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# “Who hath the world in honde”: Conflicts of Agency in Three Canterbury Tales

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“Who hath the world in honde”: Conflicts of Agency in Three *Canterbury Tales*

An Honors Thesis

presented by

Samantha Anne Streger

to

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the subject of conflicting agency in three of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and discusses the ways in which confusions of power shed light on the issues inherent in governing medieval social ideologies. In the Knight's Tale, conflicting agency between the humans and the gods is evidence of the Knight's failure to bring order to his tale. Because the Knight is unable to rationally explain the universe by employing the noble ideals of chivalry, honor, and faith in higher power, the confusion of power in the Knight's Tale highlights the failure of noble pursuits. In the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, I focus on the Wife's attempts to define her desires outside of a socially constructed female stereotype. Because these desires are in part a product of socially constructed gender roles, the Wife is unable to articulate herself fully and the result is a wavering agency. In the Franklin's Tale, I examine the erosion of female agency as the freedom afforded Dorigen in the opening marriage contract between Dorigen and Arveragus fades first into passive female power and then into a complete objectification of her character. This failure of female agency illuminates the Franklin's inability to create utopian equality in marriage amidst socially accepted codes of behavior.

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## Introduction

### **The Conflict of Agency**

Of alle men his wysdom is the hyeste  
That rekketh nevere who hath the world in honde.

~The Wife of Bath's Prologue<sup>1</sup>

A particularly moving illustration from Boccaccio's *Il Teseide*, the primary source for Chaucer's Knight's Tale, first sparked my interest in the subject of agency. The manuscript illumination shows Emily sitting in a garden of flowers, while the prisoners Palamon and Arcite grip the bars of their jail-cell window, leaning toward the garden as they stare at Emily in complete adoration. In the Knight's Tale, Emily has an inarguable amount of power: she is the cause of friction between the two knights, and the battle for her hand in marriage leads to a grand tournament and eventually to Arcite's death. But these events of the Tale also take place outside of Emily's control—for example, when she prays to the goddess Diana to remain unwed, she is told that she has no choice in the matter. In the end, Duke Thesues forces her to marry Palamon and live “in parfit joye” with him. The complexities of Emily's power are manifest in the illustration: though Emily holds the knights' rapt attention as they stare at her longingly, she is completely objectified by their gaze as she focuses only on making a garland for her hair. She is simultaneously powerful and powerless.

Although there are many ways in which to define the term agency, for the purposes of this project, I take agency to be the capacity for power. And it is the paradoxes that attend the exercise of power, as in the example of Emily, that most interest me—

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton, 1987) III.326-27. All further citations from the text of the *Canterbury Tales* will appear parenthetically by fragment and line number in the text.

complexities that I define as conflicts of agency. A conflict of agency demonstrates that there is within the text some problem or discrepancy. By noticing the moments in which power is confused, we can see the ways in which the characters of the *Tales* are affected by their social situations, and the problems within the social institutions that govern their lives.

Of the full-length critical studies of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, two specifically treat the subject of agency. In *Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex, and Agency in the Canterbury Tales*,<sup>2</sup> Mark Miller examines the ways in which the Tales present the problems of love and sexuality in relationship to agency. By looking at the way the Tales handle characters' agency and autonomy, Miller attempts to define the notions of sexual desire and romantic love as they were understood in the Middle Ages. As Miller explains, Chaucer's agents are torn between the impulse to live by societal norms (truth, justice), and on the other hand to resist the imposition of these norms. In my analysis of the *Canterbury Tales*, I build on Miller's notion of these dual impulses to further reflect upon the issues contained within these societal conventions—for example, the problems within the institution of chivalry, and the discrepancies that surround a faith in social hierarchy.

In the second study of the subject of agency, *Chaucer's Agents*,<sup>3</sup> Carolynn Van Dyke uses Chaucer's presentation of agency to determine ways in which questions about causation shape his narratives. In other words, Van Dyke focuses on Chaucer's ambiguous agents—animals, gods, women—in order to examine his treatment of the role

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Miller, *Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex, and Agency in the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Carolynn Van Dyke, *Chaucer's Agents: Cause and Representation in Chaucerian Narrative* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2005).

of free will and of the influence of Christianity on his fictional world. According to Van Dyke, the confusion over godly power in the Knight's Tale reflects Chaucer's own meditations upon questions of divine influence. Although I draw on Van Dyke's analysis to explain the Knight's preoccupation with divine intervention, fate, and fortune, my discussion of the Knight's Tale focuses primarily on the Knight's ultimate failure to employ these governing forces in an attempt to rationalize the events of his Tale.

Thus, in my opening chapter on the Knight's Tale, I examine the Knight's attempt to impose order and meaning on the chaotic events of his Tale with a reliance on noble pursuits. The Knight insists on the power of noble ideals—such as chivalry and faith in a higher power—to bring meaning to the disorder that pervades his Tale (as, for example, when Arcite appears to die for no rational reason). But his inability to handle the discrepancies that emerge in the pursuit of these noble principles leads to a conflict of agency, both for the characters in his Tale and within the Knight himself. We can see by way of confused agency that there is an inherent problem in the Knight's attempt to order his Tale, and that there is a corresponding problem within the social institutions he implements to define his world.

In my second chapter, on the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, I make use of Van Dyke's and Miller's analyses to show how the Wife's power manifests itself ambiguously as she attempts to formulate her arguments for female "maistrye" within socially constructed gender roles. The Wife's agency is confused because she attempts to voice her desires outside of the power relationships inherent in the social structure of marriage, while she is simultaneously defined by gender stereotypes. Van Dyke notes that the Wife's Prologue and Tale become a battle between subject and stereotype as the Wife



attempts to present herself outside of these social ideologies. I expand upon Van Dyke's and Miller's arguments in an attempt to determine how the Wife's wavering agency subconsciously reveals her desires—desires the Wife is unable to make clear because they are unspeakable in a male-dominated society. I am interested mostly in determining the nature of those desires, and how they seem to both rely on and reject social conventions.

From the Wife of Bath's wavering agency, I turn in my third chapter to an examination of the Franklin's Tale and its presentation of female freedom. I focus on the way in which Dorigen's steadily diminishing agency sheds light on the Franklin's inability to create utopian marriage equality. In the end, the Franklin cannot create a place for female power amidst the dominating influence of socially constructed gender relations, and Dorigen's agency becomes merely an illusion—just like the illusion that covers the black rocks that line the coast of Dorigen's castle. To salvage the conclusion of his Tale, the Franklin turns to a focus on moral ideals as they relate to masculine power and social hierarchy, completely forgoing his discussion of female freedom and highlighting the failure of female agency.

In all three Tales, a conflict of agency results from the teller's struggle to define his or her world from within the debilitating influence of social conventions. As we can see when we examine the conflicts of power in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer was aware of the growing problems manifest in a reliance on social attitudes, and his Tales examine these issues.

## Chapter 1

### **The *Knight's Tale* and the Struggle for Order**

In his influential chapter on the Knight in *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, Charles Muscatine shows in detail how the Knight's Tale's structure enacts its meaning: because the Knight sets out his Tale symmetrically (Palamon and Arcite lie "by and by," the company of ladies stand "tweye and tweye," the tournament lists are built with specifically arranged temples, and the final battle sees a mighty king fight beside each knight), Muscatine concludes that order is the focus of the Tale.<sup>4</sup> But within this carefully ordered structure arises a dangerous chaos: Saturn's violent speech, Arcite's untimely death, and the descriptions of the gods' temples all combine to threaten the stability of the Tale's careful organization. According to Muscatine, then, the Knight's main concern is maintaining his carefully established order amidst this threat of disarray. And because, as H. Marshall Leicester writes, "Chivalry and its institutions are rooted in...rage for order,"<sup>5</sup> we can see the Knight's determination to uphold this order as a product of his nobility; in other words, it is the Knight's chivalric behavior and dedication to noble ideals that reorganizes the chaotic moments in his Tale. The final tournament, for example, underlines the good of chivalry and the order it places on the social world by refashioning chaotic violence—as when Palamon and Arcite fight in the grove—into ordered knightly behavior. And in his final speech, Theseus attempts to enforce the power of noble pursuits—for example, love and faith—to battle against the frightening possibilities of a disordered world. According to Muscatine, Theseus is

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1960) 181.

<sup>5</sup> H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 356.

successful: he is able to appropriately set the “dignity” of noble life against the threatening forces of chaos, and reestablish order in the world of the Tale.<sup>6</sup>

But others have seen this struggle between order and disorder as less clearly resolved. One notable example is Lee Patterson, who historicizes the “noble life” that Muscatine refers to. As Patterson explains, medieval chivalry focused on the enactment of a social code of behavior that required, in part, a “suppression of reality.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, chivalry as an institution contained inherent inconsistencies that were often ignored in the pursuit of a noble identity—and by striving for a self-contained chivalric ideal, knights remained ignorant of these issues. For example, chivalric behavior included the derivation of honor from physical violence, because medieval chivalry necessitated violence to enforce an ordered hierarchy of power and control.<sup>8</sup> But because violence and war are inherently chaotic and disordered, chivalric behavior was by definition contradictory. Another limitation was the chivalric attempt to explain arbitrary occurrence by a noble reliance on rationality and justice (such as the reliance on divine influence enforced by Theseus in his final speech), because reality is full of seemingly arbitrary occurrences for which chivalric explanations often fall short. In the Tale, these issues pose problems for the Knight’s “rage for order” and threaten his control: unprepared for the intrinsic disorder that clouds real human experience, the Knight is ill-equipped to organize the chaos that pervades his Tale. And it is the Knight’s failure to bring order to his Tale that leads to what Patterson describes as a visible “struggle between the Tale and its teller.” In this chapter, I will argue that it is this struggle for control that creates issues of conflicting agency in the Tale. Though the Knight attempts

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<sup>6</sup> Muscatine 189.

<sup>7</sup> Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991) 196.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 191.

to explain seemingly arbitrary occurrences by offering complex explanations suited to medieval thought (fate, fortune, chance, destiny, and free will), his inability to accurately determine the cause of irrational events leaves the reader questioning what governing forces are actually in control. And though the Knight enforces the power of noble values to regain stability at the end of the Tale, the self-serving nature of chivalric pursuits actually complicates Theseus' power and fails to instill order. Thus, the confused agency that results from the Knight's attempt to bring order to his Tale contradicts Muscatine's argument because it showcases the failure of noble principles to triumph over chaos.

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*The Humans*

Moments of confused agency in the Knight's Tale often result from the Knight's struggle with the varying influences of fate, fortune, and chance. The Knight introduces these forces with the intention of providing a sense of order—he attempts to account for each of the events in his Tale, and attribute each circumstance to a just cause. But because the Knight randomly employs contradicting logic in order to rationalize each incident, the experiences appear arbitrary and outside of human control. For example, in order to explain Theseus' coincidental discovery of Arcite and Palamon fighting in the field, the Knight gives a passionate speech regarding destiny:

The destinee, ministre general,  
That executeth in the world over al  
The purveiaunce that God hath seyn befiron,  
So strong it is that, though the world had sworn  
The contrarie of a thyng by ye or nay,  
Yet somtyme it shal fallen on a day  
That falleth not eft withinne a thousand yeer.

.....

Al is this reuled by the sighte above.  
[I.1663-69, 1672]

When the Knight explains the meeting of Arcite and Palamon in the brush, however, he recounts the arbitrariness of the chance occurrence: “*By aventure* his wey he gan to holde,” “*Ther as by aventure* this Palamoun,” “*Fortune* had broght him in the snare” (I.1506, 1516, 1490, emphasis added). The Knight, in an attempt to rationalize the meeting of the two knights, attributes the event to both destiny and fortune. His inability to assign an explanation that would encompass both the coincidence and the undeniable significance of the moment actually creates confusion rather than instilling order: destiny and chance are opposites, and the knights’ meeting cannot be a product of both. In this struggle to control the events of his Tale, the Knight also confuses the possibility of human agency: sixteen lines after fortune brings Palamon “in the snare,” Arcite by chance “his wey he gan to hold.” The Knight’s inability to order his Tale is visible in this conflict of human agency: though their movements are both a product of chance, chance is described as controlling Palamon’s actions while Arcite has for the moment the power to direct his own movements. Similarly, earlier in the Tale, the Knight mislabels Palamon’s escape from prison as “*aventure or destynee—/As, whan a thyng is shapen it shal be,*” though it was clearly a product of human agency (Palamon gives his jailer drugged wine) (I.1465-66). This confusion between human agency, fortune, and destiny reveals the Knight’s indecision regarding governing forces and actually creates disorder, emphasizing the Knight’s inability to control his Tale.

The Knight’s failure to attribute each circumstance to a specific meaningful cause is often a result of the irrationality of the very noble ideals he uses to bring order to his Tale. For example, when Arcite attempts to justify his imprisonment, he claims, “*Fortune*

hath yeven us this adversitee./Som wikke aspect or disposicioun/Of Saturne by som  
constellacioun/Hath yeven us this, although we hadde it sworn” (I.1086-1089). But  
Arcite leaves out the most important explanation: Theseus came to Thebes, waged a  
brutal war, and took the knights as prisoners. The Knight avoids attributing Palamon and  
Arcite’s misfortune to Theseus’ agency because it necessitates an acknowledgement of  
the irrational cruelty and violence exhibited by Theseus’ army. Because Theseus is a  
worthy knight, all of his deeds should be in keeping with the codes of chivalry—codes  
that enforce the value of order and rationality. Accordingly, the Knight describes the  
honorable cause of Theseus’ journey to Thebes (a company of crying women, seeking  
justice) and later enforces Theseus’ noble disposition by describing the love he shares  
with his friend Perotheus (“So wel they lovede, as olde bookes sayn,/That whan that oon  
was deed, soothly to telle,/His felawe wente and soughte hym down in helle” [I.1998-  
1200]). The Knight presents Theseus as a worthy knight who fights bravely—after  
battling the injustice done to the ladies’ husbands, he conquers the city of Thebes for the  
honor of his country and for his own noble worth. But, as Patterson explains, this focus  
on honor and chivalric duty carries with it the contradiction of necessary violence.  
Theseus’ destruction of Thebes and imprisonment of the two knights seems needlessly  
cruel—though he slays Creon as noble revenge for the crying women, he continues to lay  
siege to the city: “by assaut he wan the citee after,/And rente adoun bothe wal and sparre  
and rafter” (I.989-90). Though his revenge is complete, he “ransake[s] in the taas of  
bodyes dede,” finds Palamon and Arcite, and takes them as prisoners (I.1005). It is this  
discrepancy between Theseus’ position as a worthy leader and the disorder he causes by  
waging war in the name of chivalry—the very institution that attempts to instill order—

that the Knight is unable to reconcile in his Tale. Because he is faced with a situation in which noble designs cannot rationally explain events (in fact, they *cause* irrational events), the Knight is subject to the contradictions of chivalric ideals and forced to employ different explanations, all of which fall short of the mark. The Knight's insistence on the powers of Saturn and Fortune denies an examination of Theseus' cruelty and attempts to save the noble institution of chivalry from scrutiny—but in the process, his explanations confuse the possibility of human agency: the reader is torn between the knowledge that Theseus imprisoned the knights and the Knight's explanation that it was actually “wikke” Saturn. In this conflict of agency, the Knight fails to uphold order and rationality, and the confusion further illuminates Theseus' irrational actions and the problems inherent in chivalric codes of behavior.

The Knight's attempt to establish order in the *structure* of his Tale results in similar confusions of agency. For example, the Knight introduces Palamon and Arcite as identical: when Theseus' men find them, they are “liggyng by and by,/Bothe in oon armes, wrought ful richely” (I.1011-12). They are exactly alike in social class—they both have “blood roial” and are “of sustren two yborn” (I.1018, 1019). The equality between the knights enforces order on the Tale by contributing to the symmetry of the Tale's arrangement, as I have described above. Both knights struggle equally to reasonably explain their imprisonment and love for Emily, and most critics, including Patterson, agree that they are “indistinguishable at the level of worth.”<sup>9</sup> This means, then, that the choice between Palamon and Arcite at the end of the Tale must be made for an arbitrary reason. Though the reader may try to distinguish a just outcome, the end result seems to stem from Arcite's mistaken pleas for “victory” beside Palamon's more specific request

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<sup>9</sup> Patterson 207.

for Emily; accordingly, the Knight eventually describes Arcite's death as a product of "aventure." But the Knight's focus on "aventure" is only for the purpose of enforcing Arcite's chivalry and honor (for "falling nis nat but an aventure" [I.2723]). Earlier, the Knight insisted through Diana that the outcome was pre-ordained and rational, and proved that Saturn controlled the end result by including him in the main action. Because the Knight uses divine intervention and fate as an explanation for Palamon's victory while the structure of his Tale (and the codes of chivalry) suggest that Arcite's fall is the product of chance, the Knight fails to rationalize Arcite's death, and ends up confusing accident and destiny. His attempt at organizational symmetry, rather than establishing order, eventually contributes to the chaotic climax.

