

Chaucer's Failed Feminism: The Pilgrimage Towards Potential of the Wife of Bath,
the Prioress and the Second Nun.

BY

Aidan Elizabeth Topping

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English
University of Manitoba
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	iv
INTRODUCTION	
Chaucer's Women Speak (But Who Peyntede the Leon?)	1
CHAPTER ONE	
Historical Contexts: Religious Heritage, Dissemination of Christ's Word, and Women Spreading their Words	6
CHAPTER TWO	
Speaking her Truth: The Relations of the Wife of Bath	24
Verbal Freedom: Speaking Through(out) <i>The Wife of Bath's Prologue</i>	26
The Presence of Ladies: The Wife of Bath and Female Community	49
Some Fertile Conclusions	60
CHAPTER THREE	
"Wandering About:" From Virginity to Motherhood With(out) the Prioress	69
CHAPTER FOUR	
The "Bisynesse" of the Second Nun: Faith and Feminism Meet Silence	90
CHAPTER FIVE	
Conclusion: Opening into the <i>Tales</i> and Shutting Down the Missing Potential	108
WORKS CITED	119

Abstract

This thesis examines the feminist implications of the characterizations of the three female pilgrims in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Using the term "feminism" in a new, medieval, sense, I detach "feminism" and "feminist" from their modern connotations. Instead, I apply a definition which allows the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, and the Second Nun to remain grounded in their particular milieu--of inherited antifeminist and patriarchal traditions, both literary and social--but which offers a more hopeful analysis of the female potential of Chaucer's women.

In Chapter One, I examine some of the religious traditions of antifeminism to which Chaucer responds by giving three women their narrative voices, and also demonstrate that though these traditions had real consequences for women, Chaucer was not the only writer advocating for female voices. Chapters Two through Four analyse Chaucer's women narrators in detail, and document the attempts of the three women to create a sense of female lineage through which to pass on their own inherited wisdom, and construct a space within which they can realize a more expansive potential than that which awaits those who readily accept the patriarchal hermeneutic of gender: Woman as Eve or Mary, the (in)escapable binary.

I conclude that, while Chaucer indicates a desire to allow women a discourse of their own which could lead to the realization of a fuller potential--without completely releasing them from the strictures of their time--he remains ultimately unable to escape from these constraints himself. The inherited literary tradition proves too much, and Chaucer is unable to envision a woman who can engender more than words and faith.

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List of Abbreviations

De bono Augustine. *De bono conjugali*

De Genesi Augustine. *De Genesi ad Litteram*

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. The Riverside Chaucer. Ed. Larry D. Benson

FranT *Franklin's Tale*

FrT *Friar's Tale*

GP *General Prologue*

KnT *Knight's Tale*

Mel *Tale of Melibee*

MLT *Man of Law's Tale*

PrT *Prioress's Tale*

SNT *Second Nun's Tale*

Th *Tale of Sir Thopas*

WBP *Wife of Bath's Prologue*

WBT *Wife of Bath's Tale*

Introduction

Chaucer's Women Speak (But Who Peyntede the Leon?)

In this study I will examine what I consider to be one of the most complex and fascinating aspects of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: the feminist implications of the characterizations of the female pilgrims. Chaucer conceives of women who advocate the female ability to engage intellectually with the world at large, to live creative, fulfilled lives that question and engage with traditional patriarchal social constructions. The potential for these women to become more than the sum of inherited beliefs about women accompanies each one on her own pilgrimage; there is a sense of possible individuation, wherein these women might separate from gender based expectations. Chaucer's creation of three female pilgrims who are storytellers, as well as nuns and wives, begins to open a dialogue between the inherited, public, and masculine view of Woman and the recognition of female potential. The realization of this potential is, however, limited by the constraints of the cultural legacy from which Chaucer writes. I will show that not only was Chaucer aware of the antifeminist milieu (both literary and religious) within which he worked, but that his creation and interpretation of these female lives function as a response to inherited conventions of antifeminism. Furthermore, though female characters appear within the tales told by the other pilgrims, these women have been created in turn by Chaucer's male characters; thus his appropriation of the female voice through the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, and the Second Nun constitutes the most direct link to medieval womanhood found in *The Canterbury*

Tales.

Reading Chaucer with feminist concerns is quite natural, as Arlyn Diamond points out, given the ample interest in the Middle Ages with “the problem of female nature” (61). Though I recognize the female narrators as characters within the text, and therefore realize that, as Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson state, they cannot be viewed specifically as “the repressed and marginalised voices of women from the past” (2), Chaucer’s appropriation and representation of the female voice raises questions concerning his position within the antifeminist literary tradition and his response to the female “problem.” Indeed, is it a problem at all? Need women be silent, chaste and virtuous to coexist with men in society? Can a woman function as more than a garrulous, licentious nag, or be more engaged with her own world than to exist as a one-dimensional devotee of Christ? I believe that the three female narrators constitute Chaucer’s attempt to create a fully realized and functioning woman within a contemporary context, one which takes into account not only the historical limitations on a woman’s life, but also the emerging possibilities for female action within society.

The fact that Chaucer positions these three women as storytellers within a society that holds female silence in the highest regard immediately foregrounds the importance of speech in defining new roles for women. Speech was not without danger in the late fourteenth century; indeed, accusations of treason and heresy were risks which limited discourse. As Michaela Paasche Grudin points out, the “highly charged political circumstances . . . as regards free speech” led to questions concerning Chaucer’s sponsorship of free speech “through the agency of dialogue” (25), thus positioning the

female voice as “an instrument which is potentially subversive to all authority” (25). By speaking and telling a tale, each woman reveals her character, and each is a character in which Chaucer envisions independence, strength, and creativity.

Though these women speak, I must ask the question raised by the Wife of Bath: “Who peyntede the leon” (WBP 692)? Her reference to the fable of the lion that, upon being shown a painting of a peasant killing a lion, asked who had painted the picture, a lion or a peasant, foregrounds her problem with literature; women have historically been derided because men have been the authors. Can this imbalance be rectified by another male author? If we are to question the validity of male authorship regarding negative depictions of women, should we not question its validity in consideration of positive portrayals of women? The Wife of Bath’s question draws attention to the fact that she was written into existence by Chaucer, the male author. The very presence of the three women on the pilgrimage to Canterbury, and their willingness to become storytellers, demonstrate Chaucer’s ability to conceive of female agency within male dominated hierarchies, both social and ecclesiastical. But in creating female speech, Chaucer interprets experiences to which he cannot, by virtue of his sex, have complete access.

In an essay on women’s literary tradition, Sheila Delany uses Virginia Woolf’s idea of “mothers to think back through,” a notion which is especially germane to my reading of *The Canterbury Tales*. As a son, Chaucer cannot have the experience of writing through inherited female lore; he cannot fully enter into women’s history or their future. Chaucer represents this limitation in the *Second Nun’s Tale*. Saint Cecile converts many men, establishes the Church, and withstands authoritative masculine

oppression, but when she dies, the Church passes into the control of men, and the Nun speaks no more. She has no words with which to answer her own tale. I believe that her final silence is indicative of Chaucer's inability to complete a portrait of a woman who functions fully *within* the male dominated society, as opposed to functioning as an adjunct to, and helpmeet for, the ruling patriarchy.

By virtue of their presence as pilgrims, the Wife of Bath, Prioress, and Second Nun have the most agency of all the women written into *The Canterbury Tales*, and I have focused my feminist reading of the poem on the three female narrators for this reason. Though the Wife has received perhaps the most critical attention of all women characters in the Middle Ages, I hope to bring new life to the feminist argument with my inclusion of the two religious women. The Wife is not a feminist merely because she fights with men, nor should the Prioress and the Second Nun be exempt from feminist discussions because they have devoted themselves to God. This is not to say that I believe the argument for a feminist Chaucer begins and ends with these three women; indeed, claiming proto-feminism for the poet on the basis of three characters from his substantial canon would be claiming an authorial intention that remains beyond the capacity of any modern critic. Rather, my belief is that by examining the female narrators we can gain significant insight into Chaucer's position in relation to the antifeminist literary tradition, and develop an argument which demonstrates not only the extent to which he attempted to construct female characters who are more than an accumulation of patriarchal tradition and misogynistic desire, but also how this feminism remains flawed, unable to loosen the strictures of accepted literary and historical

convention.

This thesis is arranged into five chapters. Chapter One outlines some of the historical aspects and theories of antifeminism to which Chaucer responds through his female pilgrims, as well as theories and movements more contemporary to Chaucer which demonstrate the emergence of both more critical thinking regarding religious and social constructs, and the female voice. In Chapter Two I analyze *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, while Chapters Three and Four contain, respectively, examinations of *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Second Nun's Tale*. I conclude the thesis in Chapter Five by uniting the analyses of the three women narrators and demonstrating the extent to which Chaucer attempts to create a fully realized female character, and also the extent to which he fails in this endeavour.

Chapter One

Historical Contexts: Religious Heritage, Dissemination of Christ's Word, and Women

Spreading their Words.

In a study of Chaucer's women, an examination of Augustinian tradition as it relates to women and sexuality is appropriate, for, as J. A. Robson writes, the Augustinian tradition "cast upon the medieval mind a spell which none could avoid. . . . Indeed, it is hard to think of any century . . . more soaked in Augustine than the fourteenth" (25). The work of Saint Augustine (354-430), monumental in scope, has affected philosophers and ecclesiastics for centuries, and was a great contributor to the inherited cultural legacy from which Chaucer wrote. What was Augustine's view of the spiritual condition of women, and how did his theological conceptions affect their reality? How might these ideas have influenced Chaucer to move beyond the more traditional antifeminist strictures found in literature? As Prudence Allen notes, "St Augustine stands as a watershed in the history of the concept of woman in relation to man . . . he is an extremely fascinating contributor to the philosophy of woman and man" (218). Augustine's work spans a lifetime which encompassed many different roles; he was a Bishop who had come to his role in the Church only after living with a female companion and producing a son. Though he never married, and despite the distance from women which E. Ann Matter points out that he maintained after his conversion, refraining from developing "intellectual relationships with learned ascetic women" (167), this *de facto* marriage with his unnamed female companion would have given

Augustine insight into the social context of male-female interactions, a context that would have been unavailable to many “clerkes . . . withinne hire oratories” (WBP 694).

As a Christian philosopher, Augustine’s attitudes toward women are rooted in theology, and the complexity of these attitudes has led to such diverse critical reactions as John Hugo’s contention that Augustine “may be the first Christian feminist” (153), and those which claim he completely denied the *imago dei* to women. I would like to begin, then, with a passage from *De Trinitate* that effectively demonstrates the difficulties in defining Augustine’s beliefs about women.

How then did the Apostle tell us that the man is the image of God, and therefore he is forbidden to cover his head: but that the woman is not so, and therefore is commanded to cover hers? . . . the woman together with her own husband is the image of God, so that the whole substance may be one image; but when she is referred to separately in her quality of help-meet, which regards the woman herself alone, then she is not the image of God; but as regards the man alone, he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman is joined with him in one. (*De Trinitate* 814; bk. 12, ch. 7, 10)

As Matter points out, Augustine developed this statement from Corinthians 11:7-9, where Paul says “For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. (For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.)” How, then, can woman be *imago dei* and yet also only the image of man?

Kim Power reconciles these conflicting beliefs by distinguishing between woman

as human being, and woman as female. She writes that “Augustine is adamant that sexual difference pertains only to the body and not to the mind” (139), where there is no separation between women, men, and the human image of God. Thus, theoretically and abstractly, women are, at least inasmuch as they are human beings, *imago dei*.

