"Thanne Have I Gete of Yow Maistrie": Power and the Subversive Body in Chaucer's Wife of Bath

by Laura Alexander

The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* expose the often misunderstood relationship between gender, marriage, and power that drives the contentious interplay between the Wife's authority and experience.[1] Critics have characterized her as a reflection of phallocentric values, arguing that she derives her authority exclusively from her extensive sexual and marital experience. And, because the Wife functions in a structured society where the body serves as a primary vehicle for power, readers have suggested that she remains inscribed by the sexual identity she projects.[2] Gillian Rudd, among others, argues that "the Wife aligns herself with experience, and thus with the body rather than the intellect; the sexual, not the spiritual,"[3] and this view frames the ongoing debate about the nature of experience in the *Prologue* and *Tale* as either carnal or scholarly knowledge, not both.

The argument over "auctoritee" [authority] and "experience" has traditionally left the Wife's complex character confined to a world where feminine desire opposes "masculine" reason, a limitation forced by binaries that pit men against women and authority against experience. Recent scholars have disputed this claim, "rehabilitating" the Wife by arguing that, although she participates in a system that engages sexuality as a means of achieving power, she nevertheless disrupts structural positions that leave women physically abused and socially undervalued.[4] Her violation of the traditional power structure achieves a gender reversal in the *Prologue* that permits her to subvert patriarchy and hold stereotypically "masculine" roles even as she uses this system to gain power. At first, she discloses that her knowledge of masculine desire allows her to dominate her husbands, revealing that oppression forces women to market themselves as sexual objects in order to gain autonomy. Her experiences in a patriarchal society allow her to reverse the hierarchy by "buying" her last husband, Jankyn, as she was once "bought" as a young bride; but, as I will argue, it also allows her to extend herself, to free herself from an inherently misogynistic system that uses her even when she "reverses" its pattern.

The Wife's willingness to barter the body suggests only one side of her character, however, and discloses only part of her "experience"; the *Tale* reveals another side of the Wife that offers another "experience," one that exposes her intelligence, rhetorical skill, and reason. In the opening lines of the *Prologue*, the Wife appeals to her marital and sexual experience for authority, but through the hag in her *Tale*, she derives her authority not only from the body but also from moral virtue and intellectual knowledge. She presents herself as an educated woman in the hag, whose philosophical discourse on *gentillesse* (nobility) displays her scholarship as she predicates her sermon upon themes from the theologians, poets, and philosophers who influenced Chaucer.[5] The Wife's range of experiences, both carnal and intellectual, informs our view of her character, which defies structures that juxtapose the body against the mind. She exposes the weaknesses of a binary world that forces an inequitable power distribution between the sexes. In

addition, she contrasts this world with a utopian one in her Tale that not only permits her to ameliorate the tensions between men and women but also invites a radical alternative to patriarchy: gender equality.[6] Thus, the Wife of Bath's character requires a reading that accommodates her complex use of the body along with the learned mind to establish authority and create identity. I will approach the Wife as both an idealistic and realistic character who recognizes the body as an "instrument" necessary for power, but also as one who seeks a different world, a world less contentious and less strict in its assignment of the gender roles that produce enmity between men and women. If the Wife of Bath offers us anything, it is an early feminist portrait, one that presents characteristics of reason, learning, and open sexuality as rights given to women and to men that should be celebrated rather than silenced. And, while she does not fulfill twenty-first-century feminist goals set by today's standard, since she obtains at least part of her authority from her body, she does approach earlier feminist goals, set by pioneers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, and Hélène Cixous, of an artistic being who exercises creativity to promote equality.[7]

I

Typical Aristotelian paradigms shape structural positions for men and women that conform to rigid lines: women typically project darkness and matter, men reason and light. But Chaucer confuses these oppressive categories to reverse power relationships between men and women.[8] He poses a humorous but conflicting portrait of female sexuality in the *Prologue* and the *Tale* by offering an imaginative version of the Wife through her hag, who masters the rapist-knight morally and intellectually through a rhetorical appeal to virtue. The morality the hag espouses in the Tale appears at odds with the lusty Wife's concern with managing her husbands, but it is a disparity that redirects attention to a reductive system, one that the Wife redefines in her *Tale* by proposing a mutual exchange between the hag and the knight, defined not economically but emotionally.