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### *The Gods*

As the Knight struggles to attribute various events (such as Arcite's death) to both godly influence and unfortunate accident, the power of Saturn and the other planetary gods becomes confused. Because of the pagan setting, the Knight's Tale often focuses on the power of gods to decide humans' fate. Accordingly, Palamon and Arcite believe that their future has been written by the gods: when Arcite laments that it is his destiny to waste away in prison, he bemoans that "shapen was my deeth erst than my sherte" (I.1566). But upon seeing Emily, Palamon appeals to Venus as a force *opposed* to predestination: "if so be my destynee by shapen/By eterne word to dyen in prisoun,/Of oure lynage have som compassioun,/That is so lowe ybrought by tirannye" (I.1108-11). Once Arcite is set free, however, Palamon cries,



Oh crueel goddes that governe  
This world with byndyng of youre word eterne  
And writen in the table of atthamaunt  
Your parlement and youre eterne graunt,  
What is mankynde moore unto you holde  
Than is the sheep that rouketh in the folde?  
[I.1303-1308]

Clearly, Palamon wavers between the belief that the future is decided by the gods and set in stone—that all of life is predetermined—and the belief that the gods act arbitrarily, sometimes with no rhyme or reason: “What governance is in this prescience,/That giltelees tormenteth innocence?” (I.1313-1314). Arcite is similarly indecisive: “Allas, why pleynen folk so in commune/On purveiaunce of God, or of Fortune/That yeveth hem ful ofte in many a gyse/Wel bettre than they kan himself devyse?” (I.1251-1254). The knights’ confusion about the role of the gods is a result of the Knight’s dual presentation of godly intervention as both predestination and a product of chance—a conflicted presentation resulting from warring beliefs in the medieval notion of Fortune and her turning wheel versus the role of predestination. On the one hand, the Knight attempts to instill a sense of order and control in his Tale by explaining events that appear unreasonable to be the products of divine foresight. But because the Knight is aware of the intervention of both fate and chance occurrence, his implementation of godly influence sometimes presents both—the gods at one moment symbolize the possibility of chance, and other times represent the power of destiny. These conflicting presentations confuse the role of the gods—and as a consequence, rather than instilling a sense of reason and order in his Tale, the Knight further enforces the irrationality of the knights’ imprisonment by transforming divine foresight into arbitrary decision.

What ensues from the knight's simultaneous reliance on divine foresight and arbitrary chance is a conflict of agency: though the gods should be the most powerful characters of the Tale, they begin to lose their overriding influence as more and more occurrences are attributed to random chance. When he orders Arcite to return to Athens, Mercury insists that his destiny is preordained: "Ther is thee shapen of thy wo an ende" (I.1392). Yet according to the Knight, the "ende" of Arcite's woe proceeds from multiple chance occurrences—for example, as in the case above, a meeting "by aventure" between him and Palamon in the grove. Also, the Knight attributes Arcite's death to an accident ("fallyng nys nat but an aventure" [I.2722]), but the reader can see that it is no accident that Arcite falls: Venus has appealed to Saturn by the request of Palamon, and Saturn has devised a suitable solution. As Van Dyke observes, "Apparently no one knows that Saturn caused the accident, and no one turns to the gods for blame or comfort."<sup>10</sup> Because the Knight disregards the role of Saturn immediately after his intervention, the god is relegated to a symbol of chance occurrence. Saturn's role as an arbitrary force is supported simply by his presence in the Tale: Saturn is the god of chaos, and it is therefore fitting to employ Saturn as excuse for the chaotic climactic scene of the Tale. But instead, Saturn actually goes against his nature to create a sense of order: when he hears Venus' plight, "Saturne anon, to stynten strif and drede,/Al be it that it is agayn his kynde,/Of al this strif he gan remedie fynde" (I.2450-2452). Saturn intervenes to "stynten strif and dred" caused by the chaotic disagreement between the gods. To the Knight, the intervention of Saturn reinstates a type of divine order, but Saturn should not by nature be concerned with order—so the Knight's reasoning is faulty, and, as a result, he inadvertently argues that the universe isn't naturally ordered or understandable. The

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<sup>10</sup> Van Dyke 130.

Knight's failure to employ Saturn as a rational explanation for a tragic occurrence not only undermines the Knight's own argument, but also results in Saturn's loss of power—no longer the powerful god of chaos, he becomes instead an ill-suited explanation for a chaotic event.

The gods' declining control is visible as well in the Knight's presentation of female power. At the start, the Knight makes his position regarding women's agency clear: Duke Theseus conquers "the regne of Femenye;" in other words, he removes agency from the feminine group (I.866). As a female, Emily, sister-in-law to Duke Theseus, is often described as a character with no free will, destined to bow both to masculine influence and the bidding of the gods. For instance, though she expresses her desire to remain unwed, the Knight explains that "wommen, as to speken in comune,/Thei folwen alle the favour of Fortune" (I.2681-82). And when she prays at the temple of Diana, Emily says, "I putte me in thy proteccioun,/Dyane, and in thy disposicioun," thus completely giving up agency to the goddess (I.2363-64). But though she is a deity, Diana does not seem to have any control over the situation either: she remarks that Emily's fate has been "confermed" amidst "the goddes hye," evidently excluding herself, and admits that "which of hem [she] may nat telle," indicating that she does not actually know whom Emily is fated to wed (I.2350, 2349, 2353). Finally, she declares, "I ne may no lenger dwelle," actually acknowledging that she doesn't have the ability to direct her own movements (I.2354). In contrast to Diana, Emily at some points is given a certain degree of power. She is afforded what Kenneth Bleeth describes as "ordered freedom within the enclosure of her garden"<sup>11</sup>: while Palamon is in prison and "goth in the chambre romynge

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<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Bleeth, "Chaucerian Gardens and the Spirit of Play," *Place, Space, and Landscape in Medieval Narrative*, ed. Laura L. Howes (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2007) 111.

to and fro" (I.1071), "Emelye the shene/Was in hire walk, and romed up and doun" in the garden (I.1068-1069). Though she is the *object* of the males' gaze, she has more freedom than the imprisoned knights within the confines of the garden. Further, Emily becomes an agent of nature, described as "fressher than the May with floures newe," making a garland from the flowers for her hair (I.1037).<sup>12</sup> It appears that while Emily is allowed moments of power and control, the goddess Diana becomes the powerless woman, part of the conquered "reygn of Femenye." Diana's powerlessness results from the Knight's dual attempt to explain occurrences as the product of fate and chance: Diana explains that Emily's fate is "confermed," but she cannot tell her what that fate is because, as we later see, Arcite's death occurs as the result of a last-minute divine intervention. It is the Knight's floundering explanation of the final action that reduces Diana's power: she "may nat telle" because it is not decided, but because she has claimed that it is preordained, she becomes the weak female with no control. And Emily, because she holds a certain amount of power over the knights, is therefore given more agency than that afforded to the goddess, as far as the reader can observe—even though Diana should customarily have more power than any human in the Tale. Thus, because the Knight mixes accident and destiny, the gods appear to have random amounts of power and control.

As I have so far explained, the gods are not all-mighty and powerful in the Knight's Tale because they are employed as random explanations, often as the instigators of chance occurrence rather than the agents of divine foresight. And the agency of the gods is further confused in the Tale because their power is often discussed in terms of human

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<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that the Knight later insists, "Nature hath now no dominacioun" when reflecting upon the fortune of Arcite, as Emily is at that point equally bereft of agency (I.2758)

emotion. For example, Palamon is obsessed with the cause of godly intervention, but has no knowledge to draw on except for his own human experience. As usual, he devises several explanations for his imprisonment. He laments,

I moot been in prisoun thurgh Saturne,  
And eek thurgh Juno, jalous and eek wood,  
.....  
And Venus sleeth me on that oother syde  
For jalousie and fere of hym Arcite.

[I.1328-29, 1332-33]

Saturn represents chaos, symbolizing arbitrary chance or Fortune. Yet Juno, another possible power, is “jalous” and “wood” just as Palamon is jealous of Arcite. Palamon has been imprisoned because of the agency of the gods, but for distinctly human emotional reasons. Arcite has a similar speech in which he blames the gods’ anger for his fate: “Allas, thou felle Mars! Allas, Juno!/Thus hath youre *ire* oure lynage al fordo” (I.1559-1560, emphasis added). The Knight even reminds the audience of the power of “geery [fickle] Venus” (I.1536). These descriptions are again a result of the Knight’s limitations: like Palamon, the Knight is unable to describe the specifics of godly intervention without relying on his own human experience. According to Leicester, these moments in parts one and two of the Knight’s Tale present “the way things are” in “a mystified form...external to the agents.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the human emotions and dispositions applied to the gods remove the power of their divinity by relegating them to a position that is distinctly human, and godly intervention becomes a product of human sentiment (ire, jealousy) rather than divine foresight. As a result, their influence appears as nothing more than emotional *interference*, decidedly not ordered or controlled.

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<sup>13</sup> Leicester 314.

Finally, the gods appear in physical form—but the effect is not reassuring. Palamon and Arcite’s (and the Knight’s) wonderings regarding just cause still boil down to a humanization of deistic influence. This breakdown of godly power is visible in the description of Venus in her temple. Before she appears as an active agent in the Tale, the Knight describes Venus as all-powerful: “wysdom,” “richesse,” “beautee,” “sleighte,” “strengthe,” and “hardynesse” “ne may with Venus holde champartie,/For as hir list the world than may she gye” (I.1947-50). And when Palamon visits the temple, Venus’ agency is tangible: “But atte laste the statue of Venus shook/And made signe, wherby that he took/That his preyere accepted was that day” (I.2265-2267). But later we see Venus’ real reaction: she “wepeth so, for wantynge of hir wille” (I.2665). In the Knight’s noble description, Venus is omnipotent. But when Venus actually shows up, she appears powerless and weak—she throws a temper tantrum, acting like a child in order to get her way. The same humanization is visible in Arcite’s pact with Mars: victory for him, honor and eternal service for Mars. This exchange appears similar to two humans making a deal, comparable to the “obeisance” requested of Thebes at the end of the Tale (I.2974). As noted above, Diana appears bereft of any agency, ignorant of divine will. As Van Dyke writes, “The gods are not simply astrological and mythic but also...natural. Thus agency slides along more than one axis.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, because the gods are subject to human emotion, they are exposed to the same set of varying influences as humans. Venus does not grant Palamon’s prayer through divine foresight but instead through childish bargaining. Though the Knight attempts to use the divinity of gods to order the events in his Tale, they become what Leicester describes as “human creations,” “ways

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<sup>14</sup> Van Dyke, *Chaucer’s Agents* 128.

men and women try to make an order they cannot find outside them.”<sup>15</sup> Because they are visibly a product of the Knight’s attempt to enforce order, the gods’ diminished power reveals the Knight’s failure to rationalize the events of the Tale.

And as the Tale continues, so does the precarious position of godly influence. A family squabble ensues between Mars and Venus, which Jupiter (the First Mover and most powerful of all) is powerless to fix:

And right anon swich strif ther is bigonne,  
For thilke grauntyng, in the hevene above,  
Bitwixe Venus, the goddesse of love,  
And Mars, the stierne god armypotente,  
That Juppiter was bisy it to stente.

[I.2438-42]

Jupiter’s inability to settle the argument reveals the chaotic ordering of the Knight’s universe: predestination is nonexistent and gods are no longer omnipotent. Venus “wepeth so” that Saturn is forced to reconcile the dispute: “I am thin aiel, redy at thy wille;/Weep now namoore, I wol thy lust fulfille” (I.2477-78). Saturn has been transformed from the god of chaos into “a delightfully pompous, indulgent, elderly grandfather figure.”<sup>16</sup> Why does the Knight present Saturn this way? According to Van Dyke, Saturn’s speech allows us to “tacitly accept the proposition that the forces of chaos might speak and intend.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, by attributing the climactic moment of the Tale to Saturn’s control, the Knight can transform chaos into reason. But if the Knight converts Saturn’s chaotic disposition into loving control in order to reconcile his own fears regarding order in the world, why do the other gods fold under the pressures of ruling the universe? Clearly, the Knight is not fully able to enforce order, and the actions

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<sup>15</sup> Leicester 315.

<sup>16</sup> Lois Roney *Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale and Theories of Scholastic Psychology* (Tampa: U of South Florida P, 1990) 213.

<sup>17</sup> Van Dyke *Chaucer’s Agents* 130.

of Saturn are not evidence of an ordered world—especially as his actions deliberately oppose his nature.

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### *Theseus*

When Saturn intervenes to settle the family dispute, his methods of control rely on distinctly human values: for example, in order to satisfy both Venus and Mars, Saturn “foond in his olde experience an art/That he ful soone hath plesed every part./As sooth is seyde, elde hath greet advantage;/In elde is bothe wysdome and usage” (I.2445-48). According to the Knight, Saturn does not use any omnipotent godly powers but rather principles of human existence—wisdom, the value of experience—to make his decisions. The Knight’s gods appear not unlike Duke Theseus in their power: subject to human emotion, wise, experienced, and familial. For example, just as Saturn is affected by the tears of his daughter Venus, Theseus is moved by the crying widows, for whom he besieges Thebes. Because the Knight gives the same qualities to Duke Theseus as he does to the gods in his Tale, and because he constantly emphasizes his wisdom and chivalry, Theseus becomes a symbol of the power of noble ideals to order and control events. But Theseus’ chivalric pursuit of order and power contains aspects of self-aggrandizement, as his attempts to impose order on his Tale by rationalizing the tragic outcome enforce his own authority as a political leader. In the end, Theseus’ self-imposed authority as supreme ruler evidences the insufficiencies of noble pursuits, which fail to rationally explain the events of the Tale.



If the gods can be said to subsume human emotion and lose power, Theseus rises inversely to a godly status. For example, after he finds Palamon and Arcite battling in the grove, Theseus describes his plans to settle their dispute:

Thanne shal I yeve Emelya to wyve  
To whom that Fortune yeveth so faire a grace.  
The lystes shal I maken in this place,  
And God so wisly on my soule rewe,  
As I shal evene juge been and trewe.

[I.1860-1864]

While his words exalt God for his power over human actions and establish the unquestionable influence of Fortune, the references to Fortune, God, and Theseus himself (six in only five lines) muddle any differentiation of power and establish Theseus as a ruler on par with these age-old governing forces. According to Theseus' description, though God will judge his worth, Theseus insists that God will endow him with the necessary authority to judge the tournament and create the lists—in other words, Theseus will assume the responsibility and authority of God. And he keeps this authority—after he builds the arena, Theseus sits at the tournament “Arrayed right as he were a god in trone” [I.2529]. Theseus' creation of the lists is not in Boccaccio, and the Knight's addition establishes Theseus' role as one of god-like importance—as Patterson notes, “both the oratories and the amphitheater of which they are part witness to the power not of the deities who are there represented but of the duke who has brought those representations into being.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, Theseus' supreme influence is emphasized by the grandeur of the lists, which reflect the power of their creator.

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<sup>18</sup> Patterson 223.

Muscatine positively asserts that Theseus assumes this role of sovereign ruler with divine power because this position lends itself to the aim of the Tale.<sup>19</sup> But because Theseus sets himself up as “a god in trone,” exercising his political power to gain control over the course of events, it is hard not to view some of his actions as those of a power-hungry ruler. His self-interest is apparent at certain ambiguous moments in the Tale: when he first comes across the crying women in part one, he is immediately suspicious of any attempt to usurp his throne; when he wages war on Thebes, he needlessly destroys the entire city. And Theseus’ final speech regarding the first mover who orders the universe can be seen as a self-important political address that places Theseus at the apex of the power pyramid. For example, in a statement which asks for faith in the incomprehensible workings of the universe [“take it weel that we may nat eschue,/And namely that to us alle is due./And whoso gruccheth ought, he doth folye,/And rebel is to hym that al may gye” (I.3043-46)], Theseus enforces the importance of bowing before authority and being loyal, as to a political leader. Theseus also enforces his own power when he cites the power of love to order the universe. In his speech, love becomes a divine method of control: according to Theseus, Jupiter, the “First Moevere,” made a “faire cheyne of love” to “bond” the land so that “they may nat flee” (I.2987-88, 2991, 2993). But this love fails to explain the irrational events of the Tale, because Jupiter was earlier powerless to solve the dispute between Venus and Mars. Instead, love is used as a political tool—Theseus harnesses the power of Jupiter’s “faire cheyne of love” to influence Palamon and Emily: “Lene me your hond,” he orders, binding the two by love and politics with no agency of their own (I.3082). He claims the marriage is his “parlement,” decided “by all the conseil”—thus, he equates Jupiter’s “fair cheyne” with

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<sup>19</sup> Muscatine 181.

the power of a political ruler (I.3076, 3094). Rather than explaining that love is a noble ideal that caused the chaotic events of the Tale, Theseus uses the power of love for a self-motivated agenda.