Moreover, Augustine believed that, as part of the natural order, the biological sex of women would be maintained at the resurrection; the faithful would not all be resurrected as men. However, the female body would be changed to be superior to carnal activity and childbearing; the “corruption inherent in the female function will be eliminated by God” (K. Power 156). Practically, however, women can only be considered the spiritual equals of men “without regard to the practical characteristics that make them women” (*ibid.*, 170), characteristics which Augustine consistently writes of as subjecting women to the superiority of men by virtue of the order of creation. In *De Genesi Ad Litteram*, he reasons that woman was made only to help man in the begetting of children: she would be of no use in tilling the earth, as a man would be better; she would be no use in sharing conversation and companionship, because the company of other men is more agreeable; she would especially not be considered of use in wielding power and authority within society, because, as K. Power notes, Augustine would never have contemplated such a possibility. As woman was created second, and from the rib of man, so too was she ranked below man, a hierarchy which created the arrangement that maintains household peace--man commands and woman obeys. “Surely no one will say that God was able to make from the rib of the man only a woman and not also a man if He had wished to do so,” Augustine writes. “Consequently, I do not see in what sense the woman was made

as a helper for the man if not for the sake of bearing children” (*De Genesi* 75; bk. 9. ch. 5). Thus, beyond motherhood, women have no purpose, but by virtue of this same function they are found to be inferior to men, which creates an inescapable paradox. If women fulfill their ordained purpose they are inferior and corrupt, but if they do not become mothers, then there is, in effect, no reason for their existence. The female ideal remains unreachable.

By virtue of the order of creation, Augustine contends that woman is subject to man, but this order is further compounded by the Fall. He makes the distinction between the levels of sin Adam and Eve commit: “Adam under interrogation did not say, ‘The woman whom Thou gavest to be my companion seduced me and I ate’; but, ‘*She gave me fruit of the tree and I ate.*’ On the other hand, the woman said, ‘*The Serpent seduced me*’” (*De Genesi* 175-6; bk 11, ch. 42). Indeed, he contends that Adam did not wish to make Eve unhappy by refusing the fruit, which he worried might cause her to feel alienated from him, thus leading to her death. Further, Augustine states “I do not think that the wiles of the serpent by which the woman was seduced could have been in any way the means of [Adam’s] seduction” (*ibid.*). Of course not, for Augustine believed that Adam was created with the knowledge of God intact in his mind, while “perhaps the woman had not yet received the gift of the knowledge of God” (*ibid.*), but was to be taught by Adam. Consequently, woman’s subjection to man was fortified by original sin, thus she must remain subservient to him in the temporal world.

Though Augustine’s theological views necessitate women’s subjection to men, Matters points out that “in fact, the reality of women’s subordination to men is somewhat

mitigated within the marriage contract by the ‘mutual servitude’ of the flesh” (168). Augustine wrote *De bono conjugali* in response to the writings of Jovinian, who argued that marriage was equal to virginity, and that Mary was not a virgin during the birth of Christ. Equalizing the married state and virginity denied “the hierarchical order of the sacred” (K. Power 167), and Jovinian was denounced by many of his contemporaries. One such contemporary, Jerome, responded with such vehemence, vitriol, and misogyny in his polemical writing *Against Jovinian*, that Augustine, though fully supportive of the preeminence of virginity, was prompted to write his own treatise on marriage to demonstrate its benefits: offspring, fidelity, and sacrament (Wilcox 3). Augustine writes that “in the very debt which married persons owe each other . . . they owe fidelity *equally to each other*” (*De bono* 13; ch. 4, 4, italics mine), and though “continence is of greater merit, it is no sin to render the conjugal debt” (*ibid.*, 17; ch. 7, 6), though he does specify that marital intercourse is only pardoned--not permitted--because of the marriage. The ideas of marital debt and mutual fidelity are approached by Chaucer with the Wife of Bath, and point to the prominence of Augustinian thought, for issues of virginity, sexuality and debt are preeminent in both her *Prologue* and *Tale*.

Indeed, though Augustine asserts the traditional ecclesiastic hierarchy of virginity’s moral superiority to marriage, he admits that there are no absolutes, for “not only is the obedient person to be preferred to the disobedient one, but the more obedient wife is to be preferred to the less obedient virgin” (*De bono* 46; ch. 23, 30). Therefore, as Mathijs Lamberigts states, any person who “made proper use of sexual desire within marriage bore no guilt,” and had “followed the right intention, due to the faculty of

reason” (184). But equally, a person who “sought to satisfy his or her sexual desires via adultery, for example, was guilty of sin because they refused to do what they were capable of doing: saying no to their sexual impulses” (sic, *ibid.*). Thus for Augustine, each person’s free will is a factor in his or her morality; each is responsible for his or her own proximity to grace.

It is this concept of individual agency with which I wish to end this discussion of Augustine. Augustine’s legacy, in terms of this thesis, is more than a complex attitude towards women; it is also a dedication to interpretation and intellectual inquiry. When he wrote *De Doctrina Christiana*, he did so to provide a unifying body of doctrine for Catholic Christianity, and, as Peggy Knapp writes, “he did so not primarily by asserting *what* the Bible meant but by asserting *how* it conveyed its meaning” (“Wandrynge” 146). The Bible, as the word of God, is a guide to conduct and faith, but must be properly interpreted. Though Augustine distinguishes between literal and figurative signification in the Bible and stresses the need to explicate the figurative, as Knapp points out, difficulties in interpretation can arise which undercut “the absoluteness and stability of the received word, deferring to language study, judgment, likelihood, comparison, and *human authority*” (149, emphasis mine). That Augustine leaves space for interpretation is significant, and though he stresses that the end result should be *caritas*, the love of God, and the use of all else in order to achieve *caritas*, the space created for intellectual judgement is clear. Thus the agency of the individual is necessary to achieve an understanding of Christian doctrine, and human inquiry is respected.

This space, however limited, which Augustine allows for interpretation asserts

the necessity of inquiry, a challenge with which Chaucer complies ten centuries later. Chaucer's methods for confronting the "problem" of female nature would have shocked Augustine, but it was he who opened the proverbial door.

More contemporary with Chaucer, but just as devoted to the spirit of inquiry, and even more so to the necessity of change, is John Wyclif (d. 1384).¹ Wyclif presented ideas of ecclesiastic reform, advocating a reexamination of Christian traditions and the importance of individual responsibility for one's faith. At the time in which Chaucer wrote, though some of Wyclif's ideas and followers had been condemned at the Blackfriars Council in 1382 (Hudson, Premature Reformation 70-3), not all of Wyclif's ideas were deemed heretical, thus allowing Chaucer to incorporate such a concept as personal biblical interpretation into his poetry without fear of reprisal.

The religious upheaval of the late fourteenth century consisted of dangers to ecclesiastic tradition beyond those posed by the internal fracturing of the institution of the church with the Great Schism, begun in 1378. John Wyclif advocated a revision of the way religion was practised; he claimed that, as God's word, "the Bible alone [was] sufficient grounding for Christian faith and practise" (Peggy Knapp, Contest 67), and that the laity should have access to it in a language they could understand. As a realist, Wyclif opposed official doctrine concerning the Eucharist, and believed that transubstantiation was not possible. He aimed to demystify the rituals of the Church by

¹Robson points out that Wyclif first appears as a fellow of Merton College, Oxford in 1356, and therefore "beyond the fact that he reached full middle life, we cannot fix with any precision the year of [his] birth" (10).

creating English words to discuss the sacrament, as the language had not previously contained any terms for “lay discussion of the sacrament because lay people did not need to discuss it, only to assent” (ibid., 69). For Wyclif, the true Christian not only *accepted* Christ, but understood His teachings firsthand.

Furthermore, Wyclif inverted parts of the traditional religious discourse by claiming certain terms for his own purpose. As Knapp writes,

His extreme philosophical realism allowed him to disjoin the true body of believers who comprise the invisible church known only by God from the historically situated and debased church visible. The real church, the scriptural bride of Christ, is therefore not co-terminous with the established church.

(Contest 68)

Wyclif’s dissatisfaction with what he saw as ecclesiastical abuse of both power and property allowed him and his followers to refer to Pope Urban VI as *filius Antichristi*. Traditional Christian discourse was reclaimed by Wyclif to reassert the supremacy of Biblical authority over clerical. Thus, as Anne Hudson points out, the Schism itself could be seen as providential for Wyclif, as the “ridiculous contradictory claims made by the two warring contenders” for the papacy only made the evils of the papal institution clearer to society (Premature Reformation 334). As Wyclif states, “For [as] Crist puttith wijsly his lowne lijf for hise skeep, so anticrist puttith proudli many lyues for his foule lijf; as, if the feend ledde the pope to kille many thousand men to holde his worldi staat, he sude antecristis manners” (qtd. in Knapp, Contest 67).

Wyclif himself was not atypical of his time in regard to the “place” of women in

society, and while he showed innovation in challenging the traditional ecclesiastic discourse, he writes in *Of Weddid Men and Wifis*, “See now how þe wif oweþ to be suget to þe housbonde, and he owiþ to reule his wif. . . A womman oweþ to lerne in silence, wiþ alle obedience and subjeccioun. But Poul seiþ: I suffre not a womman to teche, þat is, openly in chirche. . . and I suffre not a womman to have lordischiþe in here housbonde, but to be in silence or stillnesse” (Select English Writings, 106). However, like Augustine, Wyclif believed in the necessity of Biblical interpretation to arrive at the true Word of God. For Wyclif, the clergy was performing a disservice to the laity; the focus of the institutional Church had deviated from the faithful dissemination of God’s law and become enmeshed in internal disputes and what he saw as erroneous doctrinal practices. Therefore, since, as Knapp writes, “the *trewe men* of the invisible church were increasingly in danger from the church visible” (Contest 70), they needed to be educated to examine the faith themselves, insist upon its demystification, and arrive at their own conclusions (ibid., 71). Wyclif’s emphasis on personal responsibility for knowledge of the faith is demonstrated in *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, where he claims that all Christians must read scripture and that the “faithful whom he calls in meekness and humility of heart, whether they be clergy or laity, male or female. . . will find in it the power to labour and the wisdom hidden from the proud” (qtd. in Knapp, Contest 73). Wyclif emphasizes that, just as the study of the Bible should not be restricted to the clergy, so should it not be prohibited to women. By introducing biblical interpretation to the laity, he exposed for women the possibility that traditional ecclesiastic authority was in some way unjust, disconnected from God’s law. By holding women as accountable as

men for understanding scripture, Wyclif provoked a reevaluation of the duties and “place” of women with regard to their own relationship with God.

For Wyclif, heresy meant the choice of an opinion which is contrary to scripture, and defending that opinion publicly (Hudson, “*Laicus*” 231). As a result of his views on clerical abuses and what he believed to be fundamental errors in traditional Catholic doctrine, Wyclif believed that the true adherents to God’s law must dissent from what he saw as the heretical nature of Church doctrine, and begin anew their Christian learning, focused only on the Bible. Knapp quotes Robert Grosseteste, one of Wyclif’s teachers, to demonstrate Wyclif’s denial of “remaining obedient to a hierarchy one believed in error: ‘as an obedient son, I disobey’”(Contest 68). To remain true to the Christian faith and be obedient to God, he denounced traditional ecclesiastic authority, which he did not believe to be in full accord with scripture. However, by virtue of his insistence on biblical study uninfluenced by patristic glosses and clerical opinion, Wyclif, like Augustine, leaves a margin for individual interpretation. If some females chose to interpret Wycliffite discourse as allowing them the inner space to think and come to their own comprehension of the scriptures, then, arguably, John Wyclif was the impetus behind women saying “as an obedient daughter, I disobey.”