The Wife submits herself as a sexual commodity early in the *Prologue*: "In wyfhode I wol use myn instrument"[9] [In marriage I would use my instrument]. But since she desires to "have the power durynge al [her] lyfe / Upon his [her husband's] propre body" (158–159) [have the power throughout [her] life / Upon his own body], it is his body that she objectifies, so that "whan that hym list com forth" [when he desires to come forth], it is to "paye his dette" (153) [pay his debt] to her sexually. The power she wields participates in the exchange system by which she "wolde selle [her] bele chose" (447) [would sell [her] nice thing], a euphemism for her sexual organs, but this power involves more than an obvious prostitution of the self. The Wife derives this power through her "maistrie" [mastery], i.e. manipulation, of a marital system that, as she claims, serves as the primary vehicle for controlling her husbands, as she "brought it so about by . . . wit" (426). Her wisdom, which she coins as "deceite, wepying, [and] spynning," [deceit, weeping, [and] spinning] and which "God hath yive / To wommen kyndely, whil that they may lyve" (401–402) [God has given / To women kindly, while they may live] suggests that she lives in a world that could prove fatal to her by the end of her narrative. Sexual knowledge permits the Wife to control, manipulate, and lie, but primarily, in the end, to exist. The Wife's defense of her

"deceite" rests on her survival, and she undertakes another "deceite" not only to save herself but also to master her husband Jankyn.

When the Wife meets Jankyn, twenty years her junior, she has already entered what Jacques Lacan defines as the phallus-driven symbolic order as the signified "other," a term used in this patriarchal economy as an inferior counterpart to men, or "female." Carolyn Dinshaw suggests that the Wife's mimesis serves to "reform" this overarching patriarchal discourse; but the Wife not only "reforms" and "reveals" patriarchy, as Dinshaw claims, she also disrupts it by speaking against the silence women are typically forced to maintain, as it is men, not women, who are associated with speech.[10] While the Wife does, in fact, reaffirm the symbolic order's structural patterns in her *Prologue*, she reverses the positions to thwart established gender roles, signifying Jankyn as the "other," which she mimics from her early marriages—a reversal she will repeat in her *Tale* before introducing a different alternative in marriage, one that shuns objectification through the hag and the knight's mutual surrender.

Reality, unlike the fantasy the Wife contrives in her *Tale*, will not allow such kindly capitulation, and experience teaches the Wife that marriage remains a sexual market tied to an economic one that permits her to "buy" Jankyn in marriage. Anticipating widowhood, the Wife regards Jankyn with the same eyes that once regarded her as a sexual commodity. But instead of a rich, older husband buying a young and beautiful wife, it is the Wife, an older woman who looks for a younger, poorer, and most attractive man, and who delights in marrying him despite his lower socioeconomic status:

> I seye that in the feeldes walked we,
> Til trewely we hadde swich daliance,
> This clerk and I, that of my purveiance
> I spak to hym and seyde hym how that he,
> If I were wydewe, sholde wedde me.
> For certeinly, I sey for no bobance,
> Yet was I nevere withouten purvience
> Of mariage, n'of othere thynges eek. (564–571)
>
> [I say that in the fields we walked,
> till truly we had such conversation,
> this clerk and I, that by my foresight
> I spoke to him and said
> if I were widowed, he should wed me.
> For certainly, I say without boasting,
> that I was never without provision
> of marriage, nor without other things also.]

Jankyn revolts against the Wife by acting out against her transgression of structural patterns, which places him in an objectified, traditionally feminine position. He invokes misogynist

writers, including Theophrastus and Jerome, in his "book of wikked wyves" (685) [book of wicked wives] to condemn her rebellion against patriarchy through abusive language.

Speech serves as a way for both characters to construct identity and establish authority; it allows the Wife to reject the silence her husband desires from her and prompts Jankyn to reclaim this "stolen" privilege. By breaking silence, the Wife achieves the authority Jankyn recognizes and condemns as wicked because it divests him of power, reversing patriarchal patterns. But it also fulfills the prediction Luce Irigaray makes in *This Sex Which is Not One* that if the "aim were simply to reverse the order of things . . . history would repeat itself in the long run, would revert to sameness: to phallocratism. It would leave room neither for women's sexuality, nor for women's imaginary, nor for women's language to take (their) place."[11]

Even if the Wife performs a masculine role with "auctoritee" and is in danger of "repeating" the same phallocratic structure, she nevertheless performs this role ultimately to challenge its limitation and to satirize its ridiculous formulation, which anticipates the imaginative power she wields through the hag. Though she employs the phallocentric hierarchy in place to achieve her own ends, even at the beginning of her *Tale*, she moves away from this hierarchy by imagining a different kind of husband, one who learns to listen rather than abuse his intelligent wife. Her story serves as another speech act that allows her to challenge dominant social patterns that punish insurgent wives through violent words and deeds.

