’ bids any ‘gouernaunce’ to be
carried out, therefore ‘includingli’ bids all those further
(unspecified) things to be done which logically flow out
of the said ‘gouernaunce’.31 Therefore one cannot rightly
insist ‘that needis egh gouernaunce of Goddis . . . lawe
and seruei muss be groundid expresseli in Holi
Scripture’.32 Pecock is surely turning his opponents’
 vocabulary against them, rather than introducing
terminology of his own. That explains why he proceeds
to elaborate his point with an ostentatious display of
sarcasm, which would be gratuitous unless recognizab
sectarian cant was its target. Nowhere in Scripture, he
goes on, ‘is expresse mensioun mad’ of clocks;33 does
this put clocks morally beyond the pale? Again, ‘Where
is it groundid expresseli in Scripture, that men move
lete schaue her berdis?’,34 and so forth. It is a blatan
tempt to discredit through mimicry the claim of ‘thø
ererring persones . . . clepid Lollardis’ that they can
know all of ‘Goddis lawe . . . bi her reeding and
studying in the Bible oonli’.35

For a student of the Wife of Bath it is quite remarkable
to discover in the midst of this discussion what reads
very much like a caricature of her, assimilating not only
her devotion to ‘ expres word’ and her brash anticleri-
calism, but her ‘covercheifs’ into the bargain:

Wolde God thilk men and wommen (and namelich thilk
wommen whiche maken hem siff so wise bi the Bible,
that thei no deede willen allowe to be vertuose and to
be doon in mannis vertuose conversacioun, saue what
thei kunn fonde expresseli in the Bible, and ben ful
copidd of speche anentis cleriks, and avuante and
profen hem siff whanne thei ben in her iolite and in
her owne housis forto argue and dispute ægens cleriks),
schulden not were coueriecheifs into tyme thei couthen
schewe bi her Bible where it is expresseli bede, coun-
selid, or witnessid in her Bible to be doon.

(Repressor, 1, 123)

It looks as if Pecock had encountered or heard tell of
abrasive Lollard women no less formidable and voluble
than Chaucer’s ‘dame Alys’. Lollard texts confirm that expres and its cognates were
indeed likely to be used at key points in the sect’s argu-
ments, though it is true that the incidence does not
reach eye-catching levels. In a Lollard anti-mendicant
sermon written before 1413 the author invokes God’s
law ‘comaundering expres þat þer shulde on no wise
be a nedi and a begger among þe peple’. The Thirty-
Seven Conclusions of the Lollards (pre-1401?) include
an attack on ‘þe cumpaine of flesly cardynals, whois
office eiþer orde is not founden expressly in holy writte’.
Again, in an early fifteenth-century treatise orthodox
eucharistic doctrine is spurned as a modern invention

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repressive grew the campaign against scriptural matter propounded in English. It was chronicled that during 1388 ‘in pleno parlamento magnus rumor exuberavit’ concerning Lollards and their preachings and their English books ‘quasi per totam Angliam’. 43 To a Lollard writing (in this case in Latin) an Apocalypse commentary in prison during 1389/90, there was no doubting a ruthless prelatical drive to extirpate all evangelical material written ‘in lingwa materna’. 44

In these circumstances (though how comprehensively they would affect writers across the country it is hard to say), to be seen to wrangle contrariwise over points of Scripture in the mother tongue might be to court ecclesiastical opprobrium. Since the ground the Wife of Bath tells implies more acquaintance with vernacular Scripture than would at that juncture seem meet for a lay person, she would have struck some contemporaries as treading dangerously. The provocation doubles in that she is a woman; worse still, a woman aping preaching techniques. When the Pardoner butts in to compliment her as a ‘noble preacher’ (III 165), his jest takes us back to current controversy. The standard orthodox view of preaching held that ‘no lay person or Religious, unless permitted by a Bishop or the Pope, and no woman, no matter how learned or saintly, ought to preach’. 45 Lollards, on the other hand, challenged the licensing restriction, gave preaching a special priority, and argued that any lay Christian had the power to preach. Walter Brt, whom we mentioned earlier, specifically championed also a woman’s right to do so. In 1393 his submission that ‘women have power and authority to preach and make the body of Christ’ provoked elaborate refutation. Such controversy seems worth recalling, while we contemplate the Wife as a ‘noble preacher’ or (retrospectively in the Friar’s Prologue, III 1272) as a dabbler in ‘scole-matre’. The condescending tone contrived at these points, by pilgrims who are responding to the Wife as a prospective competitor, is reminiscent of Knighton’s mock-enthusiasm for the way in which, thanks to Lollardy, ‘both men and women were suddenly transformed into doctors of evangelical doctrine by means of the vernacular’. 46

The most strident response to this novelty was to tell women to go back to the distaff. Thus Hoccleve rebuked those women, thin of wit, who ‘Wole argumentis make in holy writ’:

Lewde calates! sitith doun and spynne,
And kakele of sumwhat elles . . .

To Clerkes grete apparteneth pat aart
The knowleche of pat, god hath fro yow shyt. 47

At about the same time it was a popular cry against Margery Kempe that she should abandon her unconventional lifestyle, and ‘go spynne & card as oper women
don’. Margery found herself constantly mistaken for a Lollard. Among the chief reasons for this was her conspicuous command of the Bible. When she recounts ‘a story of Scriptur’ among some monks at Canterbury, one of them objects that this demonstrates a familiarity with Holy Writ that she could not (should not?) have acquired by herself, but only from the Holy Ghost or the devil. It is a short step from this to the chorus of taunts shouted at her—‘bow xalt be bren, fals lollare’—as she makes a prudent retreat from the precincts. At another point the Archbishop of York, though eventually satisfied as to her orthodoxy, requires her to stop ‘teaching’ and ‘challenging’ the people in his diocese. When she cites a Gospel passage in support of her right to ‘spekyn of God’, she generates further suspicion whose foundation (as noted by the editors) is ‘probably that Margery would not be quoting Scripture if she had not been engaged in Lollard Bible studies’, and she provokes a ‘gret clerke’ to quote ‘Seint Powyl . . . a-gyns hir pat no woman xulde preychyn’.

Of course Lollardy and lay preaching had become much more highly fraught issues around the time of Oldcastle’s Lollard rebellion in 1414 (which made Hoccleve and Margery’s interlocutors so aggressive) than they probably were in the 1390s. Even making due allowance for that, we may reasonably conclude that the Wife of Bath’s demotic and fundamentalist mode of ‘preaching’ was calculated to broach questions that were already a matter for nervous concern at the period of her creation. What may be more startling is to discover that the advent of Lollardy also caused nervousness about the very topic of marriage and celibacy which so exercises the Wife.

III

We are apt to assume that in creating the Wife of Bath Chaucer engages with a timeless textual world of anti-feminist and matrimonial polemic that reaches back across the centuries and for which it would be idle to seek a specific stimulus in late fourteenth-century England. Yet the Lollards turned celibacy into a newly contentious topic. This is apparent from certain emphases they added to Wyclif’s latterly intense distaste for the religious orders. In their London publication, the Twelve Conclusions of 1395, the third conclusion

is pat pe lawe of continence amaytyd to presthod, pat in preuydys of wimmyn was first ordynyd, inducit sodomie in al holy chyrche . . . pe correlary of his conclusion is pat pe priuat religions, begynnyers of pis synne, were most worth to ben annullid.

In addition the eleventh conclusion asserts:

but a uow of continence mad in oure chyrche of wommen, pe qwiche ben fekil and vperlyth in kynde, is cause of bringyng of most horrible synne [viz. lesbian-

ism and bestiality] . . . pe correlary is pat widuis, and qwiche as han takin pe mantil and pe ryng [i.e. a ritual vow of chastity such as Margery Kempe herself made] . . . we wolde pei were weddi, for we can nout excusin hem fro priie synnis.40

There are points here which one would wish to have seen more fully developed, notably the emotive assertion that priestly celibacy was instituted ‘in preudys of wimmyn’. Does it insinuate an unfair restriction on women’s sexual chances, because so many males were obliged by their orders to abjure contact with them? Or does it bespeak a female grievance against that anti-feminism which was assumed to derive from celibacy and which, in the Wife’s phrase, made it ‘impossible / That any clerk wol speke good of wyves’ (III 688-9)? The former interpretation was among those canvassed by the Dominican Roger Dymnok when he compiled a systematic refutation of the Twelve Conclusions for Richard II, probably shortly after their publication. Since he was apparently not quite sure how to take the ‘prejudice’ claim, it may not have represented any thoroughly formulated Lollard tenet. If, wrote Dymnok, they meant that priestly celibacy took too many males out of matrimonial circulation, his instincts told him that there were nevertheless few women bent on marriage who could not find suitable partners.41

With The Wife of Bath’s Prologue in mind, let us dwell a little upon two intertwined aspects of these Conclusions. One is the cynical estimate of human capacities for sexual restraint which they incorporate, and which Dymnok found deeply offensive. The other, most interesting in its specificity, is the correlative recommendation that widows should remarry.

The wider context for these opinions was Lollard contempt for religiones private, and the movement’s general repudiation of vows. In a sense chastity became a casualty of polemic against vows per se, a point that is perhaps implicit even in an argument (ascribed to John Purvey) specifically querying vows of chastity. Did not Scripture say: ‘Non posse esse continens nisi Deus det’? Was it not therefore irrational to vow chastity without being able to know God’s inescrutable intentions towards oneself?42 However, this proves to be less typical of recorded Lollard reservations about celibacy than is the argument which depends upon the natural force of sexual instinct and the dangers of disrupting it. Thus William White, a priest who scandalized the authorities by presuming to marry even after having once ostensibly abjured hersesy, shared the London manifesto’s view that a sexually repressed priesthood gave occasion for priestly vice.43 His disciples in Norfolk were deeply indoctrinated with the idea that it was proper, indeed commendable, for priests and nuns to marry and hence (as two of them added, perhaps pointedly) ‘bringe forth frute of here bodyes’.

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Further research is needed to determine whether the movement developed a consistent doctrine on sexuality. Some adherents may have set particular store by the duty of bringing forth fruit. Proceedings by the Bishop of Salisbury in 1389 in the case of a heretic named William Rambus exposed his belief—among a range of normal Lollard doctrines—not just that the religious should marry, but also that if a man’s wife proved sterile it would be meritorious to dismiss her and take a fertile partner, and that it was proper for laymen or priests to have intercourse with many partners, ‘hoc propter multiplicacionem generis humani’. Hudson thinks Rambus somehow derived these wilder notions from the continental sect of the Free Spirit. However, historians of heresy have begun to cast doubt upon the existence of that sect. Rambus’s views have been attributed instead simply to ‘dislike of clerical and monastic celibacy’ allied with a practical emphasis on procreation.46 Unless he was one of those freelance ‘rogues of the Rasputin variety’—in Lambert’s phrase—who speciously combine religion with libertinism,47 he must represent an extreme form of the tendency in some Lollard circles to devalue celibacy by emphatically promoting (marital) heterosexuality and its fructe. By the same token, suspicions about Lollardy rather than (as Hudson argues) about the shadowy sect of the Free Spirit, could have been the basis for a test question put to Margery Kempe at York: ‘pes wordys how pei xulden vndirdystondyn, ‘Crescite & multiplicamini’’.48 Margery carefully answers that the words signify the increase of ‘frute gostly’ as well as of bodily procreation.

It is rather well known that the Wife of Bath seems to interpret the same ‘gentil text’ (III 28-9) as a warrant for unlimited remarriage. This interpretation engagingly modifies the more usual form of literal understanding (apparent in Rambus’s case) which was quite often mocked by mediaeval satirists.49 At the same time, her implied interpretation allows her attitude to procreation itself to remain as elusive here as it continues to be when she archly refers to the ‘ese / Of engendre’ for which ‘membres . . . of generacion’ were wrought (III 127-8, 116). These are considerations which make it difficult to define her standpoint firmly as a ‘Lollard’ one, yet they do not lessen the topicality of that standpoint. Indeed, some interesting evidence exists to suggest that the ‘Crescite et multiplicamini’ text may have functioned as a touchstone for detecting Lollard ‘error’ well before Margery Kempe’s time. If that were so, we might need to estimate afresh how seriously the Wife challenges the Church when she spurns the validity of any gloss (III 26) on the same text, or when she asserts a widow’s right to bestow herself again in ‘In the actes and in fruyt [whatever fruit she means] of mariage’ (III 113-14).

The evidence arises in Dymmok’s refutation of the eleventh London Conclusion. He rehearses at some length what he alleges to be the typical propaganda of the Lollards against female vows of chastity. Sure enough, the ‘wexe and multiplye’ command is central. They argue, he says, that such vows directly contravene the divina ordinacio by which women are to replenish the earth, and that they oppose the instinctuality of sexual attraction:

Et cum Deus eas [mulieres] ad prolem propagandam creuerit, atque precepto affirmatuvos easdem constringerit, ut terram solbis multiplicacione replerent, ipsas eciam utrius in auxiliu assignauerit ad generationis actum, et easdem sub uiri potestate iugiter uoluerit permanere, ‘Quecunque igiur’, inquit, ‘uotum continencie emiserit, totam hanc diuinam ordinacionem, quantum in se est, frustrare conatur, quod nullomodo aliqui creature licite poterit conuenire’. ‘Qua eciam tementetatis’, inquit, ‘audacia presumis atemptare diuine disposicionem contrarium, naturali inclinationi directe oppositum, qua quamilbet cogiti oportet uiorum consorciap articere, ut uno eodemque actu delectacionem naturalem atque ipsius purgacionem necessarium assequi ualeant, et sic opera peiora declinet. Si enim eas Deus uoluisse uniusse consorcius pe sit abstiner, ipsis feminis inclinationes tales non indiscervit, ut uirus apperet, nec earum naturas materis superflui uoneset, quod talibus purgacionibus indigenter.’ Et sic per hunc modum lasciviam necessarium affirman, continenciam impossibilem predicant, et contra diuinum preceptum illam esse allegant. Quibus ursus argumentis plenis fallaciaci et deceptionibus animas simplices et indoctas mulierem intendunt decipere ac terrere, ne continenciam perpetum seruare quoismodo proponant, ut sic facilius eis abuti ualeant ad libitum ee, quod inter cetera docent non ipsis licere cuiusque poscenti intuitu caritatis et suam indi geniam pretendenti corpus suum denegare. Et sic cum Nicholaitis hereticis conueniunt, qui uoluerunt mulieres esse communes, quorum factura Deus maxime abhominatur.49

Dymmok goes on to confront his opponents with a Tho mistic exegesis of the Genesis text. Admittedly, the extract I have presented need not be taken altogether at face value. Dymmok might be fabricating arguments presumed by anti-Lollards to underlie their Conclusion rather than reporting arguments seen or heard. The closing allegation that the sect’s leaders cynically encourage female converts towards promiscuity smacks of a familiar charge whereby the orthodox have often—justly or unjustly—sought to ostracize unorthodox sects. Yet his representation of their case against repression of heterosexual inclinacio by vows that contravene God’s praeeptum affirmativum may not have been too wide of the mark. Nor may Rambus have been the only Lollard who stretched that case in a libertarian direction.

In any case, it seems fair to state that chastity was hardly a neutral topic in the 1390s. The 1395 Conclusi ons ensured that the Church had to refurbish its arguments on behalf of religious celibacy and female vows.
of chastity. The Wife of Bath herself is cautious. She does not, like the compilers of the Twelve Conclusions, condemn wholesome 'pe lawe of continence annexyd to presthod'; she concedes that 'Virginitee is greet perfection, / And continence eek with devocion' (III 105-6). If she does share with those compilers a strong sense that 'weddyng in freete' (III 92) is the appropriate course for those such as herself who (in the Conclusions' phrase) are 'vnerpertyth in kynde', on the other hand she 'nyl enviye no virginitee' (142) and therefore avoids the more extreme position held by Lollards. 'that chastite of monkes, chanons, freres, nonnes, prestes and of any other persones is not commendable ne meritorie'. In other words Chaucer creates for the Wife a warily poised attitude, in which I would postulate that the element of wariness owes something to the fact that the topic had become problematic at the time of writing, as well as to his source material in Jerome.

IV

In a comprehensive investigation of the text's Lollard affiliations, we could dwell productively on later parts of the Wife's Prologue which acquire fresh colour once we are alerted to the topicality of her arguments in lines 1-162. For example, Jankyn's nightly readings to her from a 'book of wikked wyves' would amount to a parody of the practice in Lollard cells whereby heretical doctrine characteristically passed around 'through domestic, familiar introductions'. It is very typical of Chaucer's delight in irony that he should invert such a practice by exploring the notion of a domestic situation in which the 'dissenter' has to cope with counter-propaganda from her spouse instead of being gratified by a recital of radical views. I hardly need add that after an ensuing squabble, she obliges Jankyn to burn this book (III 816). Tearing pages from a book—as she has also done—is one thing; burning a book is quite another. It can signify that the book's contents have been officially judged heretical. Naturally enough, much Lollard literature went up in flames, as at a public burning in Oxford in 1410. Such rituals probably became more common after Archbishop Arundel's Constitutions (drafted 1407) toughened the establishment's campaign against Wycliffite literature. But there is earlier evidence for burnings, if we take at face value what is stated by the author of the Opus Ardium (1389/90) concerning a 'generalem mandatum prelatorum ad comburendum, desvrement et condemnandum' vernacular gospel writings. I suspect that the burning of Jankyn's book completes Chaucer's cycle of Lollard allusions in the Wife's Prologue. The proponent of dissent miscievously inverts the very mechanisms by which dissent was supposed to be eradicated. The 'heretic' wins an outlandish victory by forcing her clerical opponent to destroy his words, not hers.

Rather than pursuing this reading in detail to encompass further factors such as the subsequent friction between the Wife and the Friar (remembering that Lollards detested the friars, particularly for converting Scripture into 'scole-materne'), let us assimilate the implications of what has here been argued.

It may be objected that, while I have extensively elaborated the 'convergence' between the Wife and Lollard, I have not decisively proved a connection. The paradoxical defence must be that however much Chaucer wished to gain a hearing for Lollard views via the Wife, he would not have deemed it prudent to advertise this too explicitly (even in the case of a speaker for whose words he could pretend to admit no responsibility). He was writing at a time when the risk attaching to lay polemics founded upon 'express' scriptural warrant, if difficult to quantify, could not have been minimal. To me it appears that anxieties relating to that risk motivate the Wife's cautionary remark 'As taketh not agrief of that I seye' (III 191). Unfortunately this is a circular deduction. An equally circular response would have to be made against anyone who asks why the Wife's 'preaching' on celibacy and marriage is vested so largely in devious plunderings from such a stable text as Adversus Jovinianum. Chaucer is perforce using a defensive strategy, addressing Wycliffite controversies through a source safeguarded by its ancient pedigree. Indeed he may be imitating the Lollards' own guerrilla strategy whereby they frequently lodged their ideologically sensitive tenets within the beguiling confines of officially acceptable texts such as the Ancrene Riwle.

If the foregoing evidence of Lollard tendencies in the Wife of Bath commands critical assent, what conclusions regarding either the Wife, or Chaucer's interest in Lollardy, might thence arise? One means of responding is to juxtapose our experience of the Wife with Peckock's diagnosis of what factors make women ready converts to Lollard fundamentalism. He suggests that all laypersons who cultivate vernacular Scripture in the Lollard way are misled into supposing that moral truth resides exclusively in the Bible, because the Bible is in parts so 'delectable' and devotion-inspiring, and because an excessive 'affeccioun or wil' (as against 'intelleccioun or resoun') predisposes them to find all-sustaining 'hony' there. Given women's proportionately stronger 'affeccioun' and proportionately weaker 'resoun', they in particular are susceptible to the fundamentalist approach. In Chaucer, the gender-stereotyping thus displayed by Peckock is more often food for mirth (as the Wife herself intimates, III 434-42) than food for thought. Nor does the Wife hunger for devotional 'hony' in Scripture. Yet there is this much in common with Peckock's assessment: she does evince a powerful wil, not much slowed down by intelleccioun, to derive moral corroboration for her beliefs from the un-glossed Word. In the process she so manipulates citations from Scripture (for example, that concerning the marital
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‘debt’, III 154-62) that we must fancy Chaucer to be laughing up his sleeve at her exequietical limitations. However, such mockery should not be taken to prove that the poet was out of sympathy with the Lollards’ desire for straightforward biblical self-education. On the contrary, the Wife’s stumbtings serve to underline the predicament of the ‘lewed puple’ who ‘crieþ aftir holi writ’, while intolerant church officials ‘stopen holi writ as myche as þei moun’t."

V

The ambivalence of The Wife of Bath’s Prologue will probably not be much qualified by a discovery of her Lollard ‘dimension’, except in that we shall be detecting new facets to that ambivalence. But there are, I think, two broad implications of some importance. One is that we ought to reconsider the extent of Chaucer’s involvement with, and response to, principles stridently advanced by this controversial pressure-group that gathered strength as his literary career developed.27 It may be that we shall then uncover more reinforcement of the radical critics’ case for reading his work ‘in a consciously sociohistorical light’28 than many readers would hitherto have expected. There is no point in denying that Chaucer is temperamentally a ‘bookish’ poet. Yet we do not have to suppose him as indifferent to the world of current controversy as he sometimes pretends to be. If it remains true that he finds his greatest source of creative nourishment in a chest full of books, the constructs he fashions through the agency of ‘these olde appreved stories’ can nevertheless mediate the ‘tydynge’ of contemporary controversy. So far as Lollardy is concerned, we might fruitfully reflect, for example, on questions about image-worship which arise from the narrator’s intense devotion to the daisy icon in the Prologue to The Legend of Good Women. Is Chaucer there mediating a contentious debate about the legitimacy of venerating church images (triggered by Wyclifite polemic) through the disarming channel of marguerite conventions?29

The second broad implication, with which I shall conclude, concerns Chaucer’s distinctive interest in how people quote, use, ply, and misappropriate or ‘harass’ written auctoritee. He developed something of an obsession with this, and modern discussion of it proceeds apace.30 Into that discussion I should like to inject the following hypothesis. Among other things (possibly above all other things) Chaucer was drawn to become a connoisseur of the operations of auctoritee within spoken or literary argument by the furor surrounding that central feature of Lollardy which so dismayed the Lollards’ opponents and which must therefore have affected a poet who moved in Lollard circles. This central feature was the methodology they applied when they sought to ‘pike out scharpe sentencis of holy writ and of doctours for to maynteyne her sect and her loore’. Not only the Wife of Bath, but Chaucer’s whole work, may require fresh study with such features in mind.

Notes


4. One can only guess at the date of the Wife’s Prologue itself. Robinson assigns “the later Canterbury Tales (including the ‘Marriage Group’)” to 1393-1400, but states that ‘a reference to the Wife of Bath in the Envoy to Bukton fixes the composition of her Prologue, almost with certainty, before 1396’ (Works of Chaucer, ed. Robinson, pp. xxix, 698).

5. See the example of the sermon-writer, thought to be a friar, who feared persecution because his policy regarding the use of the vernacular over-
lapped with that which was prohibited on account of the Lollards: Anne Hudson and H. L. Spencer, 'Old author, new work: the sermons of MS Longleat 4', *M.E. LiIII* (1984), 220-38. D. A. Lawton suggests, reasonably, that, whereas in the late 1370s and early 1380s one could have 'sympathized with Lollard aspirations . . . without regarding oneself as a Lollard', the situation in the later 1380s and 1390s was such that 'Lollard sympathizers would have had to make a choice whether to accept or reject an increasingly dangerous label': 'Lollardy and the "Piers Plowman" tradition', *MLR*, LXXVI (1981), 780-93 (p. 780).

6. On the evolution of anti-Lollard measures at this time, see H. G. Richardson, 'Heresy and the lay power under Richard II', *EHR*, LI (1936), 1-28. For a text of the 'manifesto', i.e. *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* (said to have been pinned up on the doors of Westminster Hall and St Paul's), see Anne Hudson, *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 24-9.


11. A subsequent reappearance of the word in her *Tale*, where the 'olde wyf' declares that in Seneca or Boethius 'shul ye seen expres that it no drede is / That he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis' (III 1168-9) obliquely sustains the Wife of Bath's enthusiasm for explicit authorities.

12. See (PL, XXIII): '... ob hanc causam non esse uxorum numerum definitum' (col. 234) and context; also 'Hic adversarius tota exsultatione bacchatur: hoc velut fortissimo ariete, virginitatis murum quatietis: "Ecce, inquit, Apostolus profiteur de virginitute, Domini se non habere praecipitum: et qui cum auctoritate de maritis et uxoribus jussaret, non audet imperare quod Dominus non praecipit . . .":" (ibid., col. 227). The couplet in which the Wife first uses *express* is to be compared with: 'Quod autem ait: *Crescite et multiplicamini, et replete terram* (Gen. i. 28), necesse fuit prius plantare silvam et crescere, ut esset quod postea posset excidi. Simulque consideranda vis verbi, *replete terram*. Nuptiae terram replent, virginitas paradisum' (ibid., col. 235).

seip and techip in pe gospel pat schulden men worschipe and take as bileue, and oþir lawe of mennes fynding schulden men litil telle by' (Hudson, Selections, XV, 150-2 (p. 78)).

14. The Examination of Master William Thorpe can be consulted in Fifteenth Century Prose and Verse, ed. by A. W. Pollard (London, 1903), pp. 97-174. Pollard’s text is based on an early printed version (c. 1530). Also now known are two Latin manuscript versions, and an English one in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson c.208, ff. 1-91v, all fifteenth-century: see Hudson, Selections, p. 155. My quotations are taken from MS Rawlin c.208.

15. He is alleged to have travelled the north, preaching, ‘his twenti wyntir and more’ (f. 8v), and protests that he will not forsake 'be lore pat I haue bisied me fore pis þritti 3ecer and more' (f. 2r).


17. See C. Babington’s edition of The Repressor, 2 vols., Rolls Series (London, 1860), where Pecock discusses the concept ‘grounded in Holi Scripture’ extensively (I, 1-130), and makes semantic distinctions (I, 26-7). His ‘inside’ knowledge of Lollard language is considered by Hudson in ‘Sect vocabulary’, pp. 17-18 (rpt., pp. 167-8); and Knighton’s attribution of unius loquelae to members of the sect is reviewed ibid., pp. 15-16 (rpt. pp. 165-6).


19. Ibid., p. 111.

20. Ibid., p. 117.

21. Ibid., p. 118.

22. Ibid., p. 119.


24. Quoted from Hudson, Selections, XVII, 59-60 (p. 95); XXIV, 128-9 (p. 125); XXI A, 66-7 (p. 111); XV, 278-80 (p. 82), with dates as tentatively assigned in Hudson’s notes. See further: ‘expres contrarious to be newe testament’ (ibid., III, 137 (p. 28); and ‘syþen it is forbiden hym so expresse by þe forseyde heste of God’ (ibid., XIX, 182-3 (p. 101)).

25. Hudson, ‘Sect vocabulary’, p. 24 (rpt. p. 174). When the Oxford edition of English Wyclifite Sermons is complete, research on Lollard language will be much facilitated. The Latin work of the sect’s Dominican opponent Roger Dymock furnishes one contemporary ‘control’; see Rogeri Dymmock: Liber Contra XII Errores et Hereses Lollardorum, ed. by H. S. Cronin, Wyclif Society (London, 1922), in which are found locations such as ‘expresse contra’ (pp. 281/5-6, 290-19); ‘... expresse castiitem est professa’ (p. 72/26-7); and a citation of Aristotle, ‘ubi ponit expresse . . .’ (p. 82/10-12).


27. Cleanness, ed. by J. J. Anderson (Manchester, 1977), I 1158; the line is cited in MED, s.v. ‘expres(se) adv., (a).

28. MED, s.v. ‘expres(se)jli’, adv., (a).


in the Prologue to the Treatise on the Astrolabe, ll. 28-35 (‘But natheles suffise to the these trewe conclusions in English as wel as sufficith to these noble clerkes Grekes these same conclusions in Grek . . . and to Latyn folk in Latyn: whiche Latyn folk had hem first out of othere dyverse langages, and writen hem in owre owne tynge’), thus recapitulating a major thread in Lollard polemic on behalf of Bible translation.


35. For Brut’s arguments, see Aston, ‘Lollard women priest?’, pp. 444ff. (rpt, pp. 52ff.). Knighton is quoted ibid., p. 442 (rpt. p. 50).


38. Ibid., pp. 27-8.


40. Hudson, Selections, III, 25-34, 154-62 (pp. 25, 28).

41. Liber Contra Xl Errores, ed. Cronin, pp. 74-5. For Dymmok’s full responses to the third and eleventh Conclusions, see ibid., pp. 71-88, 272-91. If Lollards did object to priestly celibacy in the way he suggests, this train of thought was not peculiar to them, as is shown by its appearance in the Host’s remarks on the Monk as a potential ‘tredewofel’ (VII 1943-53).


43. See the record of White’s examination (1428) in Fasciculi Zizaniorum, ed. Shirley, pp. 420, 425-6. Although the Wife of Bath, too, hints broadly at sexual frustration and transgression among clerks (III 707-10), she would of course have much precedent for this in conventional anti-clerical satire.


47. Book of Margery Kempe, ed. Meech & Allen, p. 121; see also p. 121 nn. 2-3, p. 144 nn. 17-18; Hudson, ‘Lollard Mass’, p. 410 (rpt, p. 114). John Mahoney, ‘Alice of Bath: her “secte” and “gentil text”’, Criticism, VI (1964), 144-55, claims that the Brotherhood of the Free Spirit is relevant not only to Margery Kempe but also to the Wife of Bath.


50. Tanner, Heresy Trials, p. 166. Although many of the Norwich defendants were charged with holding this view, it is sensible to note Tanner’s caveat (p. 20) that ‘the questionnaire on which the charges were based has made the defendants’ beliefs appear more uniform than they were’.


52. On the Oxford burning, see Anne Hudson, ‘Contributions to a history of Wycliffite writings’, N & Q, CCXVIII (1973), 443-53 (p. 445), repr. in

53. It is worth recalling that even the prospect of giving a perfectly innocuous rendering of the Dives-Lazarus story in Confessio Amantis prompts Gower to apologise for anglicizing that which the clergy ‘in latin tunge . . . rede and singe’, VI.975-6.


56. From the Wycliffite Bible (1395-77) in Hudson, Selections, XIV, 20-3 (p. 67). The Wife has been much criticized for her ‘abuse’ of biblical quotation, from which the poet’s disdain for literal exegesis per se is sometimes inferred. For a more judicious view, see Lawrence Besserman, “Glosynge is a glorious thynge”: Chaucer’s biblical exegesis’, in Chaucer and Scriptural Tradition, ed. Jeffrey, pp. 65-73.


58. Knight, Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 3.


Colin A. Ireland (essay date January 1991)


[In the following essay, Ireland compares The Wife of Bath’s Tale with an Irish story in which the country of Ireland is personified as a woman—sometimes young, beautiful, and fertile, sometimes old and worn—to symbolize the state of the nation.]

The Wife of Bath’s search for sovereignty in marriage is the central theme in both her Prologue and in the Tale she tells. Modern criticism tends to maintain a clear distinction between the Wife’s Prologue and her Tale, noting specifically that the style of the Tale is more formal and less lively than her earthy Prologue. This stylistic difference is highlighted by the evidence that in some earlier arrangements of the Canterbury Tales the Wife of Bath was originally intended to relate the tale told by the Shipman. Although the Tale’s concern with sovereignty in marriage suits well the Wife’s own personal preoccupations, its courtly setting and sermon-like style are a bit incongruous for her less-than-idealistic approach to life. The Irish analogues of the ‘loathly lady’ theme in The Wife of Bath’s Tale have long been acknowledged but the Irish parallels of the Wife of Bath herself have not received the notice they deserve. This paper will show that Irish parallels to the Wife of Bath herself are intimately related to the Irish ‘loathly lady’ analogues through the theme of sovereignty, though certainly not restricted to sovereignty in marriage. Such evidence shows that Chaucer, in this case, had good precedents for his final arrangement of teller to tale.

Since the Irish literary works containing these analogues of the ‘loathly lady’ and the Wife of Bath are unlikely to be Chaucer’s immediate sources their existence in his work suggest that, like his choice of English over French as his medium of expression, many motifs and
themes employed in the *Canterbury Tales* had a common currency in fourteenth-century England. However, their manifestation would most consistently have been at a sub-literary level. In *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* this is most suggestively reflected in Chaucer’s use of the word *caile* ‘headress’ (line 1018). Although its etymology in English is doubtful, it is clearly the Irish word *caille* ‘veil’ from which is derived *cailech*, a word whose semantic development reverberates with meaning for the Wife of Bath and her *Tale*.