The female religious experience was not undocumented; indeed, though their number is small, there were women coming to their own terms with God and with ecclesiastic authority. A near contemporary of both Wyclif and Chaucer is Margery Kempe, a pilgrim and mystic of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. She was born about 1373, and initially lived a traditional life, marrying and having children. But,

as evidenced in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, she began to have mystical experiences wherein she was visited by Jesus in human form and the voices of the Virgin Mary and God. With the sanction of her husband, she left home to travel, making pilgrimages and speaking of the scripture. The *Book* itself was presumably dictated to a scribe by Kempe, detailing the events of her religious life, but as Lynn Staley notes in her edition of the *Book*, though much in it is verifiable, there is no “actual proof that the *Book* is any “truer” than any fiction rooted in a social reality”(vii). Written in the third person, Kempe the storyteller has distanced herself from the Margery of the *Book* (xi), although whether the distance is achieved by the scribe himself or by Margery, who, perhaps having written the *Book* herself, created a fictional scribe, remains unknown (Staley, “Authorship” 238). This superficial detachment from the story does, however, create a certain sense of safety, just as Chaucer the author distances himself from his pilgrims’ tales to relieve himself of accountability. “M’athynketh that I shal reherce it heere,” he says in *The Miller’s Prologue*, “Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame” (3170, 3185). A semantic safety net, however small, has been put in place for the eventuality of negative repercussions stemming from the tale he (or she) tells.

Whether Margery created this distance purposefully is unknown. The Margery of the text, however, *is* known, and as Clarissa Atkinson writes, Margery is not a woman who allows her life to be dictated by ecclesiastical authority (159). She challenges the clerical belief that women should be silent, and her efforts to authorize her speech are dangerous, for as Karma Lochrie points out, “she must assert her own orthodoxy as a Christian at the same time that she argues for her right to speak” (245). Consider

Margery's response when called before the Archbishop of York, accused by many of being a heretic, and made to swear she would leave the diocese without teaching or challenging any person's faith. She refuses to swear to such a silence, and vows to continue to speak of God until the Pope ordains that no one should speak of Him, "for God al-mythy forbedith not, ser, þat we xal speke of hym" (126; ch. 52, lines 5-6). Furthermore, she refers to the Gospel, where a woman heard the Lord preach and was moved to bless the Virgin who bore Him in a loud voice. "þan owr Lord seyð a-zen to hir, 'Forsobe so ar þei blissed þat heryn þe word of God and kepyn it.' And perfor, sir, me thynkyth þat þe Gospel zeuyth me leue to spekyng of God" (126; ch. 52, 10-12). She is then charged with having a devil within her, "for sche spekyth of þe Gospel" (126; ch. 52, 15). However, the reasoning behind the demonic accusation is, as Knapp points out, not that she is wrong *about* the biblical story, rather that she is wrong to know it at all (Contest 96). Margery's knowledge poses a threat to traditional patristic authority. Indeed, when a clerk reminds her of the Pauline command that women should not preach, she makes a distinction between preaching and communication in order to thwart the charges against herself, and vows only to continue to use her good words. "I preche not, ser, I come in no pulpytt. I vse but comownycacyon & good wordys, & þat wil I do whil I leue" (126; ch. 52, 18-20), she says, denying that she preaches, but refusing to be silenced.

Margery presents a certain defiance, one which questions accepted traditions. As Lochrie states, "Kempes' assertion of her own right to speak and teach directly challenges the 'language of the world,' including the writing of the Church Fathers and

the clerical prerogative of speech” (243). She also challenges gendered domestic traditions by leaving her family and travelling across England and Europe, thus refusing both literally and figuratively to remain in the space provided for her by society and ecclesiastic authority. Margery Kempe demonstrates an extreme; she is clearly the deviation, not the norm, for female behaviour. However, she also demonstrates possibility. The passage from which I have quoted above, concerning her defense in front of the Archbishop, is not used to signify her outright independence of all authority, for she does refer to the Pope and the institution of the Church; rather it is employed to signify the symbolism of her actions. For she has learned scripture, successfully defended herself against authority, and vowed she will continue to speak--all defiant actions which place Margery outside the patriarchal framework for society.

If Margery signifies nothing else, she at least conveys that women could become a part of the dissemination of knowledge, through speaking *and* writing, and that women contemporary with Chaucer could begin to envision a new way of being, or at least a way to speak. These new female voices attain a sense of permanence through the written word; Margery's confidence and knowledge are preserved in her *Book*, and the fleeting nature of the spoken word (so often negatively associated with women) has been conquered. Julian of Norwich, an even closer contemporary to Chaucer, wrote two versions of *Revelations of Divine Love*, recounting the sixteen revelations she had before she became an anchoress. Her texts serve as both records of her visions and as spiritual guidance. Though not resistant to authority in the way Margery Kempe could be--indeed, she takes pains to avoid suspicion of heresy, positioning herself as an orthodox woman

who, as Nicholas Watson writes, “was not asserting personal authority or teaching doctrines concocted by herself” (“Composition” 666)--through her writing Julian acknowledges the validity and importance of female experience.

Margery Kempe was a defender of the true faith; her contemporary, Christine de Pizan, was a defender of women. Christine was born about 1364 and lived in France, and though the majority of her literary work was written after Chaucer’s death, she is relevant to this thesis insofar as her defense of women against their treatment by men, in literature and in person, demonstrates that what we in the twenty-first century might refer to as a feminist consciousness was beginning to stir in Chaucer’s time (Gottlieb 282).

My intention in mentioning Christine is not to attempt an analysis of her defense of women, but to point out that, concerning attitudes towards women, the medieval perspective was not without female voice. While Margery defended her right to access God’s Word, Christine advocated for women themselves, and in domains beyond the religious. We need not look to the Wife of Bath alone for a dissenting female voice in the antifeminist literary and cultural milieu, but can look to Christine, who provides the first consideration of the misogynous tradition from a true female perspective. The Wife of Bath’s voice is mediated by virtue of Chaucer’s authority, while Christine’s writings are unequivocally female.

As Beatrice Gottlieb points out, Christine’s *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* is essentially an exposition of women’s worth and talents, while *Le Livre des Trois Vertus* is a “sort of instruction manual for women” (278). In response to the misogyny in Jean de Meun’s completion of *Le Roman de la Rose*, Christine wrote *L’Epistre au Dieu*

d'Amours, which attacks the defamation of women and ends by essentially claiming Eve was not at fault for the Fall, and therefore is not guilty of original sin. Furthermore, Christine supported the education of women, for “not allowing women to study implied a lack of capacity which she denied” (Gottlieb 281). Without the education she had received from her father, she would not have been able to support herself and her family with her writing after the death of her husband.

Christine is unique because she publicly “made cause with all women. She thought about women’s lives and how they might be improved,” and though “there were no demands for equal rights or political power” (Gottlieb 282), I believe that, given the constraints of the age, she can be referred to as a feminist. Sheila Delany argues against Christine’s potential feminism, claiming for her instead a more traditional conservatism. Delany challenges those who would claim that the act of writing is alone enough to qualify a woman of Christine’s time as “a radical, a revolutionary, or a model for [modern women]” (179). I do not disagree, and make no claims as to Christine’s potential revolutionary nature, but I would note the rarity of women’s writing about women. If, as Delany suggests, we must assess female writers in relation to their social context, then we must address Christine’s unprecedented status as a female professional writer. Though her words may not be intrinsically revolutionary, her choice of profession suggests a particular willingness to approach a traditionally male vocation, and she does write of women in a manner that challenges patriarchal assumptions.

The years surrounding the turn of the fifteenth century were not without examples of women striking out for themselves, either in defense of their sex or as an

advocate of the Word of God. While it was rare for a woman to write for a wide audience and to deal with the subject of women specifically (Gottlieb 278), Christine's life and work foreground the emergence of a public inquiry, however small, into the character of Women and their "place" in the world. Further, as noted below, I do not use the term "feminist" to denote a person intent on equalizing the sexes; rather, I use "feminist" to refer more to a recognition of female potential. Therefore, as such a feminist, and given her near contemporaneity with Chaucer, Christine deserves mention because she provides context to what I refer to as Chaucer's (failed) feminism. My contention is that a woman such as Christine signals a certain change in the quality of the reception of thinking about women, a change that I believe can also be seen in Chaucer. I do not suggest that Chaucer and Christine influenced each other; rather that, taken together, they indicate a nascent space in the public sphere for discussion of women that goes beyond traditional antifeminist doctrine.

Finally, a brief explanation of terminology is necessary. Throughout this thesis, I use the terms "feminism" and "feminist" in regards to Chaucer and his relation to his inherited literary tradition. The word "feminism" did not exist in the fourteenth century, which necessitates the following query: Is it appropriate to use the term in an examination of that time? In fact, I believe the relatively recent emergence of the word creates an opportunity that would remain closed had the word been used in Chaucer's era. The value of the term need not be compared to its prior medieval usage, because there was none. The qualitative differences of women's rights must, however, be taken into account in the use of "feminism" and its related terms. The modern sense of

feminism is closely connected with a belief in the equality of the sexes, with more radical feminists delving into complex issues of sexual identity, “some even suggesting that heterosexuality is inherently oppressive to women” (Gottlieb 276). Since its inception, feminism has been associated with being a movement, an attempt to unite women in their own common cause. I discard this meaning in my use of “feminism,” and claim it for the Medieval period in a different sense. Chaucer’s culture and society are historically fixed; he could not, nor can we now, remove him from his world. So while the Oxford English Dictionary defines feminism as “advocacy of the rights of women (based on the theory of the equality of the sexes),” we cannot ignore that, in Chaucer’s time, women were not equal to men, nor was there a theoretical assumption of equality. Therefore I believe that “feminism” might properly be used in a medieval context by referring to a particular way of thinking about women; without removing them from the strictures of their society, a feminist enters into women’s experience and demonstrates the potential therein, illustrating the ability women had to claim responsibility, respect, and a sense of authority within their particular milieu. The OED also defines feminism as “the qualities of females,” a less rigid definition which allows the critic to incorporate all of the abilities cited above which Chaucer gives his female pilgrims. The potential of feminism, therefore, is in advocating for those medieval women whose lives did not include a theory of gender equality.

Christine de Pizan and Margery Kempe might be said to belong to a group of what Gottlieb refers to as “embryonic feminists” (295), women who do not advocate sweeping cultural reform, but who defend their sex and often demonstrate that the

dominion of the true Church did not exclude women. To this group I would add Geoffrey Chaucer, who, through the three female narrators of *The Canterbury Tales*, attempts to construct a space in which women can create a sense of themselves and their own agency apart from the dominant male discourse.

Chapter Two

Speaking her Truth: The Relations of the Wife of Bath

For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
That any clerk wol speke good of wyves . . .
By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse. (WBP 688-9, 693-6)

So speaks the Wife of Bath in the Prologue to her Tale, her anger at the inherited lore found in her fifth husband's "book of wikked wyves" (WBP 685) directed not only toward male authored histories, but at the lack of a female answer to the singularity of recorded opinion. To begin to recuperate a sense of Chaucer's response to the accumulation of male-centred, largely antifeminist writings that came before him, critics have been drawn primarily to the Wife of Bath. Indeed, she almost demands that attention be paid to Chaucer's view of women because of the challenge she represents through her paradoxical voicing of feminine concerns via her appropriation of antifeminist thought within a male-authored text. Any attempt to create a feminist hermeneutic of *The Canterbury Tales* must include the Wife of Bath, and what Chaucer begins with her character: namely, an *attempted* exposition of independent female life within the dominant male discourse.