While Theseus' noble pursuits enforce his power as a political ruler, they fail to rationalize the events of the Tale. Though Theseus enforces the chivalric values of "worthy fame, "good name," and "honour" to describe Arcite, chivalry is insufficient to explain Arcite's arbitrary death. As David Aers points out, Theseus' inconsistent argument that Arcite is finally free of the "foule prison of this lyf" while Palamon and Emily may simultaneously live in "parfit joye, lastynge everemo" is complete nonsense to those who have followed the events of the Tale (I.3061, 3072).<sup>20</sup> Because Theseus' noble attempt to establish Arcite's honor in death contradicts the certainty with which he describes the "joye" of those still alive, his explanation is completely illogical. And when Theseus attempts to rationalize Arcite's death with the platitude "nothing lasts forever," his argument is inconsistent with the "parfit joye, lastynge everemo" that he prescribes for Palamon and Emily. Theseus' next several attempts to meaningfully explain Arcite's death fall far short of the mark: first, he insists that the existence of higher meaning is "preeved by experience" because humans ultimately face a limit to their abilities (death) (I.3001). But the simple statement that "all things die" is no explanation for why Arcite died in such a manner at such a time, nor does Theseus' trust in Jupiter account for *Saturn's* actions. "What maketh this but Juppiter, the kyng...?" asks Theseus, but Jupiter was powerless to resolve the events of the Tale; Saturn played the role of First Mover (I.3035). Next, Theseus tries to justify Arcite's death by claiming

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<sup>20</sup> David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1980) 193.

that it is best to die young with a good name; but throughout the Tale, respect and power are afforded only to the oldest and wisest. And, finally, when Theseus claims that grieving for Arcite is in vain because Arcite cannot thank his grievers, it is an oversimplification of life and human emotion. At this point, as Leicester notes, Theseus must “make use of whatever he can cobble together from the practical resources his situation and his culture provide.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, he is grasping at straws—though his authority is influenced by his reliance in noble designs, these designs ultimately fail to bring meaning to irrational human experience.

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### *The Knight*

Clearly, the Knight means for his Tale to celebrate an ideal of order. He sets his Tale up symmetrically and attempts to both justify and rationalize the most chaotic events in order to enforce the value of noble ideals and chivalric pursuits. In fact, Theseus’ role as politician and ruler of Thebes, responsible for maintaining careful control of the tournament events, reflects the Knight’s role as storyteller, determined to organize and control his Tale. But the Knight fails to maintain order in the construction of his story: for example, the Knight explicates Arcite’s suffering at length (over 30 lines are devoted to his anguish), but begins his speech with “shortly to concluden al his wo” (I.1358). His determination to “shortly” describe Arcite’s suffering, followed by his long speech, emphasizes Arcite’s weak, determinedly feminine attitude and his lack of masculine agency (“he wepeth, wayleth, crieth pitously” [I.1222]) while also revealing the Knight’s own inability to keep his story under control. Throughout the Tale, though he constantly

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<sup>21</sup> Leicester 370. It should be noted that Leicester admires Theseus’ ability to improvise in his final speech.

cites the existence of divine influence, fate, and fortune, the Knight's inability to assign each situation to an acceptable cause serves only to create further disorder: either Palamon or Arcite must lose in order for Emily to marry the other, but because the two knights are indistinguishable, the choice must be arbitrary. The Knight's insistence on fate, therefore, appears inconsistent and emphasizes the irrationality of faith in a divinely influenced destiny.

In the end, the Knight is unable to rely on noble pursuits to bring meaning to seemingly irrational events—and because the Knight fails to maintain order, his failure sheds light on the insufficiency of noble ideals to rationalize the complexities of human experience. For example, it appears that both the Knight and Theseus struggle to bring a sense of order to the Tale through Arcite's majestic, knightly funeral—yet the enormous pyre and ceremonious farewell is offset by the tree spirits and animals that are uprooted and left homeless by the spectacle. Theseus' use of social ceremony to bring an ordered conclusion to the Tale can be seen as analogous to the Knight's quest for control over disorder, but his speech is also a failure: though he cites the importance of noble designs such as love, honor, and faith in a higher power, the ideals are insufficient to explain unjust events and serve only to enforce Theseus' position as a powerful “god in trone,” with the power to bind his people with a strength equal to that of a god. Thus, in the end, the Knight's failure to establish social order amidst chaos creates a conflict of agency (the reader cannot help but focus on the humanization of the gods, the helplessness of Arcite and Palamon, and the godly authority of Theseus' political control) and underlines the insufficiency of medieval chivalric institutions to order an irrational world.

## Chapter 2

### **The Wife of Bath and the Conflict of Desire**

It is difficult to speak of the Wife of Bath's agency, because the Wife of Bath is an elusive subject. As she attempts to carve out a place for female "maistrye," the Wife is simultaneously empowered and relegated to a stereotypical feminine role. Though she is a woman living in an age in which very little agency is granted to the feminine—and women are expected to be submissive and weak-willed—the Wife presents her strong personality from her very first words. The reader easily gets a sense of the Wife's individuality as she introduces and disregards various arguments that outline the advantages of remarrying after widowhood and support a woman's right to have sex and sexual pleasure. But it's been argued that Wife of Bath is nevertheless trapped within patriarchal ideology. She seems to enforce anti-feminist propaganda when she agrees that women "swere and lyen" and "loven best riches" (III.228, 925), and she perpetuates the stereotype of the submissive feminine when she assumes the role of obedient wife. Then again, the Wife's use of anti-feminist propaganda is clearly intentional. She often draws on patriarchal ideology to argue her case, turning the tables on her first three husbands and gaining power over Janekin at the end of her Prologue. It seems, then, that the Wife consciously sacrifices her subjectivity in order to prove her point: women, above all, desire agency and sovereignty in marriage.

In that case, does the Wife have agency as she argues for agency? Though she reaches for arguments that will help to justify her desire for "maistrye," there are moments during the Wife's Prologue and Tale that seem to spiral out of her grasp, and the reader becomes privy to the Wife's anxieties concerning influences she is powerless

to control. Even while she argues for female sovereignty, these moments plus the conclusions of her Prologue and Tale imply that her desires are more complex. Though she manipulates masculine discourse in order to prove that codes of behavior ignore female desire, the Wife is powerless to navigate outside of social ideologies. Caught between the medieval perception of women as meek and obedient and a counter-impulse to present herself as strong, in control, and sexually aggressive, the Wife is unable to articulate her desires without perpetuating an anti-feminist stereotype. She tries again in her Tale, relying on the power of fairy-tale magic in order to gain agency and fulfill her own complex wishes. But the Wife is not unaware that her world is infused with fantasy, and that in reality she does not have the power to realize her every desire.

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### *The Prologue*

In the first part of her Prologue, the Wife of Bath argues for a widow's right to remarry after her husband's death. In the course of approximately 160 lines, she gives nine explanations to justify her own multiple marriages. First, she notes that Jesus told the Samaritan woman that she could not wed five times, but insists that this does not necessarily mean she could only marry once (III.15-23). Second, she claims, "God bad us for to wexe and multiplie"—in other words, marriage is a necessary means for women to produce offspring (III.28). Third, the Wife explains that in the Bible God tells us to marry, and makes no explicit mention of how many times. She describes the many wives of "wyse," "noble" Solomon, Abraham, and Jacob as examples of her case (III.35, 41, 55-56). In her fourth argument, she puts a positive spin on her five choices, claiming that

her separate marriages have taught her much more than one marriage could: “Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes,/And diverse practyk in many sundry werkes/Maketh the werkman parfyt sekirly;/Of five husbondes scoleiyng am I” (III.44c-f). Fifth, she cites St. Paul, noting his argument “bet is to be wedded than to brynne”—since the Wife does not wish to keep chaste, she remarries in order to have sex respectably (III.52). Sixth, she admits that while one should aspire to be a virgin, marriage is the worthiest alternative. Seventh, the wife notes that not all women can be chaste virgins: “everich hath of God a propre yifte,” she says (III.103). At the start of her Prologue she acknowledges that “Crist ne wente [to a wedding] nevere but onis,” but in her eighth argument rationalizes that not all humans are expected to be as perfect as Jesus (III.10, 107-09). Lastly, the Wife concentrates on the physical sexual act, noting that “oure bothe thynges smale” are made not just “for purgacioun/Of uryne” (III.120-21). In other words, because God gave women and men their sexual organs, the Wife insists that she “wol use [her] instrument/As frely as [her] Makere hath it sent” (III.149-50).

What impression do we get of the Wife of Bath’s level of control over her arguments from the first third of her Prologue? It seems that the Wife is certainly able to speak her mind. After using King Solomon as an example, the Wife crudely presents her sexual wish “to be refreshed half so ofte as he!” (III.38). As she offers her opinions, however, the Wife’s arguments constantly shift until the reader has lost track of what she set out to prove. She argues for the importance of marriage when she claims to “wel understonde” that women are meant to have children, but never mentions having any children of her own, or any intention of having children (III.29). She drops this line of reasoning—which cannot be applied to her case—and moves on to her right to be sexually active.



“Men may conseil a womman to been [a virgin],” she explains, “But conseillyng is no comandement”; “For sothe, I wol nat kepe me chaast in al” (III.66-67, 46). The Wife claims that “man shal yelde to his wyf hire dette”—placed in the middle of her argument for the use of sexual organs, “dette” refers directly to sexual activities (III.130). Evidently, the Wife’s original argument for the right to remarry becomes a lecture on the importance of marriage itself, and she eventually becomes devoted to convincing the other pilgrims of a woman’s right to have sex and sexual pleasure. From the rapid progression of the first third of her Prologue, we see that the Wife clearly has the strength to make her thoughts and arguments heard—but it is not entirely clear what she is arguing *for*.

One way to view the Wife’s shifting arguments is as “deliberate self-fashioning”—in other words, the Wife’s very unpredictability affirms her position as a unique subject with human needs and desires.<sup>22</sup> In a culture that affords very limited agency to women, the Wife can emerge through her fallible, contradictory arguments as an individual with enough power to speak her mind. Patterson argues this point: “As each element of the sermon is introduced only to be discarded we experience a growing irritation; but in devaluing the words the preacher promotes an all the more fascinating self.”<sup>23</sup> The Wife repeatedly shifts focus to achieve her ends: after dropping the argument that women are meant to propagate, she moves to a discussion of the merits of virginity. Her earlier, discarded “wexe and multiplie” argument fits her case again, and she easily reapplies it as a type of side-note: “And certes, if ther were no seed ysowe,/Virginitee, thanne werof sholde it growe?” (III.71-72). But the problem with insisting that the Wife intentionally

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<sup>22</sup> Patterson 289.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 306.

jumps from one line of reasoning to the next is that her rapidly shifting arguments undermine her own authority. The crucial issue, therefore, is whether the Wife has “her own strategic or tactical reasons even for contradicting herself.”<sup>24</sup> Does the Wife plan to argue for her sexuality, beginning with the topic of marriage, in order to convince the surrounding pilgrims? Or does she lose control over her intentions as her Prologue unfolds, causing her speech to morph and inadvertently display her secret desires?

Evidence of the Wife’s possible dwindling control appears after she proclaims her right to use “myn instrument” (III.149). Her speech seems to veer off subject and take on a darker tone:

An housbonde I wol have—I wol nat lette—  
Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,  
And have his tribulacioun withal  
Upon his flessch, whil that I am his wyf.  
I have the power durynge al my lyf  
Upon his propre body, and nocht he.  
[III.154-59]

The Wife is no longer only stating her case for marriage and sex; here she clearly outlines her desire to have power over her husband, and the shocking suggestion that she will control his “flessch” and “propre body” adds a disturbing note to her speech. At this point, the Pardoner interrupts the Wife’s rant to mockingly agree with her, claiming he would rather have no wife than give up his “flessch so deere” (III.167). After she is interrupted, the Wife seems to recognize that her comments are socially inappropriate, and switches tactics—rather than continuing with her tirade, she apologizes to the pilgrims:

But yet I praye to all this compaignye,  
If that I speke after my fantasye,  
As taketh not agrief of that I seye;  
For myn entente nys but for to pleye.  
[III.189-92]

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<sup>24</sup> Leicester 67.

According to Carolynn Van Dyke, “the change” that is apparent after the Pardoner’s interruption—the difference between the first and second parts of her Prologue—“does not produce a new version of the Wife; it reduces her to generically inconsistent female agency.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, as Van Dyke implies, the Wife’s shifting arguments are a consequence of her undecided mind, as she fails to control her own thoughts. In her defense of feminine desire, her speech runs away from her and becomes alarming; as a result, she must toss off her argument for feminine sexuality as “fantasye” in order to remain in the pilgrims’ good graces. The Wife puts herself back in the place afforded her by patriarchal society because she is unable to present a controlled argument, and she therefore negates the point she originally set out to prove.

On the other hand, it is not enough to merely declare that the Wife is out of control. At certain points, her method of speaking is unquestionably deliberate. This is evidenced by her careful manipulation of scriptural authority throughout much of her Prologue. At first, the Wife claims that she will draw on experience rather than authority: “Experience, though noon auctoritee/Were in this world, is right ynogh for me/To speke of wo that is in mariage” (III.1-3). When the Wife initially insists on the value of experience, she is denying the authoritative influence of a history of male antifeminist writing. Despite this declaration, however, the first part of her Prologue rests heavily on the very authority she has seemingly rejected. A glance at the notes to the Wife of Bath’s Prologue in *The Riverside Chaucer* reveals that, in the first 100 lines, the Wife’s arguments are shaped by the writings of Jerome, Theophrastus, and St. Paul, as well as countless biblical passages.<sup>26</sup> By mimicking the voices of masculine authority, the Wife relies on a history

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<sup>25</sup> Van Dyke, *Chaucer’s Agents* 189.

<sup>26</sup> Larry D. Benson, ed, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (Boston: Houghton, 1987) 865-66.

of male dominance to argue her point and contradicts her original assertion of the value of experience. It could be argued, therefore, that the Wife has no agency to speak her mind outside of this masculine ideology. But the Wife's quick move from experience to authority is too obvious to be unintentional. The Wife purposefully relies on the language of a patriarchal society to get her point across, and she does this by standing the model of masculine authority on its head.<sup>27</sup> At the start of her Prologue, she quotes St.

Paul:

th'apostle seith that I am free  
To wedde, a Goddes half, where it lyketh me.  
He seith that to be wedded is no synne;  
Bet is to be wedded than to brynne.  
[III.49-52]

The passage that the Wife refers to here is meant to constrain women's sexuality. According to St. Paul, women should marry in order to transform their sinful lust into a sober marital duty. But the Wife uses St. Paul's words to argue instead for the acceptability of a woman's sexual desire and fulfillment. She "recasts the marital debt...into an ideal of the pure pursuit of erotic pleasure in marriage"<sup>28</sup>—in other words, the Wife claims that if you are too lustful to remain chaste, you can have a lot of sex as long as you are married. As Leicester puts it, "the Wife may be said to womanhandle the traditional instruments of male domination in the interests of her feminist message."<sup>29</sup> At the start of her Prologue, the Wife mentions that "Men may devyne and glosen, up and down" passages of the Bible that are not easily interpreted (III.26). The Wife herself does just that: she "glosses" passages by St. Paul and Jerome, manipulating and rewriting authoritative text to suit her argument.

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<sup>27</sup> Leicester 81.

<sup>28</sup> Miller 198.

<sup>29</sup> Leicester 72.

But because the Wife deliberately uses patriarchal authority in order shape her arguments and project her opinions as learned and viable, she cannot completely avoid the pitfalls of social ideology. When the Pardoner's interruption reminds the Wife of her audience, she is quick to relegate her desires to acceptable "fantasye" as to not offend the listening pilgrims. The Wife is clearly limited by her appropriation of masculine discourse. For example, when she compares virginity to gold and marital sexuality to wood, the Wife claims, "a lord in his houshold,/He nath nat every vessel al of gold;/Somme been of tree, and doon hir lord servyse" (III.99-101). The Wife manipulates the antifeminist rhetoric: though she calls herself a tree, inferior to gold, she turns the expression on its head by proclaiming through metaphor that she is equally useful. But in the end, the Wife has still compared herself to wood. And because the reader soon learns that riches are important to the Wife (she desires all her husband's "tresoor" [III.204]), it is impossible to see the Wife's self-objectification as intentional. Leicester agrees that although the Wife uses anti-feminist rhetoric to rewrite authoritative opinions, her use of the text is "equally disenchanted in the importance it attaches to human agency."<sup>30</sup> In other words, while she claims wood is as useful as gold, the Wife has still established herself as an object in her husband's house—she is unable to escape antifeminist ideology because she uses masculine discourse to support her arguments.