We must, first of all, understand the Irish versions of the ‘loathly lady’ stories in their full cultural context. One of the most consistently portrayed metaphors throughout Irish cultural history is that a king ‘marries’ his kingdom and that a royal ordination is actually a wedding feast (*banfhais* between the monarch and his ‘sovereignty’). In other words, the kingdom itself, whether a small territory or the entire island of Ireland, is thought of as female and is espoused to the king. The ‘sovereignty’ displays her approval and acceptance of the monarch by dispensing a liquor, or an elixir. This may occur at the wedding feast, that is to say, at the ordination, itself. Or, as is typical in many medieval Irish political ‘prophecies’, the ‘sovereignty’ pours out liquor for a future monarch symbolizing her acceptance of him and his ascension to the throne. The second element of the word *banfhais*, i.e. *feis*, may mean ‘spending the night with, sleeping with’, or simply ‘feast, banquet’. The two meanings are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and in this context at least, are not meant to be differentiated. This extended metaphor of portraying Ireland as a woman appears to have been well established since the pre-Christian era and to have survived into the present age, even among Anglo-Irish writers. The ‘sovereignty’ may be described in a full range of aspects from a fair young maiden; fresh, virginal and eager for the promises of nuptial pleasures with a vigorous new monarch. Or, she may be portrayed as a haggard, weary old woman, abandoned by an exiled king, or widowed at his death. The portrait of the ‘sovereignty’, then, often serves as a barometer revealing the state of the nation.

The Irish stories with the ‘loathly lady’ motif descend to us in two major versions, one might call them the ‘southern’ and ‘northern’ versions. Each has its own variants, some told in prose, others in verse, the intertextuality of this theme attesting to the richness of early Irish literary culture. Both versions are political allegories meant to explain, claim, or justify, the dominance of certain families in the kingship of their respective regions. Both versions utilize the established metaphor of ‘sovereignty’ as a female. The basic outline of both versions is that brothers, sons of a monarch, are continually being tested, usually in a manner unknown to themselves. After displaying in various ways their worthiness, they go out together on a hunt where they meet the ‘loathly lady’ whose detailed description is so grotesque and hideous that she nearly seems non-human. The hunt out in a wild, often forested, area is a common motif in both medieval Irish and Welsh narrative which signals that the characters are about to have an ‘otherworldly’ experience.

In the first, or ‘southern’, version the sons of Déire Dóimthech compete to see whose descendants will dominate the kingship of Munster in the south of Ireland. In anticipation of a prophecy regarding who will attain the kingship, all of the brothers are named Lugaid. A prose variant, which was first noted by Whitley Stokes as an analogue of *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, is recorded in the *Cóir Anmann* (Fitness of Names). The primary purpose of this text is to explain through medieval etymologies, like those of Isidore of Seville, the various appellatives or nicknames used to differentiate one Lugaid from another. A verse variant of this tale is found in the metrical *Dindshenchas*, a text which records the history and legends attached to eminent places throughout Ireland. It is Lugaid Laigde who, in order to help his brothers, agrees to kiss the ‘loathly lady’ in return for food and shelter. She instantly turns into a beautiful and desirable young woman and reveals herself to be the ‘sovereignty’. She says that she will ‘sleep’ with many of Lugaid’s descendants, that is to say of course, that they will attain the kingship.

The second, or ‘northern’, version is the better known because it deals with the eponymous Níall, the fifth-century ancestor of the Uí Neill dynasties. The tale explains (or justifies) their subsequent domination of the symbolic high-kingship of Tara. A verse variant is attributed to the scholar-poet, Cuán Ó Lothcháin (obit c. 1024). He is described by Eoin MacNeill as one of the ‘synthetic historians’, a term used by MacNeill, himself a historian, to describe those medieval scholars actively involved in ‘synthesizing’ Irish history and legend. Closely related prose variants are preserved in the Book of Ballymote and the Yellow Book of Lecan. In this version the five sons of Eochu Muigmedón compete for recognition. Four brothers are the sons of the queen, Monghind. The fifth brother, Níall, is the king’s son by a slave-woman. In this version too, the sons go out together on a hunt which sets the scene for an ‘otherworldly’ encounter. In the evening after the camp is set up each brother goes out singly to fetch water. Each, in turn, comes to a well guarded by a hideous hag (i.e. the ‘sovereignty’) who demands a kiss in return for a drink. Those who refuse are excluded from ever gaining the kingship. Those who comply ensure for themselves, and/or their descendants, the symbolic high-kingship of Tara. In one variant, Níall not only agrees to kiss the hag but willingly lies with her. While in his embrace she is transformed into a
lovely, desirable maiden. The allegorical implications are fully disclosed when the maiden, after revealing herself as the ‘sovereignty’ (flaithius), tells Niall:

‘Just as you saw me initially as hideous, beastly and terrifying, and subsequently as beautiful, so is the sovereignty; for it is seldom gained without battles and strife but ultimately for anyone it is beautiful and becoming’.12

The descendants of Niall, through the various branches of the kindred, became the most powerful and influential political family in Irish history. Many of its members were redoubtable Irish leaders during the Elizabethan wars in Ireland.

One of the most appealing, yet enigmatic, literary characters from Old Irish poetry is a figure who almost certainly derives from, or at least was modelled on, this metaphor of the ‘sovereignty’ of a region as a female. We encounter her in a poem which, based on the contrasting opinions of its various editors, one can assign to the ninth century. Although the poem has attracted the attention of several translators and anthologists, no critical consensus has emerged on just how best to define this character. She is usually referred to as the ‘Old Woman’ or ‘Hag’ of Beare, a lonely peninsula in the southwest of Ireland which reaches out into the stormy Atlantic. In the poem she is depicted as having been the consort of kings in her youth, but is now withered with age:

These arms, these scrawny things you see,  
scarce merit now their little joy  
when lifted up in blessing  
over sweet student boy

These arms you see,  
these bony scrawny things,  
had once more loving craft  
embracing kings.

When Maytime comes  
the girls out there are glad,  
and I, old hag, old bones,  
alone am sad.13

The reliance on the ‘sovereignty’ metaphor in explaining the character of the ‘Old Woman of Beare’ is strengthened by her insistence that, although she is ravaged by old age, she does not regret her youth and is jealous only of Femen ‘whose crop is still gold’. Femen is the plain around Cashel in Co. Tipperary, the site of the kings of Munster.

A tradition that the ‘Old Woman of Beare’ had a succession of husbands is a feature that reminds us of the Wife of Bath. A prose preface in one of the five manuscript copies of the poem states:

She passed into seven periods of youth, so that every husband used to pass from her to death of old age, so that her grandchildren and greatgrandchildren were peoples and races.14

It must be noted, however, that this is not specifically stated in the poem, but only in one prose preface.

Another Irish literary character who probably descends directly from the metaphor of the ‘sovereignty’ is Queen Medb (Maeve) of the Táin Bó Cúailnge (Cattle Raid of Cooley). Etymologically the name Medb is cognate with English ‘mead’. Her name originally meant ‘the one who intoxicates’ signifying her function as dispenser of the ‘liquor of sovereignty’.15 When we meet her in the Táin she has evolved beyond metaphor into a fully developed character with her own clearly-defined personality, personal history and family (including genealogy).

The Book of Leinster version of the Táin, redacted in the mid-twelfth century, opens with the renowned ‘Pillow Talk’,16 one of the most delightful scenes between a man and woman in Irish literature, and one redolent of a personality like the Wife of Bath. Medb contends with her husband, Ailill, over the value of their respective possessions which is shown to be equal in every particular except that Ailill possessed a fine bull, Findbenach, which Medb could not match. It is this perceived lack on Medb’s part that sets in train the events of the Táin when she rallies the armies of Ireland to proceed against Ulster in order to capture the Donn Cúailnge, a bull to equal Findbenach.

But it is not merely Medb’s acquisitive nature, nor her martial hardness (making her the equal of any man) that remind us of the Wife of Bath. For Medb herself demanded an unusual bride-price the likes of which no other woman had demanded of the men of Ireland. Her husband must be without meanness, without jealousy and without fear. In the context of early medieval societies it is easy enough to understand the expectations that a king be generous and fearless. But in a male-dominated world it could hardly be expected that he would not be jealous. Yet Medb insists that it would not be suitable that she should have a jealous husband for as she states, ‘I never had a man without another in his shadow’.17 Medb’s insistence on her own independence is remarkable. Some might argue that her series of lovers is proof that she, at least formerly, was a manifestation of the ‘sovereignty’. Each lover would represent a future king. But it must be noted that during the course of the Táin she euckolds Ailill with Fergus mac Róig, a warrior from Ulster in exile among her Connacht troops. Yet there is never any suggestion that Fergus is, therefore, the next in line for the kingship.18 Medb, as we meet her in the Táin, is more appropriately treated as an invented literary character than as a demoted symbol of ‘sovereignty’. Whatever early Irish literature inherited from pagan Celtic ideology we should expect it to play no greater role than that played by Classical pagan deities in other medieval literatures. Medb might well have said, along with the Wife of Bath:
Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,
and Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse

(lines 611-12)

Both of these robust, vigorous women characters have much in common regardless of the source of the literary allusions employed to describe them.

The social reality of early Ireland, particularly with regard to marriage and divorce, helps lend these literary characters their vitality. Despite the persistent, and in several respects accurate, stereotype of medieval Ireland as the ‘Land of Saints and Scholars’, many social customs and practices whose origins pre-date the Church’s influence continued unabated. Polygamy, particularly among the higher social ranks, was an accepted practice, as was easy divorce and subsequent remarriage of either partner. These practices persisted, despite the best efforts of reforming clergy, until the collapse of the native Irish order, that is, well into the time of the Elizabethan conquest. They are customs and practices which were frequently scorned and disparaged by the English in Ireland. Whatever about the orthodoxy of certain medieval Irish social practices, the deliberate syncretism of native Irish customs with those current on the Continent, usually introduced by the Church, is one of the features that makes the study of Irish literature and cultural history so fascinating. This blend is frequently demonstrated in the early law-tracts, most of which were redacted in the late seventh- to early eighth centuries. Early Irish law was ‘customary law’. It does not record edicts and legislation but instead delineates social organization and outlines time-honoured practices.

The law-tract *Bretha Cróilge*, concerned primarily with rights and responsibilities in the maintenance of the sick and injured, offers a dramatic example of this syncretism on a matter relating to marriage. It states:

> For there is a dispute in Irish law as to which is more proper, whether many sexual unions or a single one: for the chosen [people] of God lived in plurality of unions, so that it is not easier to condemn it than to praise it.

We have here early Irish lawyers, writing c. 700, who cite precedents from the Old Testament as justification for the continuation of the long established Irish practice of polygamy. One can almost hear the Wife of Bath, nearly seven hundred years later, disputing from the standpoint of her *experience* against the Church fathers in favour of multiple marriages. She cites scripture, specifically Solomon (line 35), Abraham (line 55) and Jacob (line 56) in justification of her views. Likewise, the commentator on the Irish law-tract cited above lists Solomon, David and Jacob as examples of polygamists.

One must not over-romanticize the status and social independence of women in medieval Ireland. The early Irish law-tracts leave no doubt that a woman was always subordinate to some man: when young, to her father; when married, to her husband; when widowed, to a brother or her son. Nevertheless, a married woman of some social rank who acquired or controlled a fair amount of material wealth (excluding land, which she was not allowed to possess) could act with a degree of autonomy not available to her counterpart in a monogamous society. Irish history provides the names of several such women, a noteworthy example being Gormlaith who died c. 946. She was herself the daughter of a king of Ireland and married in succession three kings: Cormac mac Cuilennán, king-bishop of Cashel in Munster; Cerball, king of Leinster; and Niall Glündub, king of Ireland and a member of the Uí Néill. There are several poems attributed to her, most of them are laments for her last husband, Niall. Since some of these poems are linguistically too late to have been composed by her it seems likely that they were attributed to her in order to increase the prestige of the Uí Néill. But it is entirely probable that she herself authored several of the poems. The title *Serc Gormlaith do Niall* "The Love of Gormlaith for Niall", preserved from the tenth-century saga lists, in addition to the poems mentioned above, attests to the well-established tradition of her great love for Niall. She spent the waning years of her life in a convent.

Gormlaith represents only one historical example of many Irish women whose full lives and multiple husbands might remind us of the Wife of Bath. Many such women flourished during those centuries when Ireland was more completely bi-cultural, with the English customs practiced in the Pale and the native Irish order in force beyond. But we need not confine ourselves to the native Irish for interesting parallels. For example, Dame Alice Kyteyler from the English community in Kilkenny had four husbands. She was accused of witchcraft in 1324, perhaps for political reasons, and fled to England. It is often through the disapproving comments of the English in Ireland at the time that we gain insight into the social customs as practiced by the contemporary Irish who saw little need to comment on themselves in this way. For example, the statute of Kilkenny, promulgated in 1366, was an attempt by the English authorities in Ireland to halt the increasingly rapid assimilation of the English colony to Irish customs and manners, including use of the Irish language. It provides a clear example of how Irish customs influenced the English in Ireland and, hence, suggests how Irish terms and customs could become known in the England of Chaucer’s time.

It is this contact between English and Irish that brings us to the next point. *Calle* is a word found frequently in Middle English texts of the fourteenth century, and is used by Chaucer in the *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* (line 1018). The new *Riverside Chaucer*, in the textual glosses at the bottom of the page, defines it as a ‘hair-
THE WIFE OF BATH’S PROLOGUE AND TALE

net worn as a headdress’. The second edition of the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer by F. N. Robinson lists calle in its glossary as ‘caul; hair-net; headdress’. The University of Michigan’s Middle English Dictionary suggests that it might be derived from O.E. caul ‘basket, container, net, sieve’, and rejects the suggestion made in the O.E.D. under caul that it is related to O.F. cale ‘small cap; headdress’, arguing that ‘OF cale of the 15th c. is either a back-formation from calotte or a borrowing from English’. Whatever about the etymology of the French word, the Middle English calle must be a borrowing from Irish caille ‘veil’. This word is among the fifth century borrowings from Latin into Irish. Its Latin source is pallium ‘covering; cloak, mantle’, the substitution of the sound /k/ for /p/ proving its great age. Once Irish caille became current in English usage its confusion with O.E. caul would only be natural. Both the O.E. and Irish words suggest something woven and, hence, net-like. In the prose tale Compert Conchubair (The Conception of Conchobar) we find an example of calle suggesting ‘net, web’, certainly something woven, in the line ‘she strained the water into the cup through her calle’. This tale provides a particularly interesting context for this word because the characters and events of the tale belong to pagan prehistory. Nevertheless, the Middle Irish redactor understood a caile to be a typical article of clothing for a, in this case, young woman. It is perfectly clear that Mid.E. calle and Ir. caille both meant some type of head-covering or ‘veil’ commonly worn by women. With this overlap in the semantic fields of O.E. caul and Irish caille it would naturally follow that the native English monosyllabic word would win out over the disyllabic Irish word, particularly with the tendency for Middle English words to lose final -e.

The semantic development in Irish of the derived word caillech has important ramifications for Chaucer’s use of calle in The Wife of Bath’s Tale. Caillech is literally ‘a veiled one’, i.e. a ‘nun’. This meaning is well attested from the Old Irish period, that is before 900, in saints’ lives and other religious writings. But already in the same period it had developed the meaning ‘old woman’, suggesting that many women who ‘took the veil’ in the early Middle Ages did so as their life options and alternatives were reduced in their later years. Perhaps the most famous example of a caillech in Old Irish literature is the Caillech Beirí, or the ‘Old Woman of Beare’, discussed previously. She calls herself the caillech in the second stanza of the poem, stating explicitly further on that she now wears the ‘veil’:

No wedding wether killed for me,
an end to all coquetry;
a pitiful veil (caille) I wear
on thin and faded hair.

Well do I wear
plain veil (caille) on faded hair;

many colours I wore
and we feasting before.*

One should keep in mind the historical example of Gormlaith, cited above, who eventually retired to a convent.

Perhaps the most striking use of the term caillech, and one attested in the Old Irish period as well, is as a ‘hag, crone, witch’. In the Irish versions of the ‘loathly lady’ cited above, caillech is used interchangeably with sentaine ‘old woman’ for the grotesquely hideous women the kings-to-be were expected to kiss. Thus for anyone familiar with these Irish analogues, Chaucer’s lines resonate with deeper implications when his own variant of the ‘loathly lady’ says to the young knight:

Lat se which is the proudeste of hem alle,
That wereth on a coverchief or a calle,
That dar seye nay of that I shall thee teche.

(lines 1017-19)

Caille, when seen in a context informed by the Irish analogues, is more than just a woman’s headdress. It may serve as a badge of her station in life and may imply those who have taken the veil as their years advanced, women for whom the Irish term caillech applies. In the Wife’s Tale they are the women in the queen’s court whose experience will verify the ‘loathly lady’s’ advice to the young knight. As for the Wife of Bath herself, her own experience must have made her aware of the limitations of her search for sovereignty, for it could never allow her to gain maistrey over time and old age. Despite her lusty, and optimistic, ‘welcome the sixte’ husband (line 45) as she set out to Canterbury, a sadder and more resigned realization must also reside behind her motives for going on pilgrimage. But it is to our eternal pleasure that Chaucer chose to portray the Wife of Bath when he did, rather than wait until she had become the Caillech of Bath.

Notes

1. I do not present these Irish analogues as an example of source study. Given the style and setting of the Tale it is hardly likely that Chaucer himself was even remotely aware of the tale’s Irish analogues. The best study of how this motif may have come into the purview of Chaucer’s work is still Sigmund Eisinger, A Tale of Wonder: A Source Study of The Wife of Bath’s Tale (Wexford, 1957). However, the cultural context of the sovereignty theme and its various manifestations in Irish literature are very informative for an appreciation of the Wife’s Prologue and her Tale. The social history of the period in England makes it quite likely that Chaucer was aware of many stereotypes entertained by the English about the Irish and their social practices.
2. All quotations and line citations from the Prologue and the Tale are from The Riverside Chaucer, Larry D. Benson, gen. ed. (Oxford, 1988).


4. For definitions of Irish words, see the Royal Irish Academy’s Dictionary of the Irish Language (Dublin, 1913-76).

5. Notice that in the Tale the knight first sees the fairy women dance, and subsequently meets the ‘loathly lady’, as he is riding through a forest (lines 989-999).


11. Although in this variant of the tale the brothers are only seeking water from the ‘loathly lady’ it is clearly meant as a parallel symbol for the ‘liquor’ dispensed to the future king by the ‘sovereignty’.


17. The line in Irish reads, dáig ní raba-sa riám can fer ar scáth araile ocum; C. O’Rahilly, 2 line 37.

18. Francis John Byrne notes that archaic genealogical poems, possibly as old as the seventh century, trace the origins of several Munster peoples to this union between Medb and Fergus mac Róig: Irish Kings and High-Kings (London, 1973) 171. Such evidence suggests the depth of tradition and relative age of the stories dealing with the Táin.

19. For articles treating marriage in medieval Ireland, see Marriage in Ireland, Art Cosgrove, ed. (Dublin, 1985), particularly the articles by Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Marriage in Early Ireland’ 5-24, and Art Cosgrove, ‘Marriage in Medieval Ireland’, 25-50.

20. For a lucid introduction to early Irish law and social practice, see Fergus Kelly, A Guide to Early Irish Law (Dublin, 1988), particularly pp. 68-79 for marriage, divorce and the legal capacity of women.


22. Ibid. 47. Donnchadh Ó Corráin in his article ‘Marriage in Early Ireland’ makes it clear that the Irish lawyers drew on canon law in support of their views on marriage and were not merely defending pre-Christain Irish practices against the Church, art. cit. (note 19).


24. The title of this tale is ambiguous. I have translated it on the basis of the tradition of the poems ascribed to Gormlaith which depict her great love for Niall. But according to early Irish grammar do may express the agent of a verbal noun so that a more accurate translation might be ‘Niall’s Love for Gormlaith’. The likely polito-literary context of this title is discussed by Proinsias Mac Cana, The Learned Tales of Ireland.


Catherine S. Cox (essay date March 1993)


[In the following essay, Cox explores the sexual connotations of the term “glossing,” highlights the double entendres in The Wife of Bath’s Prologue, and investigates the link between sexual fulfillment and control of language. Cox maintains that although the Wife of Bath seeks to fight the patriarchal system, her lack of feminine discourse forces her to use male definitions, and ultimately she is unsuccessful in self-definition.]

Although the Wife of Bath, in her Prologue, argues in a quasi-feminist voice for the validity of her own experience and authority, her narrative seems ambiguously—and ambivalently—both feminist and anti-feminist. This sense of the narrative becomes clearer when we consider the Wife to be a textual “feminine” representation, one constructed within the parameters of “masculine” discourse and articulated in masculine terms, even as specific components of the construction may be identified as feminine. My interest in the textual feminine here corresponds not to any internal textual privileging of an écriture féminine but to masculine and feminine components of an epistemological metaphor of paradigmatic distinction. The feminine may be understood as an engendered epistemological construct existing within the parameters of an ostensibly masculine discourse. The Wife, herself a textual construct, does not produce what could be described as a feminine discourse; rather, she is produced by and reiterates an ostensibly masculine discourse, though as I hope to demonstrate, her narrative calls attention to an ambivalent feminine poetics within those parameters.

As a character within a fictional frame, the Wife exists as words of narrative; her existence is a textual reality. And as a fictional voice articulated from moment to moment by narrative structures, the Wife does not control the agency of her own narrative, her “own” voice, even as the narrative voice constructs the illusion of character. As Marshall Leicester notes,

What we call the Wife of Bath exists in the text as a set of unresolvable tensions between self-revelation and self-presentation, repentance and rebellion, determinism and freedom, the individual and the institution, Venus and Mars, past and present. In each of these cases the opposition is both necessary and unsustainable, and the terms ceaselessly turn into one another. Of course the Wife is a construction, an interpretation.

The Wife may be read as both narrative construct and literary character, the former existing discursively, as a rhetorical construct, and the latter as a mimetic reality, having an imagined history and psychological profile. Although without the latter there would be no “Wife,” Chaucer’s concern lies more clearly with the former, and my own remarks attend primarily to the Wife as the narrative/discursive construct that Chaucer uses to delineate his own discovering of the limits of discourse. While the Wife ultimately does not replace or supplant the masculine with what could be construed as an écriture féminine, her characterization nonetheless challenges patriarchal orthodoxy in its evocation of the feminine component of epistemological dualism and the text’s grappling with the tensions thereby introduced.

This said, I want to consider the linguistic, discursive, and sexual ambiguities of the Wife’s attention to “glossing,” which I shall eventually connect to the narrative’s articulation of an ambivalent feminine poetics. This poetics in turn inscribes Chaucer’s concern with his own glossing, his own sense of the equivocalness of
discursive investiture. To gloss a word, phrase, or passage is to supply a new and more readily accessible interpretation or annotation, ostensibly for clarification or explanation. Owing to the word’s etymology, however, an underlying erotic sense informs its use in the Wife’s discourse. For example, the Wife’s description of glossing—“Men may devyne and gleson up and doun,” “Glose whoso wolde, and seye bothe up and doun” (III.26, 119)—not only suggests a thorough attempt at interpretation, covering both ends and everything that is between them, but also hints at erotic activity, of the connotations of which the Wife is no doubt aware and in which, indeed, the character delights. It is important, too, to note the shift in gender identification: first, the Wife insists that “men” may gloss (III.26), using a noun which while signifying a general sense of “people” is nonetheless masculine; she then uses “whoso” (III.119), signifying “anyone,” masculine or feminine. What is initially described as a masculine activity is arguably subsequently assigned to—or appropriated by—the feminine. Both men and women may “gloss,” be it sexually or textually; as the Wife clearly demonstrates in her own ambiguous “glossing,” the tongue is, in effect, androgynous or bisexual, belonging to and representative of both the masculine and the feminine.

Glossing informs the role of the text as mediation of desire, underscored throughout the Prologue by the Wife’s articulation of sexualized language “pleye”:

But yet I praye to all this compaignye
If that I spake after my fantasye,
As takest not adef of that I seye;
For mynte entente nis but for to pleye

III.190-92

claims the Wife, using a disclaimer typical of Chaucerian narrators (who remind us not to “make ernest of game” [L.3186], not to impart to the text with such seriousness that it is stripped of its wit and pleasure). Glossing is connected to sexualized textuality in the Wife’s description of the episode involving Jankyn’s “book of wikked wyvves” (III.685), for example, an episode which demonstrates that this particular text serves as an instrument of seduction. It is, after all, the book that prompts the confrontation that in turn leads to reconciliation (according to the Wife’s narrative of events). Jankyn is described as preferring the book to his wife, substituting the eros of the text for the eros of the marital relationship; the Wife notes that he amuses himself with the book, reading it “glady, nyght and day” (III.669). The confrontation between Jankyn and the Wife is provoked by the Wife’s apparent jealousy over her husband’s preferring to spend his evenings with his book rather than with her. Thus the book substitutes for desire (for Jankyn) and then effects desire’s mediation, ultimately bringing together Jankyn and the Wife. Indeed, the Wife notes that he gave her control “of his tonge and of his hond also” (III.815), again suggesting the correlation of eros and language in her controlling of his “tonge.” The Wife’s narrative insists upon an alignment of the two, eros and language, and indeed her Prologue itself “glosses” one in terms of the other.

There is, then, a crucial connection between eros and language that the Wife draws upon throughout her narrative; her attention to sex may be understood as attention to language and vice versa, for her discourse on marriage is not only a commentary on marriage as institution, but also on the discourse of that institution and, indeed, on discourse itself. Further, as the Wife embodies the textuality of the framing narrative, her textuality is sexualized just as her body is textualized. The relationship of textuality and sexuality is underscored by attention to the abuse of each component in that abuse of eros—perversion—serves as a commentary upon or metaphor of the abuse of language. As Eugene Vance comments, “The equation between idolatry, including idolatry of the letter, and sexual perversion became a subtle force in medieval poetics,” informing sexual metaphors that call attention to their own signification processes in addition to thematic considerations of the activities described. The Wife’s inclusion of fairly explicit double entendres, then, provides an incessant, though erratic, reminder throughout her Prologue that the character is commenting on both medium and message, that the narrative addresses concerns of both textual representation and normative presuppositions in the narrative’s moral dimension. Chaucer sets out the Wife as a kind of narrative decay in order to confront normative/narrative presuppositions and to test the dangers of glossing in relation to his own poetic appropriation. He demonstrates the inevitability of discursive promiscuity—an inhering insistence upon the resistance of language to unmitigated subjection.

While moralizing readings that fault the Wife’s behavior or find her wanting—conventional masculine readings—are clearly supported by the text’s own emphases, the Wife, as a narrative construct, as a textual representation of Woman, also supports a reading that challenges this perspective without ignoring the unfavorable details included in the Wife’s construction. In other words, to find a feminine valorization inhering in the Wife’s narrative is not—and need not be—to ignore the reality of the portrait.

The Wife delights in talking about sexuality; the language of eros is, for her, apparently far more appealing than is any active participation itself. Indeed, with regard to her “olde houbondes” she notes.
For wynnyng wolde I al his lust endure,  
And make me a fyned appetit;  
And yet in baco hadde I neveere delit.

III.416-18

She endures her husband’s sexual demands in order to maintain her profit-making status as “wyf.” Moreover, she confesses outright that she feigns an appetite, that she fakes arousal and desire because she has no interest in nor derives enjoyment from “baco.” (She describes her husband[s] sexually as “baco,” old meat, aged and dry, while her own female anatomy she identifies as “bele chose,” beautiful thing [III.447, 510].) Her comment suggests that for all her sexually charged banter and erotic “pleye,” language is the medium of eros for her, and the excitement she does not find any longer in active sexuality, she finds in language, its substitute. The Wife participates in an erotization of the letter, for the erotic sense of language apparently holds for the Wife far greater appeal than does participation in the activities to which the language refers; her “bele chose” is her “pleye” of language, not the play of her female anatomy, and she apparently derives satisfaction from the response that her word “pleye” elicits from her audience. To construct her “pleye,” then, she imposes connotations not only according to her pleasure, but for her pleasure as well.26

The Wife’s use of “appetyt” to describe her desire for sexual/textual pleasure—jouissance—is curious in its apparent inconsistency, for she claims first to feign an appetite, suggesting that none is present, and then to follow an appetite of her own natural desires: “And make me a fyned appetit” (III.417) and “evere folwedwe myn appetit” (III.622). “Appetit” is first described as absent, then present. Clearly, while the Wife desires to desire (to borrow the phrase made popular by Mary Anne Doane),21 she apparently finds actual sexual desire lacking; in its place she not only constructs the illusion of its presence, but then claims to follow that very (feigned) desire as well. The apparent contradiction is reconciled, however, by the Wife’s implicit core intention: to elicit a response from her predominantly male audience, even if her narrative/rhetorical performance demands inconsistencies in the narrative/rhetorical line. “Rhetorical” here suggests that “desire” is constructed by the discourse; it exists only as the rhetorical line suggests its existence; the rhetorical line is not informed by an a priori desire, but rather the line generates it simultaneously with its articulation even if the articulation contradicts itself. “Desire” is for the Wife rhetorical, for her desire to desire seems to be accompanied by a desire to be recognized as having desire; she seems to construct her narrative for the effect of eliciting approval from her audience and, as such, the narrative voice ventriloquizes, speaking their language—the language of the audience—rather than her “own.” Hence her claims of sexual promiscuity (“I ne loved nevere by no discreicion”—III.622) and her impulse to talk about this alleged lack of discretion may be understood as an attempt to enhance the likelihood of acquiring this recognition from her audience. Indeed, the Wife’s attempts to maintain audience interest render her a caricature, an exaggeration of a woman who not only desires to desire but who uses that desire as a rhetorical strategy, as a sexualized captatio benevolentiae. As a caricature of a feminine desire produced by the dominant masculine discourse, the Wife is not only made a spectacle, but is shown as a conspirator in her own objectification.22 Hence too her own narrative of desire continues despite interruption (“Abye! quod she”—III.169), while the subsequent telling of the formal Tale is contingent upon the audience’s interest (“if ye wol heere”—III.828; “right as yow lest”—III.854; “If I have licence”—III.856). Her Prologue, which reports her own desire, is privileged over her Tale, which narrates the desire of wholly fictive others (themselves produced by a fictive construct).

Moreover, in calling attention to her “appetit,” the Wife calls attention to her desire as a desire to consume, be it sexually, textually, or otherwise. In effect, as she “glosses,” she consumes both partners and texts, appropriating them for her own use and deriving from them whatever satisfaction she can find. Her warning—“For peril is bothe fyr and tow’l’assembl; / Ye knowe what this ensample may resembel” (III.89-90)—uses the consumption metaphor of fire and fuel that suggests, or “resembles,” the consuming nature of sexuality.23 In addition, her attention to consumption imagery calls attention to the twofold manifestation of her ambivalent desire: it represents both lack and surplus. Louise Fradenburg comments:

The inability of the Wife’s desire to find closure—the sense in which it is a desire for desire—is thus presented, on one level, as lack. But of course this characterization of her desire is meant to constrain the text’s presentation, on another level, of desire as multiplicity, a supplement or surplus—as always more than its representations, and hence as always urged to remake the world.24

Her glossing suggests a kind of excess that calls attention to its own vicariousness. In Derridean terms, the Wife’s excess may be understood as supplement:

The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plentitude enriching another plentitude, the fullest measure of presence. . . . But the supplement only supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of-it; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void.25

The process of consumption, as the Wife describes it, not only represents an attempt to fill in empty space, to satisfy some perceived lack, but also suggests the underlying almost paradoxical nature of desire as represented by the Wife: in her quest to fill the empty
spaces, she is depicted as consuming far more than is needed but remaining necessarily unfulfilled by the vicariousness of her excessive supplementation. Thus Chaucer locates in the Wife his angst about his own measure of supplementation and appropriation; he constructs and embodies in the Wife his own concern with excess.

It is therefore quite fitting that the Wife should be initially described as having “hipes large” (I.472), as having excessive flesh or girth, for she apparently fails to respect any boundary or limit of consumption. (Overconsumption of food and drink is obviously manifest in the kind of carnal evidence that cannot be negated through language alone.) Further, she aligns her excessive consumption of drink with other sumptuary interests: “And after wyn on Venus moste I thynke: / For al so siker as cold engendreth hayl, / A likerous mouth moste han a likerous tayl” (III.464-6), suggesting that perhaps she must ply herself with alcohol to trigger a minimum erotic response or, additionally, that in her mind activities of consumption—carnal behaviors—are locked together. Her comment, too, erotically aligns “mouth” and “tayl,” noting that both may be described as “likeorous,” that is, lustful, greedy, eager; “likeorous” suggests “gourmandizing—with food, drink, and licking,” and its connotations extend to “lechery,” and here the Wife’s alignment seems to emphasize the possible aural pun. The Wife’s “mouth” is as eager as her “tayl,” indeed even more so, and calls attention to the Wife’s carnal excesses, for the mouth is the point of intake for excesses of food and drink, and it is a vehicle for her excess of words, most of which are associated with her “tayl.” Further, the “mouth” and “tayl” may be likened in sexual terms, an analogy articulated in contemporary feminist theory by Luce Irigaray and discussed at length in Jane Burn’s recent analysis of fabliaux, in that the mouth not only resembles the “tayl,” but serves as its substitute as well. For the Wife the mouth is instrumental in effecting not merely consumption but excessive consumption, both sexually and textually. Hence she describes herself as “Gat-tothed” (III.603), again associating her mouth with her sexual behavior, and reiterating that consumption—effected by mouth—is, for the Wife, an erotic act.