Donald Howard writes that in *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer creates a "society in

little" (Idea 154), but Chaucer's group of pilgrims might more aptly be described as a little society. Not all classes of humankind receive adequate representation, women in particular receiving scant manifestation, which leads to an enhanced awareness of the female narrators' status as "Other." To be identified as woman in the cultural milieu in which Chaucer wrote is to be defined negatively. That which is masculine creates the norm, and any aberration (femininity) is disparaged. As Catherine Cox points out in Gender and Language in Chaucer, gender-based associations derive from both Christian and classical traditions, which devise a set of binary principles which are then used to deride the female (6-8). Theologically, Woman (through Eve) is the force behind mankind's fall from grace in Eden; classically, Aristotelian theory places the feminine in direct opposition to (assumed) masculine traits, and always to deleterious effect. Therefore the female becomes unlimited, dark, carnal, corrupt, while the male retains the opposing, admirable qualities. However, Chaucer presents his readers with one secular and two *religious* women, thereby complicating any purely gender based, traditional judgment of the female narrators in *The Canterbury Tales*. By first demarcating three of the narrators as "other" in the form of women, he then suggests a sense of otherness *between* them: the religious women would seem necessarily to stand apart from the Wife of Bath and her carnal life. Indeed, the Wife's attempt to create a female community of "wys wyvves" in her prologue assuredly could *not* include her fellow female pilgrims. The most significant issue, however, manifests itself as three women existing within a literary environment in which, as Marcia Landy notes, the dominant view of women is that they must embody "silence, receptivity, and responsiveness to the needs of the man"

(20). *Yet they all three speak.* Each tells a tale, and in so doing, reveals not only her own character, but also, as he is the creator of this female speech, a part of Chaucer's.

Verbal Freedom: Speaking Through(out) *The Wife of Bath's Prologue.*

When the Wife of Bath breaks into the discussion between the Host and the Parson, she immediately establishes herself as a vociferous speaker: "Heer schal he nat preche; / He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche. . . My joly body schal a tale telle" (MLT 1179-80,1185).² In these few lines she foregrounds concepts (preaching, glossing,

²Though none of the MSS. of *The Canterbury Tales* expressly names the Wife of Bath as the speaker of these lines, the volume of textual variation and ambiguity surrounding *The Epilogue of the Man of Law's Tale* leads me to conclude the Wife is indeed the correct speaker and to reject the "Bradshaw shift" of Fragment VII. Chaucer's use of the pronouns "we" and "us" in *The Shipman's Tale* indicates a married female speaker, who can only be the Wife of Bath. The social subject matter of the Tale suits the Shipman less than the Wife (Pratt), as does the narrative voice; indeed, Chaucer altered the sources for the fabliau in favour of the wife in the story (Lawrence). The speaker in the Man of Law's Epilogue speaks to her "joly body," as does the wife in *The Shipman's Tale*, which echoes the Wife of Bath as we read her through her Prologue and Tale of the Loathly Lady. Indeed, the Wife's *Prologue* connects with the endlink through her use of interruptions, which we see repeated in her *Prologue*, her aversion to glossing, and her usurpation of the power of speech. However, once *The Shipman's Tale* ends, the host refers to the teller as a "gentil maryneer," indicating the gender shift of the narrator of that tale from Chaucer's initial intention. This shift causes many editors to insert the Shipman as the speaker at 1179, though from the evidence of the MSS. which include the *Epilogue* we can see that this line may have initially read Wife of Bath and been scribally modified to reflect the transfer of her original tale to the Shipman (Pratt). Finally, though I do not assert that Chaucer's intentions were fixed, I do contend that neither canceling the endlink nor following it with *The Shipman's Tale* represent the most accurate reading of the MSS.; not only should line 1179 read "Wife of Bath," but the endlink should be retained and accordingly followed by Fragment III and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, with Fragment VII, which begins with *The Shipman's Tale*, placed much later in the *Tales*.

carnality) that she will expound in her Prologue and Tale; she wastes no time in demonstrating to her audience the type of woman she is and the type of tale she will tell. Yet even before her interruption Chaucer has begun to unfold the character of the Wife for his audience.

The *General Prologue* introduces the pilgrims, and effects responses to them when their tales are reached, for readers will already have begun to form opinions about them. Though the portraits in the prologue are written as Chaucer the pilgrim's descriptions of his compatriots as he met them, Barbara Gottfried stresses the importance of remembering that "even within the framing fiction of the pilgrimage, the portraits are written retrospectively, only after the fictive "Chaucer" has returned from his literary travels" (204), his portraits therefore reflecting what Chaucer knows of the pilgrims that the reader cannot yet know. Thus when the Wife of Bath enters into the *Tales*, the reader has already been directed toward a particular, though limited, understanding of her character. Alisoun of Bath is a woman of experience; Chaucer states in the *General Prologue* that she has a profession ("Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt" [447]), plenty of marriage experience ("Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve" [460]), has made many prior pilgrimages ("thries hadde she been at Jerusalem . . . At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne, / In Galice at Seint-Jame, and at Coloigne" [463,465-6]), and that though she certainly has a sense of entitlement ("wif ne was ther noon / That to the offrynge bifore hire sholde goon; / And if there dide, certeyn so wrooth was she / That she was out of alle charitee" [449-52]), she does not lack for conviviality ("In felawshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe. / Of remedies of love she knew per

chance, / For she koude of that art the olde daunce" [474-6]). The sense of independence and desire for control Chaucer describes the Wife as having in the *General Prologue* bursts forth from the moment she begins to speak. Immediately she is signaled as the antithesis to the silent, submissive woman put forth in clerical writing as the feminine ideal.

When the Wife of Bath breaks into the discourse of the *Tales* and commands the attention of the pilgrims, she is at once decrying male authority and demonstrating her capacity for power. In Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse, Michaela Paasche Grudin demonstrates how "the association between women and uncontrollable speech was an active tradition in Chaucer's England" (97). Public records describe women sentenced to the pillory or the cucking-stool for being common scolds; verbal "transgressions" were followed by a physical punishment. Speech as disruption of the male ordered hierarchy was repressed, limiting even further women's freedom. Disallowing a voice denies individuality, thus keeping women under control and seemingly interchangeable in their femininity. With the words "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage" (WBP 1-3), the Wife signals that not only will she defy the dominant patriarchal aversion to female speech, but that she will do so on her own terms, and in her own time.

Critical division concerning Alisoun's discourse has abounded in recent years. Is her tirade against the "wo that is in mariage" and patriarchal glossings of biblical exegesis to be read as creating a proto-feminism in English literature, or does the ambiguity of both her prologue and her tale, ending in what she refers to as "parfit

joye”(WBT 1258) in marriage, subvert her feminist actions and leave the reader with a sense that, finally, she remains in an inescapable position of masculine control? Catherine Cox phrases this position exactly when she states that the Wife’s narrative “seems ambiguously--and ambivalently--both feminist and antifeminist” (19). In creating a female character who so vigorously exemplifies the shrewishness and excessive speaking the patriarchy uses as the formation of antifeminist discourse, has Chaucer proven the point for the male hierarchy? But such an argument disregards the essential meaning and value of the Wife’s excessive speech. In her Prologue, she describes how she gained the upper hand in her relationships with her first three “goode” husbands:

Deceite, wepyng, spynnyng God hath yive
To wommen kyndely, whil that they may lyve.
And thus of o thyng I avaunte me:
Atte ende I hadde the bettre in ech degree,
By sleighte, or force, or by som maner thyng,
As by continueel murmur or grucchyng. (WBP 401-06)

The use of the verb “yive” foregrounds the effect of the oppressive male tyranny of the times; Alisoun can only utilize that to which she has access, and all she has been allowed within the masculine ordered structures of society is the scolding speech and deceitful attitude with which the antifeminist tradition condemns women. Indeed, by reciting what her first three husbands said to her and telling how she responded to gain a sense of control and independence, she mimics the antifeminist discourse, and with her mimicry

she undermines and at least partially destabilizes the masculine discourse (Dickson 71). Through her assumption of the garrulity and deceit with which antifeminist propaganda accuses her, along with her arrogating to herself a patriarchal voice, she parodies the dominant (masculine) attitude to make herself heard.

Patriarchal discourse denies a place for the feminine to exist without the binary of Woman as either a silent and submissive party to the lives lived by men in a culture ruled by men, or the aberration of that in the form of a physically present and vocal contrarian. In the case of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* however, Lee Patterson states that antifeminism "is appropriated by a woman's voice to articulate feminist truths" (682); Alisoun refuses to remain silent concerning the devaluation of the feminine. She uses antifeminism to posit a middle ground for Woman; somewhere between silence and senseless garrulity lies the reality of what Carolyn Dinshaw refers to as "independent feminine will and desire" (114).

The Wife of Bath's appropriation of the power of speech does not go unnoticed within *The Canterbury Tales*; indeed, not only is she interrupted on more than one occasion, she draws attention to her own loquaciousness with her repeated utterances of "For I shal telle" (179), "Now wol I telle forth my tale" (193), "I shal seye sooth"(195), "Herkneth how I sayde" (234), "Now wol I speken" (452), "Now wol I tellen forth" (563), "Lat me se what I shal seyn" (585), and "Now wol I seye my tale, if ye wol heere" (828). When the Pardoner breaks into her Prologue, rather than admonishing her for speaking so freely, he calls her a "noble prechour"(165) for clarifying for him the tribulations that would befall him were he to marry. His willingness to interact with her

speech and accept her preaching seems initially to imply an emerging acceptance of women as intelligent and influential members of society. Yet the Pardoner is quite a feminine figure himself. In the *General Prologue* Chaucer claims “I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare” (GP 691), thus drawing attention to the unlikelihood of the Pardoner being “aboute to wedde a wyf” (WBP 166). His praise of the Wife is tinged with sarcasm, as he praises her for demonstrating for him female characteristics, but the female character is, perhaps, something which with he never desired to be engaged. Further, there are very few similar interruptions throughout the entirety of *The Canterbury Tales*, which draws attention to each interruption.³ Why has the Pardoner interjected himself into the Wife’s speech? By so doing, he invites special attention to his statement that the Wife is a “noble prechour,” and exposes himself as attracted to the power in her, power more generally assigned to male figures, and “noble prechour” thus takes on ironic connotations. The Pardoner’s words, if only momentarily, serve to stop the Wife’s speech, though she immediately shuts him down with the news that her “tale is nat bigonne” (WBP 169); she has much more to say, and he surrenders to her verbal barrage.

³The most effective interruption in *The Canterbury Tales* is Harry Bailly’s demand that Chaucer the pilgrim stop his tale of *Sir Thopas*. This disruption also plays with the gendered power of speech: in the *General Prologue* Chaucer describes the Host as large and bold, indeed “of manhod hym lakkede right naught” (GP 756) while Chaucer remains present but not defined. Harry calls Chaucer a “popet” (Th 701) when asking for a tale, feminizing the pilgrim and emphasizing his own masculinity, but when Harry attempts to shut him down, Chaucer comes back with the mighty *Melibee*, which gives the rein to a woman’s voice. *Sir Thopas*, linked to the Pardoner through Chaucer’s romantic, feminized description of them both, is ended so a woman’s voice could be heard, in *Melibee* as with the Wife of Bath above.

The interjection of the Friar 829 lines into her prologue serves to change the direction of the Wife's speech, but certainly does not stop or control it. He says "This is a long preamble of a tale!" (831) after Alisoun relates how "trewe" she and her fifth husband Jankyn ended up toward each other, and after a brief verbal sparring between the Friar and the Summoner, she goes on finally to tell her tale. But it cannot be said that the Friar interjects at the *end* of her prologue, because though his interruption serves as the end point of her "preamble," as noted above she has said "Now wol I seye my tale" before, and clearly has not done so. We can never know if, barring the interruption, she would have carried on with more autobiography before telling her Tale. Indeed, at more than twice the length of her Tale, the Wife's Prologue is filled with excessive speech. As Grudin says, "The Wife is a *perpetuum mobile* of self-generating speech; if the Friar had not put the cap on her Prologue, she would still be going on today" (111). Thus the Friar can be said to have effected the shift of focus in her speaking, but not her speaking itself.