So the Wife is stuck in a trap: though she has agency to twist authoritative texts to her advantage, she is still confined within antifeminist dialogue. And with no history of feminine discourse, the Wife is forced to use masculine authority to argue her point. But this trap does not seem to bother the Wife, because she purposefully perpetuates antifeminist attitudes in the next part of her Prologue. For example, when she describes

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 81.

her first three husbands, the Wife launches into a description of her power: “I made hem swynke,” “I hadde hem hoolly in myn hond,” “I sette hem so a-werke” (III.202, 211, 215). She then requests that the company “herkneth how I sayde” before launching into an account of her marriages—an account rife with antifeminist thought (III.234). At first, though she is merely describing what *she has convinced* her husbands that they said, and not what they *actually* said to her, it’s easy for the reader to lose this detail amidst the sheer length of the passage (143 lines). The Wife puts the words in her husbands’ mouths, describing their refusal to be satisfied: if his wife is poor a husband suffers by default, if she is rich she is too prideful, if she is beautiful she is untrustworthy, if she is ugly she is too desirous. The Wife relates horrible things husbands say of their marriages, and notes that wives are treated as “housewares” and constantly suspected of affairs. She doesn’t make up these long accusations off the top of her head—they are embedded within a tradition of long-standing antifeminist discourse. At this point, Leicester claims that the Wife “turn[s] herself into a counterexemplum in opposition to those in Janekyn’s book of wicked wives and the male misogynist tradition.”<sup>31</sup> If in fact her husbands had actually said those stereotypically antifeminist things to the Wife of Bath, she would be seen as the good wife, innocent of their wrongful accusations. But the Wife is adamant that “al was fals”—she merely convinced her husbands that they had said those things (III.382). Instead of turning herself into a “counterexemplum” to antifeminist thought, the Wife proves herself a master of masculine discourse. “Baar I stifly myn olde housbondes on honde,” she claims, and “atte end I hadde the bettre in ech degree” (III.380, 404). In this way, the Wife’s actions display her power: although “al was fals,” she convinced them otherwise and they believed her. It is clear, then, that the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 72.

Wife isn't negating antifeminist discourse—in fact, she does exactly the opposite: she perpetuates the stereotype of the socially unacceptable, shameless female by boasting that she lied and manipulated her husbands.

But I do not wish to argue that the Wife *intends* to enforce the values of antifeminism. Rather, it seems that the Wife's only concern is asserting and demonstrating her power, regardless of the outcome. She is merely “pointing to her ability to appropriate even antifeminist characterization and turn it back on men to gain the mastery,”<sup>32</sup> without worrying about the stereotype of the dangerous, uncontrolled woman that emerges as a result. “Oon of us two [husband or wife] moste bowen, douteless,” the Wife explains, “And sith a man is moore resonable/Than womman is, ye moste been suffrable” (III.440-442). The Wife insults herself and her gender in a statement of classic reverse psychology: what man would argue that he is not more reasonable than his wife? Because this attempt to gain power relies on antifeminist sentiment, and because antifeminist thought outlines the very inappropriate nature of female power, David Aers comments that the Wife's arguments “can only recapitulate and perpetuate in reverse, like a mirror image, the structure and logic of the institutional order it attempts to refute.”<sup>33</sup> But while it is true that the Wife appropriates the antifeminist stereotype of the brazen woman, “refuting” is never her intention. So long as she has successfully used antifeminist ideology to gain the upper hand, the Wife is unconcerned with abolishing gender stereotypes.

The Wife's reliance on antifeminist discourse in the second section of her Prologue leads to a loss of her unique self. Whereas in the first part of her Prologue the Wife's

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> David Aers quoted in Leicester 75.

conflicting, morphing arguments displayed her individuality, here she loses that unique voice because she repeatedly invokes the conventions of the defiant, audacious wife: “Deceite, wepyng, spyngnyng God hath yive/To wommen kyndely, whil that they may lyve” (III.401-402). The Wife turns herself into the stereotype of the out-of-control female—but she does not do so accidentally. It is Van Dyke who notes that the Wife’s reliance on antifeminist thought “separates her also from the categorically carnal.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, it is precisely by becoming the stereotypical unrestrained female and cloaking her individuality that the Wife can emerge unscathed from her use of antifeminist rhetoric. It is because we have seen the Wife’s fierce personality in the first part of her Prologue that she can exist outside the stereotype; by relegating herself to a socially constructed gender role she “remains elsewhere, with a body, a will, a desire beyond that which she is afforded by patriarchal discourse.”<sup>35</sup> The same is true of the Wife’s insistence on the value of experience at the start of her Prologue: she is separated from the sins of unruly wives because she uses a masculine authority to describe these sins, rather than specific experiences. The Wife’s loss of subjectivity, therefore, enhances her neglected individuality and power by denying gender stereotypes as inapplicable to real situations.

But in the following lines, the Wife’s desire for sexual pleasure and sexual equality initiates a return of her subjectivity. The Wife seems to view sex as a business transaction, understanding that the one with the power maintains the most control:

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;

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<sup>34</sup> Van Dyke, *Chaucer’s Agents* 188.

<sup>35</sup> Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) 120.



Thanne wolde I suffre hym do his nycetee.  
[III.409-12]

If woman is viewed as a commodity—as a sexual object—the Wife of Bath is quick to claim that she controls this object. She does not appear to despise her role as a commodity as long as she can assert a certain measure of control. The Wife therefore becomes an active participant in a sexual exchange—though she “assumes her position as female in the marketplace,” she decides her own price.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, the Wife later implies that she is not completely satisfied with viewing sex as a business transaction. When she describes her fifth husband, she admires his physical attributes: “me thoughte he hadde a paire/Of legges and of feet so clene and faire/That al myn herte I yaf unto his hoold” (III.597-99). And though he “bete [her] on every bon,” he was “so fressh and gay” in bed that the Wife continued to desire him (III.511, 508). The Wife’s relationship with Janekin is strikingly different from her sexual experiences with her earlier husbands (when she would “suffre hym do his nycetee” [III.412]). In her relationships with her first three husbands, the Wife was able to claim victory in bed so long as she sacrificed her desire for pleasure.<sup>37</sup> But this pleasure is obviously important to the Wife, whose interactions with her fifth husband contradict the carefully articulated control she exhibited over her previous spouses. The differences in her marital relationships therefore display the Wife’s different desires: one for physical pleasure and love in marriage, and one for “maistrye.” It is her inability to reconcile these desires that leads to the Wife’s fluctuation between individual subject and female stereotype: in order to articulate her desire for control, the Wife embraces conventionally improper female behavior; in order to clarify her longing for Janekin, she draws on detailed experience

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<sup>36</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989) 118.

<sup>37</sup> Miller 205.

and in so doing presents her identifiable personality. But the reason the Wife cannot articulate her desires without alternating between individual and stereotype is because the two needs form a social contradiction. Leicester describes the Wife's situation:

“As a fundamental part of her ‘nature,’ the Wife’s sex is inextricably both personal and social... her sexuality is both a part of herself and alienated from her, a node at which her apparent independence, self-presence, and individuality... cross her inextricable entanglement in a coercive and defining social network of gender roles and institutional practices.”<sup>38</sup>

In other words, the Wife's sexuality is both socially constructed by acceptable codes of behavior and specific to her personal experience. Therefore, though she is independent—though she presents herself as a subjective individual—she cannot describe her desire to be both master and loved spouse outside of a discourse which forces her to choose between two poles: socially acceptable, submissive, feminine sexuality and unacceptable, unorthodox, dominant female behavior. It is in this discrepancy between her desire for power and control and her longing for sexual pleasure and mutual love that the Wife's subjective self re-surfaces: we do not know what the Wife of Bath wants, yet she clearly *wants*.

So the Wife does not have the agency to articulate her conflicting desires. Her inability to openly express what she wants is apparent in the beginning of the third and last part of her Prologue, when she begins to describe her fourth marriage but instead digresses upon memories of her youth: “But—Lord Crist!—whan that it remembreth me/Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee/It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote” (III.469-71). Van Dyke describes this digression as the Wife “ambushed by memory”<sup>39</sup>: because she has just described her body as goods for sale—a market exchange through which she

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<sup>38</sup> Leicester 135.

<sup>39</sup> Van Dyke, *Chaucer's Agents* 193.

can hope to gain power—the Wife then realizes that time dictates her method of sexual control. We realize that, like the Knight, one of the Wife’s greatest anxieties is temporality—but unlike the Knight, who hopes to control the passage of time so that each event is equal and ordered, the Wife of Bath fears time’s endless march. If your body is part of your business, time will decrease the value of your goods: “The flour is goon; ther is namoore to telle;/The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle” (III.477-78). Leicester notes that we can see the tension between the Wife’s plan to present her marriages in ordered succession and her “counterimpluse to acknowledge the increasingly rich and vivid pressure of detailed memories.”<sup>40</sup> In short, we see glimpses of the Wife’s anxieties, and we see time’s power over the Wife of Bath, as patches of memory interfere with her growing arguments.

As I argue above, when the Pardoner first interrupts the Prologue, the Wife abandons her arguments concerning marriage and sex and turns to generalized descriptions of her first three marriages. The first “Now wol I speken of my fourthe housbonde” (III.452) and the next “Now wol I tellen of my fourthe housbonde” (III.480) separate another two distinct pieces of the Wife’s Prologue: with the reminder of her increasing age, the Wife begins to draw on specific characteristics of her relationships with her fourth and fifth husbands, finally focusing fully on experience over authority. It is no mystery that the Wife is unsure of her feelings regarding her fourth marriage. The description is chilling—he was unfaithful to her, so she tormented him, and then he died: “how soore I him twiste./He deyde whan I cam fro Jerusalem” (III.494-95). And though it is never explicit, the flow of the description from the Wife’s abuse to the husband’s death insinuates to some critics that the Wife actually murdered him. In any case, “in terms of ‘maistrye,’”

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<sup>40</sup> Leicester 89.

notes Leicester, “it sounds like a rather unsatisfactory draw at best.”<sup>41</sup> Though she tormented him for his indiscretion, the Wife does not seem to triumph over her fourth husband until he is “in his grave and in his cheste” (III.502). Janekin, the Wife’s fifth husband, does not allow the Wife complete “maistrye” either: in an ironic reversal of her fourth marriage, this husband beats her, and she pitifully loves him in return.

Because of the difficulties with her fourth and fifth husbands, it is at this point in the Prologue that the confounded reader would like to stand up and shout, “What does the Wife of Bath want?” Says the Wife, “We wommen han, if that I shal nat lye,/In this matere a queynte fantasye:/Wayte what thyng we may nat lightly have,/Therafter wol we crie al day and crave” (III.515-518). Though the Wife wants agency over her husband—no easy feat—it is not only “maistrye” that she refers to here: although he beats her, she wants Janekin—she wants the love of a “‘dangerous,’ withholding, scarce man.”<sup>42</sup> The problem with the Wife’s desire to be loved by a dangerous man, however, is that woman’s desire becomes a function of man’s desire. The influence of masculine desire is clear in the Wife’s description of her dream about Janekin. Claiming that she is following the advice of her mother, the Wife describes to Janekin a fake dream:

I seyde I mette of hym al nyght,  
He wolde han slayn me as I lay upright,  
And al my bed was ful of verray blood;  
‘But yet I hope that ye shal do me good,  
For blood bitokeneth gold, as me was taught.’  
(III.577-81)

Is this dream (though the wife claims that it was false—“I dremed of it right naught” [III.582]) a projection of the Wife’s desire to be sexually dominated? Only lines before, the Wife claimed that even Janekin’s beatings couldn’t keep her away from his bed. It

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 92.

<sup>42</sup> Howard 118.

can perhaps be argued that the wife is quite removed from her dream, and that a “violent objectification” would allow her to once again use the power of her body to gain control, as in the sexual politics of the marketplace.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the violence against the Wife in the dream might allow her to fall back into the stereotype of the submissive feminine, from a place where she can control her body as an object as she did with her first three husbands. But this cannot be so, because as soon as she has finished describing the dream, the Wife falters: “But now, sire, lat me see what I shal seyn./A ha! By God, I have my tale ageyn” (III.585-86). Leicester says it best: “What, above all, are we to do with the attention-getting fact that the Wife’s narration of the dream she did not dream makes her...lose her place?”<sup>44</sup>

With the description of the dream, the Wife hopes to appeal to Janekin’s desire—the masculine desire for violent control. She is telling him what he wants to hear, by “offering herself up to the masculine erotic pathology”; she wants to arouse him with “the thought of his own violent power, together with the belief that he is getting a glimpse at her desire for that violence.”<sup>45</sup> But the recounting of the dream is clearly more than a rhetorical ploy, and it seems Janekin *is* “getting a glimpse” of the Wife’s very real desire. At the end of her Prologue and the end of her Tale, when she takes on the position of submissive female, the Wife definitely appears to want to dutifully fulfill her husband’s wishes. It is not difficult, then, to look back at the dream as possible wishful thinking—the Wife wishes to fulfill her husband’s desire to dominate her. Because the violent dream relies on a history of masculine desire for power and control, the Wife’s longing to please her husband becomes a desire to submit to masculine influence. But though the

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<sup>43</sup> Miller 207.

<sup>44</sup> Leicester 96.

<sup>45</sup> Miller 194.

Wife therefore relies on the stereotype of the dominant male to satisfy her wants, “as far as she is concerned *nothing is lost*.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, the Wife, reliant on male desire for the fulfillment of her desires, does not seem to be bothered by patriarchal ideology. She will use it to prove her own arguments and attack her first husbands, but in the end she relies on it for the fulfillment of her own desires, so dependent on man’s own. In addition, the appearance of blood in her dream symbolizes virginity, displaying the Wife’s desire to start over as a pure woman, “without the taint of commodification that has hitherto marked sexuality for the Wife.”<sup>47</sup> The Wife desires, at least in part, to fulfill the role of pure, submissive wife. But this is not *all* she desires—she also clearly wants a certain amount of agency in her marriages. Therefore, “when the Wife says of the dream ‘al was fals,’ we perhaps do not entirely believe her, but we do not thereby simply convict her of lying.”<sup>48</sup> We are privy to the intelligent craftiness of the dream: the Wife never forgets her market worth, and the statement “blood betokeneth gold” brings the dream back to the scene of the marketplace, where bodies are for sale and where the wife has a sizeable bargaining chip.

It is obvious at this point that the Wife’s arguments shift and expand as her Prologue continues. When she claims that “God bad us for to wexe and multiplye,” her point is fast negated by her lack of any children, and she skips by that particular argument and moves on to the subject of virginity (III.28). It can be argued that the Wife’s lack of a definitive line of reasoning hurts her case—because the Wife is unable to decide exactly how to prove what she wants, the reader is never sure of exactly what that is. However, I view her ability to adapt to new arguments and constantly change her discourse as

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 196 (emphasis added).

<sup>47</sup> Leicester 104.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 101.

evidence of her agency. After she describes her physical attraction to Janekin, the Wife blames her lusty disposition on the planets: “Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,/And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse;/Myn ascendent was Taur, and Mars therinne” (III.611-13). The other pilgrims would easily accept this explanation of the Wife’s lustful nature; in the Knight’s Tale, Venus and Mars are construed as powerful figures who decide the outcome of events. But the Knight’s purpose in including Venus and Mars in his Tale is to establish an ordered hierarchy of power; he defines the planets as the most powerful forces in order to explain occurrences that humans cannot control. The Wife of Bath also employs Venus and Mars in order to explain that she has a disposition that is out of her control—but while the Knight focuses a large chunk of his Tale on the power of the planets, the Wife only briefly mentions the influence of Venus and Mars in order to convince the pilgrims that any of her reprehensible characteristics are not entirely her fault. In contrast to the Knight, she uses astrology as an excuse. This approach to her argument is visible in the midst of her astrological musings. At the same time she gives agency to the planets, she describes her reactions to her astrological disposition in terms of her power and her control:

I folwed ay myn inclinacioun  
 By vertu of my constellacioun;  
 That made me I koude noght withdrawe  
 My chambre of Venus from a good felawe.  
 Yet have I Martes mark upon my face,  
 And also in another privee place.  
 For God so wys be my savacioun,  
 I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun,  
 But evere folwede myn appetit,  
 Al were he short, or long, or blak, or whit;  
 I took no kepe, so that he liked me,  
 How poore he was, ne eek of what degree.

[III.615-626]

The Wife's use of the first person pronoun "I" and the possessive "myn"—"I folwed," "myn inclinacioun," "I ne loved," "myn appetyt," "I took no kepe"—suggest that while Mars and Venus give her various inclinations, *she* decides to follow these inclinations of her own free will. In this passage, the Wife presents herself as simultaneously a victim of astrological determinism and an active participant in her sexual escapades. The argument, in Leicester's words, "looks less and less like a single, worked-out explanation of the influence of various astrological forces on different aspects of the Wife's character and more like a reworking, a set of alternative explanations of the same behavior."<sup>49</sup>

When the Wife explains that she "hadde the prente of seinte Venus seel," she establishes herself as "stamped" and controlled by physical desire (III.604). Her decision to follow "myn inclinacioun" can be construed as passive action: though she is not "tragically driven by her stars," it seems she subconsciously dismisses her own agency, preferring to follow her fate.<sup>50</sup> But the Wife is craftier than that: according to Howard, her decision to blame her particular attitude on astrological influences "makes it sound inevitable and natural."<sup>51</sup> The key here is the phrase "makes it sound"—her purpose is to employ astrology in order to emerge blameless from the exploits described earlier in her Prologue. Her use of astrology is similar to her use of patriarchal discourse: she uses socially accepted explanations for her behavior in order to gain the acceptance of her fellow pilgrims. "What we have here is not an assertion of a fact about the Wife but an unfolding act of interpretation in which she tries out astrological explanation to see how well it fits her case."<sup>52</sup> And just as quickly and quietly as Venus and Mars crop up in her

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 109.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 67.