The mouth is the locus of sexuality for the Wife, for not only does it contain the teeth that apparently serve as a kind of beacon to her audience, affirming her erotic interests, but, more important, it houses the origin of speech—it is the location of the tongue of which the Wife seems so fond. Indeed, the tongue mediates the instrumentality of both textuality and sexuality. Flesh and text cleave through the instrumentality of the tongue, and the two are united through the metaphoricity of “glossing.” The tongue both covers and consumes; for the Wife, to “gloss” a text is to sexualize it, and, in turn, the sexualized text elicits erotic excitement. The tongue seduces as well, having potential use as an instrument of flattery and deception; the efficacy of flattery may be accorded to the tongue. Along these lines the Wife notes that her husband could easily seduce her with his tongue: “And therwithal so wel koude he me glowe / Whan that he wolde han my bele chese” (III.509-10). In this respect, “glossing” functions as erotic foreplay.

The Wife exploits the etymology of “glossing” and the practice of glossing biblical texts to construct a sexual rhetoric. Her treatment of patrictic authority in conjunction with her descriptions of her own experience results in a kind of “holy erotica,” a scriptural glossing designed for titillation. Her quasi-holy erotic discourse represents a rhetorical mixing, for her sexual rhetoric comprises a mixing, or coupling, of two distinct registers, the theological and the erotic. Erotica represents a “coupling” of textuality and sexuality, for it textualizes sex and sexualizes the text in its sexual instrumentality. Moreover, the instrumentality of erotica is an autoerotic one, for it serves the self and requires no other; it is narcissistic, an erotic exclusion of otherness manifest in self-affection. Glossing the Bible and its concomitant patristic directives is, for the Wife, an erotic act; she derives a kind of erotic excitement and satisfaction from her glossing and in conveying—or exhibiting—her glossing to an audience. The autoeroticism of the glossing is extended further in that the body as textus becomes a target for her own glossing as well; she, in effect, glosses herself.

Moreover, this sexual rhetoric is again a substitution, interchanging textuality and sexuality in a blurring of the boundaries between the two. This substitution is of course not limited to the female alone, as the Wife notes, for Jankyn himself used the text as a substitute for eros (III.669-70). In addition, the Wife argues that such substitution by men is fairly commonplace:

*The clerk, whan he is oold, and may noght do
Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho,
Thanne sit he doun, and writ in his dotage
That wommen kan nat kepe hir mariaghe!*

III.707-10

But the major difference between masculine and feminine substitution, according to the Wife’s demonstration, is that while men read and write about eros, women talk about it. Speaking to an audience provides the kind of direct, immediate response not possible through writing; while men derive satisfaction from the solitary act of writing about eros, women, the Wife suggests, desire active appreciation and response from an audience, an “other.” Erotic textuality is an active oral process for the Wife, delighting both speaker and audience through the instrumentality of the mouth and tongue.

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Having identified the narrative's use of "gloss" as both a destabilizing erotic metaphor and a discursive operating feature of narrative errancy, I would now like to turn to the self-reflexive, or metatextual, "glossing" that underscores the narrative's attention to an en-gendered epistemology, beginning with the Wife's rambling treatise on the role of sex in marriage, wherein she argues in favor of unrestrained sexuality by suggesting that procreation justifies such behavior (though she acknowledges no offspring of her own):

For hadde God comanded maydenhede,
Thanne hadde He damned weddyng with the dede.
And ceres, if ther were no seed ysove,
Virginitee, thanne wherof sholde it growe?

III.69-72

By first aligning the image of seed and sowing to "virginitee" as the desired fruits of that labor, the Wife extends the metaphor not only to evoke the relationship of seed and sowing to sexual reproduction, but also to question the paradox inhering in what she has determined to be the scriptural privileging of virginity. Human seed must be sown if procreation is to take place, and, according to widespread fourteenth-century explanations of physiology and reproduction, this sowing entails both male and female seed—the female contributes her own seed to the conception process even as she serves as the receptacle for the male seed.

The Wife’s exegetical glossing here is flawed by hyperbole, for she uses an extreme example and has lifted out of context the exegetical directives regarding marriage and procreation. One could of course argue that she is reacting to the views of Jerome, whose rigid and excessive advocacy of virginity is coupled with an attack on marriage. To this end, the Wife fulfills Jerome’s realistic recognition that his virginal directive could hardly be met with widespread acceptance or successful implementation. Further, her ironic, satiric treatment of marriage doctrine calls attention to the flawed structure of such directives, suggesting that all pretensions to and regulations of marital affairs, all selective codes of behavior, are ludicrous because, as the Wife of Bath suggests, they come from precisely those people who know least about them.

again the Wife privileges "experience" as "actoritee." Her response to Jerome, however, is in part problematic because Jerome’s views are hardly typical of the Wife’s contemporary social context, and, moreover, the Augustinian argument that “Christian virginity could be praised without denigrating marriage” marks a more realistic and acceptable stand for both the Church and those who follow the Church’s directives. Thus while the Wife shows off her knowledge of patriarchal “actoritee,” she simultaneously is shown to demonstrate her appropriation of anachronistic core issues, to avail herself of patriarchal orthodoxy in the construction of her rhetorical lines even as she misrepresents them by omission or exaggeration. And because virginity is too rigid a directive, the Wife accepts no directive, no restraint; she rejects the notion of continence in its entirety, observing no balance or moderation within the parameters of sexual behavior. It is hardly surprising that she who delights so in talking of sexuality would be aghast at what she perceives to be the virginity directive’s rigid constraints and at the implicit repression that such a decorum represents.

But by casting sexuality in the radical division of virginity/promiscuity, the Wife leaves no middle ground for women. Her dichotomizing imposes upon her social/political reality what might be described as patriarchal binary thought, "this endless series of hierarchical binary oppositions that always in the end come back to the fundamental 'couple' of male/female"; "Virginia, as the patriarchal ideal, is privileged within this schema as the positive, male component of the dual, while promiscuity serves as the negative complement, ultimately the target of scorn. Here, then, the Wife subverts her ostensibly assertive stance to an insidious and ultimately oppressive patriarchal context. And clearly, too, the Wife seems to invert the positive/negative valuation underlying her dichotomy—perhaps owing to her desire for audience approval—and identifies herself as promiscuous: “I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun” (III.622), she notes, boldly stating that she lacks discretion or discrimination in matters of “love”—love in its erotic, sexual sense, which the Wife herself equates with sin: “Alas, alas! That evere love was synne” (III.614), she exclaims, smugly identifying herself as a sinner. The either/or rigidity of the Wife’s imposed identifications is as reductionistic and value-laden as the patriarchal “actoritee” against which she ostensibly rails. Further, her identification calls attention to the problematic masculine nature of her stereotypical sexual belonging: she in effect speaks like a man about acting like a man, using a bullying sexuality to confront restrictive social and theological guidelines, yet seeming to sacrifice her femininity in the process of adhering to the masculine dichotomy that she herself introduces to the rhetorical line.

The Wife’s sexualized dichotomizing is further problematized by engendered tropes of fertility and propagation. In terms of the Pauline sowing metaphor, “seed” must be “sown” if the word is to propagate, and unsown seed represents unused potential. With regard to the command “to wexe and multiply” (III.28), the Wife notes, “that gentil text kan I wel understonde” (III.29). The pleasures of the text are propagated by multiplication, and, therefore, by extension, to deny multiplication is both to deny the pleasure of the text and to curtail further propagation. Following this analogy, “virginitee” may be understood not only as the physical state of
sexual chastity, but also, as the Wife suggests, a state of unused capability, of wasted potential—of seed unson. Literal and figurative manifestations of "seed" constitute a complex relationship of signification structures that underscores the Wife's Prologue's attention to poetic language, specifically as the language of the Prologue explicates what may be described as its own figurative multiplicity, its awareness of the crucial relationship between polysemy and poetry. The sexual wordplay in the Prologue may be understood as a commentary on the necessity of polysemy if poetic language is to mean. Through this garrulous, vulgar voice, Chaucer addresses his own concerns about the complex dangers of discursive fertility/promiscuity, the paradoxical necessity of the author's appropriations of language to his own task. Poetic language is necessarily polysemous, and no matter how the poet wishes to control his own words, to limit their fertility, he proves by that very desire that language is too fertile, promiscuous, beyond control. The Wife exploits the polysemy of language in order to construct her sexual wordplay; she insists that many seeds be sown, many shades of meaning inhere in the language of her discourse in order for the "pley" to occur. The Wife as a representation of Woman is a caricature, an exaggeration that draws from an anti-feminist tradition even as it ostensibly attacks that tradition. The Wife is shown to delight in the entertainment value of the word-"pley," yet at the same time she seems oblivious to the contradictions inhering in her self-revelatory discourse, making unclear just what, in fact, she is advocating, though clearly she couches her argument in sexual terms to an ostensibly feminist end.

The Wife seems similarly oblivious to the ramifications of those contradictions in terms of what many readers perceive to be the Prologue's valorization of the feminine. To this end, the Wife's discourse calls attention to an apparent and problematic alignment of the "feminine" and the "carnal." The pairing of "flesh" and "female" suggests a correlation of the feminine and the carnal, in that the seductive threat of the female to the male finds epistemological representation in the seductive threat of the carnal to the spiritual (indeed, many well-known instances of medieval misogyny can be traced to this analogy). And in a positive sense, just as the literal carnal is, in terms of signification, the base starting point from which further spiritual meaning may be conceived, so, too, the feminine represents positive potential. But to suggest that the feminine be equated wholly with the carnal as the Wife embodies carnality is to suggest that the Wife's limiting, restrictive, and rather hostile generalizations—the either/or dichotomy of virginity and promiscuity—are valid. The crux here is the Wife's appropriation, that is, her attempting to take possession—"assertively" and "knowingly," as Carolyn Dinshaw argues—of the patriarchal language of which she presumably recognizes the efficacy, or at least the necessity. The Wife would arguably not need to appropriate patriarchal discourse if she had at her disposal an alternative discourse; nor would she appropriate the patriarchal if she were not confident of its efficacy and utility. In short, she usurps what she knows works—or, more accurately, what she knows should give the illusion of working—apparently hoping that the appropriation will supply her discourse with the authority, credibility, and efficacy that she herself finds lacking.

The Wife's appropriate glossing may be understood, in terms of medieval sign theory that designates language in terms of property, as a problematic dichotomizing of public and private (or, in Bakhtinian terms, as the public or social dimension rather than an authoritative or privileged system). Medieval theologians, philosophers, and poets would have understood language in terms of the literal and figurative, proper and improper, as usurpative and polysemous: the literal sense is considered "proper," that is, the signum proprium, signifying the most immediate level of meaning, while the figurative sense is improper, the signum translatum, in the sense that meaning is transferred. In dealing with "property," Augustine, for example, realizes that one must also deal with appropriation in the sense of usurpation: "metaphora est usurpata translatio," notes Augustine in Contra mendacium, identifying metaphor as a usurpative translation, a transferring of meaning that is not only arbitrary but pleasurable as well—"impositio ad placitum"—imposed according to the pleasure of the imposer; the Wife, of course, is no stranger to the pleasures of textuality. To use language figuratively is thus to usurp meaning and transfer it; beyond the literal sense, language signifies according to usurpation and transfer, and transfer by usurpation allows for the Wife's bawdy and significant word-"pley." Usurpative transfer, then, allows for public access to private appropriation.

Further, the public/private semantic implications of the Wife's attention to glossing are framed by the aforementioned patriarchal binary thought, manifest in the ubiquitous medieval "epistemology by contraries," which asserts that comparison is the basis for all understanding and that definition is contingent upon the difference identified by the process of comparison. This epistemology likewise comments on poetic language itself, for poetic language—metaphor—may be understood as the comparison (or ratio) of differences. Jean de Meun's well-known commentary on this epistemology in Le roman de la rose, perhaps its best medieval articulation, is informed by medieval commentaries on the polarities outlined in Aristotle's Metaphysics, which Aristotle himself attributes to Pythagoras, whereby polarities are used to construct an epistemology of contraries through a series of related opposites, including, among others, male and female, limited and unlimited, one and plural. It is reasonable
to argue, as does Toril Moi, that “it doesn’t much matter which ‘couple’ one chooses to highlight: the hidden male/female opposition with its inevitable positive/negative evaluation can always be traced as the underlying paradigm”; therefore, associations may not only be traced between paired items but extended to the male/female implications of any duality as well.

Clearly, the epistemology by contraries, in its construction of oppositional binaries, dichotomizes. The dichotomizing of contraries within the epistemology, however, is not the rigid, exclusive dichotomizing evident in the Wife’s demonstration. For while the Wife uses dichotomy to construct a valued identification strategy of patriarchal labels, the epistemology uses dichotomy to establish difference, not to condemn it, and to use that difference as a means of freeing or enhancing thought, not to constrict or reduce it. If the Wife’s narrative is interpreted within a context of this epistemology, her use of sexual language takes on additional connotations. Significantly, the epistemology aligns “female” with “unlimited” and “plural,” suggesting that that which is “female” may be understood as “unlimited” and “plural” as well. (This ancient connection between the feminine and the plural is articulated in contemporary feminist theory by Luce Irigaray, who argues that “women’s speaking lips / écriture-féminine metonymically suggest plurality, multiplicity, and the dissolusion of bounds.”) Although infinite limitlessness would ultimately call into question the very possibility of meaning, the “unlimited” taken in conjunction with “plural” connotes a sense of polysemy, that is, a choice of more than one even if some ultimate limit must be identified or assumed. In this sense, the table of polarities supplies a means of understanding the impact of gender polarities on medieval language and thought.

But the usurpative appropriation demonstrated in the Wife’s narrative is problematic owing to the ostensibly feminine agency of the appropriation in relation to private discourse. On the one hand, the excess of the Wife’s glossing—culturally marked as feminine—underscores the Wife’s insistence that the restrictive, oppressive signifying practices of the patriarchal “auctoritee” be opened up; the Wife invites further glossing even as she herself glosses, thereby challenging patriarchal claims of interpretive closure. Additionally, one might situate the Wife’s challenge in a context of Lollardy, specifically the Lollards’ rejection of patriarchal interpretive exclusivity. Peggy Knapp, in her analysis of the Wife’s glossing, convincingly argues,

The “gospel glossen” associated with Lollardy did not, of course, immediately cause the patrician glosses to lose currency, but Wyclif’s attack on the system’s authority and attempted substitution of a “gloss” with different underpinnings made the ideology that sustained it visible. Ideology works best not when it is an idea being argued for but when it is the ground on which other ideas are argued: it cannot become fully visible without losing some of its privilege.

As such, the Wife may be seen as challenging the propriety of private, self-serving glossing by exposing its underlying ideological exclusivity.

And yet the Wife is herself shown as privatizing language. The Wife usurps patriarchal discourse, patriarchal “auctoritee,” in an apparent attempt to challenge its dominance; and yet her usurpation effects an exclusivity not unlike that which she confronts. Just as she speaks like a man in challenging men’s speech, so too she speaks the exclusive language of patriarchy in professing to speak out against patriarchal “auctoritee”; it is no less exclusive just because it intends to confront exclusivity. The Wife’s struggle with exclusivity marks Chaucer’s own anxiety about appropriation: How is he to effect the usurpation necessary for polysemous signification without himself risking a personal exclusivity? Can the poet use language effectively and poetically without claiming it as his own? To retain possession to the exclusion of other possibilities is to render language problematic in that the possessive usurper not only denies language its proper— and thus accessible and universal—sense, but also attempts to control how the language is understood. In short, exclusive appropriation denies language the very plurality that allows it to signify beyond the literal; attempting to privatize language renders the language meaningless to anyone except the private, possessive usurper.

The Wife professes to argue against virginity, the restricted sowing of seed, but in her attempt to usurp patriarchal language, she renders her language (as she possesses it) unisemous, not polysemous— in a sense, “virgin.” In other words, in attempting to possess language that she cannot own, she harbors its meaning as a secret unto herself, attempting to control through possession the propriety of its signification. In fact, the Wife explicitly desires to mark her discourse as her “own,” as having private meaning susceptible to misinterpretation by an audience: “If that I spoke after my fantasye . . .” (III.190). Her discourse is a subjective external articulation of an internal narrative, private and inaccessible even if partially, and willfully, exposed; it is a “queynte fantasye” (III.316) not unlike that which she says belongs to “[w]e wommen” (III.315). In attempting to appropriate language— in effect, “re-virginizing” it— she denies it the polysemy it would otherwise entail; the “virgin” word is unisemous. Moreover, the unisemey of the “virgin” word may be likened to the unisemey of the autoerotic word; both represent private appropriation— or retention— of ultimately wasted potential. A significant feature of the Wife’s autoerotic textuality is in her female- ness; although the metaphor of male auto-/homoeroticism (what R. Howard Bloch terms “sterile perversions”)
representing delight in one’s own language is treated by Alan of Lille, Dante, and others,” Chaucer’s treatment of the metaphor is given an interesting—and significant—twist in that the Wife’s autoeroticism is female. While masculine metaphors of auto-homo-eroticism call attention to the spilling of seed/language, the Wife’s own autoeroticism calls attention to the *re*vention, or privatization, of seed/language. In short, the Wife harvests, hides, and covers her words, veiling them in her own autoerotic delight. The Wife, then, usurps, or tries to usurp, from language its capacity to produce meaning outside of her own control, denying language its polysynonymous potential, rendering it tantamount to unsown virgin seed.

If the “female” sense of language is “unlimited” and “plural,” then virginity defeats that sense; virginity hinders language because just as the virgin female represents wasted potential (as the Wife suggests), so, too, the “virgin” word lacks the sense of unlimited, plural signification. And although, as Hélène Cixous has convincingly argued, the binary epistemology inevitably reduces anything aligned with the female to a negative, inferior status within the hierarchy, in poetic terms the association of “feminine” and “plural” is significant. In attempting to deny the “unlimitedness” or “plurality” of language (that is, in attempting to control its signification), the Wife “re-virginizes” her language by denying its “unlimitedness” and “plurality”; she arguably denies it its “femaleness” as well. In short, the Wife reduces the unlimited to the limited, the plural to the one and, in essence, the female to the male even as she seemingly attempts to valorize a new sense of the feminine. Thus, while the Wife is sterile, “her” words are not; she wastes but all the same exploits and entertains potential. Chaucer’s impulse to re-virginize words, to appropriate them to limited, private use, in fact foregrounds their resistance to such appropriation. Bakhtin might understand this as the public and social dimension of words, a “dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments, and accents,” where a word “weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others,” and where it “cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads.” The Wife, with every attempt to control words, instead empowers them to escape her control. Through the Wife’s narrative Chaucer suggests that this desire for re-virginizing is essentially unappeasable; it exists as a kind of wishful thinking, an index of *ex*clusive desire: “if that I spoke after my fantasies, “if wommen had written stories” (III.190, 693, my emphasis).

But the Wife’s appropriation of masculine discourse does not supply a newer “feminine” discourse; it merely supplies what could be labeled “the Wife of Bath’s” discourse, an *écriture d’Alisoun* (“sounding other”—*al-i-soun*). The Wife’s attempting to privatize—to possess privately—language not only denies it the plurality necessary if her argument is to work within the context of her discourse, but also provides commentary on the relationship between eros and language given attempts at privatization. Again, the Wife’s attempt to make private that which is public may be understood in conjunction with her eroticization of the letter—her delight in talking about sexual issues—as an auto-erotic act. Not only does the Wife find pleasure in words, in glossing, she finds pleasure in her own words, her own glossing. As a lover of her own words she is, in effect, her own lover. Her autoerotic textuality is private and exclusive, and although she may evoke a laugh from her audience through her “pleye,” that laughter serves less to corroborate her complaints than to reinforce the autoerotic motivation for her sexual rhetoric. She supplies the object of her own delight, and attempts to retain possession even as such possession effects a sense of wasted potential through its exclusion of plurality. (The ambivalent nature of the Wife’s appropriation is illustrated by her own framework: because the Wife insists upon the rigid parameters of her own reductionistic dichotomizing—virgin/harlot, in particular—she effectively excludes even herself as *wyf*.)

To this end, the Wife’s sexual representation is both paradoxical and ambivalent. As a harbinger of the autoerotic “virgin” word, the Wife represents a sexuality unwilling to participate within masculine parameters; it is, in a sense, uncorrupted by masculine seed yet corrupted by its own exclusiveness. In seeking satisfaction, the Wife instead generates it herself through autoerotic textuality—erotic glossing—and revels in the experience of her own delight. Ultimately, however, the narrative speaks to unrealized desire, for the Wife’s “holy erotica” is not enough; the privatization of eros leaves her hungry for more, and she remains—but textually and sexually—isolated and constrained within the parameters of the masculine discourse. Hence her promiscuity: the Wife is depicted as continuously searching, grasping, mixing, seeking rhetorical satisfaction through a series of appropriations. Thus her self-proclaimed status of bullying sexuality, her own attempts to depict herself as an unattractively aggressive and indiscriminate woman, is balanced with the reality of her own frustration and unfulfillment; the apparent auto-homo-erotic valorization is yet another cover or veil. The Wife thus inscribes ambivalently the paradox of “re-virginized” language, implicating her author: the more the poet strives for the “virgin” word, the more he confirms the promiscuity of discourse.

The Wife herself provides a concrete example of what happens when meaning is made personal:

Who peyne the leon, tel me who?
By God, if wommen hadde written stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikenedesse
Than at the mark of Adam may redresse.

III.692-96

Her reference to Aesop’s lion does call into question the subjectivity inhering in any artistic representation, and the Wife indeed uses the example effectively in this respect. However, the bitter, angry words that follow the example undermine her apparent efforts to demonstrate a need for a feminine-sympathetic perspective by suggesting that she seeks to replicate the masculine crime of misrepresentation; the women’s stories would merely supply an equally distorted view, framed by an opposing perspective. Hence she advocates that the hegemonic patriarchal discourse be replaced by an equally hegemonic feminine one. The Wife’s narrative seems to claim that a feminine replication of masculine “wikenednesse” should be advocated and privileged simply because its perpetrators are feminine, so that somehow the feminine is inherently better than the masculine, though she usurps the masculine, thereby suggesting that she cannot offer any equally effective feminine counterpart and that she must take what is not hers and claim it for herself. But rejecting or usurping the masculine does not constitute a feminine even as the Wife’s inversion challenges the hegemony of the masculine. Hence the ambivalence of her narrative: her ostensibly pro-feminist arguments are betrayed by an articulation that supports what it professes to subvert.

Hence the Wife’s narrative comes across as an anti-anti-feminist (rather than “feminist”) misogynous discourse that may be read as a kind of anti-feminist feminism. It attempts to refute the conventions of anti-feminist textuality—laying the groundwork for ideological challenge—but supports those conventions through illustration that seems only to validate the stereotypes upon which the conventions are based. As Robert Hanning argues, “The Wife is lost in a world of words of which she is also a constituent. She exists as a literary creation of men, a system of texts and glosses which she repeatedly attacks but always ends up confirming.”

Within the conventions of anti-feminist textuality, the Wife does fight back—or talks back—using the only weapon she knows, that with which she has been assaulted; as Deborah Ellis notes, “Indeed, women who verbally attack men most successfully use not their ‘own’ language but rather that of the men they resist.” Hence the Wife’s appropriation of “men’s” language serves to articulate her complaints but does little to effect a newer, “feminine” system of discourse.

The character of the Wife is associated with that of a weaver of fabric and, likewise, she is a weaver of texts, lifting and borrowing from even the most unlikely of sources to weave together a narrative web both self-promoting and self-incriminating; as she asserts specific argumentative points, she subsequently undermines them in a discourse that wanders from one idea to another, perhaps never really certain of its own purpose. And while the text of the Prologue is itself a fertile and provocative commentary on its own textual processes and the processes of engendered epistemological representation, the fictive character who voices those words is rendered oddly pathetic by her own role in the process. Unable to promote any single argument to any effective end, the Wife employs a sexual rhetoric that may indeed be described as promiscuous, that is, “mixed” or “confused” as well as “indiscriminate” (from the root pro/miscere). Just as the Wife cannot confine herself sexually to any single partner—“Welcome the sixte, whan that ever he shal!” (III.45)—so, too, she cannot find rhetorical satisfaction in any single argumentative line.

But the Wife is presented as caricature, and her quasi-feminist appropriation invites further consideration in its necessary resistance to closure. Since any personal usurpation of the masculine hardly suffices as a feminine, her ineffectual promiscuous narrative perhaps underscores a need for some alternative; at a minimum, her futile usurpation calls into question the role of the feminine in a masculine hermeneutics, even if her ambivalent sexual textuality frustrates the reader’s attempts to identify any potential resolution. Peggy Knapp comments,

Alisoun of Bath may become, then, a figure for the garrulous, incorrigible, inexplicable text, always wand-rynge by the wyse, always escaping from any centralizing authority that attempts to take over her story. She wants to be glossed and gives out a wealth of clues to reading her enigma, but no one reading will master the rest. And the glossing she invites is itself readable as the work of high intellect and spiritual insight, or the play of material forces and sexual cajolery, or both.

Indeed, the Wife’s narrative, through its attention to the feminine utility of poetic polysemy, asserts a feminine valorization, albeit a problematic one: an ambivalent, paradoxical, and unresolved anti-feminist feminism. If the Wife leaves us with these unresolved problematic relationships of gender, language, and society, it is perhaps because through her we see the poet discovering the limits of poetry; she is, after all, his writing, and we read him both in her and through her. Hence the unresolved issues are crucial to readers’ appreciation of Chaucer’s narrative construction because they are unresolved, and they invite further critical conversation and debate. Indeed, as the Wife notes, “Have thou ynoth, thee thar nat pleyne thee” (III.336).

Notes

1. An early draft of this paper was presented at the Seventh Citadel Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Literature, 1 March 1991. I would like to thank David Allen for inviting me to participate.


4. I use quotation marks initially to introduce terminology, e.g., “feminine,” and while I omit them upon subsequent use, they should be understood throughout the text.

5. I use “masculine” and “feminine” to correspond to social/cultural perceptions of gender (gender = L. *gener-, genus*, of a kind, category, from *genare*, to beget; see Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” tr. Avital Ronell, reprinted in *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 [Autumn 1980]: 55-81, on the interconnectedness of gender and genre), distinct from “male” and “female” in the strict biological sense, though as we shall see, “male” and “female” are used in Aristotelian/Pythagorean epistemologies to correspond to both gender and sex. (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has further demonstrated the slipperiness of these distinctions in relation to sex, gender, and sexuality in *Epistemology of the Closet* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990], 27-32, “Axiom 2.”) See also Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) on the “masculine” and “feminine” in Chaucerian poetics; it will be useful to note here that Chaucer’s being male does not necessarily indicate that his text is “masculine” or that the character of the Wife is constructed from a “masculine” perspective.


8. “Close” derives from the Greek glossa, tongue; according to the MED, the word denotes commentary, interpretation, and explanation; further, the term is used to suggest blandishment, flattery, and cajolery. The word’s origin, “tongue,” isn’t lost on the Wife, however, and this underlying erotic sense informs her carefully constructed double entendres. See also Robert W. Hanning, “‘I Shall Finde It in a Maner Close’: Versions of Textual Harassment in Medieval Literature,” in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 27-50; Lawrence Besserman, “Glosyne is a Glorious Thyng: Chaucer’s Biblical Exegesis,” in *Chaucer and Scriptural Tradition*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1984), 65-73; Peggy A. Knapp, “Wandraynge by the Wey: On Alison and Augustine,” in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, 142-57.

9. All citations of the *Canterbury Tales* refer to the Riverside Chaucer, general editor Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); fragment and line numbers supplied in text.


11. See Dinshaw, Sexual Poetics, 193n14; I agree with Dinshaw’s assertion that “Chaucer has a deep and acute sense of the differences between the genders in Western patriarchal culture,” and I use “androgynous” and “bisexual” to include both, not to blur the crucial distinctions—differences—between them even as they may likewise participate within identical textual parameters. (See also Leicester, Disenchanted Self, 414-17.) Hélène Cixous, in “Laugh of the Medusa” defines “bisexuality” as “the presence . . . of both sexes, nonexclusion either of the difference or of one sex, and, from this ‘self-permission,’ multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire” (288).

12. Other Chaucerian disclaimers include the pilgrim-Chaucer’s (I.727-44), the Miller’s (I.3136-40), and the pilgrim-Chaucer’s subsequent disclaimer of the Miller’s disclaimer (3185-86). Barrie Strauss, “Subversive Discourse,” argues that the Wife’s disclaimer “could be read as the Wife’s acknowledgment of ‘woman’s place’—traditionally restricted to privacy, domesticity, and silence. . . . Under the guise of knowing her place, however, the Wife proceeds to transgress it” (529), but I read the Wife’s disclaimer as mimicking the masculine disclaimers rather than as challenging them.

13. As Lisa J. Kiser comments, “It has become something of a truism among modern critics that the Wife of Bath’s performance demonstrates the close relationship between narrative and personal desire” (Truth and Textuality in Chaucer’s Poetry [Hanover: University Press of New England, 1991], 136). The connection between eros and language is ubiquitous in medieval poetics.


17. On such “moralizing” readings, see commentary in the articles by Lindley, Straus, and Hansen, cited above.

18. Of course since the Wife is narrative, she can only talk; however, her apparent attitude toward her subject matter varies. Clearly she suggests delight when speaking of sexual matters, just as she clearly suggests anger when describing antifeminist stereotypes of women.

19. “Wyf” according to the OED, means not only “woman” in a general sense but “especially one engaged in the sale of some commodity,” “the mate of a male animal,” and “a woman joined to a man by marriage.” The Wife evokes all four senses when she describes herself as “wyf,” though she focuses on “wyf” in terms of marital status. See also Davis et al., Glossary, 171.


In contemporary theory the relationship between pleasure and text is perhaps best articulated by Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, translated by Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus
and Giroux), esp. 17, 59. In Lacanian terms, this pleasure corresponds to jouissance, "the place of a hole in knowing, being and feeling [Lacan] called the place of desire" (Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, Introduction to Lacan and the Subject of Language, ed. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan and Mark Bracher [New York: Routledge, 1991], 2). In Julia Kristeva's words, our only chance to avoid being neither master nor slave of meaning lies in our ability to insure our mastery of it (through technique or knowledge) as well as our passage through it (through play or practice). In a word, jouissance.


26. Caroline Walker Bynum, Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), comments on the "wide range of positive resonances for both physicality and food" among religious women of the period (300). Bynum effectively demonstrates that the consumption of food was not regarded with the kind of fear and control that characterizes modern attitudes, but it is still important to acknowledge the attitude toward excessive food consumption, or gluttony—"intemperate or special appetite for food and/or drink . . . the sixth of the seven deadly sins" (MED). Dante, for example, places the gluttons in the Third Circle, "per la dannosa colpa de la gola" ("for the damning sin of gluttony")—Inf. 6.53). Langland, too, speaks harshly of gluttony, and links it to the mouth and tongue (The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-Text, edited by A. V. C. Schmidt [London: Dent, 1978]): "Shryve thee and be shamed therof, and swewe it with thi mouthe." / 'I, Gloton,' quod the gome, 'gilty me yeyle—/ That I have trespassed with my tonge, I kan noghte tell how ofte . . . " (5.367-9).


28. E. Jane Burns, "Knowing Women: Female Orifices in Old French Farce and Fabliau," in Skirting the Texts: Feminisms' Re-readings of Medieval and Renaissance Texts, ed. Barrie Ruth Straus, Exemplaria 4.1 (Spring 1992): 81-104. Burns analyzes a fabliau which uses anal descriptions to identify female genitals: "To call a vagina an asshole is to characterize woman's lower orifice in terms of man's own singular hole, obscuring the fact that women have two distinct openings in the lower body" (87); the Wife, in using the ambiguous word "tayl," would seem to evoke a similar confusing of the masculine and the feminine, reducing the feminine plural to the masculine singular.

Luce Irigaray suggests an extended analogy between oral and genital "lips" in "This Sex Which is Not One" and "When Our Lips Speak Together," both reprinted in This Sex Which is Not One, 23-33 and 205-18, respectively. Elizabeth Gross, "The Body of Signification," in Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva, edited by John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (New York: Routledge, 1990), comments (88),

All sexual organs and eroticigenic zones, Lacan claims, are structured in the form of the rim, which is the space between two corporeal surfaces, an interface between the inside and the outside of the body . . . The eroticigenic rim which locates the sexual drive in a particular bodily zone is a hole, or gap or lack seeking an object to satisfy it.