The Wife's creativity, then, counteracts patriarchal oppression, which is manifested through the violence enacted against women and which remains as the *only* power Jankyn exercises over her. Chaucer reinforces this abuse by placing brutal acts against women closely together: Jankyn's mistreatment of the Wife occurs at the end of her *Prologue*, and the knight's rape of an innocent maiden opens her *Tale*. She counters Jankyn's reliance on male-authored texts by offering a different version of history in her Prologue: "If wommen hadd writen stories, . . . / They wold han writen of men moore wikkedness" (693, 695) [If women had written stories, . . . / They would have written of men more wickedness]. But in her "storie" [story] the Wife never delivers on her promise to write "of men moore wikkedness." She presents a completely different vision by presenting a desired state of equitable marital bliss in her *Tale*, one that counteracts both the violent interplay between Jankyn and the Wife and the Wife's pragmatic view towards marital and sexual experience in her *Prologue*. She reorders speech in her *Tale* to promote this equality and transform the masculine aggression at the beginning of her *Tale* into "feminine" patience, as the rapist-knight willingly listens to the hag—a characteristic absent in Jankyn's violent character.

II

In the *Prologue*, the Wife delivers two *seemingly* firm conclusions: that she draws solely on the body as a primary source for experience, and that she participates in a system of objectification by devaluing her husband, who responds in violent verbal and physical forms. In Irigaray's assessment, she promotes "phallocratic" values, leaving Lacan's phallus-driven signification firmly in place as she role-plays masculine authority. If Chaucer left the Wife without a Tale, we

could leave the Wife with her phallocratic hierarchy. This hierarchy destabilizes, however, with the introduction of the hag, whose "masculine" rationale reveals the intellectual workings of a highly skilled rhetorician. Whereas the Wife presents sexualized representations or misrepresentations of theological texts, her hag presents a "masculine" discourse that invokes "Senec and othere clerkes" (1184) [Seneca and other clerks] to emphasize a clear sermonic theme: "gentillesse cometh fro God allone" (1162) [nobility comes from God alone]. Unlike the beautiful Dorigen in the *Franklin's Tale* or the silent, long-suffering Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale*, whose natural beauty mimics her Job-like constancy, the hag's initial physical ugliness belies her moral virtue. But if any character in the Wife's Tale has a divine or rational "light," it is the hag who instructs the "dark" rapist-knight about morality and ethical conduct.

Chaucer invests the hag and, by extension, the Wife who "creates" her, not only with carnal knowledge but also with classical scholarship and reason. He imbues her character with traditionally masculine attributes and gives her the knight's role in the medieval romance. Usually, it is the knight who saves the passive maiden from a distressing situation, but not only does the knight in the *Tale* fail to uphold chivalric ideals, he actively opposes them, causing rather than preventing a maiden's distress by raping her; this is his only assertive act in the *Tale*. Once caught, the Queen strips the knight of power, and he must rely on the hag to save him from the "iren" [iron] of the axe, which will fall lest he discover what women most desire: "sovereynetee" (1038) [sovereignty].

Chaucer blurs gender lines between active masculinity and passive feminine "otherness" with an obvious satiric glance on the romance genre in the *Tale* that, at first, parallels the reversals he foreshadows in the *Prologue*. But the reversals are not complete since the hag does not enact violence to affirm her "masculine" power. Rather, she assumes a dominant role as the knight's only saving agent, and unlike the knight, who remains driven by sexual need, she presents a more fully developed character than the medieval romance typically allows, which emerges in her rhetorical ability. She cites Dante, Seneca, Boethius, and Juvenal to affirm "poverte" (1183) [poverty] as a superior state aligned with "gentil dedes" (1115) [noble deeds], effectively winning the knight's admiration by securing power through her willingness to share knowledge, which saves him: "I am youre owne love and eek your wyf; / I am she which that saved hath your lyf" (1091–1092) [I am your own love and also your wife; / I am she who has saved your life].