<sup>51</sup> Howard 250.

<sup>52</sup> Leicester 110.



Prologue, they are discarded and forgotten. Her approach is so different from the Knight's as to be ridiculous: while the Knight desperately believes that astrological institutions can explain inexplicable events, only to tragically find that they contradict with irrational everyday occurrences, the Wife of Bath curiously attempts to determine in the middle of her discourse whether these same institutions will fill *her* purpose. And when she is finished with her train of thought, she discards astrology and moves on to the next argument without breaking a sweat.

But while the passage regarding planets enforces the Wife's power by showcasing her ability to manipulate social conventions, the following description of life with Janekin, and his book of wicked wives, can be seen as diminishing the Wife's agency by enforcing a patriarchal focus on women on the whole as depraved and immoral. The book contains long classical and biblical passages about reprehensible women, and because Janekin reads the book *to* the Wife, she is associated with and compared to these women—she is relegated from a subjective agent to what Van Dyke describes as an “amorphous construct.”<sup>53</sup> But the reader must never forget that it is the Wife who explains in detail the stories in Janekin's book, describing in over 70 lines the horrifying examples of cruel wives. And it is the Wife who then uses the book's descriptions to her advantage. Earlier, the Wife used patriarchal discourse to trick her husbands into following her will. She could easily have made a case for feminism when she recounted the antifeminist remarks her husbands made to her while drunk by affirming that the accusations were not true; she instead claimed that “al was fals”—her husbands said no such thing and she used antifeminist rhetoric to trick them into submission. In that moment, the Wife was not unlike the women she describes from the book—she was wicked and self-serving,

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<sup>53</sup> Van Dyke, *Chaucer's Agents* 196.

telling her husbands lies in order to assume power. This time, however, the Wife makes the opposite case—she finally turns herself into Leicester’s “counterexemplum,” because she is innocent of the cruelty of the wives in Janekin’s book. Why now, at the end of her Prologue, and not earlier? The simplest answer is that the Wife still is not determined to create a feminist discourse, and her negation of antifeminist sentiment is simply coincidental. She chooses the closest accessible tools in order to support her own arguments and ideas. Just as astrology is introduced merely to be discarded moments later, the Wife’s nearest available argument against Janekin’s book of “wikked wyves” (III.685) is her innocence—and so she chooses this explanation to establish her authority. Small, seemingly insignificant remarks in the Prologue support this reading: “Of [Janekin’s] proverbes n’of his olde sawe,/Ne I wolde nat of hym corrected be./I hate hym that my vices telleth me,/And so doo mo, God woot, of us than I” (III.660-63). Her argument is common sense: rather than spend a lengthy amount of time recounting her every action that discredits Janekin’s accusations, she merely claims that he was a bit stupid to reproach her—for who enjoys hearing her faults listed aloud? Another similar moment quickly follows, in which the Wife attacks Janekin’s authority: “For trusteth wel, it is an impossible/That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,” she notes (III.688-89). The Wife is offering her fellow pilgrims her side of the story: even though Janekin told her these foul Tales, they appear only as a product of bitterness.

The Wife recounts the stories within the book in order to negate them with her innocence. When she laughs over the inanity of clerks, she hopes that the pilgrims will see Janekin as prejudiced and judge his book as worthless. But the book is clearly not worthless to her, and Leicester notes the Wife’s fascination with the stories within it: “her

varied, complex, and nuanced response to the stories is evidence of her *appreciation* of them and of Janekyn's book, which is not simply a symbol of oppression and opposition (though it is that too) but also a real source, of which she can make her own uses."<sup>54</sup> In fact, we realize retrospectively that the book guides the Wife's entire Prologue, and all of the antifeminist discourse through which she speaks can be traced back to the stories within it. She *uses* the book, twisting it to suit her own needs (as when she gains "maistrye" over her first three husbands). And eventually, she *rewrites* the book: she tears out a page or three, and has him throw it into the fire. Just as the Wife's arguments shift within her Prologue, her frequent editing can be seen in her description of her violence toward Janekin's book: "I rente out of his book a leef," she claims twice (III.635, 667), but when she finally recounts the story, she claims "thre leves have I plyght" and "I with my fest so took hym on the cheke/That in oure fyr he fil bakward adoun" (III.790, 792-93). The change from one leaf to three adds more drama to the situation, while her use of physical violence establishes the Wife as an active opponent rather than an innocent bystander. Whereas, earlier on, the tearing of one leaf from his book seemed a small indiscretion for which to be so violently punished, the two edits add more power to the Wife of Bath, who becomes a force to be reckoned with. The obvious editing of her story emphasizes the Wife's ability to twist an argument to suit her means. After she tears his book and hits him in the face, Janekin violently hits her back. The Wife's response cannot be called comical, because she does indeed go deaf because of Janekin's violence. But her reaction is overly dramatic: the Wife adopts the role of submissive, victimized wife in order to once again gain the upper hand. This production

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<sup>54</sup> Lecestre 125.

directly contradicts her presentation of herself in her Prologue as a strong, controlling wife, and her actions take on the form of a dramatic performance:

And he up stirte as dooth a wood leoun,  
And with his fest he smoot me on the heed  
That in the floor I lay as I were deed.  
And whan he saugh how stille that I lay,  
He was agast, and wolde han fled his way,  
Til atte laste out of my swogh I breyde.  
'O! hastow slayn me, false theef?' I seyde,  
'And for my land thus hastow mordred me?  
Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee.'

[III.794-802]

According to Miller, "A violent assault precipitates an equally violent rejection; but then a more subtle approach disarms the opposition and allows for the beginnings of accommodation."<sup>55</sup> In other words, the Wife's use of violence is no match for that of her fifth husband, because violent power is masculine in nature (as exemplified by the dream). But when the Wife falls into her expected role as a weak and humble wife, gracious to her husband even after he has harmed her, she can use her uniquely feminine position to her advantage. "The Wife is *playing a role*," insists Leicester, "to get Janekyn where she can lay her hands on him... and it is clear that she knows she can trust him to play up."<sup>56</sup> In the end, the Wife gains control by surrendering to traditional views of women as the weaker sex.

The conclusion of the Wife's Prologue is problematic for multiple reasons. At the end of her story of Janekin, the Wife quickly shifts between lying dying on the floor and living happily ever after with her husband: "'Now wol I dye, I may no lenger speke.'/But atte laste, with muchel care and wo,/We fille acorded by us selven two" (III.810-812). The transition is comical, and exists out of time: the Wife begins on the ground, dying,

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<sup>55</sup> Miller 311.

<sup>56</sup> Leicester 127.

with no agency at all, and moments later she has made an agreement with Janekin and “geten unto me,/By maistrise, al the soveraynetee” (III.817-18). And surprisingly, once she has complete agency, the Wife “was to hym as kynde/As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,/And also trewe, and so was he to me” (823-25). Why did the Wife want “maistrise” if she planned only to relinquish it? According to Dinshaw, the Wife actually wants “mutual recognition and satisfaction of desires.”<sup>57</sup> Howard claims (and Patterson agrees) that the Wife only wants “a *token* submission on the part of the husband.”<sup>58</sup> But taking into consideration her entire Prologue, what the Wife really wants doesn’t seem quite so clear-cut. She retains agency over her husband at the end, according to her narrative, but the reader is astounded to learn that she uses her power to please him. Dinshaw rightfully calls the end of the Prologue a “fairy-tale conclusion,”<sup>59</sup> even though the actual fairytale has yet to begin. But where is Janekin now? If she lives happily with her fifth husband, why is the Wife eager to “Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal” (III.45). The Wife’s desire for another husband, expressed in the very beginning of her Prologue, implies that either her desires have not actually been fulfilled, or that her husband is dead. And if her desires remain unrealized, the Wife clearly did not want “a token submission.” It seems the Wife wants both to receive “maistrise” and to be the object of her husband’s desire; once she has power in her relationship with Janekin, she relinquishes it to make him happy so that he will love and want her. Because male desire is contingent upon female submissiveness, she cannot have both maistrise *and* her husband’s desire—she cannot have all of her wishes fulfilled.

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<sup>57</sup> Dinshaw 125.

<sup>58</sup> Howard 254.

<sup>59</sup> Dinshaw 126.

“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.”<sup>60</sup> Though the Wife persistently presents and supports various arguments throughout her Prologue, interruptions of memory (such as the reflection on her age) and inadvertent revelations of desires (such as the “dream” about Janekin) diminish her agency. Though she twists patriarchal discourse to her will, as when she gains mastery over her first three husbands by throwing antifeminist rhetoric in their faces and reaches an accord with Janekin by becoming a weak female, the Wife is often caught in the institutional aspects of her dialogue, forced to disregard her desires as mere “fantasye” in order to maintain the attention of her shocked audience. But the audience has the opportunity to watch the Wife control her subjective self: we see her pick up arguments just to disregard them, and we take note as she edits each situation to suit her own means. Evens so, the reader is unable to deem the Wife’s Prologue a success of female agency because it is ultimately unclear what the Wife hopes to prove. Though she eventually had power over her fifth husband, their relationship clearly does not end “happily ever after” (despite the Wife’s claims), because her hope for a sixth husband leaves the reader uncertain as to whether the Wife is happy in her relationship, or if Janekin is even still alive. The Wife cannot articulate her desire through the realism of her Prologue; she cannot reconcile her conflicting desires for sex and love within marriage in a society in which female sexual dominance is reprehensible, and marriage is merely a battle for control. Thus, she divorces herself from reality in her Tale, set as a fantastical fairy romance, in order to extend her argument for feminine sovereignty and to further realize her desires.

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<sup>60</sup> Leicester 138.

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*The Tale*

The Wife of Bath's Prologue alternates between showcasing the Wife's agency as she gains mastery over her husbands and inadvertently revealing her conflicting inclination to act as a submissive wife in order to please—and be desired by—her husband Janekin. As I've explained, the Wife employs a multitude of arguments in order to justify her desire for power, and any weak or ineffectual reasoning is quickly discarded in favor of a new approach. Based on the presentation of herself in her Prologue as a quick thinker with a penchant for power, one might assume that the Wife will tell a Tale that illustrates the prowess of wives. In fact, many scholars believe that the Shipman's Tale (a *fabliau* in which a clever wife cuckolds her niggardly husband) was originally intended for the Wife of Bath. But the Wife tells instead an Arthurian romance about a "land fulfild of fayerye" (III.859). Historically, Arthurian romances depict the heroic deeds of noble knights under the reign of King Arthur, enforcing the importance of courtly values and gentlemanly behavior. After the stark realism of the Wife's Prologue, this detour into fairytale appears ill-suited to the Wife's character. Yet, just as she twisted the language of antifeminist authors to suit her own ends in her Prologue, the Wife uses Arthurian romance in an attempt to reconcile her conflicting need to satisfy her husbands' desires and maintain "maistrye." In the remainder of this chapter I will examine the various ways in which the Wife, having failed to articulate herself clearly in her Prologue, creates her own fantastical Arthurian romance in order to achieve these ends. While the Wife indeed has the ability to rework her Tale in order to best argue her case, moments in

which insecurities from the Prologue reappear in the Tale reveal the Wife's lack of complete control over the harsh realities of her world. For example, the undeniable similarities between the Wife and the old hag in her Tale reaffirm the Wife's obvious discomfort with aging and the passage of time. Ultimately, the Wife's Tale can exist only in the realm of "fantasye"—the hag's magical transformation in the end of the Tale reveals itself as wish fulfillment, in which the Wife uses the elements of magic in her fantasy world in order to achieve a perfect happiness that is unattainable in her own life.

While Arthurian romance usually concerns the adventures of heroic knights, the knight of the Wife of Bath's Tale is introduced as a rapist:

a lusty bachelor,  
That on a day cam ridyng fro ryver,  
And happed that, allone as he was born,  
He saugh a mayde walkyng hym biforn,  
Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed,  
By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed  
[III.883-888]

The rape scene is described quickly and casually, and the unfortunate maiden is never again mentioned in the story. Because the rape scene is important only as a catalyst for the main action of the Tale, and the victim is immediately forgotten, it would seem that the goal of the Wife's Tale is not strictly feminist—the Wife does not care about all women gaining power over men, so long as she herself is justified in her own quest for sovereignty. Patterson agrees that the rape scene showcases the Wife's selfish attitude: "what the Wife champions...is less the rights of her sex, much less those of her class, than the rights of selfhood."<sup>61</sup> But this is not to say that the Wife will not embrace the power of wide-ranging feminine influence when it suits her case: after the knight is sentenced to death by King Arthur, Guinevere and her ladies "so longe preyeden the kyng

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<sup>61</sup> Patterson 282.



of grace/Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place,/And yaf hym to the queene, al at hir wille” (III.895-97). At this moment the Wife dismisses the power of King Arthur and defers her story to female power. The queen and her ladies gain control because they “so longe preyeden the kyng of grace,” in the same manner as Ipolita, Emily, and the crying ladies get their way by beseeching Thesus in the Knight’s Tale (III.895). Here the Wife seems to support a feminist message: the knight has “served as an allegorical representation of patriarchy at its worst,”<sup>62</sup> and the Wife punishes this antifeminism by taking away his agency: “But what! He may nat do al as hym liketh.” (III.914). But, as in her Prologue, the moments in which the Wife encourages a feminist message occur only as an accidental result of her arguments for “maistrye.” And fact it is not difficult to perceive the Wife’s self-interested presence in her Tale even in this moment of female power: Guinevere can be seen as a version of the Wife of Bath herself, cajoling her husband to give her control, and then deciding man’s fate.

When the queen assigns a quest to the knight—“I grante thee lyf, if thou kanst tellen me/What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren” (III.904-05)—the answers he finds comprise a long list of the Wife’s own desires, detailed in her Prologue. During the knight’s search for what women want, the Wife’s Tale loses any semblance of a feminist attitude. In over twenty lines, the Wife recounts the knight’s discoveries—“richesse,” “jolynesse,” “lust abedde,” “to be wydwe and wedde,” and “flaterye” comprise just a few of women’s desires (III.925-28, 932). The Wife even interrupts her own explanation to voice her approval: “He gooth ful ny the sothe, I wol nat lye” (III.931). Dinshaw, speaking through a feminist lens, insists that the importance of this passage lies in the Wife of Bath’s acknowledgement of the existence of feminine desire (so long silenced by

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<sup>62</sup> Miller 211.

masculine authorities), regardless of the actual desires themselves.<sup>63</sup> But one cannot easily dismiss the insulting nature of the list, which suggests that women's desires are often prideful and lustful. This moment recalls her Prologue, during which the Wife's actions against her first three husbands are deplorable in their dishonesty—in both places, the Wife reaffirms antifeminist stereotypes. The Wife seems to undercut herself when she confirms her socially improper desires.

But when this confirmation of antifeminist sentiment continues with the story that follows the list of women's desires, the Wife's intentions appear more guided. The Wife tells the Tale of King Midas: Midas had ass's ears, and his wife was the only one who knew his secret. Though he trusted her, she could not keep her mouth shut—as “we wommen konne no thyng hele” (III.950)—and whispered the secret into the marsh. The Wife concludes her digression, “The remenant of the Tale if ye wol heere,/Redeth Ovyde, and ther ye may it leere” (III.981-82). Why does the Wife deviate from the subject of her Tale and launch into a strongly antifeminist story, and why does she not finish the anecdote? As Patterson explains, “The obscurity of [the Wife's] speech is a function of the passion that urges her; its indecency a function of the carnality that characterizes her as a woman.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, the Wife of Bath plays into the antifeminist attitude of the outspoken, foolish woman by digressing to an impassioned story without seeing it through to completion. Similarly, within the story, Midas' wife's inability to keep her husband's secret represents her inability to keep control—she is filled with a passion that consumes her rationality. At the end of the myth of Midas and the ass's ears, the marsh reeds whisper Midas's secret to the world whenever the wind blows. Yet, if one were to

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<sup>63</sup> Dinshaw 127.

<sup>64</sup> Paterson 287.