Medieval poets were themselves aware of the obvious similarities; see Evelyn Birge Vitz, Medi-


33. On autoeroticism as a good, see Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which Is Not One” and “When Our Lips Speak Together,” in This Sex Which Is Not One. The present argument, I should emphasize, identifies autoeroticism as it is depicted in medieval poetry and poetics, where it is clearly negative in suggesting wasted potential, a point to which I shall return.

34. Here the Wife evokes a medieval commonplace of fertility imagery based on seed and sowing used by Alan of Lille, Jean de Meun, Dante, and others, to suggest fertility, regeneration, and fruition. “Seed” in this sense corresponds to the “seed” of conception—with biblical origins—and, by extension, to “seed” as “word,” informed in part by Pauline sowing metaphor. For Pauline “virginity” directives, see 1 Cor 7.25-40. On “virginity” as a cultural and literary aesthetic informed by theological dicta, see R. Howard Bloch, Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), esp. 93-112.

35. See James A. Brundage, Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 450-51, on physiological connotations of “seed” with regard to conception.


   Man
   
   Woman
   
   Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it carries us, beneath all figures, wherever discourse is organized. If we read or speak, the same thread or double braid is leading us through-out literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation and reflections.

   Thought has always worked through opposition . . .

41. “Polysemy” corresponds to the “many senses” of language, the crucial plurality or multiplicity of figurative language. Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society*, notes, “So essential a characteristic was [polysemy] that to constrict its meaning for the sake of clarity would have been to sterilize it, to kill its vitality” (136).


43. The Wife embodies the ambivalence of the “carnal” in terms of the body; on the one hand, the carnal, as grotesque and vulgar as it may be, is the human state, yet the carnal is simultaneously condemned in theological discourse. Mark C. Taylor comments in *Erring: A Postmodern Atheology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), that (172)

   The body as grotesque is the body that eats, drinks, shits, pisses, and fucks. The boundary between bodies is a permeable membrane; it has gaps and holes to let the inside out and the outside in. . . . When inside is only inside and outside is only outside, when eating, drinking, pissing, shitting, and fucking stop or are stopped, vital current no longer flows and the body truly dies.

This necessary carnality is acknowledged within medieval theology; Julia Kristeva comments (Tales of Love, trans. Leon Roudiez [New York: Columbia University Press, 1987], 167, citing Bernard of Clairvaux, *Oeuvres complètes* 4.69):

   Let us recall one of the many expressions of that ambivalence: “We also love our spirit in carnal fashion when we break it through prayer, with tears, sighs, and moans. We love our flesh with a spiritual love when, after we have subjected it to the spirit, we exercise it spiritually for the good and watch with judgment over its conservation.”

   The validity of “carnal” as a starting point of interpretation is suggested by Langland throughout *Piers Plowman B*, particularly Passus 1, where Holi Chirche offers Will the “mesure” directive of moderation with regard to carnality. Similarly, Henryson explores metaphors of carnality in the *Testament of Cresseid*, especially in the opening stanzas, lines 22-40.


44. Sexual Poetics, 120.


   In the Middle Ages “proper” denoted what we mean by the word “literal”—the first, the primary sense of a word. This sense is the “property” of the word. Ex-traliteral or metaphorical senses of a word were indicated, most suggestively, by terms like “usurpata translatio.” These senses are “improper”: they are not the property of the word; they are brought to the word, added to it, imposed upon it.


48. It is important to note that the pairing exists within the parameters of an epistemology. Outside the epistemology, valuation necessarily obtains: Mark
C. Taylor notes, “Invariably one term is privileged through the divestment of its relative. The resultant economy of privilege sustains an asymmetrical hierarchy” (Erring, 9). There is then an epistemologically contingent value relationship articulated by the dual, without necessarily a coincidence of internal and external valuation.


Finite-Infinite Resting-Moving
Odd-Even Straight-Curved
One-Many Light-Darkness
Right-Left Good-Bad
Male-Female Square-Rectangle

Genevieve Lloyd, The Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), comments on the gender-specific implications of the ancient polarities; see especially 2-9.

See also Prudence Allen, R.S.M., The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution (750 B.C.-1250 A.D.) (London: Eden, 1985); Thelma S. Fenster, Introduction, Gender and the Moral Order in Medieval Society, ed. Thelma S. Fenster, Thought 64 (1989): 201-7; Ian Maclean, The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 2-3; Bynum, “. . . And Woman His Humanity”: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages,” reprinted in Fragmentation and Redemption, 151, and “The Female Body and Religious Practice,” in the same volume, 200-22, on the Aristotelian dualities manifest in medieval thought. (As the present essay was being readied for print, I read Sheila Delany’s “Anatomy of the Resisting Reader: Some Implications of Resistance to Sexual Word-play in Medieval Literature,” in Skirting the Texts, 7-34, which makes a connection between the epistemological “female” and poetic “polysemy” similar to the argument that I present here.)

51. Sexual/Textual Politics, 105.

52. Anna Anapoulous, “Writing the Mystic Body: Sexuality and Textuality in the écriture-féminine of Saint Catherine of Genoa,” in Feminism and the Body, ed. Elizabeth Grosz, Hypatia 6 (1991), 204-12, commenting on Iriigaray’s “When Our Lips Speak Together.”

53. Caroline Bynum comments (“. . . And Woman,” 151),

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. In the devotional writing of the later Middle Ages, they were even contrasted in the image of God—Father or Bridegroom—and soul (anima)—child or bride.

54. See Leicester, Disenchanted Self, on the Wife’s “private” construction that “do not produce a single, ‘true’ private self revealed behind the facade of the public performance” (99).

55. “Wandrynge by the Weye,” 153; Knapp continues,

The Lollards accused users of patristic gloses of obscuring the truth of the Bible, and ecclesiastical authorities accused Lollards of the same thing. . . . In short, “gloss” had become by the fourteenth century, in Bakhtin’s phrase, “an active participant in social dialogue.”

(276)

56. R. Howard Bloch, Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 136. “Sterile” identifies wasted, as distinct from deficient, potential. Apparently, forbidden (sterile) sexual activities involving women together were considered far less sinful and had far less dire consequences than did sexual sins involving
men, though female “solitary vice” was considered equivalent to a woman’s “vice with a woman.” Medieval penitential handbooks identify the penitential obligations incurred by specific acts and thus provide some basis for comparison. For example, Patrick Geary, Readings in Medieval History (Lewiston, NY: Broadview, 1989), cites the penitential code of Theodore (ca. 668-690), noting that (278) a man who “defiles himself” does penance for forty days, while a woman does penance for three years; a man who commits sodomy with a man does seven years (“this is the worst of evils”), while a woman who “practices vice with a woman” does penance for three years, the same as for “solitary vice.” See also Brundage, Law, Sex, and Christian Society, 398-400, 472-4, and Bernadette J. Brooten, “Paul’s Views on the Nature of Women and Female Homoeroticism,” in Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 61-87.

57. See, for example, the conversation between Dante and Brunetto Latini in the realm of the sodomites (Inferno 15) and the description of sterile grammar in De planctu naturae (Meter 1). See also commentary in Vance, “Differing Seed,” and Joseph Pequigney, “Sodomy in Dante’s Inferno and Purgatorio,” Representations 36 (1991): 22-42.

58. With regard to the relationship between “female” and “hidden,” Irigaray attacks Freud’s equation of the hidden and nothingness in terms of female sexuality in “This Sex Which Is Not One” (26):

While [a woman’s] body finds itself thus eroticized, and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the “subject,” her sexual organ represents the horror of nothing to see. . . . This organ which has nothing to show for itself also lacks a form of its own.

Irigaray correctly distinguishes between nothing to see (the hidden) and nothing (absence or lack); the former denotes existence, even if removed from sight and therefore mysterious and unknown.

59. Cixous notes, “Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposite: activity/passivity. . . . It is even possible not to notice that there is no place whatsoever for woman in the calculations” (“Sorties,” 64).


61. See also Sheila Delany, “Strategies of Silence in the Wife of Bath’s Recital,” in Reconciling Chaucer, 49-69; Delany notes (54).

To return to the painting of lions: If we interpret the fable consistently, we find that its narrative line forces the conclusion that woman’s best hope is to work within the controlling sphere of a superior (presumably male) intelligence. In this way, the Wife of Bath, like the lion she quotes, also speaks against herself, and can only do so in citing this story whose given—animal versus human—already constrain interpretation, already load the dice.

62. Laura Kendrick, Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), notes (126):

The Wife both tempts and masters us, making us identify with repressive female authority, which knows what is best for us. Even so, the Wife of Bath’s and woman’s ascendency is temporary after all; it occurs in the unreal play time and space of the Wife’s stories.

63. Hanning, “Maner Glose,” 45-46. See also Ferster, Chaucer on Interpretation (124):

But she claims not to be merely the antifeminists’ nightmare, but their creation, and she attacks their language because it demeans and limits women. By describing women as monsters of sensuality, greed, and deceit, they produce monstrously sensual, greedy, and deceitful women.

64. Deborah Ellis, “The Merchant’s Wife’s Tale: Language, Sex, and Commerce in Margery Kempe and in Chaucer,” Exemplaria 2 (Fall 1990): 601.


Susan Signe Morrison (essay date spring 1996)


[In the following essay, Morrison asserts that, through The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale, Chaucer is seeking to authenticate the use of English vernacular as a legitimate language for writing, maintaining that they “can be read as addressing the issues of the vernacular and the role female audiences play in receiving and passing on translations of authoritative texts, as well as vindicating Chaucer’s authority as a vernacular author.”]

The Friar in his Prologue scolds the Wife of Bath, accusing her of preaching, and exhorting her to let the proper authorities, like himself, carry out an activity which is natural to them. Although he admits that she says “muche thyng right wel” (1273), he denies her permission to carry on:

“But, dame, heere as we ryde by the weye,
Us nedeth nat to spoken but of game,
The Friar’s position in the established Church allows him to comment on the potentially threatening activities of a perceived female preacher. While it was a long-established custom for mothers and midwives to baptize in “cases of necessity” and for women to instruct other women and children privately in matters of religion, the Church took a firm stand against women publicly teaching men. Late fourteenth-century Lollard activities provide a possible subtext for the Friar’s criticism on the Wife’s public declarations; his comments read as a reaction to the Wife’s words which threaten the established monopoly of authorized men on religious interpretation.

A major threat to this monopoly was universal accessibility to the texts which constituted authority. The translation of authoritative texts into the vernacular, thereby making them available to new audiences, could allow the abuses—or self-interested readings—of traditional authorities to come to light. While vernacular translations were not an innovation of the late fourteenth century, the late Middle Ages witnessed the shattering of the monopoly on authoritative knowledge exercised by university-educated, Latin-literate males, due to the increasing abundance of vernacular religious and medical literature. Chaucer’s endorsement of vernacular translations of authoritative texts is, I will argue, a unifying subtext to the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale.

Two authors of texts translated into the vernacular are alluded to towards the end of the Wife’s Prologue. The Wife regrets that there are no women writers to counteract the abuses of clerkly writers:

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

But women had “written stories.” The Wife herself mentions two of them several lines prior to the above-mentioned speech in describing Jankyn’s “book of wikked wyves” (685):

And eek ther was somtyme a clerk at Rome,
A cardinal, that highte Seint Jerome,
That made a book agayn Jovinian;
In which book eek ther was Tertulan,
Crisippus, Trotula, and Helowys,
That was abbesse nat fer from Parys,
And eek the Parables of Salomon,

Illustration by Walter Appleton Clark, from a 1907 edition of The Canterbury Tales, edited by Percy Wallace Mackay.

Ovides Art, and bookes many on,
And alle thise were bounden in o volume.

Texts by Heloise and those ascribed to Trotula were translated into the vernacular. The significance of the Abelard-Heloise correspondence, translated by Jean de Meun and called La vie et les epistres de maistre Pierre Abelart et Heloïs sa fame, for the Wife’s Prologue will be addressed later in this paper. Medical texts proliferated in the late Middle Ages, including those ascribed to Trotula, who was reputed to be a woman physician practicing medicine in Salerno, Italy, in the late eleventh or early twelfth century. The goals of vernacular translators tend to be similar, despite the diverse context and content of texts. The proclaimed intent of the translator of a Trotula text, The Knowing of Woman’s Kind in Childing, reads as follows:

I thynke to do myn ententyffे bysynes forto drau oute of Latyn into Englysch dyverse causis of here maladyes, the synes that they schall knou hem by, and the curys helpynge to hem, atture the tretys of dyverse mastrys that have translatyde hem out of Grec into Latyn. And because whomen of oure tonge cumne bettyre rede and understande thys langage than eyther other, and every whoman lettyrde may rede hit to other unlettyrd and help hem and conceyle hem in here maleadyes, withowtyn scheuyngyn here dysese to man, I have thys drauyn and wrytyn in Englysch.

And yf hit fall any man to rede hit, I praye hym and scharge hym in Oure Lady behalve that he rede hit not in no dyspyte ne sclaunder of no women, ne for no
cause but for the hele and helpe of hem, drednyng that vengains myht fall to hym as hit hath do to other that have scheuycd here preyteees vnel sandrul of hem; undyr-stondynge in certyne that they have no other evylls that nou be alaye than thoou women hade that nou be seynyts in hevyng.6

Compare this to the introduction of the Wycliffite Bible:

þis tret[ys]e þat folweþ proueþ þat ech nacioun may lefuly haue holy writy in here moder tunge.

Sípen þat þe troupe of God stondíþ not in oo langage more þan in anóper, but who so lyueþ best and techíþ best pleseþ moost God, of what langage þat euer it be, þerfor þe lawe of God witten and taitÆ in Engleish may edifie þe commen pepel, as it doþ cleriks in Latyn, sípen it is þe sustynance to soulis þat schulden be saued.12 . . . . And herfore Crist in þe houre of his assen-cioun comandid to his diciplis to preche it to alle pepelis—but, we be siker, neipor in Frenche ne in Latyn, but in þat langage þat þe pepel usd to speke, for þus he taitÆ hymseyll. And here is a rule to cristyne folke of what langage so euer þei be: it is an hyve sacrific[e] to God to knowey holy writy and to do þerat- tur, wher it be taitÆ or witten to hem in Latyn or in Engleish, in Frenche or in Duche, or in ony oþer langage after þe pepel haþ vnderstondynge.16

Both introductions acknowledge that English is the medium through which information can be communicated to those groups marginalized from the language of privileged scholars and masters, either common people and/or women. Just as women reading the vernacular medical text have an obligation to share the information they learn with their fellow women, so do Lollard texts express a duty for the literate: “whoso kan rede bookis in his langage, and so knoweþ þe better Goddis law, he is bounden to spended þat kunynge and þat grace to þe worshippe of God and to helpe of his euene cristen.”14 Just as men should not use the information they learn about women to defame women, so should learned clerks not keep the true word of God from men and women, but share it openly. Only evil clerks pervert God’s truth: “But þe kynrede of Caym, of Daton and Abiron wolden þat þe gospel slepe sage, for þei ben clepid cristynge of manye: þei prechen sum-what of þe gospel, and glosso it as hem likeþ.”17 These vernacular texts, religious and medical, are careful to announce why the translation has been undertaken—to make more widely accessible information which can heal body and soul—and to warn against misuse of the text.

Clearly some readers felt anxiety concerning women’s access to texts, which can be seen in existing glosses on the Wife of Bath’s words. Glosses in manuscripts Ellesmere and Egerton 2864 bear witness to a conflict in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries between what has been called the “old” reader and the “new” reader. The Ellesmere glosses on the Wife’s Prologue endorse the new reader, the private and “non-traditional” (that is to say, not necessarily male or clerkly) reader of vernacular texts, while the glossator of the Egerton 2864 manuscript clearly privileges the traditional Latin-literate reader. Susan Schibanooff sees the two glossators as reacting in opposite ways to “Alison’s ‘bookishness’—a woman’s literal and metaphorical taking of texts into her own hands—[which] dramatizes an extreme act of new reading.”18 The Canterbury Tales, with its textual professional rivals, such as the Friar and Summoner, and the rivalries witnessed in the glossators of the texts associated with the Wife, demonstrates “a much larger social and religious controversy over another kind of ‘new’ reading that had already begun in Chaucer’s time and would continue far beyond it: lay reading of the vernacular Bible.”14 Since the learning of Latin constituted the entry into an exclusive male realm, separate from the lower-status female home,19 any attempt to translate and disseminate information from Latin would be seen by educated men as potentially threatening.

But how threatening is the Wife of Bath? She certainly reinterprets authoritative texts. One text she treats has already undergone clerical attention: her own body, which she tells us Jankyns has glossed “so wel” (509). In her reglossing of that text, her body, the sexual organ functions metonymically as the female body, the generator or source of her authority of experience. Numerous critics have commented on the Wife’s predilection for sexual glossing. Lee Patterson has written about the importance of the rhetorical device of dilatio for the Wife’s discourse, a strategy which is sexual in implication.20 Catherine S. Cox reads the Wife’s glossing as an erotic activity in itself: “her ‘bele chase’ is her ‘pleye’ of language, not the play of her female anatomy.” Glossing constitutes a kind of erotic foreplay in this argument and the Wife constructs “a sexual rhetoric. . . . The autoeroticism of the glossing is extended further in that the body as text becomes a target for her own glossing as well; she, in effect, glosses herself.”

Significantly, the Wife translates her sexual instrument using three different phrases: the Middle English queynne, the French bele chose and the Latin quoniam. Why does she use these three languages? This use of three languages for the same signified constitutes more than just the cuteness or obscenity of which she has been charged.21 While the Wife’s Prologue has been read in the context of numerous source texts, such as sermon joyeux, sermons concerning the marriage at Cana, polemical sermonizing in general, and deportment books,” another textual antecedent has not yet been thoroughly explored: that of vernacular works, including medical treatises such as those attributed to Trotula. A group of manuscripts labeled “Trotula Translation
A" converges with issues present in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*. The translator of one of these Trotula manuscripts, MS Additional 12195, writes

> Wherefor in worship of ower lady and of all þe syntes I thinke to do myn intent and bessynes for to schew after the french and latyn þe diversis of þe maladis and þe signes þat ye schall know them by and þe cures helpynge to theme after the tretys of diversis materis.²¹

This passage shows the tri-lingual nature of translation in late fourteenth-century England, from Latin and/or French into the vernacular, English. The Wife’s chosen signifiers for her genitalia coincide with the three languages²² circulating in fourteenth-century England: Latin, the language of the church and the law; French, the language of the nobility, law and commerce; and English, the vernacular and potentially subversive tongue.²³ The Wife glosses her sexual organ in Latin and French, the languages of intellectual and authoritative discourse, and in English, the vernacular which permits transmission of privileged discourse to a larger and lay audience.²⁴ Is it any wonder that the Wife refers to the sexual organ in three different languages, the three languages which were in use in England at the time she is given voice and the three languages which either represent power or threaten established power? The heteroglossia of the Wife’s speech is literal in that she uses three languages to justify and authorize her statements. She translates her source of authority, her text of the sexual organ, into the three languages which constitute aspects of authority and power.

But her discourse remains problematic, as Lee Patterson suggests:

> Try as she (and Chaucer) might, she remains confined within the prison house of masculine language; she brilliantly rearranges and deforms her authorities to enable them to disclose new areas of experience, but she remains dependent on them for her voice.²⁵

Catherine S. Cox agrees, arguing that the Wife “is produced by and reiterates an ostensibly masculine discourse.” She concludes that in using “male discourse” the Wife fails to establish anything other than an equally repressive “feminine discourse.”²⁶ Andrew Galloway reads the Wife as briefly occupying the authoritative position of preachers on marriage, but concurs with Patterson and Cox that “[w]hat the Wife steals from the authority of preachers whose discourse she invokes she also robs from her own authority.”²⁷ R. W. Hanning suggests that her appeal to experience is largely bogus “since texts keep invading the Wife’s monologue and setting the terms for her argument.” Ultimately, he argues, she is “beten for a book,” beaten by a book.²⁸ These critical viewpoints agree that by utilizing masculine strategies of power, such as glossing, the Wife simply weakens her own stance.

The Wife provides Latin, French and English versions of her text. But this multilingual action is not simple translation; the work for word literal transcription of *bele chose* is “beautiful thing,” not *queynte ou qoniam*. The Prologue to the Wycliffe Bible, chapter 15, explicitly discusses the problems of translating from one language to another and the inevitable interpretation which the translator stamps on the text.

First it is to knowe þat þe beste translating is, out of Latyn into English, to translate after þe sentence and not oneli after þe wordis . . . and go not fer fro þe lettre; and if þe lettre mai not be said in þe translating, let þe sentence euere be hool and open, for þe wordis owen to serue to þe entent and sentence, and ellis þe wordis ben superflu eijer false . . . But in translating of wordis equiuok, þat is þat haf mane significacions vndur oo lettre, mai liȝtly be perel. For Austyn seib in þe secounde book of Cristene Teching þat, if eqiuok wordes be not translatid into þe sense eijer vndurstand- ing of þe autour, it is error.²⁹

Meaning and intent must be conveyed for a translation to be true or accurate. The very difficulty of translating sentence was in fact the basis for resistance to a translation of the Bible. Typically, vernacular translations provided both a paraphrase of a text and exegetical glossing.³⁰ Translation and interpretation, then, came to be virtually indistinguishable. *Translato*, for the late medieval writer, would necessarily involve *inventio*.³¹ Using the example of Chaucer’s *Boece* translation, Rita Copeland cites the use of doubles, different glosses on one word which stem from various source texts (i.e., Boethius and then commentators on Boethius).³² Offering readers more than one word signals verbal differences among the sources; the discrepancies among the words function then like glosses, and thus implicit interpretations.³³

Reading the Wife’s use of three terms for her sexual organ following this model suggests she is interpreting the concept of her sexual organ through the differences among its variant signifiers and their variant sources. Her words for her sexual organ come from various traditions, both the Latin and, as we will see, a vernacular version of a medical text. If Copeland’s model of medieval vernacular translation holds true and we apply it to the Wife’s own translation work, then we can see that the Wife is not simply slavishly replicating masculine strategies and texts. In fact,

medieval vernacular translations can radically differentiate themselves from the original texts. . . . [P]aradoxically, medieval translations can achieve the status of primary texts within their vernacular literary traditions, as they substitute themselves, through interpretative refiguration, for the original text.³⁴

As R. A. Shoaf suggests, “[t]o translate is to violate an authority.”³⁵ The Wife’s translation of the sexual organ, then, while drawing on source material from other tradi-
tions, texts and authors, creates her own unique interpretation. She opens up meaning by suggesting alternatives for the signified, her sexual organ. Rather than being trapped by male discourse, she transcends it.\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, we, as readers or listeners, are ourselves forced into the position of glossators.\textsuperscript{17} We are given the various translations of a text, here the sexual organ or female body, and must interpret for ourselves. We are empowered by her vernacularizing of the text, by her multiple glossing. Chaucer, through the Wife, promotes autonomy in interpretation by the reader.

Power to interpret disturbs those specialists who previously had exclusive access to material, hence the controversy over the vernacular translation of the Bible.\textsuperscript{18} This controversy resembled issues concerning vernacular translations of medical texts,\textsuperscript{19} like those ascribed to Trotula, whose intended audience included

not only literate women but also unlettered women, who can have the book read aloud for their edification. Although men are not categorically forbidden to read the treatise (a prohibition that would have been unenforceable in any case), they are warned not to use the book for ‘slandering’ women, despising them for their diseases.\textsuperscript{20}

One such audience member is Jankyn, whose “book of wikked wives” includes selections from Trotula (677).\textsuperscript{21} One Trotula manuscript, Oxford Bodley MS Douce 37, on the Knowing of Woman’s Kind in Childing, discusses the Differences between Men and Women. The fourth of such differences

ys bytuene here leggis, for ther have men a yerde [penis] with other portynauns [apparatenances] and ther hathe women an opynynge wyche ys calde in Frenche a “bele chose,” or ellys a wykkyet of the wombe.\textsuperscript{22}

Why this coincidence of terms in Chaucer and a medical text? Perhaps “bele chose” was simply a well-known term, current and available to lay readers of English. It’s possible Chaucer read this medical treatise or one similar to it and therefore used the term.\textsuperscript{23} Or the Trotula translator might have read Chaucer and subsequently used the Wife’s term for sexual organ. There is no way we can determine the origin of the term in Chaucer for sure, although it seems to me that the first two possibilities are the more likely. In fact, a closely related phrase, “prive chose,” was in common currency during Chaucer’s time. The Great Surgery of Guy of Chauliac (d. 1368) describes a hermaphrodite in the following way: “In a woman forsothe there is another in the whiche a yerde [penis] and prive stones [testicles] apperfen above the prive chose [vulva].” Another example in the same context, the “prieu chose of woman,” appears in John de Trevisa’s translation of Bartholemeus Anglicus’s De proprietatibus rerum which dates from 1398.\textsuperscript{24} The use of “prive chose” for the vulva in medi-
cal texts in the late fourteenth century indicates that Chaucer’s utilization of “chose” would not be unusual for his contemporary readers and listeners. Furthermore, the currency of “prive chose” means that “bele chose” would probably be understood even by a non-French literate audience.

This coincidence of “bele chose” with a vernacular medical tract is suggestive for the Wife’s agenda in the Prologue as a whole. In a sense, the Wife is offering an alternative medical text in the vernacular by which women can validate not only their peculiar biological experiences, but their experiences in marriage. Just as vernacular medical texts disturb the monopoly which university- or Latin-trained men had in medical practice, so too does her marriage tract undermine the male monopoly over describing or discussing marital experience. The Wife’s Prologue and Tale should be seen in the larger context of vernacular writings and translations in the late Middle Ages. Disempowered classes—male or female—could enter the discourse of power through access to authoritative texts increasingly available in the vernacular. The Wife’s translation of the source of her power into three languages is suggestive of lay medical tracts and the larger web of vernacular texts in the late Middle Ages. This suggests that Chaucer intends for us to read the Wife’s Prologue as critical of monolithic authority itself and as validating a new, previously disempowered, audience.

The recognition and validation of a new audience is what connects Heloise to this discussion. Commentators suggest Chaucer knew of Heloise from Jean de Meun’s Roman de la rose and most simply assume that Jankyn’s book (677-78) refers to Peter Abelard’s quoting of her letter in which she argues him out of marriage.\textsuperscript{25} Superficial similarities exist between the Wife and Heloise. Both want something from their respective spouses which they aren’t getting: whether marital debt or correspondence.\textsuperscript{26} Both insist on being heard and presenting their own side of the story.\textsuperscript{27} Jean, in his summation of the story of Abelard and Heloise, writes that

[he asked him to love her but not to claim any right of her except those of grace and freedom, without lordship or mastery, so that he might study, entirely his own man, quite free, without tying himself down, and that she might also devote herself to study, for she was not empty of knowledge.\textsuperscript{28}]

Perhaps this passage is echoed in both the Prologue and the Tale where this issue of mastery comes up. The Wife admits she has gotten “By maistrie, al the soveraynetee” (818) from Jankyn. The rapist-knight tells the queen in answer to her question

“Wommen desieren to have soveraynetee
As wel over hir housbond as hir love,
And for to been in maistrie hym above.”

1038-40

324
The Wife endorses the concept of mastery while Heloise rejects it. The automatic assumption that Jankyn's Heloise allusion refers to misogynist and misogynamus arguments is not incorrect.

But what if, in fact, the equation of Heloise with anti-marriage views is too limiting an analysis of the Wife's allusion to Heloise? Jill Mann points out that medieval commentators rejected Heloise's own anti-feminist interpretation of her role in the affair and write virtually unanimously in sympathy for her.6 Heloise is important for more ideas than simply the arguments Abelard ventrilquizes for her. "Heloisys" is referred to as an "abbesse nat fer fro Parys," rather than as Abelard's lover or wife. Surely this reference to her being an abbess as opposed to (mere) lover has some significance. In Letter 5, one of the so-called "Letters of Direction," Heloise asks Abelard to sketch out a version of the Rule of St. Benedict appropriate for women, since these rules did not take into consideration the peculiarities of women's physique and emotions. In fact, her criticism suggests that the Rule was "inadequate to the requirements of women."7 Her asking Abelard for new rules could be read as nothing revolutionary. After all, she's going to the same old source—a Latin educated male of the Church. But Heloise's request also suggests that no single truth exists. The notion of a handbook for women which Abelard must create in response to Heloise's letter is not unlike the one the Wife offers us in her Prologue and the vernacular medical and religious texts which swirl in the subtext of the Canterbury Tales. Rules change depending on the recipients or audience of those rules. Truth is different for women. The references to Trotula and Heloise in The Wife of Bath's Prologue suggest the necessity for texts designed for female audiences, which must be translated into the vernacular. The Wife's realm is not the cloistered and strictly female audience of the Paraclete, but a mixed—in terms both of gender and religious status—audience of pilgrims on the open road. While Heloise wrote in Latin, the Wife speaks in the vernacular, thus expanding the field of her potential audience. The Wife's translation of the source of her authority into three languages draws on issues which vernacular translations explicitly lay out. By presenting us with three versions (queynte, bele chose, and qyoniam) for the same text (sexual organ), Chaucer through the Wife forces us to play the role of glossator ourselves and forces, if not endorses, our glossing.

To conclude, let us return to The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale to read them in light of the argument above. Critics have oscillated between two poles concerning the Prologue, either seeing the Wife as the personification of carnality and misogynist fears and stereotypes and/or admiring the Wife for her energy and joie de vivre. The Tale, on the other hand, is simply troubling. The raped maiden is violated in terms not only of the plot, but also of the text, in that she is forgotten once the knight comes to court. The women at the court intervene on behalf of the rapist, who is ultimately rewarded with a beautiful young wife for his transgression against a woman. Additionally, the choice of the romance genre for the Wife has long been a puzzle for critics, many of whom find it more in character for her to tell a fabliau.8 I hope to show how reading both the Prologue and Tale in terms of issues of vernacular and Latin usage and related concerns of authority and audience can illuminate the place of the Wife of Bath and her texts in the Chaucer canon.

The Wife welcomes a female audience throughout her discourse by using metaphors which the average woman, an unlettered wife, could easily understand. Her metaphoristic exercises invoke bread and bread-making, an activity with which women undoubtedly would be familiar. When she contrasts virgins and wives, the Wife says,

| Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed,       |
| And lat us wytes boten barly-breed;        |
| And yet with barly-breed, Mark telle kan,  |
| Oure Lord Jhesu refrisshed many a man.     |

When she describes how she would complain to her husbands in order not to be reprimanded herself, she comments, "Whoso that first to mille cometh, first gynt" (389). In talking of her relatively advanced age, she says,

| The flour is goon; ther is namoure to telle; |
| The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle.    |

Although she addresses only men and religious women within the context of the Tales as a whole, her homely metaphors, while drawing on Jerome and possibly Paul,9 open up possibilities for other audiences, such as laywomen, to understand her arguments more easily. How could such a wife succeed in reaching other wives? Don't husbands and celibate men have a monopoly on private and public preaching to women? After all, even the Wife admits that husbands preach.4 She tells how Jankyn "often tymes wolde preche, / And me of olde Romayn geestes teche" (641-42). Yet the Wife also teaches,10 admitting she has her own "lawe" (219) for controlling her husbands. Her own experiences with her husbands function as a kind of pedagogical text for "Ye wise wyves" (225) to follow and use in their own marriages.

Isn't she giving her trade secrets away to the enemy? In the Wife's essentialist view of women, women are doomed to reveal such secrets even to their own detriment. Women can't help but pass on private informa-
The Wife herself admits that her own marriages were far from a household affair. Her best friend heard all.

Hir name was Alisoun.
She knew myn herte, and eek my privete.
Bet than oure parisha preest, so moote I thee!
To hire biwreyed I my conseil al.
For hadde myn housbonde pissed on a wal,
Or doon a thynge that sholden han cost his lyf,
To hire, and to another worthy wyf,
And to my nece, which that I loved weel,
I wolde han toold his conseil every deel.
And so I did ful often, God it woot.
That made his face often reed and hoot
For verray shame, and blamed hymself for he
Had toold to me so greet a privete.

The female audience the Wife addresses gets increasingly larger, until three other women know the innermost secrets of her marriage. In fact, this female audience knows more than the one member of society sanctioned to hear such confessions, a male priest; and the privileged male on the edge of this gossiping group will become the Wife’s fifth husband, Jankyn himself. The anxiety the Wife’s husband feels reflects the anxiety felt among those men who opposed vernacular translations; once privileged men no longer maintained exclusive access to knowledge, society itself would be threatened with subversion. Think of the hope expressed by the translator of the Troilus text quoted above that reading women would pass information along and that men would not use this information against women; think also of the comparable passage in the introduction to the Wycliffite Bible. The Wife’s Prologue addresses these issues of vernacular translations and audience and the anxiety produced when secrets are made common knowledge.