The hag acknowledges her occupation of the traditional "gentil man" [gentleman] or knight's role in a romance, placing her husband in the traditionally feminine or passive role which he affirms by granting her "sovereynetee" when she asks him to choose his pleasure. She achieves sovereignty not only through her knowledge of his desire, however, but also through her "maistrie" of classical authors, which she employs to reinforce Christian ethics and to persuade the knight to fulfill his obligation: marriage to her, which she effectively accomplishes. He acknowledges her superiority by placing himself under her "wise governance" (1231) [wise governing], granting her power to "chese" (1237) [choose] as "certes" [certainly] he "holde it best" (1238) [holds it best]. The hag agrees to obey her husband and thereby relinquishes her

power—power the Wife relishes in her "maistrie" of sexual desire. It would seem that the Wife effects a total reversal of power in the *Tale*.

And yet, the hag humbly affirms that she remains under the knight's "wille" (1042) [will], capitulating to him as " . . . she obeyed hym in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance of likyng" (1255–1256) [she obeyed him in everything / That might do him pleasure]. Though she gives up her authority, the hag still has the power to transform herself into a beautiful maiden literally and to transform the rapist knight morally. In contrast to any other female in the tales of the Marriage Group, the hag in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* not only possesses a supernatural power that May in the *Merchant's Tale*, Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale*, and Dorigen in the *Franklin's Tale*, for example, lack, but more importantly, she possesses an obvious superior ability to argue and reason, winning the knight's respect. Ultimately, she is his teacher, changing him from a rapist to an honorable knight governed by humility, virtue, and reason. This instructive role signifies another way in which she holds "masculine" power, as men, not women, moralize on spiritual and philosophical truths taken from classical texts and sacred works. Though she ostensibly concedes her power to him, it is with the understanding that he has been altered from a rapist, who by definition takes away a woman's choice, to a humble husband, able to let a woman choose her fate. She only yields her power when it appears safe for her to do so.

Even so, one never forgets that the Wife tells the *Tale* and that sexual experience shapes the dynamic between husbands and wives. Only the promise of the hag's metamorphosis into a beautiful, desirable woman prompts the knight to wed her; though, he listens to her wisdom respectfully. Because the hag, like the Wife, understands masculine desire, she returns to the body, which Chaucer fashions as the basis for power between the sexes, even when this power begins to equalize between them before the end of the *Tale*. Power relies on sexual dominance, and the hag, despite her intellectual exercises and her appeal to the authority of ethics, religion, and philosophy, must also possess a sexual perspicuity that appeals to the baser nature of her husband. Even in her "utopia" the Wife cannot imagine a world not somehow driven by "essential" difference, or a world not predicated on sexual power. She approaches a new definition of marriage that includes mutual respect and sexual equality but falls short of delivering the hag from the gender stereotype that a woman must have beauty and seductive powers to win a husband.

The Wife, through her hag, conceives a world beyond patriarchal limitation by allowing her imaginative character to deploy rational logic through a sermonic rhetorical strategy. She returns, however, to the self/other paradigm that constitutes a binary system because this system has fashioned her. The phallocentric values that drive this system configure the material body as the central agent necessary to preserve patriarchy, which the Wife outlines early in the *Prologue* and returns to at the end of her *Tale*. Like the Wife, the hag exercises autonomy only through an exclusionary sexual system that inscribes feminine desire because it routes it in a decidedly reductive system of exchange: marriage. The hag triumphs in achieving a transference of power from her husband, who allows her to "gete . . . maistrie" (1236) [obtain . . . mastery] by putting him under her "wise governance," but her perpetuation of a patriarchal cycle, her desire to wed

and bed the knight, who is her obvious moral, spiritual, and intellectual inferior, reinforces the idea that women really want the sexual and social roles given to them, only they want to exert the same economic and sexual power men typically hold. It also reinforces a "masculine" power structure so that, even when the Wife and her hag achieve this "masculine" power, they continue to function as victims of an oppressive system, "miming" it in different ways that emphasize the ultimate dichotomy that separates the narratives: reality versus fantasy. The Wife cannot escape the former, though she attempts to in the latter by attaching other characteristics to the hag that allow her to effect change in the knight and win his esteem for her wisdom.