“Redeth Ovyde,” he would learn that in the original Tale it is not Midas’s wife but his barber who cannot keep the secret. In fact, Midas himself is the fool of the Tale, who earned the curse of ass’s ears by unwisely voting for the demon Marsyas over the god Apollo in a contest of musicianship. The point of the Tale is not the barber’s tendency to gossip but “Midas’s punishment for his foolish incapacity as a listener.”<sup>65</sup> The Wife knows this, and plays up this incapacity: understanding that “men do not easily learn distasteful lessons about themselves,”<sup>66</sup> she again uses a type of reverse psychology by invoking standard antifeminist discourse in order to enforce the lesson. If men are loath to learn “distasteful lessons,” they will appreciate the masculine discourse that serves to mask the Wife’s actual intention: to insult foolish men who won’t listen to her arguments. Her voicing of antifeminist attitudes actually exposes men’s limitations.

In her manipulation of the Midas story, the Wife denies female stereotypes precisely by invoking these stereotypes. When she explains that “we wommen konne no thyng hele,” she makes a sweeping generalization about women as a whole—but by *incorrectly* depicting the faults of Midas’s wife, she proves that wife’s innocence (III.950). The Wife makes the same type of generalizations as her Tale progresses in order to support her arguments for female “maistrye.” With the help of the loathly lady he meets on his travels, the knight returns to Guinevere with the answer to her question: in general, “Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee/As wel over hir housbond as hir love,/And for to been in maistrie him above” (III.1038-40). No lady in the court is able to disagree, and the knight is granted his life. While the Wife’s Prologue focuses on *her* specific desire to have power over her husbands, her Tale creates a situation in which every available

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 288.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 296.

female agrees with this quest for sovereignty. The Wife's insistence on the agreement of all the women in court legitimizes this desire for "maistrye" as widespread and well understood. We've seen that the Wife's uses patriarchal discourse in order to enhance her arguments—for example, her first three husbands easily believed her claims because they reflected standard antifeminist thought. Therefore, in order for her arguments to appear rational, the Wife must "standardize" female agency—she must argue that women *in general* desire sovereignty. In other words, because antifeminist discourse teaches that *all women* have a propensity toward lust and lecherousness, and socially acceptable behavior requires that *all women* be meek and subservient, the Wife must include *all women* in her argument for female agency. By making a sweeping generalization ("wommen desiren to have sovereynetee" [II.1038]) she legitimizes her need for power: if all women want sovereignty, her desires are not unacceptable but rational and agreeable.

But we see a little too much of the Wife's individual self in her Prologue and Tale to be convinced by her attempts to generalize women's desires. As Van Dyke explains, "The Wife of Bath exerts more agency ... than does almost any other Chaucerian character, but it is a travesty of subjective agency, flattened into the 'sect' of domineering wives."<sup>67</sup> In other words, the Wife's Prologue and Tale display a mix of subjective, personal "experience"—Janekin, for example—and generalized authoritative discourse (as in her account of her first three husbands). It is the combination of these two approaches that leads Van Dyke to describe the Wife's agency as a "travesty," because the Wife's individual desires and experiences constantly conflict with her broad generalizations. In her Prologue, the Wife introduces a series of arguments—arguments

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<sup>67</sup> Van Dyke, *Chaucer's Agents* 198.

that she supports by simultaneously presenting experiential evidence *and* citing authoritative sources. These two approaches come into conflict, because the Wife's insistence on the universal feminine desire for sovereignty is interrupted by instances in which the reader gains insight into the Wife's personal struggle and realizes that her desires are not so black and white.

It isn't difficult to see the Wife's individuality appear between the instances of generalization. Little egocentric comments throughout remind the reader that the Wife is actively participating in her story—for example, she describes the audience that gathers to hear the knight's conclusion and includes a compliment to widows: “Ful many a noble wyf, and many a mayde,/And many a wydwe—for that they ben wise” (III.1026-27). And the Wife clearly emerges in her own Tale, most notably in the form of the old hag. There are various moments in the Tale in which the hag takes on characteristics of the Wife: she is first described as a “wyf”—though it is another word for woman, it is also a reference to the Wife of Bath (III.998). She is the one who tells the knight what women most desire, and she mimics the Wife's skill in argument (though she is more organized) during her speech on “gentillesse.” At the end of the Tale, the knight lives happily ever after with the hag, “his herte bathed in a *bath* of blisse”—the Wife of Bath literally adds her signature to the character of the hag (III.1253). The most convincing similarity is the hag's age, which reflects the Wife's digression in her Prologue on the topic of old age and the passage of time. The hag is described as old seven times, and the phrase “olde wyf” appears four times in the Tale. The knight first comes upon a group of ladies dancing at the edge of a forest, but when he decides to approach them, the ladies “vanysshed” and the hag is sitting in their place (III.996). Leicester notes that this

degeneration from dancing young women to an old hag is synonymous with the Wife's own process of aging.<sup>68</sup> Through the character of the hag, the Wife attempts to come to terms with the temporal anxiety she displays in her Prologue. Her fear that her age will degrade her desirability is reflected in the knight's disgust when she tells him that he must marry her as repayment for her aid: "my dampnacioun!" he claims, "Thou art so loothly, and so oold also" (III.1067, 1100). But in the world of her Tale, the Wife is able to emphasize the positive qualities of old age: "olde folk kan muchel thyng," the hag says immediately before divulging the secret of what women most desire (III.1004). In the long dissertation upon "gentillesse," the hag attempts to convince her new husband that her age is a positive quality by drawing upon both authority and experience:

Now, sire, of elde ye repreve me;  
 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;  
 And auctours shal I fynden, as I guesse.

"Now ther ye seye that I am foul and old,  
 Than drede you nought to been a cokewold;  
 For filthe and eelde, also moot I thee,  
 Been grete wardeyns upon chastitee."

[III.1207-1216]

The "gentillesse" speech encompasses more than the Wife's anxiety regarding aging. Unimpressed with the knight's insistence that she is old, ugly, and poor, the hag launches into an explanation that on the surface explains that "gentillesse," or proper, gentlemanly behavior, does not stem from noble birth but instead from noble deeds ("Thanne am I gentil, whan that I bigynne/To lyven vertuously and weyve synne" [III.1175-76]). She also claims that the poor are virtuous: "He that coveiteth is a povre wight,/For he wolde

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<sup>68</sup> Leicester 146.

han that is nat in his myght./But he that noght hath, ne coveiteth have,/Is riche, although ye holde hym but a knave” (III.1187-90). The hag herself is old and poor—by claiming that the poor are honorable and the old free from temptation, she turns herself into the stunning image of the “gentillesse” that she describes. In fact, because the hag proves her worth to her husband, Patterson argues that the “gentillesse” speech functions as “feminist propaganda.”<sup>69</sup> But rather than actually attempting to outline the values of acting “gentillesse,” it seems that the hag (like the Wife) grabs on to the nearest convincing argument in order to gain power. If we see the hag as a manifestation of the Wife in her Tale, her claim that poverty is enviable is undeniably weak in light of what we already know about the Wife. She has made it clear in her Prologue, and in the list of what women most want in her Tale, that she desires riches (she wants her husbands to turn over all their wealth to her control). When the hag claims that her old age and ugliness will keep her faithful, it “ungenerously assumes that fidelity is possible only for the woman who has no alternative.”<sup>70</sup> Rather than encouraging feminist thought, the “gentillesse” speech parallels the Wife’s arguments in her Prologue, in which she relies on accepted antifeminist discourse to argue her case. In her discussion of virginity, the Wife of Bath quotes the Bible and St. Paul; when she argues that husbands should give up their power, she cites Ptolemy and St. James. In the “gentillesse” speech, the old woman references Christ, Dante, Valerius Maximus, Seneca, Boethius, and Juvenal, again using accepted authorities in order to sway her audience.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, the hag does not simply intend for the young knight to accept his virtuous wife—instead, she hopes to convince him, through an extraordinarily long speech with many references to

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<sup>69</sup> Patterson 142.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 312.

<sup>71</sup> Benson, ed 874.

knowledgeable authorities, of her own knowledgeable authority. According to Leicester, “the Wife makes no real attempt to present the knight as someone who learns something or changes his mind; he is simply coerced and manipulated, as he has been throughout the Tale.”<sup>72</sup> I agree with this statement: though the hag sets up a convincing argument for her own moral worth, her true intent is to overpower any possible counterarguments from her husband with the authority of her claims.

Because she overwhelms the knight with the power of her arguments, the hag, representing the Wife, has agency over her husband. When the knight objects to the wedding, he begs, “taak al my good and lat my body go” in a type of reversal of the original rape sequence—he is now dependent on feminine leniency, and the hag controls his body (III.1061). After the knight lists her reprehensible qualities, the hag replies, “I koude amende al this,/If that me liste” (III.1106-07). As we see when we reach the Tale’s conclusion, the hag is referring both to her ability to coerce her husband into changing his mind and also to her power to physically transform herself. After the hag digresses about “gentillesse” and the advantages of having an old, ugly wife, she offers her husband a choice between having an old and faithful wife, or a young and faithless one. The knight responds with a grand gesture of submissiveness:

“My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,  
I put me in youre wise governance;  
Cheseth yourself which may be moost plesance,  
And moost honour to yow and me also.  
I do not fors the wheither of the two,  
For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me.”  
“Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie,” quod she,  
“Syn I may chese and governe as me lest?”  
“Ye, certes, wyf,” quod he, “I holde it best.”  
[III.1230-1238]

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<sup>72</sup> Leicester 156.



The hag has exactly what she claims all women want: complete “maistrye.” Her husband is so beaten down by her arguments that he has no qualms about calling her “my love” and “wyf so deere.” But after her husband relinquishes all authority—after the hag gets the power she fought so hard for—she inexplicably gives up her claim on that control. She allows both of her husband’s wishes to play out by transforming herself into a beautiful young woman while simultaneously remaining faithful to him, and hands the power back to the knight: “And she obeyed hym in every thyng/That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng” (III.1255-56). While many critics argue that the phrase “plesance or likyng” indicates that the wife merely allows her husband sexual pleasure, the word “obeyed” implies that she assumes a submissive role, relinquishing her agency to her husband and treating him as her master.

Why does the hag give her husband everything he desires, when she already has all that she says she wants? The moral of her “gentillesse” argument is destroyed—for example, though she asserted that age and ugliness would have kept her husband from being a “cokewold,” she later remains faithful to him even while beautiful (III.1214). Critics have responded in a variety of ways to the hag’s relinquishment of power, because it so directly opposes the overriding argument for sovereignty in the Wife’s Tale. Dinshaw insists that the hag’s transformation and exchange of power is meant to realign patriarchal ideas in order to keep the Tale socially acceptable, while acknowledging the existence of feminine desire.<sup>73</sup> In other words, the Wife makes certain that the hag ultimately fulfills the role expected of a socially acceptable wife, in order to introduce the possibility of female desire in a manner suitable to medieval expectations. But the presentation of socially accepted female desire cannot be the Wife’s goal, because we

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<sup>73</sup> Dinshaw 129.

have seen clear evidence that she often perpetuates antifeminist stereotypes in her Prologue and Tale. In another argument, Miller suggests that the ending of the Tale is actually unproblematic because the hag never had agency in the first place: “The knight does not forego his desire or become an instrument of his wife’s will: in offering the promise he is still laying claim to his own satisfactions and the fulfillment of his own pleasure and honor.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, the knight exercised *his* power in order to give his wife power—for purely selfish reasons. Even so, the hag does not have any reason to effect a magical transformation and return control to her husband, having already received agency.

An obvious answer to the question of why the hag undergoes a magical transformation after she has mastery over her husband is that the Wife does not really have all that she desires. One line of argument is that the Wife attempts to recreate herself through a transformation of her body, to free herself from the connotations of antifeminism and power relations that have so far dominated her discourse. In this case, the Wife’s new body represents a new historical or social identity, and the transformation “free[s] [the hag] from the pollutions and sufferings of her erotic life, free[s] her, that is, from the phantasmatic ‘ugly body’ to which patriarchy has bound her.”<sup>75</sup> But the reason for the transformation may not be this profound: it is entirely possible that the Wife just doesn’t want to be old! In her Prologue, the Wife of Bath is inadvertently jolted into a burst of memory, in which she laments that she grows less desirable as she grows older. In the Tale, the knight harps on the hag’s age, disgusted by how old she is. Therefore, the hag’s transformation from a loathly lady to a young, beautiful wife can be seen as the

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<sup>74</sup> Miller 211.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 213.

Wife finally getting her wish to be young again, with the agency to control the passage of time. Yet this approach to the problem of aging exposes the Wife's lack of agency because it relies on magic—in her real life, the Wife knows she has no power to fulfill her desire. The reader sees that in comparison with the hag, the Wife has no power to become young again, and her marriages fall far from the mark of a fairy-tale romance.

At the end of her Tale, the Wife's inability to reconcile her dueling desires for power and love resurfaces once again. In her Prologue's lament, the Wife worries that her old age will make her less desirable—thus, the Wife wishes to be young because she wants to be desired. Leicester notes that while the magical transformation would normally act as a reward for the virtuous knight, the hag's conversion seems to be reward for the Wife herself.<sup>76</sup> But this is not necessarily true, because the Wife wants to appear young and beautiful in order to be desired by her husband, who wants an attractive wife. The transformation, then, is a reward for both of them: the Wife satisfies her husband's desires, and is loved in return. But this reasoning supports the claim that the Wife is dependent upon masculine wishes—she relies on the attainment of her husband's desires for her own happiness. And in the Wife of Bath's medieval world, social ideology confirms that husbands desire an obedient wife. So, though she claims to want “maistrye” in marriage, the Wife's additional wish to be loved and accepted by her husband requires that she fulfill the role of submissive, loyal wife. Earlier I note that the Wife must attempt to explain her desires within a discourse that forces her to choose between two opposing stereotypes: the socially acceptable, desirable, submissive woman and the unacceptable, unorthodox, dominant female. With no available position between these two poles, the Wife is unable to articulate her wish to be simultaneously

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<sup>76</sup> Leicester 159

empowered *and* desired by her husband (which often requires submissive behavior); she cannot enter into a relationship free of social ideologies. Though she wants a relationship with mutual satisfaction of desires, these desires conflict by their very social conditions.

Unquestionably, the Wife of Bath realizes the conflict of her desires at the end of her Tale. Her claim that the knight and the lovely wife live their lives together “in parfit joye” concludes her story, but the phrase does not complete the Tale, or even the line:

And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende  
In parfit joye; and Jhesu Crist us sende  
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fresshe abedde,  
And grace t’overbyde hem that we wedde;  
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves  
That noght wol be goverened by hir wyves;  
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,  
God sende hem soone verray pestilence!”

[III.1257-1264]

The Wife of Bath realizes that the end of her Tale has reified the social order, though it was not her intention to do so, and she quickly reaffirms her desire for agency and mastery over her husbands, using the language of her Prologue in order to gain the last laugh. But the Wife has let a bit too much slip—her last lines are overly theatrical for their placement at the end of a “happily ever after,” and they highlight the failure of her Tale to express an unachievable female desire. The Wife seems to realize her inability to relate this fairy-tale ending to her real life only at the conclusion of her Tale, and her reaction is to respond with an over-the-top cover-up. Patterson describes the Wife’s final statement as a “subversion of her *Tale*’s wish-fulfilling promises, a jesting but nonetheless severe...judgment upon the masculine enterprise that has been constituted as her *Prologue* and *Tale*.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, the failure of the Wife’s Tale to express the possibilities of a real relationship shed light on the shortcomings of patriarchal ideology.

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<sup>77</sup> Patterson 315.

For Patterson, the ending of the Tale is satisfying because it enforces this insufficiency of “hegemonic masculinity.”<sup>78</sup> But I do not see the ending as “satisfying”—the Wife ultimately fails to achieve her desires because she cannot articulate herself within a socially constructed, masculine world. And her failure exposes the impossibility of expressing female desire outside of a fairytale.

The Wife of Bath’s conflict of agency, visible throughout her Prologue and Tale, lies in the presentation of these desires. At times the Wife draws on authorities and anti-feminist discourse in order to argue her point, such as when she describes her methods of gaining control over her first three husbands, or when she claims that an old, ugly wife is more desirable because she is by default more faithful. At such moments, the Wife is arguing for a woman’s sovereignty in marriage, and she craftily draws on widely accepted authorities, fitting her argument into accepted gender stereotypes to argue her case. But at other times, the Wife’s goal for “maistrye” in marriage is confused by instances of memory and real-life experience, hints of a subjective, individual personality which reveal (often unintentionally) the Wife’s more complex longing for a mutual satisfaction of desires—for acceptance and love. When she describes her relationship with Janekin, the Wife cannot deny her physical attraction to him, and her desire to be in some way dominated by him. In the Tale, she immediately turns her argument in favor of old, ugly wives on its head by transforming herself into a beautiful, *faithful* bride.