The Tale reinforces the Wife’s view that women are incapable of keeping secrets. The Wife’s rewriting of the Ovidian Midas legend maintains “we wommen konne no thyng hele” (950). Midas’s wife cannot refrain from passing on, even to the watery marsh, the information that Midas has ass’s ears: “hir thoughte that she dyde / That she so longe sholdhe a conseil hyde” (965-66). The Wife glosses this text by commenting,

Heere may ye se, thogh we a tyne abbye,
Yet out it moot; we kan no conseil hyde.

Just as the Wife and Midas’s wife reveal male confidences, so too does the availability of vernacular texts disturb the status quo and the control learned men have had on information. The audience of vernacular texts was frequently singled out as a female one; hence part of the cause for the anxiety the Lollards aroused. This passage in the Tale, however misogynist, is also empowering; the ability or tendency for women to reveal secrets only heightens their own power. Those who possess secrets in common create a community of power. When the Wife in her Prologue tells her girlfriends her husband’s secrets, those women create a privileged group, knowledgeable about a man. Midas’s wife discloses her husband’s shame, thus leaving him open to ridicule. Just as vernacular texts disrupt the power of the Latin tradition, so too women threaten male power by revealing men’s secrets.

The Tale shows what happens when strictly female groups allow a man access to their communal knowledge. Female audiences abound in the Tale. The “queene and other laydes mo” (894) intervene to test the rapist. They ask him to figure out the answer to a female secret. The rapist encounters “laydes four and twenty, and yet mo” (992) dancing while on his travels and thus encounters the old woman. Back in the palace

Ful many a noble wyf, and many a mayde,
And many a wydwe, for that they been wise.
The queene himself sittynge as a justise,
Assembled been, his answere for to heere.

When he reveals the secret desire of women,

In al the court ne was ther wyf, ne mayde.
Ne wydwe that contrarieth that he sayde.

While an exchange takes place repeatedly between groups of women and one man, the women all fully expect that once a secret is revealed, good faith will be maintained. Access to matters formerly secret gives power, hence the warning to men reading the Troilus Middle English translation not to abuse women with private information about their gynecology. The status of truth changes once hidden confidences are exposed to previously uninformed audiences. No longer to be used simply to exert power over others, exchange of secrets in good faith necessitates the maintenance of respect by the recipient of a confidence. Therefore in the Tale, despite all his curses, the rapist knight must marry the old woman since she revealed the secret of women to him.

The knight complains that the hag is not only ugly, but “of so lough a kynde” (1101), whereupon the famous “gentillesse” speech commences. The hag points out that lords do not always perform “gentil dedes” (1115), arguing “he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis” (1170). If we read this as a metatextual comment on the vernacular, we could understand her view that, just as lords don’t always act in a noble way, so too the Latin tradition does not always act nobly, specifically in misogynist
writings. She cites traditional (males writing in Latin) auctoritiees to endorse her view that nobility is not an accident of birth.

"Thenketh hou noble, as seith Valerius,  
Was thilke Tulius Hostillius.  
That out of poverete roos to heigh noblesse."

1165-67

While vernacular texts might have been despised for not being Latin and authoritative, as the old woman argues about herself,

"Al were it that myne ancesstres were rude,  
Yet may the hye God, and so hope I,  
Grante me grace to lyven vertuously.  
Thanne am I gentil, whan that I bigynne  
To lyven vertuously and weyve symne."

1172-76

Vernacular texts were seen as "rude," yet the old hag, the Wife, and Chaucer argue for the potential nobility of the vernacular verse. The hag is old, like the English language, and neither is accorded proper respect—yet. The Wife's Tale speaks to the resistance by powerful men to the loss of their authority in the dissemination of vernacular translations to female audiences. In accepting her argument, the knight is rewarded; or, in this metatextual reading, acceptance of the vernacular is rewarded. The old woman is transformed into a beauty, or, as the Clerk describes Griselda's transformation upon putting on noble clothes, she is "translated" (385). This beauty comes when her authority is recognized and accepted by the knight/Latin tradition who has resisted the old hag/vernacular. Now the vernacular is seen as beautiful, "fair" and "yong" (1251).

The whole question of the Latin tradition, authority, and the vernacular boils down to the question of who's in and who's out, who's excluded and who's included. The Tale's structure bases itself on the figure of limitation and boundary. The initial fairyland the Wife describes (857-63) is in a pre-lapsarian state, replete with images of fullness: "fulfild of fayere" (859), when fairies "[d]aunced ful ofte" (861). The time she harks back to is spoken of in terms of proliferation: "manye hundred yeres ago" (863). But the multiplicity of the past has ended. Three times in eleven lines she uses the word "lymytours" or "lymytacioun" (866, 874, 877), which refers to the friars licensed to beg in a given district and which mocks the pilgrim Friar who also is a "lymytour" (1.209, 1.269, III. 1265). Though a "lymytour" in the sense of "one who or that which limits" was not used until the late fifteenth century, "lymytacioun" is used in the sense of "the action of limiting" as early as 1380 by Wyclif. I would suggest that not only the religious connotation for these words is being suggested in this early part of the Wife's Tale. The fact that the words are used three times within a few lines suggests we are to pay attention to them. Limitations are set up in this opening passage before the rape occurs. We are told that the "lymytours" bless

halles, chambres, kichenes, bournes,  
Cites, burghes, castels, hye toures.  
Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes.

869-71

The places described are locations which are limited, structures of defined spaces, quite unlike the "grene mede" (861) where the elf-queen dances with her company in fairyland. These "lymytours" infect spaces where all classes and both genders dwell, city folk and country folk: castles and barns, kitchens and ships. The entire society is hemmed in and constricted by the actions of these limiters. In the metatextual reading of the Tale, the "lymytour" lies in wait to dishonor women (874-81), just as authoritative texts, such as those misogynist ones cited in Jankyn's book, lie in wait to dishonor and limit women who are denied the opportunity and authority to retaliate or defend themselves. The most extreme instance of this limitation is seen in the raped maiden. It is crucial that she is cut out of the rest of the Tale—nothing can bring back the voices of women from the past who have been violated and denied a voice.

Only through the rapist-knight's acceptance of the ugly hag can a world of openness and fullness return. The qualifiers in the closing passage of the Tale suggest abundance and shade off into hyperbole. The hag is now "so" fair and "so" young (1251). He kisses her "[a] thousand tyme" (1254) and she obeys him in "every" thing (1255). They live "unto hir lyves ende / In parfit joye" (1257-58). Most embroidered of all is the happiness of the rapist-knight whose heart is "bathed in a bath of blisse" (1253). The use of "bath" twice in one line for the conclusion of the Wife's Tale, plus the uncommon use of alliteration to reinforce the impact of these words, suggests both the Wife's emphasis on this sense of plenitude and her direct association with such plenitude, in that she comes from Bath.

By the late fourteenth century, England had witnessed traumatizing events and dire disruptions in its social hierarchy and control, the most obvious example being the revolt of 1381.9 The limitations and hierarchies which the culture engendered and replicated were no longer functioning. The Wife suggests that the only recourse for a society to heal itself from disruptions is, in fact, to restructure itself. In the terms of her Prologue and Tale, this means providing access to all of things formerly kept secret and exclusive. These revelations constitute a two-way street: men's knowledge must becomes available to women just as women's secrets become available to men.40 Only the expansion of truth
beyond the limits of a specific group can lead to understanding and, ultimately, reconciliation and healing.

This potential for reconciliation of various groups with their separate interests raises issues of the vernacular. The liminal position of a vernacular writer as author in the late fourteenth century is alluded to obliquely in the Tale. The old woman assures the knight,

“And certes, sire, thogh noon auctoritie
Were in no book, ye gentils of honour
Seyn that men sholde an oold wight doon favour
And clepe hym fader, for youre gentilnesse;
And auctours shal I fynden, as I gesse.”

1208-12

Of course, she won’t necessarily find authoritative writers, as she suggests, but perhaps invent them, as fynden ambiguously suggests. She’ll invent authority and authorities to support her ambiguous position who’ll necessarily write in the vernacular. Chaucer’s concern about the vernacular and the role of translation is not restricted to the Wife’s Prologue and Tale. This issue comes up repeatedly throughout his corpus.

Chaucer’s own role as author is questionable since he writes not in Latin, but in the vernacular. Within thirty lines (43-63) of A Treatise on the Astrolabe, Chaucer refers to his activities and himself with the following words: “endityng” (43, 45), “written” (48), “compilator” (61-62), and “translatid” (63). These words constitute similar if not identical activities in Chaucer’s eyes, and the seemingly indiscriminate use of these words for his writing activities hints at an anxiety concerning his artistic achievement. He must do this well, fashioning his own authority as a writer in the vernacular by playing with the role of author and the words connected to the writing act. As a vernacular writer, considering the ambiguous position of vernacular texts in the late Middle Ages, the very achievement of his work could be in doubt. As Tim Machan points out

[T]he tension between his cultural status as a vernacular writer and his recognition of his authorial achievement is both expressed and resolved in Chaucer’s conception of translation, and . . . it is this tension which underlies the conceptual and procedural overlap between Chaucer the translator and Chaucer the original writer. For by medieval standards Chaucer was a paradox—a “vernacular author.”

But the introduction to A Treatise on the Astrolabe explicitly endorses the legitimacy of diverse languages for expressing similar conclusions, including his “lighte Englishh” (51).

Chaucer’s narrator in various poems recurrently denies responsibility for his text, arguing that he is simply translating or transcribing. In actuality, of course, the work is original and unique due to Chaucer’s revisions of his source material. Concepts such as writing, endityng, makyng, translation, and compilacio recur in his various works and translacioun and endityng were indistinguishable for a writer like Chaucer. That is to say, inventio and compilation were an integral part of the act of original composition no matter how he designated the task.

The Wife of Bath functions as Chaucer’s counterpart in her writerly activities. Her defense of the vernacular, thinly veiled in both her Prologue and Tale, is both Chaucer’s defense and a defense of Chaucer. The Wife’s Tale can be read as addressing the issues of the vernacular and the role female audiences play in receiving and passing on translations of authoritative texts, as well as vindicating Chaucer’s authority as a vernacular author. The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale are suggestive of a larger web of vernacular works in the late Middle Ages, works directed at new and previously ignored audiences. The Prologue and Tale should be read in the context of increased vernacular writings and translations in the late Middle Ages since the way disempowered classes—women or non-aristocrats—can enter the discourse of power is through access to authoritative texts, available in the vernacular. Chaucer, in citing Troilus and Helen in Jankyn’s book which otherwise lists exclusively male authors, recognizes the validity of a new audience and a different truth for women.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the text are according to line number from fragment III, Riverside Chaucer; 3rd edition, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).


5. This in turn implies that Chaucer was sympathetic to certain Lollard beliefs that upheld the dissemination and reception of vernacular texts. David Lyle Jeffrey argues more generally that “we can see close correspondence between Chaucer’s apparent thinking and Wyclif’s expressed opinions and convictions on a number of quite controversial subjects” in “Chaucer and Wyclif: Biblical Hermeneutic and Literary Theory in the XIVth Century,” *Chaucer and the Scriptural Tradition*, ed. Jeffrey (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1984), 114. Aston writes, “It was as a vernacular literate movement that Lollardy had gathered momentum and it was as a vernacular literate movement that it was suspected and persecuted” (*Lollards and Reformers*, 27).

6. Granted, there have been scholarly questions as to the authorship of these texts. All the so-called Wyclifite texts may not be properly ascribed to her, if she ever existed. The debate about Heloise’s authorship has been put to rest by Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 140-43.


18. This paper does not concern itself with some critics’ disgust at the vulgarity of the Wife’s “euphemisms.” Maureen Quilligan comments “not surprisingly, Alisoun is a figure who uses many full-blown, dirty words, made all the more wonderfully vulgar by her fake French euphemisms: she is a character, however, whose speech Chaucer claims he merely records,” *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan’s Cité des Dames* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 35-36. I myself chose to use “sexual organ” throughout this essay after it was pointed out, at the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast “Chaucer and Related Topics” session, where I first presented this paper as a talk (November 1993), that my own use of *pudendum* was in itself a euphemism, is coy or “quaint,” and replicates the very culture which stigmatizes female sexuality both by using Latin and by implying that female sexual parts are “shameful” (“pudendum”). Larry Benson argues that *queynte* is etymologically distinct from “cunt” and was not considered obscene in Middle English, stating that “[q]ueynte is not the forerunner of the modern obscenity; it was not the normal word for ‘vagina’; and it was not considered vulgar or obscene,” “The ‘Queynte’ Punnings of Chaucer’s Critics,” in *Reconstructing Chaucer*, SAC Proceedings 1 ed. Paul Strohm and Thomas J. Heffernan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 33. Benson argues that “queynte” is equivalent to “elegant, pleasing thing” and that she is “talking cute” when she is speaking to her old husband (447). He concludes that “given the Wife of Bath’s propensity for euphemism and periphrasis, a direct obscenity is the last thing we would expect from her” (43-45). The overall success of Benson’s argument is undermined by the not-so-subtle misogynistic asides he makes (30, 31). Susan Crane criticizes Benson’s conclusions by taking his own rhetoric to task in “Medieval Romance and Feminine Difference in The Knight’s Tale,” SAC 12 (1990): 55-56. It is worth noting Augustine’s view of obscene words and euphemisms in *De dialectica* 7.100-103:

[The chastity of the ears] would be offended if the private part of the body were called by a low or vulgar name, though the thing with a different name is the same. If the shamefulness of the thing signified were covered over by the propriety of the signifying word, then the base character of both would affect both sense and mind.

Quoted by Hult, “Language and Dismemberment,” 114, from the translation of B. Darrell Jackson (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1975). While the signified is the same, the signifier is what can cause offense. The Wife also calls genitalia “members” (116), “thynges” (121), “instrument” (132, 149), “chambre of Venus” (618) and “privee place” (620). But *queynte* has aroused the most critical debate and anger. Thomas Hahn, “Teaching the Resistant Woman: The Wife of Bath and the Academy,” *Exemplaria* 4 (1992): 440, suggests “that verbal profusion [calls] to account the clerkly view that these ‘thinges’ are not signifieds at all, but signs marked on the body ‘to knowe a femele from a male’ (III.122).”


22. Law in particular necessitated expertise in three languages in the fourteenth century.

The Rolls of Parliament were regularly in Latin and French, but occasional entries indicate that the discussion was in English. . . . In 1362 the clerks admitted for the first time that Parliament was addressed in English, and in the same year Parliament decreed that all legal proceedings had to be carried on in English because the litigants could not understand French. . . . Evidently by the 1360s most oral exchange in commerce and government must have been carried on in English, but the records were still kept in Latin and French. Formal education was in Latin, and the writing masters who taught English clerks the secretarial skills of *ars dictaminis* taught them in Latin and French. Virtually all religious and cultural writings intended for any kind of circulation were in Latin or French.


24. Carol Meale cautions against a “rigid association” of women with a particular language, citing Alice West’s casual reference to owning books in Latin, French and English; see her article “. . . alle the bokes that I haue of latyn, englisch, and frencsh”: Laywomen and Their Books in Late Medieval England,” in Women and Literature, 128-58, especially 138.


29. Hudson, Selections from English Wycliffite Writings, 68, 71.

30. Rita Copeland points out that For the medieval author, translation is no less than an act of translatio, of metaphor or troping, for translation refrigures, through interpretive reception and transfer, what has previously been known in a different textual condition.


33. Copeland, “Rhetoric and Vernacular Translation,” 61-62. Hult cites Roman de la rose 21543-52, in which glosses are discussed:

Thus things go by contraries; one is the gloss of the other. If one wants to define one of the pair, he must remember the other, or he will never, by any intention, assign a definition to it; for he who has no understanding of the two will never understand the difference between them, and without this difference no definition that one can make can come to anything.


35. “A translation, in one sense, is literally a missaying. . . . It violates the original. A translation violates a prior intention or purpose” (Shoaf, “Notes towards Chaucer’s Poetics,” 58). Carolyn Dinshaw, Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 122, argues that glossing “is a gesture of appropriation.”

36. Lesley Kordecki writes,

Surely dogmatic univalent glossing is integral to patris
tic power maintenance, but texts that imbed contrary
terprettive interjections . . . open up meaning—what
Dinshaw calls “reading like a woman.” . . . Chaucer’s
famous indirect method, his open-ended conclusions,
his oxymoronic quality all are a result of conflicting
imbedded glosses which pit one answer or interpreta-
tion against another.

“Let Me ‘telle yow what I mente’: The Glossa
Ordinaria and the Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” Exem-
that the Wife “mimics the operations of patriarchal
discourse” likewise reads the Wife’s discourse as
an affirmation and not as trapped by patriarchal
discourse (Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics, 115).

37. Hanning points out that the Wife refers to her
sexual organ by a French euphemism which we
must ‘gloss’—thus putting the concept of interpret-
tation, in a sexual context, at the forefront of our
activity as readers at that moment” (“Roasting a
Friar,” 20).

38. As Hanna puts it (“Compilatio,” 11):

Perhaps most distressing for the conservative, En-
glished Latin had been cut free from the Latin tradition
and its learned practice of reading. It had become
“open.” Englished texts were now consultable and interpretable, perhaps in ways unforeseen, seditious and dangerous. They had lost the support provided by that system of control and indoctrination by which Latin had always been approached—the grammatical education which made “fit” and trained readers. Such Englished texts, like the compiling activities by which the Wife constructs her Prologue, were now part of a more general discourse where they might be abused.

Aston remarks (Lollards and Reformers, 206):
This Master John Wycliffe, the chronicler Henry Knighton wrote accusingly some years after his death, translated the Gospel from Latin into English so that it was more open to laymen and ignorant people, including “women who know how to read,” whereas previously it had been the preserve of well-read clerks of good understanding.

39. C. H. Talbot, Medicine in Medieval England (London: Oldbourne, 1967), 196-97, discusses the proliferation of vernacular medical texts in the late Middle Ages and the anxiety it caused among university-trained males who attempted, but failed, to have Parliament pass a bill in 1421 which would prevent and punish non-university-trained medical practitioners, including, of course, women. He also speculates on “the probability that the vernacular texts dealing with gynaecology, written expressly for women so that they need not have recourse to male practitioners, may have been written or translated by [women].” Also see Elaine E. Whitaker, “Reading the Paston Letters Medically,” ENL 31 (1993): 19-27.

40. Green, “Obstetrical and Gynecological Texts,” 58. Elsewhere, Green offers the intriguing theory that the appeal to modesty of such introductions might in fact be a strategy to ensure that women’s health remain in the domain of women health practitioners to “ensure them a field of practice where men could neither claim competence nor offer competition” (“Women’s Medical Practice,” 74).

Benton writes that many such vernacular texts “differ from the Latin Trotula and pay more attention to the practical obstetrical problems which concerned female practitioners” (“Trotula,” 48). Benton goes on to assert that Trotula’s name was mentioned often and intentionally in these medical treatises because she was a woman, and thus an authority in a realm men could know nothing about (50-51); at the same time, Latin medical treatises containing Trotula texts were not in the possession of female readers, by and large:

By including in their medical compendia these [Latin] treatises falsely attributed to Trotula, medieval physicians . . . unwittingly excluded women even further from participation in their own medicine. Though the treatises of “Trotula” bear a woman’s name, they were the central texts of the gynecological medicine practiced and taught by men.

(52)


42. Barratt, Women’s Writing, 32.

43. Baird-Lange writes, “No evidence in his writings suggests that Chaucer was well versed in either the gynecological-obstetric treatises or the cosmetic and beauty regimens ascribed to Trotula” (“Trotula’s Fourteenth-Century Reputation,” 255). While she may be right that Chaucer never studied this subject intensely, he certainly could have looked through a few of these texts and picked up the terminology. I do not wish to argue that he knew of or used one particular version.


47. See Kamuf, Fictions, 11-12 and III.633.
48. See Miller, Chaucer, 447, and Riverside Chaucer, 871 n677. Heloise is mentioned in Roman de la rose 8759-8832.
49. Translated in Miller, Chaucer, 458.

50. Mann, Geoffrey Chaucer, 52-55. Mann goes on to read Heloise’s argument “dialogically,” that is, the framework for Heloise’s anti-marriage and misogynist argument transforms it into her defense. Chaucer uses this technique for the Wife of Bath so that her Prologue can be read against itself (70, 77ff). “Her tirade thus functions simultaneously as a demonstration of female bullying and a witness to masculine oppression” (79). Katharina M. Wilson and Elizabeth M. Makowski, Wyked Wyves and the Woes of Marriages: Misogamous Literature from Juvenal to Chaucer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 152, argue that the Wife’s dissuasio from marriage is “disguised as a persuasio.”

51. Dronke, Women Writers, 130.


55. Compare her activities to those of Margery Kempe, who tells the clerics questioning her, “I do not preach, sir; I do not go into any pulpit. I use only conversation and good words,” in The Book of Margery Kempe, translated by B. A. Wendtatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 164.

56. See Patterson “For the Wyves Love,” especially 656-58, for his argument that this Midas digression problematizes men’s listening.

57. David Wallace, in a fascinating article, “‘When She Translated Was’: A Chaucerian Critique of the Petrarchan Academy,” in Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 194, argues that Chaucer deliberately uses the verb translaten to emphasize “Walter’s power as both ruler and rhetor.” Wallace equates Walter with Petrarch in terms of the dichotomies village/court and vernacular/Latin. “Both Walter and Petrarch, who gaze with a court-trained eye, know that village or vernacular virtue is blind to itself. Such virtue can only be made visible if it is translated to court space in court language.” Petrarch’s translation of Boccaccio’s vernacular text into Latin is undermined by Chaucer’s rejection of that Latin version, in that “Chaucer chooses to restore this text to the vernacular” (196). Also see Dinshaw, Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics, 132-55, for a discussion of the gender politics of translation.

58. See OED, 2nd ed., under the entries “limit,” “limitation,” and “limiter.”

59. For more on the social situation in the late fourteenth century, see Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Janet Coleman, Medieval Readers and Writers; and Paul Strohm, Social Chaucer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

60. As Patterson puts it, “If men are really committed to a disinterested quest for truth they will avoid a surface misogyny in favor of the wisdom offered by the full story” (Chaucer and the Subject of History, 288).

61. Machan continues.

If posing as a translator in the Troilus enabled Chaucer to act as an author, it is perhaps to be expected that even when writing in a way which most closely resembles modern conceptions of translation he should perform many apparently authorial operations, such as combining and rearranging texts . . . To be simply a vernacular writer precluded Chaucer from exercising his unique literary genius; but to be an author was a cultural impossibility. By conceiving literary production in general as translation to a greater or lesser extent, Chaucer enabled himself to act as that paradoxical creature, the vernacular author.

“Chaucer as Translator,” in The Medieval Translator, ed. R. Ellis, 64-66.

62. Wallace argues that Chaucer “shares Dante’s profound conviction that the vernacular is uniquely adequate to human experience” (“When She Translated Was,” 199).

63. “Not one of Chaucer’s translations consists simply of the grammatical and lexical transference of a text in one language to another; they all involve, though in various ways, the incorporation of material from other texts or the inclusion of original and significant Chaucerian additions,” writes Tim Machan, “Chaucer as Translator,” 60-62. Wallace points out that “[t]ranslation in Chaucer is a term that is customarily hedged with nervous qualifica-
itions: it is an activity that calls for some sort of apology or explanation” (“Whan She Translated Was,” 197).

64. Machan, “Chaucer as Translator,” 64, and Burnley, “Late Medieval English Translation,” 44. Burnley goes on to write that “whether [the poet] regards himself as an author, enditer, compiler, or translator probably has more to do with the particular posture of humility or self-enhancement which he chooses to adopt than with any sharp distinctions in his actual mode of procedure” (48). The Wife, too, is no mere “compilator,” or citer and quoter of authoritative texts. Hanna points out that the compiler “seeks to become a transparent vehicle—merely an arranger of statements. The statements themselves are presented without qualification, as if purely descriptive” (“Compilatio,” 6). The Wife’s compilations expose the rhetorical fiction of the depersonalized compi-
lator.

Susanne Sara Thomas (essay date 1997)


[In the following essay, Thomas draws a correlation between Alisoun’s adamant defense of her rights concerning her body and a mock legal case.]

In the Prologue to her Tale the Wife of Bath argues that Paul gave wives authority over their husbands. She summarizes her argument thus:

I have the power durynge al my lyf
Upon his propre body, and noght he.
Right thus the Apostel tolde it unto me,
And badoure houshondes for to love us weel.
Al this sentence me liketh every deel.

(D 158-62)

There is some ambiguity in the Wife’s reference to Paul’s words as a “sentence,” a term which in Middle English has a number of meanings, including an opinion, a doctrine, a judgment rendered by God or by a court, a punishment imposed by a court, a statute or law, and a practice or custom (MED). Immediately following the above-quoted lines, the Pardoner responds to the Wife’s remarks by exclaiming: “Now, dame, . . . by God and by Seint John! / Ye been a noble prechour in this cas” (164-65). Like “sentence,” the word “cas” has a variety of meanings, such as a state of affairs, an event, an action or deed, an instance or example, a civil or criminal question contested before a court of law, an accusation or charge (MED). In both quotations there is a disjunction between legal and religious terminology. Is, for instance, the “sentence” of Paul, in the Wife’s use of the term, a religious doctrine, a judgment rendered by God; or a legal doctrine, a judgment rendered by a court? The Pardoner calls the Wife a “prechour,” which suggests that in his view she is arguing religious doctrine; and yet, the Pardoner conjoins this label with the statement that the Wife is arguing a “cas,” a word which has legal, but not religious connotations. The Pardoner suggests that the Wife is presenting a legal issue for the listeners’ judgment. I will argue that the Wife is not delivering a mock sermon, as critics such as Lee Patterson and Charles E. Shain have argued, but is, rather, delivering a mock legal case.

While I agree with Patterson and Shain that the Wife is in control of her rhetoric rather than powerless before it, and does not suffer from what one critic has called “a certain mental blindness.” I differ about what type of rhetoric it is that she is in control of. While Patterson argues that the Wife offers a sermon joyeux in the Prologue, he bolsters his argument with some points which, in fact, undermine his assessment of her rhetorical strategy. He claims that the Wife “preempts the very language of accusation” in her “mastery of masculine modes of argument.” However, is a sermon joyeux the embodiment of “the language of accusation”? Or does this not sound, again, like a disjunction between legal and religious terminology? And what could more embody a masculine mode of argument than the rhetoric of the courtroom, stemming as it does from the agonistic tradition of the Greeks and Romans, and replacing in medieval society, or perhaps merely embodying another form of, the trial by battle? Furthermore, the Wife’s strategy of turning other people’s words against them is surely more appropriate to the cross-examination strategy of the courtroom than to the pulpit.

Like Patterson, Shain is convinced that the Wife’s Prologue results from the fact that Chaucer, like all of his contemporaries, “was steeped in the lore of pulpit rhetoric.” Shain goes so far as to posit that “Chaucer had inevitably to make use of that powerful and pervasive instrument of medieval culture, the sermon” [italics mine]. However, the trial, in both the ecclesiastical and secular courts, was increasingly becoming another “powerful and pervasive instrument of medieval culture,” and it is inevitable, as well, that Chaucer, having performed the functions of magistrate and civil servant, would also have been steeped in this powerful cultural form. Derek Persall has noted that Chaucer’s lifetime saw “the increasing use of litigation and the increasing sophistication of legal procedure.” He concludes, “[T]he law, which had once functioned and been
thought of as a last resort when all means of reconciling disputes had failed, was now becoming a first resort." The Wife may be mocking the newly evolving forms of legal procedure and argumentation, and their practitioners. Furthermore, this interpretation can explain the Wife's use of legal terminology which critics in the "sermonist" camp must ignore. Some of the terminology of the Prologue can only be fully understood in the context of fourteenth-century legal practices; however, Shain and Patterson overlook disjunctions between legal and theological terminology.

The form of the Wife of Bath's rhetoric closely follows certain Common Law practices of presenting a case. These legal echoes create an unwritten text behind the garrulousness of her Prologue. However, some legal background and definitions are necessary to facilitate this discussion. Sir Matthew Hale's History of the Common Law serves well to define what the Common Law is: "The Laws of England may aptly enough be divided into two kinds, viz., Lex Scripta, the written Law; and Lex non Scripta, the unwritten Law: For although ... all the Laws of this Kingdom have some Monuments or Memorials thereof in Writing, yet all of them have not their Original in Writing; for some of those Laws have obtained their Force by immemorial Usage or Custom, and such Laws are properly call'd Leges non Scriptae, or unwritten Laws or Customs." The Common Law of England is unique in its use of unwritten law; unlike legal systems which are derived from the Roman tradition, it is not completely codified. As Henry Sumner Maine explains, "The theoretical descent of Roman jurisprudence from a code, the theoretical ascription of English law to immemorial unwritten tradition, were the chief reasons why the development of their system differed from the development of ours." The Leges non Scriptae create an indeterminate quality in the English Law, as well as an instability, which in its positive aspect is an adaptability to changing social and political circumstances.

The lex non scripta is determined and decisions are made by examining prior cases and thereby establishing the "custom of the courts." A modern legal writer explains: "The idea of looking back to prior cases for guidance is as old as our professional courts. . . . During the Middle Ages . . . prior cases were also inspected, but rarely revered. Law was not found in a single case; rather, a group of cases illustrated the true law. Law, in this sense, was the total custom of the courts." However, it has been established by legal historians that the citation of cases in medieval courts took a necessarily vague form. Arthur R. Hogue explains:

The movement towards literacy, which created the written case record, also created the need for a new profession, one which then sought to expand its role. The legal profession has from its very inception incited suspicion and hostility. May McKissack, for instance, notes how during the Peasants' Revolt on June 13, 1381, "prisons were opened and in Cheapside a number of lawyers, Flemings and other unpopular persons . . . were summarily beheaded." The unpopularity of the profession may be related to the form of oral argumentation it uses, and to the profession's alignment with rhetoric, not with either writing or literacy.

The form of legal argumentation in the fourteenth century was fundamentally similar to that practiced at present. Legal reasoning, which depends upon a balancing of findings on both the law which applies in a case and the facts which apply (or can be proven), has always been problematic to logicians. For instance, in "A Semiotics of Legal Argument" Duncan Kennedy discusses the logical problem inherent in the conventions of legal argumentation: "From the great mass of facts, the lawyer selects those that he or she thinks can be cast as 'relevant' to one of the preexisting rule formulae that together compose the corpus juris. Then the lawyer works to recast both facts and formula so that the desired outcome will appear compelled by mere rule application." A further convention of legal argumentation described by Kennedy is that "argument and counterargument are presented as simply 'correct' as applied to the general question, without this presentation binding the arguer in any way on the nested subquestion." Kennedy concludes his dissection of legal argumentation by asserting:

Legal argument has a certain mechanical quality, once one begins to identify its characteristic operations. Language seems to be "speaking the subject," rather than the reverse. It is hard to imagine that an argument so firmly channelled into bites could reflect the full complexity either of the fact situation or the decision-maker's ethical stance toward it. It is hard to imagine doing this kind of argument in utter good faith, that is, to imagine doing it without some cynical strategy in fitting foot to shoe.
The Wife of Bath is aligned with the legal profession through her use of similar rhetorical strategies. John Manly has pointed out how highly rhetorical the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale are. He claims that about fifty percent of their content consists of rhetorical devices, with only the Monk's Tale and the Manciple's Tale showing a higher incidence. John A. Alford has demonstrated that the rhetorical Wife is the philosophical Clerk's direct counterpart. He states: "The Clerk has not merely gone 'unto logyke'; he is Logic personified. The Wife is not only one of the most rhetorical of the storytellers; she is Dame Rhetoric herself. . . . [A]nd their performances stand out as examples of (and commentaries upon) the two disciplines they represent." In Alford's interpretation, the conflict between the Wife and the Clerk "is rooted in the recurrent tension between two modes of discourse, rhetorical and philosophical." We see in this opposition a tension between oral and written traditions, although Alford does not address this dichotomy in his article.

In Platonic thought the opposition between rhetoric and logic/dialectic is essentially a moral one. Alford explains: "In contrast to dialectic, whose object is truth, rhetoric is morally indifferent. Its only guide is self-interest. Its practitioners may side with the true but they may just as easily side with the false—to deceive, to have the guilty judged innocent, to make the worse cause seem the better. . . . Their object, in a word, is not truth but power." We can see from the examples which Alford uses the obvious connection between rhetoric and the legal profession, and by an extension which Alford does not make, between the Wife of Bath and the lawyer. The objections to and anxiety caused by the legal profession seem to be related to its professional practice of undermining what Douglas Canfield has termed the "chivalric code of the word as bond." He says of the Wife: "Her most dangerous weapon is not so much her 'queinte' . . . but her tongue, with which she subverts not only Scripture, . . . but the entire Code."