The Friar's discomfort with her verbal freedom reappears in his own Prologue when he says:

But, dame, heere as we ryde by the weye,
Us nedeth nat to speken but of game,
And lete auctoritees, on Goddes name,
To prechyng and to scoles of clergye. (FrT 1274-77)

The Friar accuses the Wife of Bath of arrogating to herself that which is supposed to be his province, and that of other traditionally proper preachers. Her "prechyng" threatens the Friar's position, both in society at large and, ultimately, within the Church.

Moreover, the dissemination of information through means not sanctioned by the traditions of the Church would, to a contemporary male religious, signify not only a danger to the traditional order of society, but, more importantly, a danger to the very souls of those so led astray. Both the Friar and the Pardoner refer to the Wife's preaching and, of course, as members of the clergy, they should know what constitutes preaching, as would the Summoner, who also took part in the Friar's interruption. Two rare interruptions in the *Tales*, consisting of three members of the clergy expressing discomfort with the Wife's arrogation of male ecclesiastical power, suggest not only Chaucer's acknowledgment of the dissidence involved in Alisoun's discourse, but also his approval of her speaking, given the inability of the clerical trinity to halt her voice. The implication of Chaucer's perceived approval of this female preaching is that the clergy could begin to be seen as less than essential for the formation of the beliefs of the people; responsibility for the spiritual education and salvation of the population could, therefore, be assumed by any member of society willing to speak the truth of God.

The Wife's discourse in her Prologue is largely an appropriation, both of the antifeminist tradition to meet her own purpose and, to a certain degree, of the right to public preaching. Clerical uneasiness targeted at Alisoun's preaching to her fellow pilgrims is based in more than just a patriarchal response to her gendered appropriation, because as fourteenth-century treatises on preaching stress, it is mandated by Christ, and is a tradition that began with God preaching to Adam. As such, it is linked with unfallen language. However, the Wife's appropriation of biblical texts to suit her feminine, carnal impulses toward desire and freedom creates a shifting relationship of her spoken word to

the (masculine) Word.

Her preaching exposes her resolve and “independent feminine will and desire,” those things which masculine discourse would like kept silent, but which are essential for her to preach the gospel according to “wys wyvves.” So the question then becomes what exactly *is* the gospel according to Alisoun? She directs the energy of her Prologue and Tale toward a feminist response to the patriarchy; as Kenneth Oberembt writes, the Wife of Bath uses her feminine discourse “to criticize and to correct Authority by means of Experience” (294). She refuses to allow herself to submit to the accepted clerical precepts regarding marriage, virginity, feminine decorum and, especially, silence. Through the Wife, Chaucer opens a space for feminine speaking. The Wife attempts to create her own story; Alisoun claims that “though noon auctoritee / Were in this world” (WBP 1-2), she would still have the independence and the strength of voice to speak her beliefs. But, of course, there is “auctoritee,” and as she demonstrates it is unavoidable.

Though she begins her Prologue by speaking of the five husbands she has had, she quickly juxtaposes her personal experience against Biblical tenets when she states that she has been told recently that she should, as Christ commanded, have been married only once. The censure she receives for her multiple marriages immediately creates a sense of the unavoidable nature of masculine exegesis. The Wife says “me was toold,” which, as Elaine Tuttle Hansen points out, is a passive transformation, showing the Wife as “a person acted upon rather than acting” (30). This sense of passivity, of being acted upon, connects the Wife of Bath to Mary, the Virgin Mother, the ultimate example of a human being subject to another’s will, to a higher authority. As the angel Gabriel tells Mary,

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1.35). The power that Mary, as mother to the God child, holds within the Christian tradition suggests that being acted upon does not necessarily connote ineffectiveness. So while the Wife did receive masculine censure for her remarriages, this cannot be cited as evidence of any subsequent lack of freedom or self-determination, for she follows this reproof by actively deconstructing both the argument against multiple marriages and those who would uphold such an interpretation.

Indeed, she goes on to criticize those who gloss the Bible to distort spiritual meaning. The Wife makes her point by going back to the letter of biblical texts, and responds to the idea of Jesus’s censuring of multiple marriages by saying:

How manye myghte she have in mariage?

Yet herde I nevere tellen in myn age

Upon this nombre diffinicioun.

Men may devyne and glosen, up and down,

But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye,

God bad us for to wexe and multiplye

.....

But of no nombre mencion made he,

Of bigamye, or of octogamye;

Why sholde men thanne speke of it vileynye?

(WBP 23-8, 32-4)

The Wife of Bath speaks against glossing the biblical text and uses Solomon, Abraham

and Jacob as examples of men who married more than once. She has already voiced her disapproval of glossing in the *Man of Law's Epilogue* when she stops the Parson with the words "He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche" (1180), and asserted that her "joly body schal a tale tell" (1185). To gloss is to explain and interpret, but not always for clarification, thus glossing is also appropriative.⁴ Dinshaw states that "the *glossa* undertakes to speak the text, to assert authority over it, to provide an interpretation, finally to limit or close it to the possibility of heterodox or unlimited significance" (22); by denying the gloss and asserting the facts of the text, the Wife asserts that which is literal. By returning to the literal Word, the Wife asserts the preeminence of the text while simultaneously shutting down her glossing critics.

Throughout her prologue, the Wife of Bath continues to rail against masculine authority in the form of antifeminist writings and glosses, and in the form of her husbands. Her relation of the interaction between herself and the first three husbands serves to document all the many failings a husband may attempt to attribute to his wife throughout a marriage; the conflation of the three men suggests not specific arguments and relationships, but a more generalized account of the institution of marriage and, thanks to the dominant patriarchal discourse, the antifeminist attitude inherent in husbands. She repeatedly uses "thou seist" and "thou seydest" in her relation of how she fought back in her arguments with her first three husbands. The Wife mimics what

⁴The *MED* defines a *glose* not only as "a gloss or explanatory comment on a text or word," but also as "specious or sophistical interpretation." To *glosen* could be to "interpret, explain, paraphrase . . . or describe" or to "obscure the truth" or "speak with blandishment, flattery, or deceit." Indeed, a *gloser* is defined as "one who provides . . . commentary, or interpretation for a text," but also as a "sycophant."

she used to say to each of these men individually, using the second person singular when she relates what she said in her marital quarrels. She reports a model argument to her fellow pilgrims while simultaneously creating a sense of intimacy. She has already conflated the husbands of her youth by separating them from her “badde” husbands (WBP 196), and does so again when she says “Lordynges, right thus, as ye have understonde, / Baar I stifly myne olde housbondes on honde (WBP 379-80). By relating how she accused *a* husband of her youth of treating her poorly, she relates how she spoke to them all. The frequency of the different forms of “thou seist,” along with her earlier utterance that she “was toold,” stress what Hansen refers to as the Wife’s fight “against the power of male voices to control her behaviour” (31). Though she refers to them as “goode men”(197), she claims “They loved me so wel, by God above, / That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love!” (207-8), and recounts with apparent glee how she turned all the established antifeminist accusations against them to gain control. Indeed, she says “They were ful glade to excuse hem blyve / Of thyng of which they nevere agilte hir lyve” (391-2), connoting contempt for how easily they were dominated and exploited by not only her shrewishness, but also her mercantile use of her “queynte.”

Alisoun freely admits to using her sexuality as a commodity with which to barter for power within the marriage contract, stating:

Namely abedde hadden they meschaunce:
Ther wolde I chide and do hem no plesaunce;
I wolde no lenger in the bed abyde,
If that I felte his arm over my syde,

Til he had maad his raunson unto me;

Thanne wolde I suffre hym do his nycetee. (WBP 407-11)

As a woman, the Wife has been allowed scant power, and must again resort to using that which the dominant antifeminist ideology concedes to her: her sexuality. Referring to the Wife's willingness to trade upon her body for goods and power within her marriages, Gottfried claims the Wife "acquiesces in a fundamental patriarchal attitude toward women by accepting the reduction of herself to a sexual object" (213), and that by continuing to "work within the system she cannot avoid being co-opted by it" (ibid.). However, by examining the changing dynamics of the sexual relationships the Wife had with her different husbands, Alisoun can indeed be seen finally to set herself at a remove from her earliest co-option.

Considered as a group, husbands one through three inspired no true sexual passion in the Wife of Bath, though she made use of her knowledge of it freely enough. She says "For wynnyng wolde I al his lust *endure*, / And make me a *feyned* appetit; / And yet *in bacon hadde I nevere delit*" (416-18, emphasis mine), foregrounding not only her lack of desire for them, but also her ability to subsume her own feelings to achieve power. Chaucer demonstrates the depth of her disregard for these men by having the Wife refer to them, as Cox notes, as "bacon," old, preserved meat, while she refers to her own female anatomy as her "bele chose" (447, 510) (22). These verbal designations for the physical represent not only the contempt with which she views her husbands, but also the extreme age difference between her husbands and herself. For just as they are "bacon," Alisoun was only *twelve years old* when she took her first husband. Indeed,

later in her prologue, her reflections on her *fourth* husband cause her to reminisce about her youth, clearly denoting how young she was during all her earlier marriages. A question is thus mooted: can a girl of twelve really be charged with the subversive duty of countering the patriarchal hegemony? Her sublimation of her feelings in these earlier marriages can thus be excused, her co-option partially explained, by her lack of age, experience and knowledge; her raging feminism had not yet formed.

When she speaks of her fourth marriage, the Wife of Bath refers to her sexual feelings after drinking wine (“After wyn on Venus moste I thynke, / For al so siker as cold engendreth hayl, / A likerous mouth moste han a likerous tayl” [464-6]), and to her scorn for her husband’s reveling with a paramour; she no longer feigns anger at her mate’s alleged philandering, she “hadde in herte greet despit / That he of any oother had delit” (481-2). When she “made hym of the same wode a croce” (484), though she still plays with subterfuge and duplicity in that she does not claim the truth of her alleged adultery, merely that she said and acted as if so to make him jealous, she has altered her methods. While she preemptively accuses her first three husbands to gain mastery, in this later instance she feigns not an unfelt lust for her husbands for personal gain, but adultery in an attempt to punish *this* husband for his real transgressions against her. She has moved from youthful verbal play into an arena where she is able to feel hurt and react to it with genuine emotion. Once the Wife discovers that the joys of marital sexual relations could extend beyond their commercial aspects, those joys are summarily removed. Her husband’s neglect of her denies her the only power she has known, and so she attempts to create a space where his lack of control over her behaviour will repay

him in kind for the spite she feels, a space where, though her status as a sexual object is verbally avowed by the Wife, it has in fact ceased to function in the relationship. Thus Alisoun uses *her* voice to control the behaviour of her husband: “in his owene grece [she] made hym frye” (487).