According to Miller, “The Wife *says* that her, or women’s, or everyone’s fundamental desire is for domination, but that is just part of her rhetorical strategy.”<sup>79</sup> He explains that her “*real* fundamental desire is for reciprocity,” but then quickly backtracks: “the thought

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Miller 204.

of a fundamental desire for domination cannot be so easily set aside.<sup>80</sup> This explanation goes full circle, exactly as the Wife does in her Prologue: after enforcing her central argument (“maistrye”), she gives us an exemplum in which real life and true desire prove to be astoundingly more complex (her relationship with Janekin). Similarly, in her Tale she restates the case for female dominance, includes a fairytale solution for not only “maistrye” but also for reciprocity and love, and then concludes with a jolting reality check, in which female agency is of prime importance. The constant back-and-forth of her arguments reveals her inability to reconcile her two desires.

Though the Wife’s arguments constantly shift as she attempts to articulate what she wants, is this evidence that the Wife lacks agency? She is decidedly powerful in her ability to morph the voice of male authority to suit her particular situation. She uses patriarchal language to subvert male expectations—and though she therefore does not invalidate antifeminism and give agency to all women, she does not seem to care. Though her personality reveals some unachievable desires that she may wish to keep hidden, we are only able to see this personality through her strong presentation of her subjective self. She bursts out of her Tale, she responds to the Pardoner, she pokes fun at the Friar. But in the end, she does not have the agency to get everything that she wants. She takes the news lightly, and insists that she is powerful and happy—and we as readers are very nearly, but not quite, convinced. Yet we see into the heart of the Wife of Bath, and her ability to create and describe her life and experience, her mastery of argument, and her penchant for control convince us of her very real power. As a subjective individual, she manipulates scriptural authority, and displays a remarkable amount of control over masculine discourse. But the pilgrims whose Tales follow hers dismiss the markers of

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

the Wife's agency—"her rueful humor, her deft table-turning, her admission of vulnerability, and her pleasure in mutual submission. Rather, they launch their own ironic forays from her stereotype, shutting down her subjectivity decisively."<sup>81</sup> The Clerk responds with a Tale whose female protagonist embodies the very docility and obedience that the Wife of Bath so forcibly argues against; the Merchant uses the Wife of Bath as an example of the folly of marriage. But the Wife's power is still undeniable—the pilgrims are so affected by her speech that they mention her by name in their Tales. Though they interpret the Wife as a lustful, sinful, inappropriate female, she remains a thorn in their side, and she refuses to budge.

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<sup>81</sup> Van Dyke, *Chaucer's Agents* 198.

## Chapter 3

### **The *Franklin's Tale* and the Failure of Female Agency**

I argued in the previous chapter that the Wife of Bath's Tale demonstrates wavering female agency—as the Wife powerfully asserts her desires through strong-willed arguments, she discovers that she lacks the power to fully realize those desires because she is constrained by social stereotypes. The Franklin's Tale, on the other hand, displays the complete erosion of female agency. The opening contract between Arveragus and Dorigen introduces the possibility of female freedom and power as the Franklin focuses on the strength of moral ideals—such as “gentillesse” and “freedom”—to sustain equality in marriage. But the events of the Franklin's Tale ultimately deny the possibility of marital equality because the Franklin is unable to circumvent social conventions that define proper wifely behavior—and as a result, Dorigen's power is reduced to that of a submissive wife. As Dorigen's agency diminishes, the message of the Franklin's Tale shifts from marital equality to class equality—and the moral values the Franklin promoted as the foundation of equality in marriage become character-building qualities through which men can navigate across class lines. Because Dorigen's power is relegated to that of an obedient wife as the Tale winds on, the shift in focus from female equality to male moral worth emphasizes the importance of men's reliance on moral values to reestablish proper social relationships. As a result, Dorigen becomes a means by which men can prove their morality—she is stripped of even the limited power of a submissive wife, and becomes nothing but an object in the hands of men.



The marriage introduced at the start of the Franklin's Tale picks up where the Wife of Bath's Tale left off. Like the Wife of Bath's knight, who has relinquished power to his wife, Arveragus promises Dorigen

That nevere in al his lyf he, day ne nyght,  
Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie  
Agayn hir wyl, ne kithe hire jalousie,  
But hire obeye and folwe hir wyl in al,  
As any love to his lady shal.

[V.746-50]

Dorigen, in return, promises to be a "humble trewe wyf" (V.750). In the mutual promises, the Franklin attempts to set up a marriage based on equality, in which neither husband nor wife has "maistrye" over the other. The Franklin's assertion that "love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye" is the same conclusion that the Wife of Bath seems to come to at the end of her Tale (V.764). But by *beginning* his Tale where the Wife's Tale leaves off (with a marriage free of power struggle) and then changing course, the Franklin points to the flaws of this solution, suggesting that it is impossible to maintain equality between husband and wife.<sup>82</sup> These flaws are visible early on—for example, the description of the equality between Dorigen and Arveragus is undercut by social ideologies that enforce a wife's necessary submission to her husband: though Dorigen does have the authority to "*take hym for hir housbonde,*" she "*fil of his accord*"—in other words, she takes on a submissive position (V.742, 741, emphasis added). And because orthodox medieval thought considers female equality in marriage unacceptable, Arveragus must hold on to "the name of soveraynetee" in order not to suffer "shame of his degree" (V.751-52). Because it includes both equality and the implication of male sovereignty,

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<sup>82</sup> Angela Jane Weisl, *Conquering the Reign of Femeny: Gender and Genre in Chaucer's Romance* (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1995) 106.

the entire “humble, wys accord” is self-contradictory (V.791). In fact, an air of questionable reality hangs over the agreement, evidenced in the opening description of the marriage: Arveragus and Dorigen remain nameless for over 125 lines, existing more as abstract exempla of a perfect union rather than fully realized characters. The flaws of the agreement are also visible in the Franklin’s final description of the marriage: “Thus hath she take hir servant and hir lord—/Servant in love, and lord in marriage./Thanne was he bothe in lordshipe and servage./Servage? Nay, but in lordshipe above” (V.792-95). Though the Franklin is attempting to blur the distinctions of dominant husband and submissive wife by explaining that Arveragus acted as both lord and servant, many critics find this passage incoherent. The moment is filled with what Pamela E. Barnett describes as the “diction of master and slave,”<sup>83</sup> which serves to bring further emphasis to the unequal positions of husband and wife. When the Franklin concludes that Arveragus was “in lordshipe above” even while in “servage,” he is implying that Arveragus was triumphant even while a servant. Though he spends several lines outlining the flaws of “maistrye,” by manipulating the language to evoke different connotations (using “lordshipe” positively and “servage” negatively) the Franklin still implies that lordship, or “maistrye,” is the preferred state.

In his argument against “maistrye,” the Franklin rewrites the Wife of Bath’s argument for women’s sovereignty: “Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee” (V.768). Though sovereignty implies control over another and “libertee” refers to control only over oneself, both terms require agency over one’s actions, and the Franklin is in effect arguing for women’s agency. His presentation of Dorigen, however, does not uphold this

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<sup>83</sup> Barnett, Pamela E. “‘And shortly for to seyn they were aton’: Chaucer’s Deflection of Rape in the *Reeve’s* and *Franklin’s* Tales.” *Women’s Studies* 22 (1993): 145-62.

claim. When Arveragus leaves “to seke in armes worshipe and honour” (V.811), Dorigen is actually oppressed by her longing for her husband: “Desir of his presence hire so distreyneth/That al this wyde world she sette at noght” (V.820-21). The Franklin does insist that Dorigen has the some agency in her grieving: “For his absence wepeth she and siketh,/As doon thise noble wyves whan hem liketh” (V.817-18). Yet while “whan hem liketh” suggests that Dorigen has the ability to do as she likes, it is actually within her power to decide only the *amount* of suffering she will undergo in her husband’s absence; her power is that afforded to obedient wives, dependent upon the actions of her husband. Also, the tone of “whan hem liketh” is dismissive of feminine desire—the Franklin implies that women actually *want* to grieve, and appears to shrug his shoulders at the notion. Dorigen’s grieving, therefore, is representative of her lack power, as she submits to the role of submissive female. Her lack of agency is visible in her envy of the freedom of the ships in the sea: “she many a ship and barge seigh/Seillynge hir cours, where as hem liste go./But thanne was that a parcel of hire wo” (V.850-52). “After the opening declaration that wives should not be dominated, we expect Dorigen to exert agency comparable to that of the male characters, but she does not,” Writes Van Dyke.<sup>84</sup> Though the Franklin attempts to enforce Dorigen’s freedom and agency, he is not able to simultaneously uphold her role as dutiful wife and free agent.

The precise nature of Dorigen’s limited agency is particularly evident in her speech on the “grisly rokkes blake” that line the coast by her castle (V.859). The speech begins strongly, as Dorigen asserts her power to question and voice her concerns regarding nature and the role of God:

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<sup>84</sup> Carolynn Van Dyke, “The Clerk’s and Franklin’s Subjected Subjects.” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 17 (1995): 60.

Lord, this grisly feendly rokkes blake,  
 That semen rather a foul confusioun  
 Of werk, than any fair creacion  
 Of swich a parfit wys God and a stable,  
 Why han ye wroght this werk unresonable?  
 For by this werk, south, north, ne west, ne eest,  
 Ther nys yfostred man, ne bryd, ne beest;  
 It dooth no good, to my wit, but anoyeth.  
 Se ye nat, Lord, how mankynde it destroyeth?  
 [V.868-76]

But as the speech continues, Dorigen appears to run out of steam. Her forceful questioning becomes a deference to the knowledge of clerks: “I woot wel clerkes wol seyn as hem leste,/By argumentz, that al is for the beste,/Though I ne kan the causes nat yknow” (V.885-87). Dorigen actually acknowledges her own ignorance and powerlessness—as Van Dyke notes, this moment shows Dorigen as incapable of standing on her own feet.<sup>85</sup> Because she defers to male authority (“To clerkes lete I al disputison” [V.890]), Dorigen becomes a passive figure. But even the small degree of passive agency afforded Dorigen in this scene is stripped from her in the following lines. The Franklin describes the method by which Dorigen is convinced by her companions to forget her sorrow: “By proces, as ye knowen everichoon,/Men may so longe graven in a stoon/Til som figure therinne emprented be” (V.829-31). Whereas McGreggor argues that “the metaphor...suggests that there is something firm and stable about Dorigen,”<sup>86</sup> I see the image differently. The implication is that Dorigen *is* eventually affected by her friends’ sympathies: like a tree that can be carved upon, Dorigen is turned from a passive female into an inanimate object that the other characters can manipulate. When Dorigen later learns that Aurelius has removed the rocks as she had asked, and that she is expected

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Francine McGreggor, “What of Dorigen? Agency and Ambivalence in the ‘Franklin’s Tale,’” *The Chaucer Review* 31 (1997): 373.

to sleep with him, she loses any sense of agency to this same objectification: “she astoned stood” (V.1339). She is metaphorically turned to stone, and has no power even as a passive wife.

After her discourse on the “rokkes blake,” Dorigen moves to the garden where she is propositioned by the squire Aurelius, and promises to love him “best of any man” if he “remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon” (V.997, 993). This moment is difficult to interpret because it both displays Dorigen’s power to assert herself in her relations with another man and also evidences her inability to retain complete power over these assertions. After Aurelius declares his love for her,

She gan to looke upon Aurelius;  
“Is this youre wyl,” quod she, “and sey ye thus?  
Nevere erst,” quod she, “ne wiste I what ye mente.  
But now Aurelie, I knowe youre entente,  
By thilke God that yaf me soule and lyf,  
Ne shal I nevere been untrewed wyf  
In word ne werk, as fer as I have wit;  
I wol ben his to whom that I am knyght.  
Taak this for fynal answere as of me.”  
But after that in pley thus seyde she:  
“Aurelie,” quod she, “by heighe God above,  
Yet wolde I graunte yow to been youre love,  
Syn I yow se so pitously complayne.  
Looke what day that endelong Britayne  
Ye remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,  
That they ne lette ship ne boot to goon—  
I seye, whan ye han maad the coost so clene  
Of rokkes, that ther nys no stoon ysene,  
Thanne wol I love yow best of any man;  
Have heer my trouthe, in al that evere I kan.”  
[V.979-998]

Though she challenges Aurelius to remove the rocks, Dorigen is aware and that her wish will never become reality (“For wel I woot that it shal never bityde” (V.1001]) and her words are said “in pley” (V.989). In her speech, therefore, Dorigen intends to enforce the

fact that she will never love Aurelius, and the promise to love him “whan [he] han maad the coost so clene/Of rokkes that ther nys no stoon ysene” is equivalent to the statement “I’ll love you when pigs fly” (V.995-96). But Aurelius is unable to handle such a prominent display of female power: because Dorigen is actively indulging in her fantasy to be rid of the rocks and claiming the sexual freedom to be unfaithful to her husband, Aurelius interprets her words as a challenge. As Susan Crane explains, Dorigen’s position as a woman in courtly literature denies her the power to say “no” and mean it<sup>87</sup>—in other words, because she is a woman, Dorigen is unable to control how her language is understood. Thus, though the Franklin sets Dorigen up as equal to her husband, she remains susceptible to masculine interpretation. It is her inability to control her words that that leads to the crisis at the end of the Tale: once Aurelius finds a clerk who can cover the rocks by illusion, the remainder of the narrative is concerned with introducing a suitable method by which to *fix* Dorigen’s mistake. The reader is left with the sense that female agency is dangerous: Dorigen’s moment of freedom to assert herself results in potential disaster, and she would have been better off with no agency at all. By denying Dorigen’s power to speak her mind without being misunderstood, the Franklin denies the possibility of female agency—as Hansen explains, the Tale “suggests that only men can truly achieve and use freedom so that no harm actually befalls anyone.”<sup>88</sup> Though moments earlier the Franklin emphasized the importance of female “libertee,” Dorigen’s moment of “libertee” results in a crisis that needs to be fixed by a reversal of the marriage contract: in the end, Arveragus takes “maistrye” and orders Dorigen to keep her “trouthe.” Dorigen’s loss of agency is foreshadowed by the Franklin’s description of

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<sup>87</sup> Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994) 62.

<sup>88</sup> Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992) 270.

sunset in the garden: “the brighte sonne loste his hewe;/For th’orisonte hath reft the sonne his lyght—/This is as muche to seye as it was nyght” (V.1016-18). The descriptive passage outlines the sun’s submission to the horizon, and the words “loste” and “reft” hint at Dorigen’s complete loss of agency as a result of the challenge she has given Aurelius.

The illusion used to hide the rocks is a symbol of the illusive nature of Dorigen’s agency. The disappearance of the rocks is described by Dorigen as “agayns the proces of nature,” and the Franklin calls the magic “swich folye/As in oure dayes is nat worth a flye” (V.1345, 1131-32). The Franklin’s dismissal of magical illusion centers around the holy church—he believes magic contradicts religious faith. But the same argument can be applied to female agency: a wife’s freedom contradicts the social institution of marriage. The Tale opens with a marriage agreement that allows for female equality in marriage—an equality that would be deemed social unacceptable by medieval society. This social custom is apparent in the tale—Dorigen, though she displays moments of power, eventually loses agency; when she attempts to use her authority to deny Aurelius and fails, she discovers that her power was merely an illusion. Arguing that Dorigen has agency, David Raybin writes, “Women...need that the obstacles to freedom, emblemized by the famous black rocks of Brittany, be removed.”<sup>89</sup> But Aurelius is unable to move the rocks—he merely covers them with magic. If we think of the rocks as metaphorical “obstacles to [women’s] freedom,” then those obstacles cannot be removed, and women’s freedom is just an illusion. And the breakdown of the marriage contract between Dorigen and Arveragus enforces this illusive nature of female agency,

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<sup>89</sup> David Raybin, “‘Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee’: Rereading Dorigen, Rereading Marriage,” *The Chaucer Review* 27 (1992): 79.

because the Franklin does not have the ability to assign Dorigen more freedom and power than that afforded to her as an obedient wife.

To get a clearer take on Dorigen's power, we need to look at the manner in which Aurelius' agency is set up in the Tale. Described as a tortured lover, Aurelius "dorste nat his sorwe telle,/But langwissheth as a furye dooth in helle;/And dye he moste, he seyde, as dide Ekko" (V.949-51). Echo, in Greek mythology, could not speak with her own voice, and was able only to repeat after those who spoke to her. The reference to Echo demonstrates Aurelius' lack of agency to articulate his desire. Also, Aurelius' suffering for his love of Dorigen is described in over sixty lines, and matches Dorigen's grief for her husband's absence in intensity: whereas Dorigen "moorneth, waketh, wayleth, fasteth, pleyne" (V.819), Aurelius "seeth he may nat fro his deeth asterte;/Hym semed that he felte his herte colde" (V.1022-23). At the start of the Tale, Aurelius is able only to pine for Dorigen; after she sets him the challenge of moving the rocks, he prays to the gods for help because he is powerless to fulfill her request. His exaggerated appeal to Apollo lasts for nearly fifty lines, but despite Aurelius' plea, the gods do not participate in the Franklin's Tale. Aurelius lacks the ability to do anything besides faint with despair, and the Franklin requests that his audience "Chese he, for me, wheither he wol lyve or dye" (V.1086). Aurelius' actions are so far out of his control that the Franklin, bored by the display, finally defers the power to the audience. But Aurelius' powerlessness does not last long. I have argued to this point that Dorigen's role as woman and wife will not allow for her to have agency equal to that of Arveragus, and that Dorigen's attempt to act authoritatively leads to a crisis that must be resolved by her husband. The opposite is true of Aurelius, who slowly gains control of his situation as



Dorigen loses her ability to articulate any power. Though he has no power to move the rocks and calls on the agency of the gods, he eventually learns from his brother that a clerk of Orleans can help him with magical illusion. When he learns that the clerk will help him, “to bedde is goon Aurelius whan hym leste” (V.1235). The image of uncontrolled anguish (he lives for two years “in langour and in torment furyus” [V.1101]) transforms into a moment in which Aurelius is again in control. Only with this control does Aurelius have the “libertee” to do as he desires.