Essentially, for the medieval audience, the lawyer is aligned with speech, not written language. It is what lawyers orally do to texts which causes the most suspicion and anxiety, just as what the Wife of Bath does to texts in her narrative arouses suspicions about, and objections to, her. The Wife wields rhetorical power over the written word which lies "buried" in her argument just as the case records do in their heaps of parchment scrolls. It is not easy to "search the record" in the Wife's case either, as one must have considerable memory of Scripture to be able to recall extemporaneously the "buried" halves of her Scriptural quotations.

The same vagueness of citation common to the fourteenth-century judicial system is notable in reference to the Wife's use of citation in the first part of her Prologue. The "cas" she argues is founded upon doctrine which is proven by reference to the writings of St. Paul, but typically the Wife cites only one half of a "sentence" and ignores the other. In lines 158-62, quoted in the opening paragraph above, the Wife uses two statements of Paul as her authority. The first reads, "The wife has not the power of her own body, but the husband; and likewise also he hath not power of his own body, but the wife" (I Cor 7:4). She uses this passage to affirm the "sentence": "I have the power duryinge al my lyf / Upon his propre body, and night he" (158-59). Similarly, she makes use of Paul's commandment, "Husbands, love your wives" (Eph 5:25), while suppressing the fact that this "sentence" is embedded in a text which also commands, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord" (Eph 5:22). The Wife exploits the "buried" nature of the scriptural case record she cites in her effort to establish her own laws of marriage which are based upon "custom," not the text of the New Testament. She establishes the lex non scripta of marriage, which then takes precedence over the lex scripta of Paul. From the point of view of English jurisprudence, this is correct procedure.

The Wife mediates between the written laws of marriage found in the New Testament and the "custom" of marriage established by experience. She finds the "custom of marriage" by examining a group of "cases": her five marriages. We can make an alignment between her use of "experience" and the legal use of "custom." In her determination of the "custom of marriage" the Wife also uses the legal strategy of combining a rule formula with a body of facts. She applies her rule to her marriages, but the marriages are recast in a manner that proves her rule.

The Wife presents her argument without addressing the counter-argument, thereby following a standard form of legal argumentation. "I quitte hem word for word" (422) she says, proclaiming that she is presenting one side of a battle of words, not dialectically balancing the sides of a logical argument. Like a barrister, she engages in a verbal contest which has distinctly well-drawn lines of demarcation. Verbal ammunition, and not fairness, is the primary consideration in the formulation of her argument. As a sermon, the Wife's speech would be absurd; however, as an example of legal reasoning it is quite typical of the rhetorical strategy of the courtroom.

The Wife's use of Paul involves channeling him into "bites" which automatically become rules which are then presented as simply "correct" as applied to the general question of a wife's authority over her husband. The other halves of the quotations do not have to be addressed, as her assertions do not have to be binding on "the nested sub-questions." The Wife applies her bites of law to her facts, which are taken from the history of her marriages, and proves that her definition of the
custom of marriage is correct. She recounts the stories of her marriages in such a way that her authority over her husbands is proven. However, her rule has been cast in such a way that her stories will prove it, and the facts presented in the narratives are limited to those that prove her rule. Whether or not the Wife is found to be "misquoting" or "misusing" Scripture depends upon whether one considers her to be using a dialectical strategy or a rhetorical one. The agonistic form of trial law, by this period fully established, does not compel barristers to give a fair and balanced description of the other side’s position; in fact, procedure compels them to do the opposite. Lawyers, like all rhetoricians, must continually play to an audience, and cannot follow the motive of fair play. As Alford states of the rhetoricians: "To achieve ‘the maistre,’ to manipulate other people into believing or behaving according to one’s own wishes is ‘what orators most desire.’"24

At the conclusion of the “Thou seist” passages in the Prologue, the Wife explains, in summary, “Under that colour hadde I many a myrthe” (399). While “colour” contains the meaning of “pretense,” it also refers to a legal practice called “pleading colour” which was invented in the fourteenth century. D. W. Sutherland explains this peculiar practice:

It is odd that the defendant should have to describe not only his own claim but also the plaintiff’s. . . But this description of the plaintiff’s claim by the defendant was the specific element of “color,” and the law insisted that the defendant include it if he wanted any discussion of the parties’ rights in court before the case went to a jury. And if this seems strange, it is surely much stranger that what the defendant said about the plaintiff’s claim was not true and not expected to be true, but pure sham, pure fiction.25

Sutherland claims that colour was “a product of the early fourteenth century. . . . Fourteenth century barristers could give fictitious color if they wanted to, and sometimes they did.”26 It became by the fifteenth century necessary to ascribe false claims to one’s legal opponents in order to facilitate judgment and mediation of a case.27

The “Thou seist” passages in the Prologue are clearly meant to be seen as instances of pleading colour, for not only does the Wife specifically refer to her ploys as “colour”, the Wife concludes this section of the poem by saying:

Lordynges, right thus, as ye have understonde,
Baa r stifly myne olde hounsbondes on honde
That thus they sedyon in his dronenesse;
And al was fals, but that I took winnesse
On Janekyn, and on my nece also.  

(379-83)

In this passage the Wife openly admits that she ascribed false arguments to her husbands, and invented fictional claims which she used against them. It seems that in the Wife’s use of “colour” there is a buried reference to a developing legal practice, one whose ironies and, perhaps we could even say, moral subversiveness, Chaucer could not have failed to notice.

It is the rhetorical nature of the legal profession which makes it dangerous and highly unpopular. What lawyers orally do to a buried case record in the fourteenth century gives room for abuse in the legal system. It seems that it was not in their function as writers of documents that lawyers were attacked by the peasants during the Revolt, but in their role as rhetorical speakers about hidden documents. It is “hidden writing” and those who have control and mastery over it which appear to pose the greatest threat to the “word as bond.”

If the Wife is, as Canfield argues, “subversive to the chivalric code of the word as bond,”28 it is not as “subversive female,” but in her appropriation of the barrister’s rhetoric that she poses a serious threat to the “code.” Michael Clancy has noted that the increased dependence upon litigation and the increasing sophistication of legal procedures toward the end of the medieval period had the effect of “weakening and straining the bonds of affection in feudal lordship.”29 The courtroom undermined the chivalric code of the oral oath as much as any other force at work to bring about the demise of feudal society. As a “mock lawyer” the Wife is much more dangerous to the chivalric code than she is as a “resistant woman.”30 In the face of a growing bureaucracy, the personal, feudal ties of the oral oath were fast disappearing. The agonistic approach of trial procedure was antithetical to the idea of personal allegiance contained in feudal bonds.

Jean Sire de Joinville, in his “Histoire de St. Louis” describes King Louis as the ideal feudal king who settles disputes between his subjects in person. Joinville describes the king not as a judge who makes rulings, but rather as one who presides over the making of bargains and compromises.31 On the other hand, the bureaucratic system now in place in England was devoid of the personal attention of the king as arbitrator, and replaced bargaining with hostile litigation. M. T. Clancy explains:

Henry II devised an automated system of justice emphasizing speed and decisiveness. The plaintiff obtained a writ in standardized form . . . instructing a jury to be summoned, the jury gave a verdict of ‘Yes’ or ‘No,’ and judgment and execution then followed. The system stopped people rambling on about their grievances by compelling them to confine their statements within prescribed forms. . . . Like Frederick II’s system, the common law penalized people for making agreements. To compromise with the defendant was to insult the king, whose aid had been given to the plaintiff to prosecute a wrongdoer. . . . Henry II’s automated system of law made it easier—and more necessary—for neighbors to sue each other in the king’s court.32
In Clanchy’s assessment it is legal procedure itself which is pulling society apart. The bureaucratic system is disintegrating feudal ties and replacing them with increasingly necessary disputes.

Carolyn Dinshaw has said, “The Wife is everything the Man of Law can’t say.” Dinshaw argues that the Wife is exposing the techniques of the “clerky glossatores.” “Exposing techniques that they would rather keep invisible,” yet the Wife’s rhetorical techniques go far beyond mere glossing. She is herself a product of uncertainty; her contradictions and antagonism are an embodied depiction of the new bureaucratic system itself. As Dame Barrister, the Wife represents the agonism and contorted logic of the new bureaucratic order of society. However, like the Man of Law, good bureaucrats are always possessively secretive as bureaucracy works best when it and its procedures are kept the most invisible. A modern writer has noted that in contemporary American society few people have any understanding of even their basic legal rights. This problem stems from the occulted nature of the procedures of all bureaucratic systems.

From an historical perspective there are a number of significant factors underlying the Wife’s attitude toward texts and documents. She uses texts in a manipulative fashion and also attacks them, tearing “thre leves” out of one and tossing another in the fire. The increasing bureaucratic dependence upon documents in the fourteenth century caused concern about their proper use and function, and about the nature of what constituted a “valid document.” As M. T. Clanchy states, “Documents did not immediately inspire trust.” The Peasant’s Revolt of 1381 reveals anxiety about legal documents in the rebel’s inconsistent use of them. The peasants burned legal documents and then turned around and asked for other documents as proof, usually within a remarkably brief period of time, suggesting a naive attitude towards what constitutes proof of an agreement. For if proof can be burned and the agreement cancelled, of what value is any document as proof?

May McKisack relates how in their attack on the Abbey of St. Albans on June 15, 1381, the rebels burned the charters of the Abbot “by virtue of which he enjoyed his manorial rights, and, displaying the king’s charter, forced him to seal a deed of manumission concocted by themselves.” Just two days earlier, the peasants had rejected the King’s offer of a charter of pardon, calling it “a mockery and some of them, returning to the city, ordered the execution of all lawyers.” A further instance of the rebels’ attitude toward legal documents occurred during their attack on Cambridge. The peasants, McKisack relates, entered St. Mary’s during mass and seized the chest containing the university archives . . . ; another chest full of parchments was taken from the house of the Carmelites. Both chests (containing documents of priceless value to the historian of the medieval university) were publicly burned in Market Square, an old woman named Margery Starre crying, ‘Away with the learning of clerks, away with it!’ as she flung parchments on the fire. The rebels then drew up a document whereby the university formally surrendered its privileges to the town and agreed to be governed by the municipal authorities.

It appears that it is not writing and literacy which the peasants are objecting to, as they are willing to use documents to their advantage. However, the peasants place too much faith in the power of the document in and of itself, when it is only proof of a preceding agreement. The document is not the actual agreement, and can only be offered in court as evidence of an agreement. Once in the courtroom, as we see in the Wife of Bath’s performance, rhetoric seizes a manipulative power over the documentary evidence.

During the Revolt the peasants demonstrate a belief in the magical power of the document itself. This is illustrated in their attitude that if it is burned it has no power, and if it is in hand it is all-powerful. They are naively unaware of the ascendant power of the legal profession and its ability to manipulate documentary evidence. Legal procedures are much more complex than the peasants are admitting to in their actions. They attempt to override the bureaucracy, but ultimately cannot. To do the peasants justice, however, we must acknowledge that legal naiveté remains a problem in modern, democratic societies. One legal author recently asked: “Is it really the case that it is the fault of lawyers that no one understands the law but lawyers?”

The autumn Parliament of 1381 confirmed “the king’s revocation of his charters of manumission to the rebels,” demonstrating the fundamental worthlessness of the documents which the peasants had demanded and received. The rebels’ initial skepticism about the power of a written charter had within days given way to an almost magical belief in it. Too late did they discover that the documents had no magical power, nor any real power at all, as power did not rest in the written charters but in those with the power to manipulate and interpret them. It is through interpretation and application that the legal document assumes meaning as proof of an agreement.

In an examination of the peasants’ actions in the Revolt of 1381 we can see a crippling legal confusion. While I am in agreement with Steven Justice’s assertion that the peasants did have a degree of literacy and legal knowledge, Justice ignores the fact that the peasants’ legal demands and legal ideology were somewhat confused. During the Revolt, they frequently demanded documents which did not exist. As in their previous belief in the legal value of the Domesday Book, the
peasants exhibited a mythical belief in the existence of ancient legal documents which were supposed to promote their freedom from bondage. The peasants believed in a chivalric past where words held true. They longed, essentially, for a mythic legal past, not as it was, but as they nostalgically imagined it to have been. The peasants believed in the value of the “word as bond,” whereas in the new legal bureaucracy this bond was routinely subverted. It was, in fact, the bureaucratic legal system itself which undermined the written documents which formed the only remaining evidence of those ancient oral oaths.

The peasants were looking back to an Edenic past—a time when the oral word was the bond, and the written document was a recording of what was spoken, not merely negotiable evidence, as it had now become. In Jesse Gellrich’s interpretation of the events of 1381, what incited the anger of the peasants toward legal documents was “the theft of spoken promise”—what peasants took to be their natural right—out of the venerated symbol of it on the inscribed page.” So, that spoken promises and legal contracts appear to be two separate and distinct things is at the heart of the peasants’ legal anxieties and confusion. They wanted the oral promises given to be put in writing as proof, but discovered that the new “proofs” were worthless. The peasants could not create by themselves legally valid documents.

In the Revolt the peasants looked for and attempted to create the equivalent of what we could oxymoronically call “written oaths,” documents which would constitute evidence of the oral ties which once bound them to their land. They believed that the original documentary evidence surviving from the oral past offered them legal redress, when in reality this is extremely unlikely. They also believed that they could create new charters, not realizing that these documents could easily be subverted or ignored. The peasants addressed their complaints to the king personally, wanting to see in him a king similar to Joinville’s portrait of St. Louis. They wanted to see the king as their seignorial protector and arbitrator; however, this direct contact between king and subjects had been replaced by a bureaucracy which now oversaw the complex procedures embodied in what one scholar refers to as “the extraordinary formalism of medieval common law.” The peasants rebelled against the mediation of these bureaucratic officials who now blocked their access to their lord, the King.

M. T. Clanchy has demonstrated that “lay literacy grew out of bureaucracy,” and in this sense literacy and bureaucracy worked together to block the peasants from obtaining the mediating function of their king as feudal lord. If the peasants were opposed to literacy it was in this context that it appeared most hostile to their customary rights: law now equalled bureaucracy. Feudal law was personal and based on oral oaths which did not require the function of intermediaries, but now law was a complex bureaucratic system. It had become the modern definition of “law,” that is, “everything to do with the administration of justice in a society, such as the law or laws, the lawyers, the judges, and every system, office, and fonctionary concerned with the enactment, application, determination, and enforcement of the laws.”

Bruce Lyon explains that “the last two centuries of medieval England witnessed the elaboration of the machinery of process and of the rules of pleadings and a refinement of legal principles previously established. No longer was the law dominated and molded by legislation but by a skilled, learned, proud, and jealous legal profession.” He explains further:

It was during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that the legal profession became highly organized and obtained a monopoly over the law. It was this learned, skilled, and tough legal profession that molded and practiced a tough common law that withstood all competition and attempts to weaken it and emerged triumphant under the legal principle that the law of the realm is the supreme master, above both king and parliament.

So, while the king, parliament, and peasants try to wrest control of the law, the battle is about to be won by the legal profession, and this profession is instrumental in bringing about the ascendency of a bureaucratic system over a feudal one. The lawyers’ powers lie in the indeterminacy of the unwritten rules and customs which control the application and interpretation of the written laws. In the fourteenth century their power also lay in the occulted nature of the buried case record.

The Wife’s argument in the Prologue is ostensibly about the authority of the wife over the husband in marriage; however, the buried legal argument is about the legal authority of the oral over the written. This aspect of the Prologue reflects the social tensions in the background of the literary performance. There is, in fact, a battle going on outside the poem for control of the law, a battle which will be won by “a skilled, learned, proud, and jealous legal profession” with which the Wife is subtly aligned through her appropriation of legal rhetoric. There is also a buried accusation against the misuse of documents by those in power, including both king and parliament. The Wife covertly exposes the tortuous logic by which the courts are making their rulings, bringing up the question of who is ruling whom, or what is being ruled by what. Is law ruling or is rhetoric? And what form of law has precedence, if law indeed is ruling—the written or the unwritten?

The authority of the lex non scripta over the lex scripta forms not only a backdrop to the Wife’s Prologue, it is her Prologue. The Wife’s fifth husband reads her a case
history of wicked wives, and she quites him by tearing “thre leve” out of the book and making him later “brenne his book” (D 816), an action which echoes that of the defiant peasant Margery Starre who cried, “Away with the learning of clerks, away with it!” However, unlike the rebel peasants, the Wife asks not for a new lex scripta, but creates for herself a lex non scripta. Her “lawe” of marriage is an oral argument which quiites the written word. She proves through witty argumentation that wives were given authority over their husbands, and that she has had authority over her own. Doubtless her argumentation throughout makes the foot fit the shoe, but this form of rhetoric is about to become a powerful force in society. Furthermore, the Wife’s Prologue leads to a tale about a legal case, its sentencing, and the commuting of that sentence, giving further justification for the legal undertones of her Prologue.

Chaucer aligns the Wife of Bath with the practitioners of a form of oral argumentation which uses a particular form of logic and rule application. In the tension between lex scripta and lex non scripta, the Wife is on the side of the unwritten law. She “proves” her authority in her Prologue; and, as one who is aligned with the lex non scripta, she does have authority. The courts have the power to interpret the lex scripta, and through rhetoric and rule application they make it say what they want it to say. Likewise, the Wife assumes the power of oral interpretation over the written texts of both Paul and her husbands. There is buried in her Prologue an alignment between the hatred toward lawyers (and their power of interpretation) demonstrated by the peasants’ attacks upon them, and the hatred toward women (whose rhetoric is necessarily oral) in written texts of the period. The Wife is aligned in her Prologue with interpretation, the unwritten law, and legal rhetoric, and most significantly with the mediation between written and unwritten.

At his coronation ceremony Richard II “swore on the cross to confirm the laws and customs of the people.” However, just what exactly constituted “the laws and customs” was not that easy to determine. For instance, a historian notes that in the coronation ceremony, “especially noteworthy were the pains taken to remove any doubt that the laws which the king swore to confirm were those which had been established in the reign of Edward the Confessor, not those which had been ordained by the legislation of Edward I,” and further, an alteration was made to the coronation oath established in 1308 for Edward II, “whereby the king swore to uphold whatever laws the people might elect for the glory of God. For these phrases there was substituted in the coronation oath of 1377 an ambiguous reference to the laws of the church.” From the very opening of his reign, those close to Richard attempted to escape from being bound by the laws and customs of the people; however, the underlying problem is the uncertainty of what constituted the laws and customs. Were they established by Parliament’s spoken word and by the written laws which it established; or, was the law established by the decisions of the Judges whom Richard consulted on his rights and obligations; or by immemorial custom filtered down through the established case record; or by the word of the King himself? At the heart of this confusion is the dichotomy inherent in the common law between the supposed certainty of codified law, and the flexibility and apparent uncertainty of the unwritten law determined by custom.

The Wife of Bath reinforces rule by law (a written/oral negotiation) rather than by oath and sovereignty. She is aligned with the new order of things which will not be bound by the sovereignty of the king, but takes the power of interpretation and negotiation unto itself. Neither the written laws nor the sovereign oath rule; what now rules is the professional, bureaucratic negotiation between lex scripta and lex non scripta. The buried argument of the Wife’s Prologue is that those who are professionally assuming the power of legal interpretation are an emerging political force destined to become “the supreme master, above both king and parliament.”

Notes

1. All references to the text of Chaucer are to Larry D. Benson, et al., eds., The Riverside Chaucer (Boston, 1987), and they will be included within the text as line citations.


5. Patterson, “For the Wyves Love,” 678.


17. Ibid., 190.

18. Ibid., 192.


22. Ibid., 110.


26. Ibid., 186.

27. Although it is no longer necessary to “plead colour,” the term remains part of the legal lexicon and is understood as a common tactic. The term was used, for instance, in Milo Gayelin, “Their Own Petard: Many Lawyers Find Malpractice Suits Aren’t Fun After All,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 6, 1995, A1, A6. A defense lawyer explaining the nature of the growing number of legal malpractice suits states: “In many cases where conflicts [of interest between the lawyer and the opposite side] are alleged, the conflicts really do not cause anyone any harm. They’re in there for color.”


34. Ibid., 120.


37. McKisack, 415.

38. McKisack, 411.


41. McKisack, 419.


43. Rosamond Faith, “The ‘Great Rumour’ of 1377 and Peasant Ideology,” *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston (Cambridge, Eng., 1984), 43-73. She states of this early revolt, “its legitimizing ideas seem not to have come from egalitarian hopes of a better future but from views of an idealized past. It was conservative to the point of archaism, and the book that largely inspired it was not the Bible, but the Domesday Book.”


46. Clanchy, *From Memory*, 19 and passim.


49. Ibid., 625.


51. Ibid., 14-15.

Charles W. M. Henebry (essay date 1997)

SOURCE: Henebry, Charles W. M. "Apprentice Janekyn/Clerk Jankyn: Discrete Phases in Chaucer’s

[In the following essay, Henegby further develops the theory that Chaucer rewrote and revised the Wife of Bath’s character repeatedly. He contends that Chaucer changed Alisoun’s views on marriage, fidelity, and autonomy throughout the writing process and eventually blended these ideas together to form a multidimensional character.]

The idea that the Wife of Bath did not spring forth fully fledged from the mind of her creator is not a new one. Her character is in conception both original and complex. For this reason, the thesis that she underwent a process of reconstruction and revision is attractive—not simply to critics who are inclined to believe that something cannot come out of nothing, but also to those who would like to know more about the way in which something often does do just that in the creation of great art. However, as Sidney noted (echoing Horace), art is that which conceals its own artifice; without access to the working manuscript, we can only hope to detect the poet’s developmental process in the fissures where the poem does not quite hang together. Just such a fissure has been detected by some critics between the portrayal of the Wife of Bath in the *General Prologue* and the story she tells in the *Prologue* to her own *Tale*, for she seems in the one to have made herself financially independent of her husbands by means of a thriving business in the manufacture of cloth, while in the other she makes no explicit reference to this trade, but tells instead how she attained independence through sheer shrewishness. I plan, however, in this essay to consider the Wife’s *Prologue* in isolation from her portrait, her *Tale*, and from her appearances in the tales told by the Clerk and Merchant. To the extent that I am successful in tracing a pattern of development through her *Prologue*, it will remain for others to show how this process may be understood within the larger context of the *Canterbury Tales*.

The *Prologue* is a good candidate for close analysis in terms of development and reconstruction because, as R. F. Jones and Robert F. Pratt have shown, it is an intricate patch-work of different sources and styles which can be roughly divided into three main sections. The Wife opens with a defense of monogamy against the claims of St. Jerome on behalf of virginity. In seeming contradiction of her initial claim that experience alone is sufficient grounds for a discussion of marriage, she relies extensively in this first section on biblical authority, St. Paul in particular. Her closely-argued discourse is written in the style of a theological tract or sermon, drawing on arguments both for and against marriage which are found in Jerome’s *Adversus Jovinianum*. Having shown the viability, if not the superiority, of marriage in comparison with virginity, the Wife describes marriage in terms of raw sexuality, placing her emphasis on the marital debt:

> In wythod I wol use myn instrument
> As frely as mye Makere hath it sent.
> If I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwe!
> Myn housborne sal it have bothe eve and morwe,
> Whan that hym list come forth and paye his dette.
> An housborne wol I have—l wol nat lette—
> Which sal be bothe my detour and my thral,
> And have his tribulacion withal
> Upon his flessh, whil that I am his wyf.

This picture of the marital state contrasts sharply with the one that follows in the next section, in which the Wife describes in detail how she harassed her first three husbands, withholding sex from them in order to get the upper hand. Her emphasis shifts from marriage as sexual thralldom to marriage as a struggle for psychological and economic dominion. Sex is no longer the mutual duty of husband and wife, but rather a favor which is offered by the wife only for monetary reward: “I wolde no lenger in the bed abyde, / If that I felte his arm over my syde, / Til he had maad his raunson unto me; / Thanne wolde I suffer hym do his nycete” (409-12). I do not deny that the transition between these two sections is handled well: the Pardoner (no doubt the one of the few marriageable men on the pilgrimage who would have been alarmed at the prospect of having to “paye his dette”) is made to interrupt the Wife by reminding that if he would have to “bye it on my flessh so deere,” he would avoid getting married. This brings up the subject of hardship in marriage (the subject which the Wife had initially proposed to discuss), and she replies that if he wishes to speak of hardship, she can show him real tribulation. The deftness of this transition, however, is really a testament to the degree of difference between the two sections. Here, in speaking of her first three husbands, all of whom were much older and richer than she, the Wife relies entirely on experience rather than authority. Her experiences, moreover, are drawn by Chaucer out of a different collection of sources: the *Miroir de mariage* of Eustace Deschamps, the self-portrait of La Vieille in Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la rose*, and the *Liber aureolus de nuptiis* of Theophrastus. True, the *Liber aureolus* forms part of the same anti-matrimonial tradition with the *Adversus Jovinianum* (indeed, the *Liber aureolus* was preserved from classical times as a chapter within Jerome’s epistle), but the emphasis in Chaucer’s selections from Theophrastus is less anti-matrimonial than misogynist. In place of arguments against the state of marriage, we have disparaging remarks as to the capacity of women to satisfy their husbands intellectually.

Passing over the story of the Wife’s fourth husband for the moment (the “revelour” who keeps a mistress on the side), we come upon the third and last major section
of the Prologue. It describes the Wife’s travails at the hands of her fifth husband, the violent-tempered Jankyn, a clerk who habitually reads aloud to her from an anthology of anti-matrimonial and misogynist writings. This section is especially remarked for its narrative sequences. Two scenes in particular are rendered by Chaucer with a vivacity and color worthy of the best of the tales and not present elsewhere in the Prologue: that of the Wife’s first meeting and courtship with Jankyn out in the fields during Lent and that in which she precipitates their climactic battle by ripping three pages from his book in the middle of one of his nightly readings. Anthologies such as Jankyn’s were actively promoted by the Church in the fourteenth century in a campaign “to promote clerical celibacy and to encourage young men to embrace celibacy with eagerness and thanksgiving.” Part of the irony, of course, is that Jankyn is woefully misusing the book when, having chosen to ignore its admonitions and marry, he goes on to apply it as an instrument of torture to his wife. But of equal interest, as many critics have noted, is the appearance of the book as a text within the narrative. For its contents, listed by the Wife, include many of Chaucer’s anti-matrimonial and anti-feminist sources for the earlier sections of the Wife’s Prologue. As such, the book provides a sort of ironic commentary to cap the story of the Wife’s apparently lifelong struggle with the “authority” of these writers. This serves in a sense to unify the disparate sections of the Wife’s Prologue, but it also serves to set the narrative of her fifth marriage apart from the story of her earlier marriages. Up to this point, Jankyn’s book (or one very like it in Chaucer’s possession) has served as a reservoir from which proverbial arguments are silently drawn and placed in the mouths of characters. Now Chaucer begins, through Jankyn, to quote directly from their source and, in doing so, shifts his focus away from proverbs to concentrate on exemplary narratives of “wyikked wives.” As a result, this third section is as distinct from the second as the second is from the first.

These differences of style, source, and focus suggest that the three sections of the Wife’s Prologue may well have been conceived and written at different times. We are ultimately concerned, however, with developmental process; mere difference cannot of itself enable determination of the order of conception and composition. Nor is difference in itself even sufficient evidence that the various sections of the Prologue were conceived and written at different times, for as N. F. Blake has pointed out in this connection, difference can also arise from a complex original idea incorporating a variety of sources:

As for the composition of the WBP it has been claimed that it consists of several parts and that these witness to various stages in the Prologue’s growth, which in turn reflect Chaucer’s continued interest and involvement in the Wife herself. The Prologue may for critical purposes be divided into two parts, the “sermon” on marriage and virginy on the one hand, and the description of the Wife’s marriages on the other. This does not mean that the two parts were necessarily composed at different times. No manuscript contains only the one or other part, and so the only support for this idea of a serial-type composition is individual scholars’ subjective reactions. Yet the Prologue relies on several different sources, and the differences in tone and approach may reflect those sources. This is something that happens frequently in the poem.

Blake’s devotion to manuscript evidence can run to excess, but it provides us here with a useful check on speculation and purely subjective reactions. Evidence of Chaucer’s changing conception of the Wife must be sought, if it is to be sought at all, in the text of Prologue itself.

It is my contention that evidence of precisely this sort is to be found in the varied presentation which Jankyn receives from the Wife over the course of her narrative. Jankyn does not seem to have been originally conceived by Chaucer as a clerk, for the Wife refers to him at one point in her description of her first three marriages as “oure apprentice Jankeyn” (D 303). This gives the impression of an unlearned, probably unlettered apprentice in the Wife’s cloth-making trade. He could not have been the owner, much less the devoted reader, of a “book of wykked wives,” nor could he logically have participated in the famous Lenten courtship scene, for he seems already to be intimately acquainted with the Wife and stands therefore in no need of an introduction via her glossib. This impression of household intimacy is confirmed when Jankeyn puts in his next appearance:

Baar I stifly myne olde housbondes on honde
That thus they sydeny in hir dronkennesse;
And al was fals, but that I took witnesse
On Janekyn, and on my nece also.

(D 380-83)

If Janekyn is to be considered a plausible corroborating witness to such goings-on, he (along with the niece) must be living in the same house with the Wife and her husband(s), whether as a relative, as an apprentice, or as some sort of boarder. It is, of course, possible that this Janekyn is a different individual from the Jankyn who later becomes her fifth husband. After all, the Wife has the same name as her glossib, “dame Alys” (D 548). Her name, though, is far more common in Chaucer, and in Middle English generally, than Jankyn. The Riverside editors agree with me in treating Janekyn and Jankyn as the same person (enjoining the reader to use the trisyllabic Jankyn even where Jankyn is written) though they do not go on to comment upon or explain his mysterious change of profession. Another possible explanation might be found in the word “apprentice” if in some circumstances it could be used to denote a
That apprentice Janekyn was indeed intended to be Alys’s fifth husband is suggested by the circumstances in which he is introduced in a speech of the Wife to one of her earlier husbands:

And yet of ooure apprentice Janekyn,
For his cripe heer, shynyng as gold so fyne,
And for he squiereth me bothe up and doun,
Yet hastow caught a fals suspicioun.
I wol hym night, thogh thou were deed tomorowe!

(D 303-07)

Her doting description of his hair and of his behavior towards her belifes the emphatic denial she makes at the end of the passage. That, however, is the ingenious method of her railing, as she explains it to her fellow pilgrims. She would habitually preempt her husband(s)’s legitimate complaints about her behavior by complaining loudly that he was always criticizing her. In this passage she accuses her husband(s) of thinking Janekyn handsome and of suspecting her motives with respect to their young apprentice, and by doing so she is trying to force him not simply to disavow his suspicions, but to positively avow that he has no reason for being suspicious: that Janekyn is not handsome and that his behavior is perfectly honorable. But because she has given to us the key with which to decipher all this double-talk, we know that Jankyn must indeed be quite handsome, his hair fine gold, and that her husband(s) probably has every reason to suspect that were he to die, she would soon wed again. Chaucer goes out of his way to suggest in this passage an erotic tension within the household between the Wife and her apprentice, a tension no doubt destined to end in marriage upon the death of her current husband.

As things turn out, though, she marries someone else instead. This fourth husband is not, however, distinctly different in character or behavior from what we might have imagined the apprentice Janekyn to have turned out like had he not been transformed into a clerk. Apprentice Janekyn was to be the young and randy colt whom the Wife would marry at the end of her long career of fleecing tired old men; he was to be the one who would turn the tables on her, subjecting her to all the tortures of shrewishness, teasing sexuality, and jealousy to which she had subjected each of her old husbands. Had this theme of turnabout been fully developed, it would have added point and irony to the Merchant’s Tale, for, growing old, the Wife’s May would recapitulate January’s mistake: she would be the one with money and young Janekyn the one with ambition and good looks. This early theme remains visible in the introduction which the Wife gives of her fifth husband:

I trowe I loved hym best, for that he
Was of his love daungerous to me.
We wommen han, if that I shal nat lye.
In this mateare a queinte fantasye;
Wayte what thynge we may nat lightly have,
Therafter wol we crie al day and crave.

(D 513-18)

I would go so far as to argue that the passage from which this quotation is drawn (D 503-24) is an artifact of Chaucer's initial conception of the Wife's marriage to apprentice Janekyn. No mention is made here of Clerk Janckyn's studies or of his love for anti-feminist literature. Instead, the emphasis falls upon turnabout and role-reversal. In the context of this passage, he is "daungerous" with his love not in the sense of physical brutality, but rather in the sense of playing hard to get—a role which is ordinarily that of the woman and one which we have seen the Wife practice adeptly upon her old husbands. Alison has made the mistake of giving her love to him outright, just as each of her old husbands did with her, and now she finds, as they did, that she has to buy affection back with coin of a different color. This thoroughgoing reversal of her early marriages leaves no room for the fourth husband whom we meet in lines D 453-502, for his distinguishing characteristic of a "revelour" would certainly have been an aspect of apprentice Janekyn's personality: she had been wont to wander and make her husbands jealous, so too would he have done the same to her. It seems likely to me, therefore, that Janekyn was originally conceived as her one "bad" husband, a "revelour" who drove the Wife to distraction with jealousy.