Alisoun’s anger toward her fourth husband juxtaposes harshly against what Gottfried refers to as “the most lyrical passage in [the Wife’s] *Prologue*” (217):

But - Lord Crist! - whan that it remembreth me
Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee,
It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote.
Unto this day it dooth myn herte boote
That I have had my world as in my tyme.
But age, allas, that al wole envenyme,
Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith.
Lat go. Farewel! The devel go therwith!
The flour is goon; ther is namoore to telle;
The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle;
But yet to be right myrie wol I fonde. (WBP 469-79)

The Wife’s nostalgic reminiscence considers only the joy in youth and neglects any sense of strife, thus sharpening the sense of disappointment in her fourth husband. Her reticence to tell much of this relationship draws attention to itself because of her garrulity in every other situation; husband number four is dead and she has moved on, but not through any sense of resolution. Alisoun claims to have tortured him through her

assertions of infidelities; indeed she later recounts how she courted husband number five while her current spouse was away in London, creating what amounts to a back-up plan for wifedom. Perhaps her final strike against his neglect of her lies in her refusal to accord him anything but a cheap burial and begrudging emotion, for as she says, “It nys but wast to burye hym preciously” (500), and upon his death she “wepte but smal” (592). Her complaint against her fourth husband can only be requited in such a manner, as his death precluded a resolution of their troubled marriage; the Wife takes advantage of the only recourse she can in her refusal to accord him an expensive burial and “by neglecting him in the “now” of the re-telling of her marital experiences as well” (Gottfried 218). Alisoun’s power lies in her voice, and in her unwillingness to accord her words to her fourth husband, she demonstrates not only the depth of his effect upon her, but her need and desire to move past him.

The story of Alisoun’s fifth husband, however, comprises the largest portion of her Prologue, as she does not withhold her speech from him, either in their marriage or in its telling. Though by her own admission Jankyn was to her “the mooste shrewe” (505), she loved him dearly. Unlike her first three marriages where she was loath to partake of the marriage bed and would do so only after securing her “payment,” her last husband “was so fressh and gay” (508) that she states “That thogh he hadde me bete on every bon, / He koude wynne agayn my love anon. / I trowe I loved hym best” (511-13). Her marriage to Jankyn is an inversion of her first three marriages; Alisoun relates that she married him for love, and not for riches (526); indeed she gives her heart up to Jankyn, which effectively lays her bare. As she says, “I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun”

(622).

Kenneth Oberembt refers to Jankyn as “the arch-misogynist” (292), a particularly apt term for the man who married and took control of all his wife’s assets (“And to hym yaf I al the lond and fee / That evere was me yeven therbifoore” [630-1]), maintained no regard for her “lists” (633), read daily from his “book of wikked wyves” (685), and caused his wife’s deafness with a beating. As the Wife says, “He smoot me so that I was deaf” (668). The Wife of Bath faces both her love and her nemesis in the person of Jankyn, espousing as he does the written word of Valerie, Theofraste, Saint Jerome and others of the antifeminist genre. The Wife’s adherence (as previously discussed) to the literal text of the Bible in her arguments against the antifeminist position necessitates an examination of her response to Jankyn’s diatribe against wives as taken from his “book of wikked wyves.” The constancy of the written Word which Alisoun has previously used to her advantage in defending her multiple marriages and sexuality now confronts her with its very presence in the form of the words written in the “book of Wikked Wyves,” and forces her to re-evaluate her fidelity to the letter of the texts with which she is confronted.

What degree of faithfulness does the Wife owe the written word? She has adhered to the letter of Biblical passages that suit her purposes, denigrating glosses of the Word, but does this allegiance necessarily extend to *all* words? Which texts are to be privileged? Jankyn’s book is, in effect, a compilation of stories from many sources, bound together literally and thematically. But these narratives were brought together for a misogynistic goal, interpreted by the creator of the book, which could be referred to as

a gloss in and of itself. There can be no definitive “book of Wikked Wyves.” Jankyn forces the Wife to submit to his roster of wicked women and their vices, and, as Jill Mann notes in Geoffrey Chaucer, “the emphasis is on the book as source of and authority for this anti-feminist attack” (80). Chaucer thus creates a paradox: shall Alisoun submit to the word as it is written and conveyed to her, or shall she bring her subversive power, her voice, to bear on Jankyn and his authorities? In fact, she does neither. Gottfried states that as “both husband and clerk, Janekin (sic) is literally an embodiment of authority” (218); it follows that even the formidable Wife of Bath might need to formulate a novel approach to such an onslaught of antifeminist authoritarianism. Indeed, the litany of evil perpetuated by the wives with which Jankyn assaults the Wife affects the reader similarly. Alisoun’s repeated utterances of “redde he me,” “he tolde me,” and “tolde he me” echo her earlier use of “thou seydest” and “thou seist” when relating her interaction with her first three husbands and her fight against male voices which would control her (feminist) behaviour. The use of the personal pronoun, however, commands a sense of empathy from the audience; as Mann writes, “when [the Wife of Bath] recounts Jankyn’s readings from his anti-feminist book, there is no choice and no escape: we listen to these readings in the Wife’s position - that is, *as a woman*” (80-1).

Alisoun’s depiction of Jankyn’s tirade against her and, indeed, all women, evokes empathy and a sense of righteousness when she finally defends herself against the words, the book, the misogyny. Her previous attempts to overcome overwhelming patriarchal attitudes consist of using those same male authored tracts against her accusers, searching

out that which, to the letter, supports her independent attitude. She is unable to do so when confronted with Jankyn and his book; the only way to end the accusations and stem the misogyny is to destroy the book, for even should she momentarily silence her accuser, the written word would stay, for the text is more constant than speech, and she has no means to refute this particular text.

And whan I saugh he wolde nevere fyne
To reden on this cursed book al nyght,
Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght
Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke
I with my fest so took hym on the cheke
That in oure fyr he fil bakward adoun.
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. (WBP 788-96)

The Wife has been rendered silent; her only recourse is physical. Her earlier mimicry of the antifeminist discourse to create a middle ground for herself, apart from the patriarchal binary of either silent participant in the dominant ideology or senseless garrulity confirming the antifeminist rhetoric, has, in this instance, failed her, and she can only act out against the physical manifestation of that rhetoric: the “book of Wikked Wyves.”

Michaela Paasche Grudin’s argument that the tearing of the pages in Jankyn’s book “symbolizes what the Wife does with established discourse through the *Prologue*,”

and that the Wife's "many-sided attack on authority is particularly an attack on the discourse by which that authority is maintained" (100) certainly follows from Alisoun's denigration and denial of the antifeminist hermeneutic in the section of her Prologue that deals with her first three husbands. There is, however, a significant variant to this particular attack; Alisoun *loves* Jankyn. Even as she lies on the ground, hurt and even deafened by his hand, she speaks her commitment to him: "Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee" (WBP 802). There has been a significant change in marital relations, in every sense of the term. Not only does she desire this husband, but she does not, *cannot*, verbalize her nascent feminism to him. She cannot accuse him, as she does with her first husbands, of transgressions he may or may not have committed; cannot barter with her "bele chose;" indeed, though she asserts herself by continuing to walk as she would, "from hous to hous, although he had it sworn" (WBP 640), it is an assertion which demands she *leave*, removing herself from the immediate equation. The only time she asserts herself against Jankyn in his immediate presence, she does so "al sodeynely," and though her violence begets his, they quickly reconcile to a version of matrimony of which they had not previously conceived.

Her reaction to his misogyny is unstudied and instinctive, and as such demonstrates the emotional distance the Wife has travelled from her first marriages. Her spontaneous replies to Jankyn's words and actions signify the development of the Wife's ability to respond honestly, demonstrating a sense of import to her own emotional well-being. Her earlier co-option by the commercial nature of marriage has been supplanted by a true affection she feels for Jankyn and which it would seem he felt for her:

But atte laste, with muchel care and wo,

We fille acorded by us selven two.

He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,

To han the governance of hous and lond,

And of his tonge, and of his hond also;

And made hym brenne his book anon right tho. (WBP 811-16)

He gives her sovereignty, which she promptly returns with kindness and fidelity, thus creating a marriage of mutuality which enacts, at least within the sphere of home, a leveling of gendered hierarchies.

However much I have argued in favour of a feminist hermeneutic of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* thus far, there are impediments to the success of such an ideology. The very act which causes the Wife's fifth marriage as she knows it to implode and reform as a companionship of razed patriarchal hierarchies is also the act which gives pause and causes further reflection on Alisoun's character. She effects change in Jankyn first by ripping pages from his book, and then, just before relinquishing her sovereignty to become the true wife she claims to have been for the remainder of their marriage, demands that he burn what remains of the antifeminist catalogue. She who would initially adhere to the word without gloss, who asserts the literal meaning of a text, has destroyed the written word. The Wife has discovered that all words (and all glosses) are not created equal, but has she also lost the will to attempt to further subvert the misogynist discourse? The Wife of Bath initially derives her power through her appropriation of the dominant rhetoric. By mimicking the patriarchal accusations against

women, she effectively creates a space for herself to live as a woman within the masculine hegemony. But by destroying the written word she subverts the very discourse she appropriates earlier to allow her part of her power. She receives what she has always wanted, indeed, what we shall see in her tale that every woman purportedly wants, but only by attacking that which helped her achieve her position. To both expropriate and then symbolically destroy the traditional antifeminist discourse complicates the Wife of Bath's feminism.

How is it possible that Chaucer has created a woman *capable* of subverting the patriarchy to the extent that she could approach mutuality in marriage, but who ultimately denies her own power (of speech, of rebellion)? I must return for a (partial) answer to the quote at the beginning of this chapter:

Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?

By God, *if wommen hadde writen stories,*

As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,

They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse

Than al the mark of Adam may redresse. (WBP 692-6, emphasis mine)

Who painted the lion is indeed an imperative question; from whose perspective are we receiving this tale? Is Alisoun truly telling her story? If women had written stories one might have looked *something* like this, but women had not authored stories; the Wife of Bath is Geoffrey Chaucer's gendered construction. What might a female authored representation of such a character look like? How close to verisimilitude does Chaucer come? Perhaps Chaucer's sex allows him to take Alisoun further than any female author

would have dared, but alternately, by virtue of his gender, Chaucer may miss some essential element of a woman's existence that ultimately leaves the Wife of Bath lacking. As Elaine Tuttle Hansen writes: "It is an apparently paradoxical but finally explicable and revealing fact that the one woman in the *Canterbury Tales* who is so often viewed, for good or bad, as an autonomous being is the one from whose mouth comes the reminder that "she," like every female character in the male-authored text, never existed at all" (35). On the textual level, Alisoun tells her story insofar as the Knight tells his tale and the Pardoner tells his, and so forth, but there is a moment when Chaucer (the author) renders himself *almost* visible within the confines of Alisoun's tale. The fact that women did not write stories does not negate the lives they lived, and although the Wife may be "(de)constructed by her own words as that which is not actually speaking" (Hansen 35), it does not follow that she is not actually being represented. I therefore do not subscribe to Hansen's belief that Alisoun is a "feminine monstrosity who is the product of the masculine imagination against which she ineffectively and only superficially rebels" (ibid.).

Perhaps it may seem innocuous, but the use of the definite article "the" instead of "a" for "masculine imagination" by a scholar who deconstructs language as readily as Hansen is a telling choice. In speaking of "the masculine imagination" within a context of medieval feminism, the reference can only be to the pervasive antifeminist doctrine of the time. Clearly the patriarchal discourse could not (and would not) necessarily produce effectual rebellion in a female character, but I believe *Chaucer's* masculine imagination would. Though her destruction of the text complicates a reading of the Wife as feminist,

it certainly does not negate such an interpretation of her character. At the end of her prologue, the Wife relates not a sense of pride in her superiority, but the sense of mutuality with which she and Jankyn lived. If the antifeminist doctrines and patriarchal hegemony seek to denigrate women and conflate men with a higher authority, then the Wife's feminism *as envisioned by a man* seeks a leveling, not only of gendered constructions of loyalty, love, and power, but of the traditional binaries within which women are trapped (silent and helpful / garrulous and useless, virgin / whore, etc).