To return to Irigaray's "proletization" of women "on the exchange market" and the problem of "phallocratism,"[12] we see a clear desire to reverse power roles in the *Prologue* that nevertheless unravels in complex ways in the *Tale*, despite the triumph of sexual over intellectual power or moral virtue. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that the Wife reorders the masculine hierarchy through language, investing it in a way that completely redefines discourse, specifically women's creativity in language, which is typically characterized as mad.[13] I would extend Gilbert and Gubar's analysis by arguing that the Wife's creativity not only "redefines language," it redefines the entire relationship between men and women in her *Tale* just by introducing equality. Unlike the *Prologue*, the *Tale* affords a space where hierarchies begin to disappear between men and women, and language inspires concession rather than contention. The knight, who allows his wife to "cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance, / And moost honour to yow and me also" (1232–1233) [choose yourself which may be most pleasant, / And does most honor to you and me also], submits to his wife. Though the hag replies "Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie" (1236) [than have I gotten of you mastery], they are "no lenger wrothe" (1239) [no longer angry] or no longer in a power struggle, which defines the Wife's relationship with Jankyn. The fairy tale ending, "And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende / In parfit joye" (1257–1258) [And thus they lived unto her life's end / In perfect joy], might suggest that their bliss results from any number of possibilities in the *Tale*, including the hag's concession to the knight, his metamorphosis, her ability to bewitch him, or their sexual bliss. But the Wife leaves these paths inconclusive, possibly to reemphasize the fairy tale finish of the romance —the fantasy that invites the reader to choose an ending before reintroducing reality.

The Wife could have offered a *Tale* that corresponds to her gender performance in the *Prologue*, one where a "knowing," i.e. older, sexually experienced woman dominates her husband, who might have appeared as an obedient slave, possibly of a lower social status—a husband more like Jankyn. The Wife does not reverse gender roles at the end of her *Tale*, although the early role reversals between the hag and the knight might have indicated this type of ending, especially given the Wife's *Prologue* and quarrelsome relationship with Jankyn.

Instead, the Wife problematizes their roles, alternately giving the knight and the hag power throughout the *Tale* and suggesting that a transformation had occurred in the rapist-knight's treatment of women. He looks to a woman for wisdom and honors his agreement to marry her—all of which imply a change in the knight since the beginning of the *Tale*, which may or may not have resulted from the hag's supernatural influences. Certainly Chaucer intends for his audience

to perceive this change as a consequence of some spiritual power, given the hag's reliance on Christian doctrine, her ability to alter her appearance, and her conversion of the rapist knight, whether by her sermon or her bewitching powers.

This otherworldly power, which the hag ostensibly concedes to her husband, remains problematic because it is so inconclusive. She professedly relinquishes power but seems hardly without it if she can so transform her body and the knight, who is made humble by a "lower-class" wife. Like the Wife, she may fabricate an illusion of "parfit joye" (1246) [perfect joy] with her husband. But even if the hag holds power and in that way seems to dominate her husband, her coercion, supernatural or otherwise, opposes the self-effacing humility she espouses in her Christian sermon:

> And certes, sire, thogh noon auctoritee
> Were in no book, ye gentils of honour
> Seyn that men sholde an oold wight doon favour,
> And clepe hym fader, for youre gentillesse. (1208–1211)
>
> [And certainly, sir, though none of this authority
> came out of a book, your honorable nobles
> say that men should do an old creature favor,
> and call him father, for your nobleness.]

Her speech, reflective of the Wife's appeal to "auctoritee" in the opening lines of her *Prologue*, suggests that the hag understands the patriarchal mind-set held by the knight, who remains unwilling to sleep with his acknowledged savior, intellectual superior, and physically repulsive wife until she presents him with a better option: a more attractive bedfellow.[14] But she turns this speech into one that espouses a democratic conception of nobleness, one that rejects existing social paradigms and introduces a Christian alternative that gives husbands and wives more liberty through their reciprocal renunciations of power. The hag appears as a spiritual guide to the knight, one who introduces what marriage could offer men and women: sexual, spiritual, and emotional "joye," rather than the "wrothe" engendered by the power struggles that the Wife understands all too well.

Indeed, their relationship appears more equitable than any marriage in *The Canterbury Tales*, one that loosely conforms to a Pauline proscription for marital relations. Paul decrees in Ephesians 5:22–33 that "wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (verse 24), which the hag agrees to do, as "she obeyed hym [her husband] in every thyng" (1255) [she obeyed him in everything]. As an addendum to this prescription, Paul insists that a husband "must love his wife as he loves himself" (verse 33), "just as Christ loved the church" (verse 25), which the knight at least approaches, else his wife would not "thus . . . lyve unto hir lyves ende / In parfit joye" (1257–1258) [thus . . . live unto her life's end / In perfect joy]. All the avenues that potentially produce the hag and the knight's "parfit joye"—mutual submission of the wife and the husband, sexual bliss, and the hag's powers—remain unanswered. But one result of this

"parfit joye" is conclusive: that there is no animosity, no monetary exchange to mar the knight and the hag's marriage.