What I think happened to this plan was that Chaucer suddenly saw the possibility of having the Wife confront directly the literary exponents of anti-matrimonial and misogynist diatribe by making her fifth husband a clerk. Because he still wanted to have the Wife deal with the problem of jealousy, though, he split off a new fourth husband from his original plan. This theory is corroborated by the fact that Chaucer's primary literary models for the character of the Wife, Jean de Meun's La Vieille and Villon's La Belle Heulmière, both fall for only a single "bad" lover late in life. This does not necessarily mean, however, that Chaucer originally planned only four husbands for the Wife. Robert F. Fleissner has argued that Chaucer chose five as the number of the Wife's husbands for not-insignificant numerological reasons. This presents little difficulty, for, as Pratt points out, the Wife's collective portrait of her elderly husbands is so undifferentiated that it might easily have once described four men rather than just three.

Of greater interest is the question of what led Chaucer to have the Wife directly address the anti-matrimonial, misogynist tradition. Our brief survey of his sources in the Prologue has shown that in the second section he drew primarily on de Meun and Theophrastus for a collection of anti-feminist proverbs which he has the Wife accuse her husband(s) of uttering while in his cups. Chaucer may well have been reading Theophrastus from an anthology of anti-matrimonial literature like the book owned by Jankyn. Proverbial misogyny could, of course, sound plausible in the mouths of unlearned husbands, but anti-feminist anthologies also contained a great number of stories of evil wives culled from Scripture, myth, and history which could only be introduced by a scholarly character. Clerk Jankyn offered just such a plausible solution and, as I have already suggested, a way to comment explicitly upon the anti-matrimonial tradition and its perverse effects on marriage. Once a clerk-husband had been invented, it was then possible to conceive the first section of the Prologue, for without the Wife's long exposure to his never-ending readings of Jerome's adversus Joviantum, she could never have plausibly defended marriage so ably, matching authority with authority. This is the argument made by Pratt, who further notes that if the Wife's defense of marriage is removed along with the Pardoner's interruption, the first six lines of her Prologue (which declare that she will rely on experience rather than authority, and promise to speak of "wo that is in mariagen") will make a much nicer fit with the section which then follows directly after, the story of her first three marriages. Thus, it seems likely that the Wife's account of her fifth husband was composed after her account of her first three husbands, perhaps after some work had already been done on the Wife's experiences while married to the revelour, apprentice Janckyn. And then at the very end, Chaucer probably inserted the Wife's defense of matrimony into the beginning of her Prologue.

Thus far we have treated the Wife's account of her stormy fifth marriage as having been conceived and written as a single unit, some time after the account of her first three marriages, and (probably) some time before the defense of marriage which opens her Prologue. In doing so, we have followed in Pratt's footsteps, endeavoring to repeat and even amplify his successes and to avoid the pitfalls of his analysis. There is reason to believe, however, that the Wife's fifth marriage was not conceived as a unit, but was, rather, reconceived in a process similar to the one we have observed in the development of the Prologue as a whole. The clue is an easy one to overlook and is, unfortunately, not so unambiguous in its interpretation as the one we have been following up to now. It is, however, profound in its implications. What it shares in common with "oure apprentice," ironically enough, is that it is also a reference to Jankyn. After telling the story of their first meeting and rapid courtship in a field during Lent, the Wife goes on to describe how, during the funeral of her fourth husband, she was struck by the handsomeness of Jankyn's legs and feet:
To churche was myn housbonden born a-morwe  
With neighebores, that for hym maden sorwe  
And Jankyn, oure clerk, was oon of tho.  
As help me God, whan that I saugh hym go  
After the beere, me thoughte he hadd a paire  
Of legges and of feet so clene and faire  
That al myn herte I yaf unto his hoold.

(D 593-99)

There are a number of things in this passage which cry out for explanation, but chief among them is the Wife's use of the pronoun "oure" to modify "clerk". Surely, if Jankyn is her new lover, with whom she has already made arrangements in case something happens to her fourth husband, the appropriate pronoun would have been "my". And if he is her lover already, then why does Chaucer place such an emphasis on his legs and feet, as if this were the moment at which she fell in love, or at any rate made up her mind that she was in love with him? It also seems strange that Jankyn would walk so close behind the bier if he is a secret lover and a stranger to her husband (and until recently, to the Wife herself). Finally, the Wife uses "oure" only two lines after and within the same sentence as she refers to her deceased husband. All these odd instances lead me to suspect that at the time Chaucer wrote this passage, he was still thinking of Jankyn as a member of the Wife's household—most likely a clerk boarding with her and her husband, like Nicholas in the Miller's Tale. These lines would then, seem to represent an intermediary stage in the process of Jankyn's development: from an apprentice who lives in the same house with the Wife, to a scholar who boards with her, and finally to a scholar boarding with one of her intimate friends whom she meets in the fields during Lent.

Before we further investigate the implications of such a model, however, we need to be sure of our foundation. For a great deal is riding on the assumption that the word "oure" cannot in this instance be taken to mean "my". Here the MED gives us pause, for its editors list, under the seventh of nine meanings for "oure": "our, my, often used with a singular referent, indicating familiarity, endearment, or domestic intimacy, sometimes with pejorative connotations."14 If "oure" could be used for "my" in intimate situations, we would be able to account for "oure clerk" quite simply, without the necessity of postulating that it represents some sort of intermediate stage in Jankyn's development. Upon closer examination, however, none of the eight textual citations listed in the MED fits the case of the Wife and her lover with any degree of accuracy. Citations from the Ancrene Riwle and from Gower's Confessio Amantis refer, respectively, to friars and to a prelate with the collective "our" in what seems primarily a gesture of speaking in the first place for an institution and in the second for the people in general. Neither is connected to the situation here at hand or even, with apologies to the editors at the MED, to the definition under consideration. In the remaining six citations the precise meaning of the pronoun is ambiguous, but in each case its use carries a strong connotation of the domestic sphere: "Oure syre bradsy lyke a dere" (Leve Lystynes p. 31); "Colle oure dogge" (CT NP B2 4573); "my lord don Juan, Oure deere cosyn" (CT Sh B2 1259); "Oure dame" (Sum D 1797 and WBP D 311); "Our wuthi werwolf" (W Pal 2306). The strangest in this collection is that taken from the alliterative romance William of Palerne, also known as William and the Werewolf. The use of "oure" here, though, is not substantially different from its use in "oure dogge," as the werewolf in this passage has just been seen in a dream by William's lover, Melior, acting the part of a guard dog by protecting the rock quarry where she and William are hiding from a lion and a crowd of other wild beasts.

This consistency of application implies that the peculiar use of "oure" to mean "my" arose from its customary application within a family in the identification of collective kinship (our mother, our father, our dog, etc.), becoming gradually associated with the family as a unit—the household. Thus the Wife of Bath in a clarifying instance missed by the editors of the MED calls her husband(s) affectionately "oure sheep" (D 432), even though they are the only two persons present, because she means that he is figuratively the sheep of the household, of their family unit. Here, and I think elsewhere as well, "oure" does not translate simply as "my" but rather denotes household intimacy and a close familial relationship. This may seem an overly complex interpretation, but it is necessary if we are to adequately explain the Wife's use of "oure" in line D 311: "What," she says, arguing with her husband(s), "wenestow make an ydiot of oure dame?" Here "oure" cannot mean "my", for she is referring to herself. Rather, as before, "oure dame" means the "the lady of our house." This, in fact, is precisely the gloss offered by the Riverside Edition.15 Similarly, when the Nun's Priest tells us, as narrator, that along with the widow and her daughters ran "Colle oure dogge, and Talbot, and Gerland," he does not mean to imply that Colle is his own dog, or that he was himself a member of the widow's household, but simply (and with an engaging intimacy) that Colle, the household dog, ran with the others after Reynard the fox.

This clarification of the MED definition has its immediate bearing upon the Wife's reference to Jankyn as "oure clerk." It would seem to preclude the possibility that Jankyn is not a member of her household, and that the Wife means simply "my clerk" as in "my lover." Some might insist that she is using "oure" as a special sign of intimacy because they have just plighted troth in the Lenten fields. But while this is conceivable, it does not fit the pattern we have established in our survey of Middle English usage. Every one of our examples has
made use of “oure” in a context of domestic rather than erotic intimacy, and we cannot simply speculate as to the possible meanings of Middle English words, but must endeavor to stick as closely as possible to the range of their contemporary usage.

Clerk Jankyn, then, is referred to here as though he were a member of the Wife’s household, quite possibly a boarder. This interpretation is, as we have seen already, consistent with the immediate context of a funeral procession in which Jankyn appears as a prominent mourner. It is, however, entirely inconsistent with the story the Wife has just finished telling of her meeting and courtship with Jankyn, according to which they were introduced by the Wife’s “gossyb dame Alys,” in whose house Jankyn was a boarder.4 That Lent, the Wife’s fourth husband happened to be away in London on business, and this left her free to range about, “for to se, and eek for to be seye” (D 552). The three of them attended various vigils, processions, miracle plays, and marriages, and one day the Wife found herself walking in the fields with Jankyn. It was here that she proposed marriage to him, telling him of a marvelous dream she had had of him. Because this scene is so much more detailed an account of the process through which they became lovers than that of the funeral scene, we may safely assume that it was written afterwords as a modification and further elaboration. On the other hand, the story of the Wife’s tempestuous marriage with this clerk was almost certainly conceived and written concurrently with the funeral. The story of their marriage was, after all, the whole reason Jankyn became a clerk, and the funeral scene is really nothing more than a simple account of how Alys came to meet and marry such a man: he was a boarder at her house, and during the funeral of her husband she noticed—probably not for the first time, but it was the first time she could act on the impulse—just how handsome he was. The funeral scene, then, was conceived and written as part of the original narrative of the Wife’s marriage to clerk Jankyn, and both scene and narrative together represent a stage in the story’s conception prior to the Lenten courtship. Both of these suppositions are corroborated by the Wife’s account of her wedding with Jankyn. If we ignore the astrological digression of lines D 609-26 (almost certainly added in revision as portions of the argument are missing from some manuscripts) the wedding scene links the funeral scene organically to the marriage narrative which follows:

What sholde I seye but, at the monthes ende,
This joly clerk, Jankyn, that was so hende,
Hath wedde me with greet solemnlytee.

(D 627-29)

Why, after all, would the Wife apologize in this manner for offering an inadequate account of her brief mourning and rapid courtship of Jankyn when she has more than adequately explained both in the Lenten scene? Why indeed, if not because the Lenten scene had not yet been conceived when these lines were written?

Having established that the funeral scene was almost certainly conceived and written before the famous scene of the Wife’s courtship of Jankyn which it follows, the next logical step would be to piece together a reconstruction of the narrative’s initial form. I suspect, however, that while Chaucer probably saved much of his earlier work (and indeed seems to have missed correcting certain minor discrepancies which we have employed here as clues), he must certainly have canceled key passages and transitions. Thus, while it is easy to imagine the death of her fourth husband (D 495-502: “Lat hym fare wel; God gyve his soule reste! / He is now in his grave and in his cheste”) being followed directly by the funeral scene (D 598f.: “To chirche was myn housbonde born a-morwe / With neighbores, that for hym maden sorwe”), it is difficult to figure out how the Wife’s introductory comments about her fifth marriage might be made to fit between these two passages: D 502-24: “Now of my fift houesbonde wol I telle, / God lete his soule nevere come in helle! / And yet was he to me the mooste shrewhe; / That feele I on my ribbes al by rewe / . . . / Greet prees at market maketh deere ware, / And to greet cheep is holde at litel prys: / This knoweth ever womman that is wys.” This is confusing because, as I have noted above, these lines may well have been written for apprentice Janekyn rather than clerk Jankyn, and probably predate all the rest. Of course, it is possible that they were written for apprentice Janekyn, set aside when Chaucer first altered his conception, and then re-integrated when the Lenten courtship scene was introduced. But it is also possible that we are now missing the transition sequence which used to link the Wife’s introduction of her fifth husband to the funeral scene at which we learn how she became stricken with love for him. In the midst of such uncertainties, I wish to concentrate upon what can be concluded with confidence on the basis of the available evidence.

Jankyn, then, seems at first to have been conceived as an apprentice, then as a clerk boarding in the Wife’s house, and finally as a clerk boarding with the Wife’s gossip. In thinking about the importance of this second change, we need first to realize what the first alteration left unchanged. For while changing Jankyn from apprentice to clerk utterly transformed the possibilities for their married life, it did not substantially change how they were to meet and fall in love: in both cases they are thrown together by circumstance, by the accident of living together in the same house. Few details are provided by Chaucer, and few are needed: the apprentice is handsome and often squires the Wife gallantly about town on her errands; the boarder is handsome and she takes special note of this at her last
husband’s funeral—her hour both of opportunity and need. These simple plots require no further explanation or adumbration because they are the stuff of fabliau, a genre noted for simplicity both of conception and execution. Beryl Rowland summarizes the critical consensus as follows:

The [fabliau] plot itself is single and clear-cut with a dénouement that seems inevitable; it makes a steady progression usually involving some kind of sexual conflict whereby one character or group of characters is outwitted by another; it exploits stock types and keeps the attention focused on action rather than character by employing certain conventions of behavior which the audience can readily anticipate and accept. The wife is inevitably lecherous, and also cunning enough to outsmart her menfolk... [D]escription, like characterization, is minimal and never allowed to impede the movement of the action.  

What is important for us here is the premium which the fabliau places on rapidity and movement. The use of conventional characters enables the writer to quickly place each one in relation to the others, and then let this initial configuration play itself out by way of stratagem, betrayal, revenge, and counter-revenge. This was taken over by Chaucer in his first two conceptions of the Wife’s fifth husband, Jankyn. But some time after writing the story of Alys and Jankyn’s epic battle of the book, or perhaps in the process of writing it, Chaucer seems to have become dissatisfied with this simplistic conception of how they met and fell in love. She herself had said that Jankyn was the great love of her life, and after the writing the touching story of their reconciliation—a rapprochement worked out in despite of years of bitter hatred, hatred which existed in direct proportion to their love—I think Chaucer must have come to believe her. Such a love was not simply the material of farce, though it certainly had farceal qualities. Such a love, imperfect and yet profound as it was, could not be conceived as the product of a simplistic configuration of stock characters—widow and apprentice, widow and boarder clerk—but had instead to be given a more explicit, individuated foundation:

I seye that in the feeldes walked we,
Til treweelly we hadde swich dailance,
This clerk and I, that of my purveiance
I spak to hym and seyde hym how that he,
If I were widwe, sholdye wedde me.

(D 564-68)

The result was an original conception which, it seems, Chaucer was still working on in the last years of his life. Unsatisfied, perhaps, with this account of how a forty-year-old woman could manage to charm a twenty-year-old into marriage, he added the dream passage, in which the Wife lets Jankyn know, in an enchantingly poetic manner, that their life together will be satisfying both sexually and economically:

This dream continues the process of trying to find adequate means to explain the origin of the deep and yet quite tawdry passion which binds the Wife and her clerk together. Her dream is, of course, all a lie, and yet we cannot doubt but that Jankyn had enchanted her, and that she managed in this way to enchant him. Such is the seed, half-fle, half-truth, from which their passionate, conflicted love grew, blossomed, and, at the very last, bore fruit.

We have located two discrepancies in Chaucer’s presentation of Jankyn and have used them as clues in tracing the development of the Wife of Bath’s Prologue. While superficially similar in wording and in their immediate implication, they are artifacts of two quite different changes in Chaucer’s initial conception. The first had certainly the more profound impact, for the introduction of clerk Jankyn made possible the Wife’s first-hand encounter and confrontation with the anti-matrimonial, misogynist literary tradition, and also—in all likelihood—made possible the scholarly defense of marriage against virginity with which she begins the Prologue. The second discrepancy points, however, to a change of plans which is equally original in conception, for it represents a turn away from the conventionalities of character formation in the fabliau (and, for that matter, in the Roman de la rose), pointing in the direction of more modern notions of a character as a fully-realized individual. It is hazardous, of course, to project modern biases upon Chaucer, whether they are of the moral or literary sort, but the rich complexity which is the Wife of Bath invites such a response: “[De Meun’s la Vieille] is a demonstration that women out of order are out of reason, and that freedom breeds unbridled lust and desire to dominate. The Wife of Bath’s monologue is not so transparent: it demands to be looked into, puzzles and intrigues the observer, offers opportunities for contrary responses, creates, though itself a monologue, the effect of a dialogue, within the speaker and also within the reader.” The complexity and rich texture to which Derek Pearsall testifies in this passage are in large part the result of the process of conception and reconception which we have been studying. Chaucer’s multiple additions and revisions give the Prologue a layered effect, like the rich build-up of paint on a canvas. If we wish to understand his striking originality, we must first appreciate the creative process through which his portrait came into being.

Notes

1. On the basis of thematic and stylistic differences as well as differences of source material, Jones
divided the Wife’s Prologue into two main sections—her defense of matrimony and the story of her five marriages—and claimed that these differences pointed to a modification of Chaucer’s original conception of the Wife (Richard F. Jones, “A Conjecture on the Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” JEGP 24 (1925): 519-20). Pratt modified Jones’s model, subdividing the Wife’s marriages between the first three “good” husbands and the two “bad” ones, once again on the basis of differences of source material and theme (Robert A. Pratt, “The Development of the Wife of Bath,” in Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Carol Baugh, ed. MacEdward Leach [Philadelphia, 1961], 45-79, see esp. 50-51). In the brief outline of the structure of the Wife’s Prologue which follows, I am indebted to Pratt for the basic outlines of my tripartite division (although I make some minor modifications). I owe my summary of Chaucer’s sources to Bartlett J. Whiting, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” in Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s “Canterbury Tales,” ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago, 1941), 207-22; to Robert P. Miller, ed., Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds (New York, 1977), 399-402; and to Dean Spruill Fansler, Chaucer and the Roman de la Rose (Gloucester, 1965), 168-69.

2. All references to the Canterbury Tales are from The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987) and appear parenthetically in the text.


5. Riverside, note to line 303, p. 1126.

6. MED, “apprentice” (sense b).

7. One weakness of Pratt’s argument is its reliance on the notion that Chaucer originally intended for the Wife to tell what is now the Shipman’s Tale. Hazel Sullivan has examined this idea thoroughly, finding little evidence in favor and a number of compelling arguments against (“A Chaucerian puzzle,” in A Chaucerian Puzzle and Other Medieval Essays, ed. Natalie Grimes Lawrence and Jack A. Reynolds, University of Miami Publications in English and American Literature 5 (1961), 1-46).


11. Pratt, 53-56.

12. MED, “our(e)” (sense 7.a).

13. The Riverside Chaucer; note to line 311.

14. Mary Carruthers has suggested that Jankyn’s relationship to the Wife’s gossip was not that of a stranger paying rent, but of a close relative (“Clerk Jankyn at Hom to Bord / With My Gossip,” ELN 22:3 [1985]: 11-20):

He som tyne was a clerk of Oxenford,
And hadde left scule, and wente at hom to bord
With my gossip, dwelinge in oure toun.

(D 527-29)

“At hom”, Carruthers points out, did not have the same metonymic range it has now, and could not refer to one’s home town, but only to one’s physical home. Moreover, “bord” still referred in Middle English to meals taken in any context, not just that of an “individual paying rent for board and bed.” Carruthers further argues that the small town in which the Wife dwelled, “biseide Bathe,” was too small to have had facilities for boarders. After all, the students in the Reeve’s Tale are forced to lodge overnight with their enemy the Miller when the sun goes down in the town of Trumpington, “biseide” Cambridge. All this may be thought to throw doubt upon the idea that Chaucer initially envisioned clerk Jankyn as a boarder in the Wife’s house, for she certainly could not have married a relative boarding with her. However, the evidence of the Reeve’s Tale speaks only to the difficulties of finding lodging in a small town on short notice. That more permanent lodging could be arranged is clear enough from the Miller’s Tale.


16. Because this passage, among others, is not present in many manuscripts (including the Hengwrt), Manly and Rickert believe that it and the others were added by Chaucer at a late date, after early manuscript editions had been made and circulated among friends (John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, The Text of “The Canterbury Tales” Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts [Chicago, 1940], 3: 454). Blake, however, argues that the absence of these passages from the Hengwrt is a sign of their illegitimacy (N. F. Blake, “The Relationship between the Hengwrt and the Ellesmere Manuscripts of the ‘Canterbury Tales’”, Essays and Studies 32 [1979]: 1-18). The idea that a mere scribe or editor inserted these passages into the Wife of Bath’s Prologue, however, seems to me unlikely. Each of them is lyrically beautiful.
and imaginatively original; the dream-vision which
the Wife invents for her lover is particularly strik-
ing for how well it fits into the process we have
traced in Chaucer’s development of her narrative.

17. Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London,
1985), 76.

**Alcuin Blami res (essay date 2002)**

SOURCE: Blami res, Alcuin. “Refiguring the ‘Scandal-
ous Excess’ of Medieval Woman: The Wife of Bath and
Liberality.” In *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle
Ages to the Renaissance*, edited by Thelma S. Fenster
and Clare A. Lees, pp. 57-78. New York: Palgrave,
2002.

[In the following essay, Blami res contrasts the Wife of
Bath to Blanche from The Book of the Duchess, studies
Christine de Pizan’s theories on the masculine and
feminine definitions of largesse and liberality, and
uncovers the stereotype common in Chaucer’s time that
women were miserly and selfish.]
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Elaine Treharne (essay date 2002)


[In the following essay, Treharne contends that in The Wife of Bath’s Prologue, Chaucer reinforces many misconceptions of women’s ability to manipulate and claim language.]

'I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man'

INTRODUCTION: METHODS OF ANALYSIS

This essay will focus on one of the most memorable English literary characters: Chaucer’s Wife of Bath. I shall be taking a primarily sociolinguistic approach in interpreting her: drawing out interactions between language and gender, language and power that are as relevant now as they always have been in male-female relations, and in engendering and maintaining the powerful ideologies that drive both the social construction of identity and academic discourses of character and morality.

The complexity of interpreting Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales arguably forms a major impetus for continuing to study the poet and his most famous work. As well as bringing to life his cast of pilgrims on their journey to Canterbury, Chaucer provides us with a multiplicity of generically and stylistically varied tales to entertain and engage us. The polyphony of the author, narrator, tale-tellers, and characters within the tales leads to a layered
narrative in which the least distinguishable voice is that of the author. When readers seek to determine what the meanings of the text might be, both within its contemporary context, and to the modern reader, this obscurity of the author inevitably problematises any act of interpretation.

So it is that there is little that can be definitive in reading and interpreting Chaucer. This, naturally, is ideal fodder for critics, and among Chaucer's many controversial characters, one of the most ultimately indefinable is the Wife of Bath.

**Critical Response to the Wife of Bath**

Critical response to the Wife of Bath has been as diverse as it has been emotive. Early commentators such as William Blake found her to be 'a scourge and a blight'. He went on to comment that he 'shall say no more of her, nor expose what Chaucer has left hidden; let the young reader study what he has said of her: it is useful as a scare-crow. There are of such characters born too many for the peace of the world.' Of the Wife's Prologue itself, Dryden comments that: 'I translated Chaucer first [before Boccaccio], and among the rest pitch'd on The Wife of Bath's Tale; not daring, as I have said, to adventure on her Prologue; because 'tis too licentious.'

From these early, slightly prudish comments, twentieth-century criticism emerged to illustrate a continuing controversy in scholarly response, particularly to the Wife of Bath as a character. Kittredge's famous article on 'Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage' reveals (under the guise of the Clerk's anticipated response) that 'The woman was an heresiarch, or at best a schismatic. She set up, and aimed to establish, a new and dangerous sect, whose principle was that the wife should rule the husband... She had garnished her sermon with scraps of Holy Writ and rags and tatters of erudition, caught up, we may infer, from her last husband.'

More recently, Tony Slade reaches a similarly critical judgement, claiming that 'The Wife's character has already been exposed in some detail in her Prologue, which rambles around the theme of "sovereign" in marriage; her tone is coarse and garrulous, and there is little evidence of that sort of delicate poetic beauty which some critics have professed to find in the Tale itself.'

Notably, these unfavourable readings are by male critics. One of the most significant developments in the interpretation of the Wife of Bath has come from those women (and some male) critics seeking to appropriate the Wife for feminist scholarship in the last three decades. These responses have extended across the full range of critical approaches, incorporating the psychoanalytic, the New Historicism or Cultural Materialist, to deconstructive affective stylistic and reader-response theory. Such methodologies have yielded readings of the Wife that see her as a shrewd businesswoman in an emergent bourgeoisie, a 'master of parody' providing a corrective to the 'tricks' of conventional authorities; or a 'proto-feminist,' an early independently minded woman seeking to reject oppressive patriarchy.

In discussing the manner in which the Wife engages with the writings of the anti-feminists cited throughout her Prologue, and takes issue with the ways in which women in contemporary medieval society are portrayed, Jill Mann comments that:

The double structure of the Wife's speech thus has a meaning of far wider import than its role in the Wife's individual experience. And yet it plays a crucial role in creating our sense of the Wife as a living individual. For what it demonstrates is her interaction with the stereotypes of her sex, and it is in this interaction that we feel the three-dimensionality of her existence. That is, she does not live in the insulated laboratory world of literature, where she is no more than a literary object, unconscious of the interpretations foisted upon her: she is conceived as a woman who lives in the real world, in full awareness of the anti-feminist literature that purports to describe and criticise her behaviour, and she has an attitude to it just as it has an attitude to her.

Further, citing Patterson's phrase, Mann comments that 'Chaucer could not invent a new "female language", and sensibly did not try to do so... but... the Wife's Prologue is designed precisely to make the reader conscious of the confining nature of "the prison house of masculine language".'

While there is a good deal of truth in these statements, I would suggest that Chaucer does nonetheless attempt to "invent a new female language" inasmuch as he provides a voice for the Wife that deliberately attempts to emulate aspects of a woman's language, albeit from an entirely stereotypically conceived basis. Moreover, the textual dissemination of the authorities against which she speaks was such that the access she has had to them can only have come through an interpretative mediator—her fifth husband Jankyn with his impromptu evenings spent vernacularising the Latin auctoritas contained within the anti-feminist writings. Not only, then, does the Wife internalise the interpreted words of the Church Fathers, but she re-interprets them, uttering them in a language—English—that was itself marginalised, Other: in so doing, she further marginalises herself even as she seeks to situate herself within the realm of the authoritative.

Problematising the issue of verbal and social intercourse, the Wife is interpreted by Barrie Ruth Strauss from a psychoanalytic perspective as 'participating in a

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homosexual exchange with the Pardoner' in the course of her Prologue, following the Pardoner's interruption. 'Under the guise of sharing with men the secret of the feigned appetite as one of women's ways of handling men, the Wife articulates the homoerotic nature of phallocentric sexuality: that it is masculine desire seeking only itself. When she makes the Pardoner her accomplice in betraying her husbands' secrets, she in effect puts the Pardoner in bed with her and her husbands.'

While this reading is puzzling, Straus's overall evaluation of the Wife is one that foregrounds the opacity of the text: that 'The Wife of Bath is the uncontrollable voice that eludes interpretative truth. The ultimate secret she reveals is that all who think they can control, penetrate, and master such texts as she represents are deluded. All the critics can do is create interpretations that double their own desire.' It surely is the case that the crucial aspect of Chaucer's work is the demands made on the readers' own interpretation and moral response. As Chaucer's Wood succinctly puts it: 'it is not the text that produces readings but the readings that produce the text.' But here, certainly in Straus's argument, and elsewhere in other scholarly comments, the critic appears to perceive the Wife as the shaper of her own Prologue and Tale, as a 'voice' that effectively propagandises a new 'truth'. Lynne Dickson, for example, argues that:

Despite textual signals that Alison tries to control and disempower the antifeminist topos, it ultimately overwhelms her. The sheer length of her Prologue and the fact that she loses her train of thought six times support the reading that Alison experiences considerable discomfort with her speaking situation. One of the Prologue's strategies, then, seems to be to expose the tyranny of masculine discourse: it oppresses even a figure like Alison. This revelation is complemented by the text's method of hailing its reader as more complicated and open than the oppressively monolithic audience that Alison cannot escape.

And it is this that strikes me as most problematic: to read the Wife as if she were anything other than a fiction masterfully created by Chaucer is to fall into the trap of 'truth' that he sets through his vivid, realistic depictions.

There is no doubt that Chaucer ventriloquiases his female fiction effectively. The Wife's is a voice that resonates loudly in Middle English literature, and that assists in making her stand out as one of the most memorable of all female literary characters. It is precisely this multi-layered speech-act that permits for a sociolinguistic analysis employing theories of language and power, and language and gender to determine the possible nature of the characterisation of the Wife, and the potential acuity of and purpose in Chaucer's depiction.

Sociolinguistics is the modern study of the ways in which language operates within society. It emerged, in part, from Saussure's analyses of language in the earlier part of the twentieth century, and the movement away from more historical modes of language analysis such as philology, dominant in the nineteenth century. Through sociolinguistic experiment, it has proven possible to determine, for example, the use by particular groups of speakers of variant forms of language. Where this usage correlates to a social, economical, or gendered group, relationships between language and power, language and class, and language and gender can be determined and analysed. The discipline, in principle, is not a judgemental one: no values are notionally placed on the results; rather, it collects and collates empirical data about variability within language and possible determining features.

There is no question about Chaucer's own language awareness. In The Reeve's Tale, the two students, John and Aleyn, are of Northern origin. Their speech is peppered with Northernsms that are interpreted by the editors of The Riverside Chaucer as 'apparently the first case of this kind of joking imitation of a dialect recorded in English literature'. Chaucer thus attempts, with relative success, the phonetic representation of variant forms of English within his text. Taking a wider linguistic perspective, Chaucer demonstrates himself to be very conscious of his role as a transmitter of the vernacular, at a time when its prestige as a vehicle for literary production had yet to be firmly established. In his lengthy Romance, Troilus and Criseyde, Chaucer's narrator comments:

And for ther is so gret diversite
In English and in wrytynge of oure tonge,
So prey I God that non myswrite the,
Ne the mysymetre for defaute of tonge;
And red whereso thow be, or elles songe,
That thow be understond, God I biseche!

Furthermore, Chaucer's awareness of literary form is not only evident from his manipulation of it within The Canterbury Tales' variety and versatility, but also from his comments through the voice of the Parson of the associations of alliterative verse in contemporary England:

But trusteth wel, I am a Southen man;
I kan nat geeste 'rum, ram, rut', by letter.
Ne, God woot, rym holde I but lietel better;
And therefore, if yow list—I wol nat glose—
I wol yow tell a myrie tale in prose

Chaucer's mockery of this poetic form in the mouth of the prose-telling, truth-telling Parson illustrates clearly the author's own linguistic acuity and observation.
The demands of ostensibly telling the truth by repeating the (fictional) words of the characters in his writing result in Chaucer's creation of a variety of realistic voices, each of which is suited in varying degrees to a particular pilgrim narrator. In the case of the majority of the pilgrims, the men, Chaucer's main concern may have been the representation of a register appropriate to each narrator; for example, in the choice of doctrinaire prose for the Parson; the courtly language and rhyme royal versification of the Knight in his philosophical romance; the classically-infused religious register of the Monk throughout his episodic tragedy; and the bawdy language and frequent colloquialisms uttered by the Miller in his complex fabliau. In the case of the three women who tell tales, however, the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, and the Second Nun, Chaucer has not only to find a register and style suitable to their respective status, but also an appropriate means of imitating the language usage of women.

It has long been the case that the perceived differences between men's use of language and women's have been thought worthy of judgemental comment, especially by male scholars and writers. These differences have until very recently been noted in order to indicate women's irritating habits, their deviancy or inadequacy in language usage in comparison to the norm—that is, men's language usage. This 'inferior' use by women of language is, of course, part of the paradigm of the social and familial subjugation of women, for perceived inequality in language usage reflects and contributes to actual inequality in society. Such attitudes to women's speech—that women are not as adept at language usage, or that there are particular forms of language use more appropriate to women—persist, however, in phrases such as 'girls' talk', or 'women talk too much', or 'ladies shouldn't swear'.

The myths surrounding women's use of language are ancient in origin, and their constancy and ubiquity is testimony to the stability of a social order which has undoubtably been, until relatively recently, patriarchal, institutionally controlled, and exclusive. Chaucer's linguistic awareness yields interesting results in terms of his use of then-current (and in many cases still current), folklinguistic or anecdotal accounts of women as speakers. His ventriloquism as the Wife of Bath, and indeed as the Prioress and Second Nun, offers ideal material for analysis using socio-linguistic theory, and leads to the conclusion that he was very much immersed in, and quite content to perpetuate, the stereotypes of women's language use prevalent in late medieval academic (and therefore male) culture. An evaluation of the female pilgrims becomes, consequently, not so much a matter of what they say, but of how they say it.