When the clerk finally hides the rocks, Aurelius once again confronts Dorigen:

Madame, I speke it for the honour of yow  
Moore than to save myn hertes lyf right now—  
I have do so as ye comanded me;  
And if ye vouche sauf, ye may go see.  
Dooth as yow list; have youre biheste in mynde,  
For, quyk or deed, right there ye shal me fynde.  
In yow lith al to do me lyve or deye—  
But wel I woot the rokkes been aweye.

[V.1331-1338]

His speech is filled with deference to Dorigen’s will: “for the honour of yow,” “ye comanded me,” “ye vouche sauf,” “ye may go,” “yow list,” “youre biheste,” “ye shal me fynde,” “In yow lith.” This is all an illusion of female power, however, just as the disappearance of the rocks is only illusion.<sup>90</sup> If Aurelius were truly concerned about Dorigen’s honor or will, he would not ask for her to love him; he knows well that she never expected him to move the rocks, and later admits that “she nevere erst hadde herde speke of apparence” (V.1602). Aurelius holds the power in the situation, forcing Dorigen to keep her “trouthe” or face a regrettable situation. And when, at the end of the Tale, Dorigen arrives to keep her promise by the will of Arveragus, it is Arveragus’ gesture of “gentillesse” that convinces Aurelius to return Dorigen to her husband. Though Aurelius

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<sup>90</sup> Hansen 277.

“hadde greet compassioun/Of [Dorigen] and of hire lamentacioun,” the passage doesn’t end there—Aurelius’ goes on to admire “Arveragus, the worthy knyght,/That bad [Dorigen] holden al that she had hight/So looth hym was his wyf sholde breke hir trouthe” (V.1515-19). After spending years of misery yearning for Dorigen, it is Aurelius’ admiration of Arveragus’s moral ideals as a “worthy knyght” that eventually persuades him to release her from her promise, and he gives her up in order to match her husband’s moral worth. It is this conclusion that leads Hansen to note that Aurelius’ original passion for Dorigen stems from “the pleasure of challenging and supplanting the male rival, as much as or more than loving the woman.”<sup>91</sup> For, as Crane writes, “To desire the wife of a lord...is primarily to desire the lord’s power.”<sup>92</sup> It is entirely possible that Aurelius’ is jealous of Arveragus’ power—when Dorigen asks, “What deyntee sholde a man han in his lyf/For to go love another mannes wyf,/That hath hir body whan so that him liketh?” Aurelius is undeterred from his love (V.1003-05). Arveragus is also of a higher class, and as such has more power than Aurelius in the social realm. But in the Tale, the Franklin enforces the idea that the hag presents in the Wife of Bath’s Tale: “gentillesse” spans social class, and is not achieved by birth but by deeds. Aurelius is convinced to release Dorigen from her promise if he can enforce the value of his moral worth as equal to that of Arveragus: “Thus kan a squier doon a gentil dede/As wel as kan a knyght, withouten drede” (V.1543-44).

Dorigen is left out of this exchange of moral values. Before she married Arveragus, she was of a higher social class, and he maintained a demeanor of “meke obeysaunce” (V.739). Once married, Dorigen’s social class no longer matters—although the marriage

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 276.

<sup>92</sup> Susan Crane, "The Franklin as Dorigen," *The Chaucer Review* 24 (1990): 239.

agreement attempts to place her on an equal playing field, Dorigen's power slowly diminishes until she has none but as a passive wife. When her offer to Aurelius is misinterpreted as a serious challenge and the rocks are hidden by illusion, the reader realizes that she has no power even in "pley." She then goes off on a long-winded tangent concerning her options, listing women who have chosen death over defilement. Many critics determine this wordy speech to be a failure by the Franklin—his "most serious rhetorical blunder"<sup>93</sup>—because Dorigen dithers for a hundred lines without coming to any decision, and the speech is a divergence from the main action of the story. Because Dorigen's speech feels out of place and extra long in the sequence of the narrative, Van Dyke notes that the reader can react to her as an independent agent without considering closely the surrounding action.<sup>94</sup> On the other hand, this same argument diminishes Dorigen's power—she has nothing to contribute to the main action of the story, and her speech postpones the resolution to come. The possibility of female power discussed within Dorigen's speech is also problematic. Raybin, arguing for Dorigen's power and control in the Franklin's Tale, notes that her speech proves that Dorigen is "generally aware of a woman's right to make choices affecting her body."<sup>95</sup> But the choice between death and defilement can hardly be called much of a choice, and Dorigen abhors both possibilities. Instead of the freedom outlined by the Franklin at the start of his Tale, Dorigen's power is relegated to that of social convention—her choices are those women are afforded by society.

But even her small amount of agency as a wife constrained by social expectations fades during her speech. She begins with a complaint to Fortune: "'Allas,' quod she, 'on

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<sup>93</sup> Hansen 279.

<sup>94</sup> Van Dyke, "The Clerk's and Franklin's Subjected Subjects" 68.

<sup>95</sup> Raybin 72.

thee, Fortune, I pleyne,/That unwar wrapped hast me in thy cheyne” (V.1355-56). Crane describes this image as “more fatalist than Fortune’s conventional blindfold or ever-turning wheel”<sup>96</sup>—after Dorigen learns that Aurelius has somehow removed the rocks, she negates her own ability to effect the same type of change by referring to Fortune’s “cheyne” as a metaphorical straightjacket hemming her in. In fact, Dorigen’s speech finally denies her power even as a submissive wife: she chooses neither death nor dishonor. Her indecision is almost comic—Dorigen clearly does not wish to make the choice, and her speech appears to buy her some time. Her hesitancy suggests that there must be another way to work things out, a way outside of her power: in the end, she takes her problems to Arveragus to solve, and she relies on her husband to decide for her. Not only does Dorigen rest her fate in her husband’s hands, but her decision also enforces her subservience: she cannot choose to kill herself or to commit adultery because both would hurt Arveragus. She does not decide to defer to his authority merely because she is frightened or unsure, but because she realizes that she is not in control of her decision from the start; as Van Dyke concludes, “her monologue’s futility is ... the logical culmination of Dorigen’s redundance as an agent.”<sup>97</sup>

When Dorigen decides to tell her plight to her husband, his response is confusing:

This housbonde, with glad chiere, in freendly wyse  
 Answerde and seyde as I shal yow devyse:  
 “Is ther oght elles, Dorigen, but this?”  
 “Nay, nay,” quod she, “God helpe me so as wys!  
 This is to mucche, and it were Goddes wille.”  
 “Ye, wyf,” quod he, “lat slepen that is stille.  
 It may be wel, paraventure, yet to day.  
 Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay!  
 For God so wisly have mercy on me,  
 I hadde wel levere ystiked for to be

<sup>96</sup> Crane, “The Franklin as Dorigen” 248.

<sup>97</sup> Van Dyke, “The Clerk’s and Franklin’s Subjected Subjects” 63.

For verray love which that I to yow have,  
But if ye sholde youre trouthe kepe and save.  
Trouthe is the hyste thyng that man may kepe”—  
But with that word he brast anon to wepe,  
And seyde, “I yow forbede, up peyne of deeth,  
That nevere, whil thee lasteth lyf ne breeth,  
To no wight telle thou of this aventure—”  
[V.1467-83]

At first Arveragus is calm and understanding, but his demeanor quickly changes to overwhelmed and angry. He orders Dorigen to keep her promise to Aurelius, arguing that “trouthe is the hyste thing that man may kepe.” His point is illogical in the grand scheme of things: by insisting that Dorigen keep her promise “in pleye” to Aurelius, Arveragus is forgetting his own promise never to take “maistrye,” and Dorigen’s original promise to remain a “trewe wyf” (V.758). And the Franklin’s insistence on marital equality at the start of the Tale disregards the fact that “trouthe” signifies very different things for husband and wife: because he retains the “name of soveraynetee” for social purposes, Arveragus is clearly concerned about his social image—for Arveragus, therefore, “trouthe” is adherence to one’s word. Dorigen’s role as wife, however, necessitates only her complete loyalty to her husband, and this is the “trouthe” she worries about. Her promise to Aurelius was said “in pleye,” in a situation in which Dorigen was not fully in control of her language, and her “trouthe” was misinterpreted. Though he set up a marriage based on equality, the Franklin’s insistence on moral values enforces the inequality between husband and wife. By insisting that “trouthe” is equal for both Arveragus and Dorigen, the Franklin inadvertently rips away Dorigen’s agency to act even as a submissive wife—he denies her desire to remain faithful to her husband as an obedient wife should by insisting that she commit adultery—and turns her into an object used to prove the moral worth of her husband. Arveragus’s tears are evidence of

the insufficiency of morality to establish marital equality: though the Franklin insists that upholding one's "trouthe" will lead to the perfect conclusion, Arveragus has a hard time reconciling the abstract ideals with the reality of his situation.

There are those critics who believe that Dorigen maintains some power over Arveragus in this scene. There is no doubt that her earlier actions have affected his emotions, and necessitated his high-minded reaction. Raybin insists that though Dorigen is not the authority in the situation, she has the power to "determine the measure of *her husband's* honor."<sup>98</sup> Though she may have the power to turn her husband into a joke in the social sphere, however, she does not do it willingly—she does not have the freedom to impose her will. Though Arveragus is actually giving up his wife to Aurelius, and using his power in order to surrender his control, he is at the same time asserting his right to give her away. Because in the original marriage agreement Arveragus promised never to "take no maistrie/Agayn hir wyl," there is the possibility that it is Dorigen's "wyl" for Arveragus to take all the "maistrie" (V.749). In this situation, Dorigen believes it is her duty as a wife to leave her fate in the hand of her husband, because at the conclusion of her speech she has clearly determined that her own options are insufficient. It is therefore plausible that Dorigen is requesting that Arveragus reassume a traditional role as her husband and lord. But she is certainly not pleased with his response: when asked by Aurelius where she is headed, "she answerde, half as she were mad,/‘Unto the gardyn, as myn housbonde bad,/My trouthe for to holde—allas! allas!’" (V.1511-13). Rather than fulfilling her role as dutiful wife, Dorigen is completely objectified. She becomes a representative agent for Arveragus, and Aurelius in return speaks *through her* to Arveragus: "Madame, seyth to youre lord Arveragus..." (V.1526).

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<sup>98</sup> Raybin 67.

The remainder of the Tale enforces Dorigen's objectification at the hands of male authority. When Aurelius and Dorigen meet in the crowd, the Franklin notes that the two cross paths "of aventure" (V.1501), and insists again later that they met "of aventure or grace" (V.1508). The intervening lines, however, assert Aurelius' agency: "And he was to the gardyn-ward also;/For wel he spyed whan she wolde go/Out of hir hous to any maner place" (V.1505-07). While Dorigen is ordered to the garden with "a squier and a mayde" as her guides, Aurelius seeks her out and effects their meeting (V.1487). Though Arveragus' honor and Aurelius' "gentil dede" are contingent upon Dorigen,<sup>99</sup> she is the object they rely on to prove their morality (V.1543). After Aurelius sends Dorigen back to her husband, he explains his deeds to the clerk of Orleans: "right as frely as he sente hire me,/As frely sente I hire to hym ageyn" (V.1604-05). Dorigen has as no more agency than a baby doll—she is an object of exchange. As Van Dyke suggests, "perhaps female subjectivity cannot be coherently represented in narrative traditions that define woman as the object of another subject's desire and revulsion." In other words, Dorigen was never equal to Arveragus, despite the marriage contract, and her role as woman and wife determines that the moral worth of the male characters be measured by their treatment of her: in Dorigen, the male characters find an excuse to behave nobly. Crane describes Dorigen as "paradoxically superior and subordinated,"<sup>100</sup> because though the male characters rely on her to establish the measure of their generosity, her power is only that of a valuable piece of property and not a living agent. She is the equivalent of the thousand pound reward generously relinquished by the clerk.

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<sup>99</sup> Van Dyke, "The Clerk's and Franklin's Subjected Subjects" 65.

<sup>100</sup> Crane, "The Franklin as Dorigen" 240.

When he completes his Tale, the Franklin asks his fellow pilgrims for their opinion: “Lordynges, this question, thane, wol I aske now,/Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?” (V.1621-22). Most critics agree that the Franklin’s final question concerns only the three men of the Tale: Arveragus, who has given up his wife to keep her “trouthe,” Aurelius, who has given Dorigen back to Arveragus to match his generosity, and the clerk, who has waived payment for his illusion. Dorigen had no power to effect any change in the latter half of the Tale, and I agree that she cannot be considered a candidate for “the mooste free” (V.1622). But the reader has reason to be disappointed with this conclusion. The Franklin’s Tale has not fulfilled its purpose: though it began with a prescription for achieving complete happiness and equality between spouses in marriage, the Tale’s conclusion serves only to describe the importance of “gentillesse” between men—a “gentillesse” which not only reestablishes socially constructed marital relations of the dominant husband and submissive wife but also completely negates the legitimacy of women’s agency. His new conclusion is that men’s adherence to moral ideals will unite the social classes: a squire, a clerk, and a knight have proven themselves equally “fre.” But after a Tale that has focused strongly on the character of Dorigen, how can we be satisfied with a conclusion that leaves her out? In an attempt to create a relationship that allows for female “libertee,” the Franklin ends up presenting the problems of this liberty: when woman exhibit power outside of that afforded to the submissive wife, disaster strikes. When Dorigen tries to dismiss Aurelius with the power of free speech, she faces the harsh consequences of her inability to command her language. In effect, the Tale has resolved “the implicit dangers of . . . female subjectivity”<sup>101</sup> by refusing Dorigen any power. The moral ideals originally ordained to sustain a marriage of equality

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<sup>101</sup> Hansen 273.



become instead principles important for the purpose of male bonding—the problem of Dorigen’s freedom is dropped in order to address the problem of equality between men, and the Tale’s subject becomes the methods by which the male characters—Aurelius, Arveragus, and the clerk—can successfully adopt the moral values necessary to cross class lines and save women from their own poor judgment.

According to critic Pamela Barnett, “The conflict and resolution of the story depend on establishing the terms by which a woman’s will is to be violated and by establishing the ‘generosity’ that eventually spares her the violation.”<sup>102</sup> Such a description emphasizes the Franklin’s Tale’s shift in focus from the power of moral values to establish marital equality to the power of moral ideals to unite men of different social classes. This shift is a product of the Franklin’s unsuccessful attempt to bestow power and freedom on the character of Dorigen: though he establishes her as equal to her husband, Dorigen is nevertheless bound by her role as a wife—a role which defines her moral values as those of obedience and faithfulness. Thus, in the marriage free of “maistrye,” it is the precarious nature of female agency that causes conflict and confusion: Dorigen is unable to assume power without having her intent misunderstood, and the problems that result from Dorigen’s actions can only be fixed by a complete objectification of her character. When the Franklin explains that a marriage based on love has no room for “maistrye,” he is quick to point out the need for husband and wife to exhibit patience in order to maintain equal amounts of freedom: “After the tyme moste be temperaunce/To every wight that kan on governaunce” (V.785-86). In other words, as Ben Parker says in Spider-Man, “with great power comes great responsibility”—and, as the Franklin’s Tale suggests, this responsibility cannot be entrusted to women. The

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<sup>102</sup> Barnett 155.

Tale's conclusion, therefore, is that men should value "gentillesse" and women should depend on these "gentil" men to decide their every action. Though the Franklin appears to want to rewrite social expectations regarding men's and women's roles in marriage, he clearly does not have the power: though he can navigate across class lines by appropriating moral values, he cannot create a new position for Dorigen.

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As the Franklin attempts to redefine conventional gender roles in marriage, he finds himself constrained by social expectations that necessitate a woman's submission to her husband. He is unable to rewrite these socially constructed marriage roles—just as the Wife is unable to define her desires outside of gender stereotypes. And in his attempt to instill order with a focus on chivalric pursuits, the Knight is similarly trapped within the inconsistencies of his socially constructed noble ideals. Thus what we can determine from an analysis of the conflict of agency is the debilitating influence of social conventions: as each character remains bound by standards of social expectation, we see the failure of these ideologies to allow for the complexities of human experience.

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