It is a joy that the Wife dispels by concluding her utopia with a "prayer" that "Jhesu Crist us sende / Housbandes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde" (1259–1260) [Jesus Christ send us / Husbands meek, young, and fresh in bed]—reintroducing a world in which men are not as changed as the knight, whether by magic or by their wives' attributes, into amenable and loving husbands. And though she returns the audience to a patriarchal worldview where she invokes "verray pestilence" (1264) [very pestilence] on husbands who cannot be charmed, or, rather, manipulated, she nevertheless allows her desire for sexual and marital equality to emerge as part of a perspective that does not mimic oppressive relations; rather, it transgresses structural boundaries, at least momentarily.[15] She approaches a redefinition of marriage that offers men and women a relationship free from antagonism, if not from binaries, and she proposes a potential vision of a world without patriarchal limitation, where women speak intelligently and win respect not only by their physical attributes, but also by their wisdom and learning.

Laura Alexander is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She specializes in British literature of the eighteenth century with a focus on feminist theory, women writers, philosophy, and aesthetics.

Notes

1. In the eighteenth century, for example, the Wife of Bath was at best regarded as a humorous character who expressed Chaucer's comedic qualities, and at worst as a vulgar character. John Dryden and William Blake regarded her as one of Chaucer's most inferior creations. Alexander Pope, in fact, adapts the Wife's *Prologue* for an imaginative translation, "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue," in 1713 by augmenting Chaucer's lines to create a misogynist portrait of women that prefigures *The Rape of the Lock* and "Of the Characters of Women" in his *Moral Essays*, 2. Whereas Chaucer's version presents a more sympathetic view of women as victims of a masculine-dominated society in lines 248–270, Pope portrays them as victims of their own wiles and madness: "If poor (you say) she drains her Husband's Purse; / If rich, she keeps her Priest, or something worse; / If highly born, intolerably vain; / Vapours and Pride by turns possess her Brain: / Now gayly Mad, now sow'rly Splenatick, / Freakish when well, and fretful when she's Sick. / If fair, then Chast she cannot long abide, / By pressing Youth attack'd on ev'ry side. / If foul, her Wealth the lusty Lover lures, / Or else her Wit some Fool-Gallant procures, / Or else she Dances with becoming Grace, / Or Shape excuses the Defects of Face. / There swims no Goose so gray, but, soon or late, / She finds some honest Gander for her Mate" (l86–99). Pope's caricature of the Wife has persisted over time despite the evidence Chaucer offers in her *Prologue* and through the hag that counteracts antifeminist themes. For the full poem with notes on eighteenth-century views of Chaucer, Pope's additions and adaptations of the Wife's *Prologue* in *The Canterbury Tales*, and an analysis of these changes, see Geoffrey Tillotson's introduction and Pope's poem in the Twickenham edition of *The Rape of the Lock and Other Poems* (London: Metheun; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), pp. 3–12 and 55–78.

2. W. F. Bolton, "The Wife of Bath: Narrator as Victim," in *Gender and Literary Voice*, ed. Janet M. Todd (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1980), pp. 54–65, in fact, suggests that the Wife "is digressive, self-centered, inconsistent, apparently incapable of a well-formed narrative or attractive characters of her own creation." While Bolton argues that Chaucer "depicted the traumata of woman's

status in sexist society . . . in Alis' narrative failings," p. 54, he nevertheless regards the Wife and her Tale as part of a "ruined imagination," p. 64, despite his concession that in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* Chaucer presents women as morally equivalent with men.

3. Gillian Rudd, *The Complete Critical Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 120.

4. The Wife combines sexual knowledge with intellectual "maistrie" over her husbands, which, as Norman Klassen suggests, reveals her to be a "self-conscious narrator." The Wife projects self-consciousness not only to expose how "knowledge and love" operate between the sexes, however, but also to reveal that her "maistrie" proceeds as much from her intellectual capabilities as her body—a theme she articulates more clearly though the hag in her Tale. See the analysis in Norman Klassen, *Chaucer on Love, Knowledge and Sight* (Cambridge, Engl.: D. S. Brewer; Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell & Brewer, 1995), pp. 202–205.