The sense of mutuality between Alisoun and Jankyn has a parallel in the end of the tale she tells of the Loathly Lady, a tale many critics refer to simply as the Wife of Bath's wish fulfillment, insofar as the Hag regains her youth and uses her power of speech to ensnare a youthful husband. The *Wife of Bath's Tale* is, however, much more than the actualization of the Wife's inner desires; her Tale continues the story she tells of herself and of what she really wants, for herself and for all women.

The Presence of Ladies: The Wife of Bath and Female Community.

The Wife's tale begins with the rape of a maiden by a young man, a "lusty bachelor" (WBT 883) of King Arthur's court. "He saugh a mayde walkyng hym biforn, / Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed, / By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed" (886-8) the Wife says, stating so matter of factly that a rape has occurred that, as Thomas A. Van writes, the knight seems to have acted unthinkingly, automatically, and the swift punishment brought about was equally automatic (185). The ruling patriarchy of

Alison's time sees that which is carnal and dark and unlimited as belonging to females: the patristic doctrine of Eve passed down through generations. Yet in her Tale, the Wife has, as Judith Slover notes, "transferred Eve's sin of carnality to the male figure, the Knight. . . absolving the female figure from sin when the Knight rapes the girl" (251). The fault lies with the masculine, not with the feminine. Alisoun has created a "view of man as aggressor and violator, usurper of body and mind" (ibid.), in the place of the patristic norm of Woman as seductress.

In response to this violation, the Knight is automatically sentenced to die, but in another neat inversion of traditional power structures, the King grants the Queen control over the Knight's fate, at her request. She and her ladies grant him a reprieve, based upon what Van refers to as the women's ability to "see an ironic connection between an unthinking act and an unthinking punishment for it, and also the waste in separating an act from its causes and underlying assumptions. . . . They want to change the insides of a head the law proposes simply to remove. The only power they have is persuasion" (185-6). The power of these women lies in their voices; through speaking they enact change. The punishment is designed, as Mann writes, "as an educative process which will eradicate the male mentality that produced the crime" (88). The Queen sends the Knight on a quest to find the answer to the question "what thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (905), with instructions to return with the answer or forfeit his life. The Knight must now act in deference to feminine will. In her relation of the Knight's search for his answer, the Wife lists many things that he is told women want. "Somme seyde. . ." repeats over and over, followed each time by a different desire. This repetition

foregrounds what Dinshaw refers to as “the notion that it’s more important to acknowledge *that* women desire than to specify *what* it is that pleases them most” (127); indeed, the Knight must “acknowledge the integrity of the feminine body” (ibid.), and realize the boundaries of his own self.

The Knight meets his answer in the form of an old hag, who elicits his pledge that he will do the next thing she asks, if it be within his power. That the answer to the Queen’s question is sovereignty seems, in this context, to abnegate most of what the Wife of Bath spoke in her Prologue. The misogynist rapist has been spared so he can tell women that what they really want is mastery over men (and, it follows, themselves) . . . “hardly the way to change his values or his behaviour” (Van 188). She has not, however, finished her tale, and as the Knight reluctantly submits to the hag’s request of marriage, the parallels between Alisoun’s Tale and her Prologue begin to emerge. On their wedding night, the Knight is loath to be physical with the hag; a version of his initial transgression (rape) now plays out in inverted form, with the male in the vulnerable position and the female holding the power. Instead of physical force, though, the Hag gives full reign to her verbal prowess in order to induce the payment of the Knight’s debt.

He states “Thou are so loothly, and so oold also, / And therto comen of so lough a kynde, / That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and wynde. / So wolde God myn herte wolde breste!” (1100-03), to which the Hag responds she could amend all of his problems with her “If that me liste, er it were dayes thre, / so wel ye myghte bere yow unto me” (1107-08). The Hag’s use of the three days alludes, perhaps, to Biblical passages whereupon Jesus is believed to have said that, were a temple razed, he could rebuild it in three days

time (Van 192).⁵ The Wife gives the Hag the ultimate voice of authority as she hints at miraculous religious feats. The “gentillesse” passage in which the Hag argues for earned nobility, virtue and gentleness intimates her belief that she has the support of God: “Thy gentillesse cometh fro God allone, / Thanne comth oure verray gentillesse of grace; / It was no thyng biquethe us with oure place” (1162-4) she states, connoting a “radical grace set loose from nature and authority,” which, as Walter C. Long notes, “destroys masculine privilege” (280). Having been divested of his former attitude that his will was superior, indeed automatic, in the face of a woman, the Knight capitulates to the Hag’s arguments and allows her to decide what he shall have: a wife who is foul and old but loyal and true, or one who is fair and young but quite possibly a licentious adulteress. The question has changed from what women want, to what he himself wants, but it seems no less imperative that he answer correctly.

When the Knight originally met the Hag in the forest, he walked toward many dancing ladies who promptly disappeared, leaving behind the Hag who said, “Sire knyght, *heer forth ne lith no wey.* / Tel me what that ye seken, by youre fey!” (1001-2, emphasis mine), at which point he strikes his deal with her to answer the question that will save his life. The wedding night riddle demands, as Van writes, that the “man has to appreciate what the Hag told him in the forest: that there is no way here, that another way

⁵The passages are found in Matt. 26.61 and 27.40, Mark 14.58 and 15.29 and, most closely related to the Hag, John 2.19-22, where it is written “Jesus answered [the Jews], ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?’ But he spoke of the temple of his body.”

needs to be found. His choice is a third choice” (190). Allowing himself to submit to the Hag causes his wife to become something more than “an instrument of his personal wishes” (ibid.). Indeed, having echoed the Wife of Bath at the end of her lecture on “gentillesse” with the words “thogh noon auctoritee / were in no book” (1208-9), the Hag has silenced the Knight; he has become as compliant and as silent as he thought women were supposed to be (Slover 253), just as Jankyn acquiesced to Alisoun at the end of her Prologue.

The Hag has, as has the Wife, been *told* by her husband that she has sovereignty, but uses it to only as a means toward a leveling of gender biased hierarchies within the marital structure. A sense of equality and mutuality emerges at the end of the *Tale*, which echoes Alisoun’s own marriage to Jankyn. This equivalence partly springs from what Van refers to as the disappearance of the need for sovereignty once it has been gained. In the case of the Hag and the Knight, the “final scene seems to be more a mutual eclipse of individual fears than a power struggle resolved to one party’s advantage and then given a romantic ending” (190). Taken as a piece with Alisoun’s ending with Jankyn, her Tale of the Hag and the Knight suggests that “mutual deference between spouses, unforced by claims to mastery, female or male, is the ground of marital bliss” (Oberembt 295), yet to reach such a point the Wife, through her own actions and as seen through the Hag’s, must redress an imbalance. To counteract the patriarchal “maistree” which defines itself against a feminine “lack,” a “radical female “maistree” is rhetorically necessary” (Long 276). The Wife discovers that to overcome the domination of the feminine, women (as illustrated by both Alisoun and the Hag) must become, if

only temporarily, masculine, radically acting out against established traditions of control and submission. Once again the Wife of Bath appropriates and subverts the dominant (masculine) ideology for her own ends.

And yet she ends her Tale with this:

.....and Jhesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (WBT 1258-64)

Hansen writes that the Wife's Hag, who had all the power in her tale, releases her power to the Knight and thus becomes "a Constance or Griselda," implying that Alisoun as teller of the Tale "lacks confidence in the female's power of speech" (33). But has the Hag become "the archetypal feminine transformation" with what Hansen sees as her dissolution into literal silence? Perhaps she has, as the last lines accorded to the Hag's life are "And she obeyed hym in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng. / And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende / In parfit joye" (1255-8), which indicate that "the patriarchal paradigm is still in place" (Dinshaw 129). Nowhere in the Tale is there an indication that the Knight, once he initially submitted to her, and her magical transformation was effected, did anything other than bathe "in a bath of blisse" (1253). The rhetoric lacks a statement or sentiment such as can found in the *Wife of Bath's*

Prologue concerning Alisoun and Jankyn; he gave up his “maistrie” and she was to him “kynde” and “trewe,” and, she avers “*and so was he to me*” (825, emphasis mine).

The curse upon ungovernable husbands with which the Wife ends her Tale results directly from the lack of a sentiment of reciprocity at the end of her Tale of the Hag. The Wife, having found a sense of mutual reciprocity within the societal mores of the patriarchal hegemony for herself once, is angered by her inability to do more with the Hag than recognize what Dinshaw refers to as the crucial nature of “feminine signifying value, integrity, and desire” (129). The Wife of Bath rails against husbands one final time as a retort to the antifeminist ideology that cannot allow equivalent marital relations for all spouses. She has been allowed a partial recuperation of individuality and independence through her happiness with Jankyn, but, inasmuch as the Hag can be considered a continuation of the Wife’s story, this mutuality cannot be maintained by the community of women at large which is encompassed not only in the Tale but in the Wife’s speech.

Alisoun asks “Jhesu Crist *us* sende,” and refers to them “that *we* wedde” (1258, 1260): to whom exactly is she referring? Or more precisely, to whom is Chaucer the author having her refer? Indeed, she has been speaking of a community of women since very early in her Prologue when she says: “Now herkneþ hou I baar me proprely, / Ye wise wyves, that kan understonde” (WBP 224-5), but the only women in her audience are the Prioress and the Second Nun; there are no wives to hear the Wife. She speaks fondly of a close group of women in her Prologue, a female community consisting of herself, her “gossib,” also named Alisoun, another “worthy wyf,” her “nece” and her “dame,” a

community through which the Wife gains knowledge, loving friendship, support, and, most importantly, what Dickson calls “a discursive alternative to an oppressive patriarchy” (83). Not only do the Wife’s female companions know both her “herte” and her “privetee” (531); Alisoun demonstrates her privileging of female discourse by asserting that they know her better than the parish priest. Patriarchal religious authority and knowledge shrink in contrast to the Wife of Bath’s feminine social constructions; when the Wife says “My dame taughte me that souliltee- . . . I folwed ay my dames loore, / As wel of this as of othere thynges moore” (576, 583-4), she foregrounds her loyalty to female teachings, a feminine doctrine in direct opposition to the patriarchal hermeneutic against which she has vehemently railed.

This community of women consists of family and of women so close to her own image as to have the same name. Besides her mother, there is her “nece,” which the MED defines as a niece, a female relative, or a kinswoman. A “gossib” is defined as a close friend, companion, or even a child of a godparent; this particular “gossib” is also named Alisoun, which further emphasizes the intimacy and immediacy between the two women. The last member of her community she refers to only as a “worthy wyf,” defining the woman as she herself is defined: as a wife. The closeness of these women to the Wife of Bath (in strict definition, in name and as relatives) points to what Dickson refers to as a kind of “reduplication of the Wife herself” (84); Alisoun attempts to create a sense of a growing community of women like herself. Citing her mother and “nece” specifically foregrounds her lineage, and suggests a sense of continuation and propagation to this group of “wise wyves,” but the language Alisoun uses suggests the

inherent difficulty she faces in maintaining a feminine discourse. The plurality of “us” and “oure” when the Wife says “lat *us* wyves hoten barly-breed; / And yet with barly-breed, Mark telle kan, / *Oure* Lord Jhesu refreshed many a man” (WBP 144-6, emphasis mine) quickly breaks down to the first person singular. “I wol persevere; I nam nat precius” (WBP 148), Alisoun says, which emphasizes her fundamental aloneness, as does the inaction of all the other women. Agency, almost without exception, is accorded only to the Wife of Bath; she “biwreyed” (533), “toold” (538), “wente” (544), made “visitaciouns / To vigilies and to processions” (555-6) and “bar hym on honde” (575). While her dame taught her the trickery to trap a husband, the Wife created the action; she is acting alone.