Although Chaucer himself has been regarded by some scholars as a proto-feminist writer, this seems akin to anachronistic wishful thinking. Better, it seems, if one wants to regard him as proto-anything, is the conception of Chaucer as a proto-sociolinguist, or more properly perhaps, proto-folklinguist. He is a writer whose fictional creations deliberately raise issues of the relationship between language and social structures, and who questions implicitly the status quo in crucial cultural relationships such as language and gender.

Before I outline the major aspects of mythical language use by women incorporated by Chaucer into his depiction of the Wife of Bath, I should like to offer a word of caution to allay any suspicions that my focus on this methodology may have prompted. First, sociolinguistic analysis focuses mostly on parole, that is the actual spoken utterance, and here, I will be applying it to written language. Moreover, a fairly formal versified language. Even so, it is a relevant approach, since Chaucer the author through his pilgrim narrator is claiming to be repeating the actual spoken words of his subject, the Wife of Bath. Second, sociolinguistics often analyses language synchronically. However, as it assists in explaining relations between language users and society, it can most fruitfully be used diachronically in order to illustrate and elucidate power relations in society at any given point in social evolution.

Perhaps the primary linguistic determinants of women's language, and it should be noted that these are also folklinguistic are that women gossip, nag, verbally harass, give bad advice, cannot be trusted, and talk uncontrollably. This myth could be evinced by very considerable numbers of quotations from texts, both ancient and modern. The twelfth-century Proverbs of Alfred, numbers fifteen and sixteen, for example, reveal that:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Pus quep Alved.} \\
&\text{'Ne wurp þu never so wod} \\
&\text{Ne so wyn-drunke,} \\
&\text{Pat evere segge þine wife} \\
&\text{Alle þine wille.} \\
&\text{For if ðu iseye þe bivore} \\
&\text{Pine ivo alle,} \\
&\text{And þu hi myd worde} \\
&\text{Iwreþed hevedest,} \\
&\text{Ne scholde heo hit lete} \\
&\text{For þing lyvyinde,} \\
&\text{Pat heo ne scholde þe forþ upbreyde} \\
&\text{Of þine halesyþes.} \\
&\text{Wymmon is word-wod,} \\
&\text{And haveþ tunge to swift;} \\
&\text{þeyþ heo wel wolde,} \\
&\text{Ne may heo hi nowiht wolde.}' \\
&\ldots\text{Pe mon þat let wymmon} \\
&\text{His mayster iwræþe,} \\
&\text{Ne schal he never beon ihuþ} \\
&\text{His wordes loverd;} \\
&\text{Ac heo hine schal steerne} \\
&\text{Totrayen and totoene,} \\
&\text{And selde wurþ he blype and gled} \\
&\text{Pe mon þat is his wives qued.}
\end{align*}
\]
THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

In these proverbs, erroneously ascribed to King Alfred, and surviving in a number of thirteenth-century manuscripts, oft-repeated criticisms of women's language usage are iterated. Women are 'word-wod' ('word-mad' or 'wild in speech') and cannot be trusted to hold their tongue; an infuriated wife's proximity will inevitably result in her public reprimanding of the unfortunate husband in front of even his worst enemies; and women in general simply cannot control their verbosity, even if they try to. Such commonplace and stereotypical myths about women's language usage are entirely bound up, from the male perspective, with a woman's trustworthiness, her discretion, and her overall demeanour and appearance.

Such proverbial derogations of women's language, and the inevitable allying of 'shrewishness' with a more general female proclivity to unfortunate and unacceptable habits, are explicit in Chaucer. The Merchant, for example, tells his (clearly male) audience to: 'Suffre thy wyves tonge, as Catoun bit; / She shal comande, and thou shal suffren it'; and the host adds to The Merchant's Tale, that:

I have a wyf, though she povere be,
But of her tonge a labbyng shrewe is she,
And yet she hath an heep of vices mo;

Women's loquaciousness thus becomes symptomatic of their general urge to 'comande' with the consequence that the male recipient—usually the husband—must endure excessive torment as a result. This insidious stereotyping of women, and wives in particular, is endemic in the writings of medieval male authors. Elements of this folklinguistic myth to which women have been subject are ancient, and develop in part from the most authoritative of sources, the Bible. In I Timothy 2.11-14, for instance, St Paul asserts: 'Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp 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 the transgressions.' From such scripture and subsequent exegesis, therefore, emerges the ideal woman: a silent one. It is possible to go even further and to suggest that when women are supposed to be quiet, a talkative woman is one who talks at all."

This is the easiest myth to evidence as replicated by Chaucer in his creation. The Wife has by far the longest Prologue in the Tales, and one where the narratorial subjectivity is more pronounced than elsewhere, other than the feminised Pardoner's Prologue. Moreover, confirming the stereotype of the verbose woman are the speeches within the speech by which the Wife recalls her own words to her husbands, condemning the successive husbands' anti-feminist commonplaces, while simultaneously confirming them. The myths of women's inability to maintain privacy, their tendency to gossip, and to speak of 'trivial' matters—such as love and relationships—are shown to be part of the operative mode of the Wife. When she discusses Jankyn, who went to board with her friend Alison, we learn that the Wife tells Alison everything:

She knew myn herte, and eek my privete,
Bet that oure parrishe preest, so moot I thee!
To hire biwreyed I my consell al,
For hadde myn housbonde pissed on a wal,
Or doon a thing that sholde han cost his lyf,
To hire, and to another worthy wyf,
And to my nece, which that I loved wel,
I wolde han toold his consell every deel.
And so I did ful often, God it woot,
That made his face often red and hoot
For verray shame, and blamed himself for he
Had tool to me so greet a pryvete."

Here, the Wife takes obvious pride in recounting her indiscretions that occur 'ful often', not only to her best friend, but also to another woman, and to her niece. These intimate news reports include the revelation of secrets told to her by her husband, even those where disclosure would have cost him dearly. Her delight in these activities, no matter how positively they can be read, serves to confirm the stereotype of the 'gossiping' woman, incapable of remaining discreet, incapable of earning trust. The Wife's pleasure and self-approval in these activities, the lack of censure she appears to receive, reinforces those proverbs and myths that warn men of the danger of telling women their secrets, and then subsequently blame the same men for the foolishness they show in trusting their wives. Such confirmation of the 'truths' about women (and, one might add here, too-trusting men) perpetuated by male authors like Chaucer actually weakens the Wife's position, and stereotypes her even as she tries to throw the anti-feminist stereotyping back at her husbands. And, while the length of the Prologue itself is the most obvious evidence of the woman's mythical inability to be brief, Chaucer invites us to look more closely at the Wife's language through the ample amount of evidence he provides for her in mimicking the voice of the late fourteenth-century widow. Her Prologue, in effect, becomes a handbook to observations on women's language, some five hundred years before a sustained thesis was advanced.

LANGUAGE AND GENDER

When Otto Jespersen wrote his famous book on language and its origins in 1922, he ostensibly presented empirical evidence to validate his work. In
his chapter entitled ‘Woman’ (with, significantly, as pointed out by various later twentieth-century linguists, no comparable chapter for ‘Man’), he signalled that women’s language requires its own discussion and set of comments, because it is not the norm; rather, it is to be measured against the normative language usage of the white, middle-class male. Chaucer’s lengthy characterisation of the Wife of Bath similarly marks her out as beyond the norm. While this positively questions social roles, it also highlights the manner in which the Wife is outside; in providing the Wife with an opportunity to talk about herself at a length and in a manner not afforded to any other pilgrim, Chaucer marks her out as ‘unusual’ or ‘remarkable’ (in a positive reading) and as ‘deviant’ (in a negative). As she is representative of the non-standard, it is almost inevitable that she can be read as being depicted derogatorily in comparison with the norm, particularly within the fourteenth-century cultural and social contexts of male dominance and female subordination.

Jespersen and Chaucer have a good deal in common as proponents of folklinguistic stereotyping of women’s language: Jespersen provides a list of the folklinguistic myths to which sociolinguists in the 1970s and 1980s felt compelled to reply, and not always with a rebuttal. Much of Jespersen’s ‘evidence’ is based on anecdote rather than objective and empirical observation, but it is cited as (his) truth because of the permeation of long-held derogatory views about women’s language usage. Similarly, Chaucer is able to manipulate stereotypical facets of women’s language usage through his creation, and he, to a significant extent, pre-empts in a literary framework what Jespersen would go on to write within a linguistic structure some five hundred and more years later.

Jespersen’s account of women’s language provides a blueprint for the promulgation of folklinguistic stereotyping, iterating commonsplaces about women’s particular characteristics of language usage that owe more to the medieval proverb than they do to the objective collation of data. Among the key features he notes are the divergences between the ‘lower and higher registers of language’:

The difference between the two ‘languages’ is one of degree only: they are two strata of the same language, one higher, more solemn, stiff and archaic, and another lower, more natural and familiar, and this easy, or perhaps we should say slipshod, style is the only one recognized for ordinary women.

He goes on to discuss the use of hyperbolic lexis and intonation in women’s speech:

Another tendency noticed in the language of... women is pretty widely spread among French and English women, namely, the excessive use of intensive words and the exaggeration of stress and tone-accent to mark emphasis.

This he expands upon with the remarkable series of examples and explanations:

the fondness of women for hyperbole will very often lead the fashion with regard to adverbs of intensity, and these are very often used with disregard of their proper meaning... There is another intensive which has something of the eternally feminine about it, namely so... The explanation of this characteristic feminine usage is, I think, that women much more often than men break off without finishing their sentences, because they start talking without having thought out what they are going to say.

This hyperbole of intensifiers helps assist, perhaps, in making more emphatic and startling the woman’s subject of discourse, because, according to Jespersen, women are incapable of what might be loosely termed ‘straight-talking’; hence, their preference for euphemism:

But when... we come to... vocabulary and style, we shall find a much greater number of differences... There is certainly no doubt, however, that women in all countries are shy of mentioning certain parts of the human body and certain natural functions by the direct and often rude denominations which men, and especially young men, prefer when among themselves. Women will therefore invent innocent and euphemistic words and paraphrases, which sometimes may in the long run come to be looked upon as the plain or blunt names, and therefore in their turn have to be avoided and replaced by more decent words.

Considering that women are so innovative in language, having to ‘invent innocent... words and phrases’, it comes as something of a surprise to discover that:

the vocabulary of a woman as a rule is much less extensive than that of a man... Woman as a rule follows the main road of language, where man is often inclined to turn aside into a narrow footpath or even to strike out a new path for himself... Those who want to learn a foreign language will therefore always do well at the first stage to read many ladies’ novels, because there they will continually meet with just those everyday words and combinations which the foreigner is above all in need of, what may be termed the indispensable small-change of a language.

The fact that women are adept at the ‘small change’ of language, that they talk before they have thought through what they are going to say, and that they pepper their speech with intensifiers and phatic words, is summarised by Jespersen’s general explanation:

The volubility of women has been the subject of innumerable jests: it has given rise to popular proverbs in many countries... The superior readiness of speech of women is a concomitant of the fact that their vocabulary is smaller and more central than that of men. But this again is connected with another indubitable fact, that women do not reach the same extreme points as men, but are nearer the average in most
respects... Genius is more common among men by virtue of the same general tendency by which idiocy is more common among men. The two facts are but two aspects of a larger zoological fact—the greater variability of the male.38

And the causes for the major linguistic distinctions evinced between the sexes are:

mainly dependent on the division of labour enjoined in primitive tribes and to a great extent also among more civilized peoples. For thousands of years the work that especially fell to men was such as demanded an intense display of energy for a comparatively short period, mainly in war and in hunting. Here, however, there was not much occasion to talk, nay, in many circumstances talk might even be fraught with danger. And when that rough work was over, the man would either sleep or idle his time away, inert and torpid, more or less in silence. Woman on the other hand, had a number of domestic occupations which did not claim such an enormous output of spasmodic energy. To her was at first left not only agriculture, and a great deal of other work which in more peaceful times was taken over by men; but also much that has been till quite recently her almost exclusive concern—the care of children, cooking, brewing, baking, sewing, washing, etc.—things which for the most part demanded no deep thought, which were performed in company and could well be accompanied with a lively chatter.39

While it is easy enough to dismiss Jespersen out of hand for his subjective descriptions of women’s language usage and domestic habits particularly in the light of more recent sociolinguistic theory, it is the case that his analyses, anecdotal as they may be, reflect commonly held beliefs about the way women use language—not only in 1922 when his book was published, but also in the present day. It is precisely because these folklinguistic myths about women’s language have a millennia-old history, and are ubiquitous, that it is possible to ascertain Chaucer’s own use of them in the depiction of, arguably, his greatest literary fiction, the Wife of Bath.

Man Writes Woman

If repetition, euphemism, hyperbole, unfinished sentences (and illogicality), limited vocabulary, volubility, and a contextual focus on domestic issues are characteristic of the deviant speech of women, and any indication of the limited nature of one’s language, then certainly Alison is made a chief exemplar.40 Throughout the Prologue, she is ventriloquised using hyperbole and phatic fillers: empty phrases such as ‘by my fey’ (line 203) and ‘God woot’ (used six times in a variety of combinations).41 Such phrases are generally not only phatic, in that they add little to the semantic context, but they are, cumulatively, hyperbolic, giving an exaggerated effect to her various points. In its most positive interpretation, the Wife’s apparent insistence on placing considerable emphasis on ‘truth’, and the witness of God’s testimony in her text through the use of ‘God woot’, acts ironically to undermine the authority that she claims here for herself.

Hyperbole and the use of intensifying adverbs are well illustrated throughout the Prologue. I have already mentioned the use of ‘God woot’, but a different kind of hyperbole is yielded by the frequent use of the adverbs ‘wel’, ‘ful’, ‘verray’, ‘so’ (alone, 49 times) and ‘ofte(n)’. These intensifiers are used throughout the Prologue—one hundred times, every eight lines or so, a percentage that is higher than other Prologues, such as that of the Pardoner (one every 15 lines), or the Miller (one every 10). The receptive consequences of using intensifiers in speech is to add to the exaggerative, emotive, and individuated nature of the discourse; judged against the ‘norm’ of language usage, the result is that the authority of the speaker is weakened. The following sample quotation from lines 27-30 illustrates this use of intensifiers (in the repetition and insistence on the truth of her personal knowledge in line 27, in particular):

‘But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye,
    God bad us for to weaxe and multiplye;
    That gentil text kan I wel understonde.
    Eek wel I woot, he seyde myn houstebonde...’

Alison is here made to emphasise the veracity of her experience, but in a manner that is less declarative and assertive than defensive and exaggerative. Chaucer’s mimicry of the stereotypical features of a woman’s speech, then, renders the content of that speech less authoritative, more subjective and less effective than it might otherwise have been.

From this brief survey, Chaucer’s encapsulation of stereotypical aspects of women’s speech pre-empt many of the same elements described in Jespersen’s account of the variation between the sexes’ use of language in his chapter. To these folklinguistic characteristics can be added others that have been proposed by more modern socio-linguists in the last few decades. Robin Lakoff, in Language and Woman’s Place,42 for example, asserts that adjectives such as ‘adorable’, ‘charming’, ‘sweet’, ‘lovely’, and ‘divine’ belong to women’s speech. These adjectives are ‘terms that denote approval of the trivial, the personal; that express approval in terms of one’s own personal emotional reaction, rather than by gauging the likely general reaction.’43 In terms of syntax too, according to Lakoff, ‘women’s speech is peculiar’.44 Women use tag-questions: ‘used when the speaker is stating a claim, but lacks full confidence in the truth of that claim’.45 Other characteristics would include the tendency of women to being open to interruption by men in mixed sex conversations.46 Each of these so-called traits of women’s language have been shown to be questionable,
measured as they were against the norm of male ‘standard’ patterns of language usage. These conclusions by Lakoff and other linguists have rightly been the focus of corrective criticism by subsequent empirical research, particularly because the conclusions drawn from these early observations was that women’s language use was inferior to that of men: less assertive, less convincing, less credible. It is only the recent late twentieth-century corrective criticism of feminist linguists that has succeeded in beginning to reposition women’s speech as different from but equal to that of men. Thus Chaucer’s fourteenth-century replication of stereotypical features of women’s speech in his portrait of the Wife of Bath succeeds in producing—for him and for his contemporary audience—a fictional woman who is ultimately ‘deficient’ in her discourse in comparison to the norm of the male pilgrims. He fundamentally accomplishes the depiction of a woman who is undermined by her own prolixity and hyperbole, and who, furthermore, exhibits virtually all the major elements of women’s stereotypical language usage in her Prologue.

In this respect, in addition to the features noted above, the Wife’s discourse frequently demonstrates the use of tag questions, rhetorical questions, and questions that are answered intratextually—39 times in all: when she tells her audience that she often went to vigils, processions and the like (lines 555-8), and wore her scarlet robes (559), ‘Thise wormes, ne thise mothes, ne thise mytes, / Upon my perill, frete hem never a deel; / And wostow why? For they were used weel’ (lines 560-2); or, again, ‘What reketh me’, she says, ‘though folk sete vilenye / Of shrewd Lameth and his bigame?’ (lines 53-4), showing here both colloquial language as well as rhetorical questioning, seeking approval or cooperation from her audience in the claim of her often-married status. In relation to the declaration by Jespersen and others that women avoid language that directly pertains to taboo subjects such as sex or parts of the body, the Wife engages in euphemism, as well as underlining her point with a rhetorical question, ultimately seeking agreement from her audience:

Of uryne, and oure bothe thynges smale
Were eek to knowe a femele from a male,
And for noon oother cause,—say ye no?
The experience woot wel it is noght so.

The number of such questions within this text contrasts with one question in the Pardoner’s Prologue, and one in the Parson’s Prologue, each of them a shorter text than the Wife’s Prologue; the proportional disparity is evident enough.

As regards interruption, the Wife of Bath is interrupted twice: once by the laudatory Pardoner at lines 163-92, and once by the Friar’s laughter at line 829. The first of these interruptions is worth citing in context:

Up stirte the pardon, and that anon:
‘Now, dame,’ quod he, ‘by God and by seint john!
Ye been a noble prechoor in this cas.
I was aboute to wedde a wyf: allass!
What sholde I bye it on my flesh so deere?
Yet hadde I levere wedde no wyf to-yeere!’
‘Abyde!’ quod she, ‘my tale is nat bigonne.
Nay, thou shalt drynken of another tonne,
Ere that I go, shal savourere wors than ale.
And when that I have toold thee forth my tale
Of tribulacion in marriage,
Of which I am expert in al myn age,
This is to seyn, myself have been the whippe.—
Than maystow chese whether thou wolt sipe
Of thilke tonne that I shal abroche.
Be war of it, er thou to my approche;
For I shal telle ensamples mo than ten.
—Whoso that nyl be war by othere men,
By hym shul othere men corrected be.—
The same words writeth Ptolomae;
Rode in his Almageste, and take it there.’
‘Dame, I wolde praye yow, if youre wyl it were;
Seyde this pardon, `as ye bigan,
Telle forthe youre tale, spareth for no man,
And teche us yonge men of youre practike.’
‘Gladly’, quod she, `sith it may yow like;
But that I praye to al this campaignye,
If that I spoke after my fantasye,
As taketh not acrief of that I seye;
For mynte entente is nat but for to pleye.’

In this particular excerpt, many of the facets of the stereotypical woman’s language usage are exemplified. Not only is the Wife interrupted (albeit to be asked to give advice), but she does not hold her train of thought (demonstrating the lack of logicality or sequenced thought so often attributed to women); she cites authority to lend weight to her argument but attributes the proverb wrongly to Ptolemy; and she exaggerates for effect in declaring that she will tell more than ten examples of, presumably, tribulation in marriage. While other pilgrims are interrupted—Chaucer the pilgrim, for example, in the telling of The Tale of Sir Thopas—and while other pilgrims use hyperbole, such as the Physician in his formulaic description of Virginia, for instance, it is the bringing together of all these features in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue that marks her character out as employing, to a considerable extent, the stereotypes of women’s speech labelled (until recently, that is) ‘deficient’ or ‘deviant’ in relation to the norm of male language usage. Through these characteristics, Chaucer effectively renders his literary creation ‘powerless’ in the face of masculine oppression: an oppression filtered through judgements about language use, reflecting and contributing to patriarchal social and cultural paradigms.

‘Experience, though noon auctoritie’—the opening gambit of the Wife—is, then, precisely the point; she has no authority, either through her inability to read and interpret the authoritative texts she cites, or through her teaching and preaching in the manner Chaucer permits
her. But any pretence at authority that Chaucer allows, and which is seized upon by positivist readings of the Wife, is undermined conclusively by Chaucer’s stereotypical and perceptibly inferior forms of women’s speech recorded and employed by him.

The emphasis on the Wife and her spoken language is most clearly pointed up by the semielastic act in which she engages when she literally and deliberately destroys the written word contained in Jankyn’s book. This act privileges metaphorically the Wife’s reliance on the spoken word for authority as well as symbolising her derision of everything Jankyn’s book represents. This foregrounding of the vocal, the supposed domain of women, extends to the gendered aspect of actual spoken discourse: that is that women are reliant on the uttered word—theirs primarily by virtue of exclusion from formal education—but that it can never be superior to, or more authoritative than, men’s reliance on the written word, on traditional auctoritee.

Moreover, the Wife, in contrast to the other female tellers, is not ‘literate’: the level of traditional literacy she attains, she attains through hearing, not reading the Latin texts. Whereas the Prioress and Second Nun have access to (at the very least in the vernacular), and repeat, traditional tales in a manner very much according both with their positions and their stereotypical gendered roles, the Wife is ostensibly free of these ideologically imposed constraints. Although at times the Wife immerses herself in the discourse of patriarchy, presumably to be heard—to sound authoritative—she is ultimately unable to overcome this discourse because of her verbal powerlessness: the way in which, through Chaucer, her words render the argument ineffectual.

Illustrating this most effectively is the analysis of that spoken word within the framework of sociolinguistics or, more appropriately, folklinguistics. It is here, within that analysis, that the nexus of her power is located, for it is here that Chaucer is operating at his most indefinable level: one might wonder what it is that he intended in ventriloquising so effectively the voice of the woman. Depending on how one interprets the text, the author has either created a female fiction whose power is defined by what she says, or a female fiction who becomes powerless through the manner in which she speaks, no matter what she actually says.

Chaucer’s awareness of language usage and the power of language is everywhere evident. He creates an opaque text through his multi-layered approach, breaking many of the rules of conversation between reader and writer that demand clarity of meaning, a process of implicature where the relationship between what is stated and what is implicit is clear, and where there is explicit co-operation. The lack of explicitness in the creation of the Wife has led inevitably to the problemising of what she is meant to stand for, and what Chaucer intended through her depiction. She has been labelled as the worst of women, as a proto-feminist, appropriated by scholars to meet their own requirements. The same, of course, is true of Chaucer. What is certain is that as author he questions issues of language and power, of typical fourteenth-century gender roles and social relationships in a way that is itself didactic. Ironically, perhaps, the ultimate powerlessness of the female voice is that, in reality, it does not exist, for this is not a woman speaking here giving voice to the concerns of female experience, it is a male author enacting the role of woman, silencing her as effectively as the female audience of texts such as Hali Melidh and Andrene Wisse are silenced.

Chaucer has the opportunity to subvert social expectation, to undermine stereotype, but it is not an opportunity he exploits here, though he may appear to be doing so at the surface level. On the contrary, as a man of his day, he confirms the stereotypes of women, but also indirectly raises issues about the validity of ideological norms that he subsequently refuses to clarify. No matter how much or how little Chaucer and subsequent critics sympathise with the character of the Wife of Bath, may celebrate her creation as a wonderfully independent, free-thinking woman or might condemn her as the harridan of the anti-feminist diatribes she so joyously appropriates, she is ultimately powerless: powerless not so much through what she says, but through how she says it. And that makes her a fourteenth-century victim of patriarchial ideology, no matter what our own view of her might be.

In the Envoy to Bukton, the Wife is presented as a humorous case study against the recipient’s imminent marriage, and against women like her in general. While we may be meant to laugh at her, even find her a joyous and exuberant creation, she is, in the final analysis, a stereotype. It is precisely because Chaucer adopts, with considerable success, the stratagem of replicating women’s speech that critics and students are so frequently momentarily beguiled into believing they are reading the real words of a real woman. Chaucer’s linguistic acuity and his ability to deceive—despite the formal restraints of the written verse form—are what make his observations, not only of social mores and culture in late fourteenth-century England, but also of social and communicative interaction so interesting. Aspects of gendered language use are brought to the fore in the Wife’s Prologue that would not be the focus of sustained scholarly research for another five hundred years, and in this, as in so many other things, Chaucer’s innovation is remarkable.

Notes


6. Many of these perspectives are well exemplified in Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson, ed., Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect (London: Routledge, 1994). The editors’ Introduction (pp. 1-21), in particular, situates recent scholarship within the overall context of feminist criticism.


9. See, for example, Marion Wynne-Davies, “‘The Elf-Queen with Hir Joly Compaugnye’: Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Tale”, in Women and Arthurian Literature: Seizing the Sword, ed. by Marion Wynne-Davies (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1996), pp. 14-35.


11. Mann, Chaucer, p. 80.


15. Lynne Dickson, ‘Deflection in the Mirror: Feminine Discourse in The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale’, Studies in the Age of Chaucer 15 (1993), p. 79. Dickson does go on to say that ‘Drawing lines between the fictional and the actual in The Wife’s Prologue is problematic because Alison herself is not an actual speaking woman but a fictional construct’ (p.85, n.50). There should not, of course, be any difficulty ‘drawing lines between the fictional and the actual’ since the entire Prologue is a fiction however realistically the fiction might be portrayed.


17. The Reeve’s Tale, lines 4084-9, for example, illustrate a multitude of Northern spellings [in small capitals] in the quotation below:

“Allas,” quod John, “Aleyn, for Cristesayne
Lay dowyn thy swerd, and I wil myn alswe.
1 is ful wight, God waat, as is a raa;
By Goddes herte, he sal nat scapre us batihe!
Why ne haethow hit the capul in the lathe?
Ilhay! By God, Alayn, thou is a fonne!”

All quotations are taken from Larry D. Benson, ed., Riverside Chaucer, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), unless otherwise stated. The quotation commenting on dialect in The Reeve’s Tale is from the Riverside Chaucer, p. 850b.


20. The derogatory comments of male commentators on women’s language subsequently led to the proposition that women’s language is powerless, indicative of women’s inferiority in verbal communication. In recent years, this ‘powerlessness’ has been reappraised and shown to be demonstrative of women’s communicative strengths of cooperation, lucidity, and solidarity. See, for example, Dale Spender, Man Made Language (London: Routledge, 1980), Deborah Cameron, Feminism and Linguistic Theory (London: Macmillan, 1985), and Jennifer Coates, Women, Men and Language, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1993).

21. That is, long perpetuated myths, which are still highly visible in social interaction and communication today, and to which this author does not, in any way, subscribe.


23. The Merchant’s Tale, lines 1377-8.

24. The Epilogue to The Merchant’s Tale, lines 2427-9.

26. As discussed by Jennifer Coates, Women, Men and Language, pp. 33-6, illustrated by a number of medieval and Renaissance literary sources.

27. Spender, Man Made Language, p. 43.

28. The Wife of Bath’s Prologue, lines 531-42.

29. Some critics have read this narration of the Wife’s network of female friends as demonstrating the close and powerful communities that women formed in this period. This may well, indirectly, be the case, but it remains that Chaucer is depicting here a less-than-positive picture of women’s volubility as the norm. Susan Signe Morrison, ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell: The Wife of Bath and Vernacular Translations’, Exemplaria 8 (1996), 97-123, discusses this same passage at pp. 115-16, and suggests at p. 116 that: ‘The anxiety the Wife’s husband feels reflects the anxiety felt among those men who opposed vernacular translations; once privileged men no longer maintained exclusive access to knowledge, society itself would be threatened with subversion’; and at p. 117, ‘the ability or tendency for women to reveal secrets only heightens their own power’.


31. See, for example, Coates, Women, Men and Language, pp. 18-20; Dale Spender, Man Made Language, pp. 10-11.


34. Ibid., p. 243.

35. Ibid., p. 250.

36. Ibid., p. 245. Elaborating on this characteristic (which he labels ‘affectation’), Jespersen goes on to say at p. 246: ‘There can be no doubt that women exercise a great and universal influence on linguistic development through their instinctive shrinking from coarse and gross expressions and their preference for refined and (in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions’.

37. Ibid., p. 248.


39. Ibid., p. 254.

40. As a model of the non-standard, the ab-norm-al, deviating from the norm (the powerful male hegemony), the Wife is a fictional example of the powerless mode of discourse.

41. The analysis of fillers is made more complex by the verse form, which by virtue of the couplets occasionally demands phatic phrases to complete the scansion and rhyme.


43. Ibid., p. 227.

44. Ibid., p. 228.

45. Ibid., p. 229.

46. For a critique of which see Spender, Man Made Language, pp. 43-5.

47. See, for example, Spender, Man Made Language, pp. 8-9; Cameron, Feminism and Linguistic Theory, 33-4.

48. Lakoff states that women lack authority and seriousness, they lack conviction and confidence. In her view, in comparison with the (ostensibly) forceful and effective language of men, women are tentative, hesitant, even trivial, and are therefore “deficient”: Spender, Man Made Language, p. 8.

49. See above, page 107.

50. Wife’s Prologue, lines 121-4.

51. The number of interrogative structures, whether rhetorical or direct, will, to an extent, depend on the editorial process. The majority of them are unequivocally provided by the syntax.

52. Wife’s Prologue, lines 163-92.


54. Which would be Carruthers’ reading in ‘The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions’.

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55. In both these earlier texts, the authors imagine their audiences’ responses and questions in a series of indirectly reported questions framed by ‘You ask . . .’; and in rhetorical questions seeking the audiences’ approbation. See B. Millett and J. Wogan-Browne, eds., Medieval English Prose for Women from the Katherine Group and ‘Ancrene Wisse’ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

56. This lytel writ, proverb, or figure
I sende yow; take kepe of yt, I rede;
Unwys he is he that kan no wele endure.
If thou be siker, put the nat in drede.
The Wyf of Bathe I pray yow that ye rede
Of this matere that we have on honde.
God graunte yow your lyf frely to lede
In fredam, for ful hard is to be bonde.

*Lenvo de Chaucer a Bakton*, in the *Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 655-6, lines 25-32.

57. I should like to thank Professors Greg Walker, David F. Johnson and Roy M. Liuzzo for their helpful comments on an early draft of this paper.

Explores the various facets of the Wife of Bath’s personality and examines certain interpretations of her words and actions.


Probes the silences and the omissions of *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale* and how these gaps relay information about Chaucer the man and the poet.


Defines the Wife of Bath’s attempts to claim language and self-definition as temporary and not fully developed, yet recognizes Chaucer’s nontraditional attempt to explore feminine discourse.


Asserts that Chaucer’s attempts to establish feminine discourse in *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* are unsuccessful owing to Chaucer’s masculine-centered viewpoint.


Uses the analogy of weaving to characterize the Wife of Bath’s multi-layered viewpoints, ideologies, and willfulness in an era of female subservience.


Questions the lack of moral outrage over the rape of the maiden in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and investigates the steps taken to bring about justice.


Provides an in-depth overview of *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and focuses on Alisoun’s sense of self during her lengthy discourse.

Evaluates the Wife of Bath’s wariness of trusting authoritative biblical interpretations of God’s will over common sense, experience, and the actual text of the Bible.


Establishes that “the Wife’s Tale largely mirrors and in some ways amplifies the portrait she paints of herself through the lengthy self-revelation in her Prologue.”


Recounts the ironies in the Knight’s crime and penance in The Wife of Bath’s Tale and traces the underlying theme of freely given love, observing: “We all desire not the sterile domination of rape and the marriage debt but true love.”


Uses The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and works by medieval writer Christine de Pizan to illustrate a woman’s life in medieval England, and investigates early literary instances of women’s self-definition, self-determination, and discourse.

Additional coverage of Chaucer’s life and career is contained in the following sources published by Thomson Gale: British Writers, Vol. 1; British Writers: The Classics, Vol. 1; British Writers Retrospective Supplement, Vol. 2; Concise Dictionary of British Literary Biography, Before 1660; Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 146; DISCovering Authors; DISCovering Authors 3.0; DISCovering Authors: British Edition; DISCovering Authors: Canadian Edition; DISCovering Authors Modules: Most-studied Authors and Poets; Literature and Its Times, Vol. 1; Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800, Vols. 17, 56; Literature Resource Center; Poetry Criticism, Vol. 19; Poetry for Students, Vol. 14; Poets: American and British; Reference Guide to English Literature, Ed. 2; Twayne’s English Authors; World Literature and Its Times, Vol. 3; World Literature Criticism Supplement; and World Poets.