5. Chaucer reveals a number of his sources through his characters and relies heavily on them to create the Wife of Bath, a character Arthur Lindley argues as "absent" because she is almost wholly formed from other classical sources, including Seneca's moral epistles and Ovid's *Art of Love*. For further information on Chaucer's sources for the Wife and her hag, see Arthur Lindley, "'Vanysshed Was This Daunce, He Nyste Where': Alisoun's Absence in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*," *English Literary History* 59 (1992), 1–21.

6. Despite feminists' challenges to traditional readings of the Wife, negative views of her continue to persist. Elaine Traherne, for example, argues from a sociolinguistic standpoint that the Wife has no authority in either the *Prologue* or her *Tale*: "any pretense that Chaucer allows . . . is undermined conclusively by Chaucer's stereotypical and perceptibly inferior forms of women's speech recorded and employed by him." See Elaine Traherne, "The Stereotype Confirmed? Chaucer's Wife of Bath," in *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts*, ed. Elaine Traherne (Cambridge, Engl.: D. S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 93–115. Lee Patterson supports this reading; he claims that "the Wife has no rhetorical strategy at all . . . she speaks, apparently, only that we may know her." See 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), 656–695, at p. 658.

7. Since Simone de Beauvoir's declaration in *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1952) that women are autonomous beings created separately but treated unequally by men throughout time, modern French and Anglo-American feminists have sought equality in, if not a complete rejection of, the dominant patriarchal structures in place. Recent theoretical trends in feminist theory have largely rejected the French feminist ideas proposed by Hélène Cixous in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" and Luce Irigaray in her essay "This Sex Which is Not One," based on their reliance, like de Beauvoir and even earlier feminists, on an essential difference between men and women. These "second wave" feminists argue for tolerance, equality, and a rejection of Sigmund Freud's model of woman as medusa who inspires hate contrived by fear of castration. Feminine writing, a literary mode Cixous proposes in her essay, expresses woman's many variations, which she argues must express themselves, since the suppression of woman can only lead to a death of her many selves, and worse, perhaps, a life of perpetual silence and loss of self, which she constructs similarly to Gayatri Spivak's oppressed subaltern female. See Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabel Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press,1980), pp. 245–51, reprinted in *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader*, ed. Lucy Burke, Tony Crowley, and Alan Girvin (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 161–66; and Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which is Not One," trans. C. Reeder, in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane

Price Herndl (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1977), pp. 363–69.

8. Barrie Ruth Straus has demonstrated that the Wife's importance lies in her exposure of "who may speak and who may not, and on what authority . . . [I]n the process, the Wife will show the problem of women's place in phallocentric discourse." Straus regards the division between "auctoritee" and "experience" as the framing binary that constricts women's language in society. She summarizes the corpus of literary criticism that denigrates the Wife as a body driven by fear of what the Wife does, exposes, and achieves in her language, which she argues "threatens the loss of our professional tool . . . the life of literary criticism. For this reason she has been condemned and labelled criminal and mad." For further information on patriarchy and women's language in Chaucer, specifically the Wife of Bath's speech, see Barrie Ruth Straus, "The Subversive Discourse of the Wife of Bath: Phallocentric Discourse and the Imprisonment of Criticism," *English Literary History* 55 (1988), 527–554, at pp. 529 and 550.

9. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, line 149, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), pp. 105–122, at p. 107. All quotations of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* are from this edition. Subsequent citations will be given in the text with line number(s) in parentheses.

10. See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 113–132.

11. Luce Irigaray, "This Sex" (see n. 7 above), pp. 363–69, at p. 369.

12. Ibid, p. 369.

13. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality," *New Literary History* 16 (1985), 515–543.

14. Brian Stone offers an interesting interpretation of how the women who appear in the *Tale* are "all images of . . . the Wife of Bath." For further analysis of the "democratic, ideas from Dante" that the hag invokes in her sermon to the knight, see Brian Stone, Chaucer (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 84–91, at p. 91.

15. Mary Carruthers suggests that the Wife achieves "a mutually nourished marital bond" in the *Prologue* because she effectively becomes a "capitalist entrepreneur." In Carruthers' analysis of the material benefits gained by the Wife, she points out that the wealth the Wife accumulates allows her economic independence, which fosters a power reversal that transgresses traditional husband-wife relationships. See Mary Carruthers, "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions," *PMLA* 94 (1979), 209–222, at pp. 209–10.