Indeed, though she presumes (and desires) to speak to a community of women, ultimately, as demonstrated through a complete lack of female response to her, she cannot create such a discourse. The Wife contends with multiple interruptions to her speech, a number of responses to her words, but *none of them are from a woman*, for within the context of *The Canterbury Tales*, she largely tells her tale to men. The Pardoner and the Friar both respond to her and interact within the confines of her narrative space (that is to say, exclusive of endlinks), which highlights both the interactive possibilities to her speech, and the lack of a female response.

The Tale of the Loathly Lady the Wife of Bath tells further accentuates her conception of a female community. The Queen and the ladies of the court decide the Knight’s fate after he commits rape, which initially appears to emphasize women’s power. However, as Dickson notes, that same power “requires masculine permission. . . .

Women, the *Tale* reminds us, must always be aware of the patriarchal boundaries circumscribing their experience” (86-7). However, once the King surrenders his authority, the Knight becomes dependent upon female discourse for his very life. In his search for what women truly desire, the Knight discovers that if women will not speak, he will not live, foregrounding the importance of feminine speech. Through the Hag’s manipulations, the Knight gains his life, but loses his freedom to her in marriage, though, ultimately, he is rewarded when she chooses to be “bothe fair and good” (1241).

Though the antifeminist discourse against which the Wife of Bath rages in her Prologue would not allow the possibility of a woman both fair and true, and her creation of such a woman in aid of marital mutuality seems an attempt at a feminist act, both the Knight’s inability to do more than bathe in the bliss of the Hag’s loyalty (as discussed above) and the necessity of magic to effect the change in the Hag connote a final inability to overcome the antifeminist discourse. The magical overtones to the Hag’s transformation into the “perfect” wife echo the earlier disappearance of the twenty-four dancing ladies; they vanish and the Knight is left with the Hag, who has the knowledge of all women, thus the implication that the Hag *is* all women. That the Hag manifests the desires of her community of women only to be subsumed into a marriage of obedience instead of true mutuality, along with the use of magic to effect change in women, asserts that “the Wife’s attainment of a community of “wise wyves” . . . remain[s] illusory and untenable” (Dickson 88). She is, finally, alone with her husband, the (former) rapist; without another magical intervention, she will remain contained by her marriage.

Her Tale ends with the silencing of any sense of feminist speech, and so the Wife

of Bath responds with her curse on ungovernable husbands, returning to the issues she addresses in her Prologue. This recurrence of her verbal vitriol towards all husbands directs us to what Grudin refers to as “a discourse that revels in irresolution rather than resolution, in aperture rather than closure” (178); the end of the Wife’s speech takes us back to the beginning. Alisoun reasserts her own voice to end the entirety of her narrative; she cannot let it rest with the dissolution of her community of “wise wyves” into a marriage of “parfit joye” (1258), a joy we must read ironically in consideration of the curse that follows.

The Wife’s return to the plural “we” (1260) in her curse against husbands reiterates her previous commitment to other women (her “gossib,” “nece,” “dame,” the other “worthy wyf,” and a potential community of others which she imagines and desires), and, just as the curse asserts a resistance to closure, declares the threat female speech poses to masculine authority. That she ends her Tale with a reference to her community of women reminds us that feminine speech is a betrayal of the male discourse community (Dickson 83). To speak out, to create a voice for women, is to defy established male authority and move beyond traditional and biblical strictures against females as more than helpmeets for their husbands. The Wife spoke so openly and frequently to her female friends regarding her husband, “That made his face often reed and hoot / For verray shame, and blamed hymself for he / Had toold to me so greet a pryvetee” (540-3). This frequency and transparency of speech within a group of women foregrounds the attempt to create a feminine base of knowledge with which to counteract not only masculine dominance within marriage, but the communities of men (religious

and secular) who would keep women in their traditional, hierarchical placement. Female speech attacks antifeminism. As Alisoun's "dame" taught her, so would Alisoun pass on. The question becomes, however, to whom shall she pass her knowledge, childless as she is?

The feminine discourse community to which she refers is absent from the immediacy of the pilgrimage; the Prioress and the Second Nun clearly do not, and cannot, respond to her appeal to wives and there are no other women. Even her absent community holds a certain sense of ineffectiveness, as they can all be read as older or of the same generation of the Wife. As noted above, "nece" can simply mean kinswoman, and does not necessarily infer the youth of a niece in the modern sense. Though married five times, the Wife of Bath has engendered no offspring, and if there is no younger generation, her dream of a place within society for a specifically female dialogue could very well end with her, end merely as betrayal-of her own body, of the imagined community-her vision of a leveling of gender never achieved on any level at all.

Some Fertile Conclusions.

As Gottfried points out, Alisoun's "role is primarily defined by her marital status" (204); she is, after all, the "*Wyf* of Bathe." Indeed, she defines herself primarily as a wife, and her focus on marriage and wifhood necessarily dominates reactions to her and her tale. Her vociferous relation in her Prologue of the debates she had regarding what a wife may or may not do motivates her audience to base its judgement of her on her

“wifely success, the measure of her matrimonial experience” (ibid., 205). The role of childbearer was of critical importance in the Middle Ages, when large swathes of the population of Europe were obliterated by plagues (Slover 245). The Wife of Bath was married at twelve years of age, which was not uncommon because of the necessary emphasis on fertility; an heir must be produced so the family, indeed, the community, could survive. The Wife herself acknowledges the importance of childbearing, for she says: “. . .to what conclusion / Were membres maad of generacion. / And of so parfit wys a wright ywroght? / Trusteth right wel, they were nat maad for noght” (WBP 115-18). Indeed, she allows that “they maked ben for bothe; / That is to seye, for office and for ese / Of engendrure, ther we nat God displese” (WBP 126-8). As Gottfried writes, the Wife shows herself to be biased before she even begins her argument by referring to sex organs as “membres of generacion,” thus “emphasizing the strictly orthodox notion that sexual organs, and therefore the sexual act, are for procreation, and not for sexual gratification” (209).

Indeed, she states at the very outset of her Prologue, in defense of her many marriages:

How manye myghte she have in mariage?

Yet herde I nevere tellen in myn age

Upon this nombre diffinicioun.

Men may devyne and glosen, up and down,

But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye,

God bad us for to wexe and multiplie;

That gentil text kan I wel understonde. (WBP 23-9)

Her proof in defense of marriage is the religious tenet to wax and multiply. By equating the procreative purpose of marriage with marriage itself, the Wife of Bath undermines her own pro-marriage perspective, for though she says of husbands that she shall “Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal” (WBP 45), she also knows she has long passed her fertile, childbearing years: “But age, allas, that al wole envenyme, / Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith” (WBP 474-5). And yet in all her five marriages, the Wife of Bath *has produced no children*. Her childlessness, while certainly suggesting sterility, as she makes no mention in her lengthy Prologue of ever having had any offspring, also stands in direct contrast with her affirmation of what Oberembt refers to as her formal avowal of the procreative function of marriage (296). If, as the Wife avers, one of the main purposes of the institution of marriage is to have children, then her unions have failed.

The Wife of Bath is an extremely sexual woman, as she demonstrates by saying, concerning Jankyn: “As help me God, I was a lusty oon” (605), “And trewely, as myne housbondes tolde me, / I hadde the beste *quoniam* myghte be” (608), and “Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse . . . That made me I koude noght withdrawe / My chambre of Venus from a good felawe” (611, 617-18). But her sexuality goes beyond lustiness; indeed, the Wife wields sex as a weapon in her earliest marriages:

In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument

As frely as my Makere hath it sent.

If I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwe!

Myn housbonde shal it have bothe eve and morwe,
Whan that hym list come forth and paye his dette.
An housbonde I wol have - I wol nat lette -
Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,
And have his tribulacion 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. (WBP 149-59)

The Wife claims her power from her female sexuality, and as long as her husbands meet her needs, she will accord them their marital due (“I wolde no lenger in the bed abyde . . . Til he had maad his raunson unto me; / Thanne wolde I suffre hym do his nycetee” [409, 411-12]). The Wife’s aberrant sexual behaviour is just the beginning of the way an audience reads her, for her verbalization of her sexuality deviates so far from the patriarchal norm for wives that she becomes, almost, an awful caricature of the physicality of women. Husband number four challenged her power by having a paramour, but she continued to assert her sexuality to assume a sense of control over the masculine. By claiming her own profligacy, true or not, Alisoun recaptured her husband’s attention, inducing anger and jealousy through her sexuality.

Sheila Delany writes that through the Wife of Bath’s revelation of her marital history, she shows that “her sexuality is as capitalistic as her trade” (77). God bade (wo)man to “wexe and multipye,” and for her this begets not children, but profit from marriage. The Wife has internalized the commercial possibilities of marriage and says

“al is for to selle . . . For wynnyng wolde I al his lust endure, / And make me a feyned appetit” (WBP 414, 416-17). Her childbearing years were spent in commercialized marriages that earned her property, but she never generated any children. Though she withheld sex at times from her husbands, the Wife of Bath is clearly sexual, *but she is not fertile*. She creates speech, not life. As Catherine Cox points out, women who have not or cannot have children represent, according to the prevailing Christian paradigm, “such perceived deficiencies as unnaturalness, sterility, wasted potential and language abused” (8). Fulfilling the traditional role of woman as mother remains beyond the experience of the Wife of Bath, thus to the patriarchy she would remain a failed wife.

The Wife of Bath’s attempt to create a community of women, a feminine group which passes on knowledge and uses speech to work against the masculine, antifeminist discourse, is the repudiation of this sense of wasted potential. Of course, the Wife of Bath herself exists only insofar as *she* was created, and though perhaps the most verisimilar of Chaucer’s pilgrims, she must be seen within the context of her creation. Chaucer foregrounds the Wife’s sterility by surrounding her not only with husbands, but with kinswomen; her “gossib,” “nece” and “dame” can all be defined as relatives. If there were children, Alisoun would speak of them, but her only reference to childbearing is when she connects it to the purpose of marriage. Therefore she is, in effect, a failed woman, her very womanhood denied through her own admission of the necessity of wives to propagate the (husband’s) lineage. However, this failure has two aspects: Alisoun fails to reproduce an heir for any of her husbands, which encapsulates the masculine terms of her deficient fertility, but there are feminine terms to this failure as

well. She also fails to provide an heir for herself, a (female) child to teach, one who could take part in the larger community of women and begin to write the stories which remain, in the context of the Wife of Bath's world, untold.

The breakdown of the Wife's plural pronouns (as discussed above) suggests Chaucer's inability to maintain the fiction of a feminine discourse; the lapse from "we," "us," and "oure" to "I," "me," and "my" indicates that while Chaucer was comfortable in a female voice, he was *unable* to sustain any sense of identification with a group of women. The "wise wyf" community to which the Wife refers remains silent; indeed the only responses to Alisoun's Prologue and Tale come from men, and more often than not these responses are in the form of an interruption. The Wife's rejoinder to these interjections in her speech is to continue speaking, but the insertion of male opinions into an ostensibly feminine narrative which so clearly calls out for female response indicates that Chaucer cannot imagine a female response to the Wife of Bath. When she appeals to female listeners, who are we to believe them to be? The "gossib" and "nece" who are clearly a part of the Tale the Wife tells of herself, and must therefore exist in the past? The Prioress and Second Nun who are the only other women on the pilgrimage to Canterbury? Or can this appeal be seen to extend beyond the frame of the pilgrimage? Is Chaucer hoping for a response from the external audience for *The Canterbury Tales*? Though perhaps admirable from a feminist perspective, this appeal is shouted into a void, from which a response, though it is hoped for, is not guaranteed. As Dickson states, the female narrator "appeals to an apparently absent feminine discourse community" (74), which I believe foregrounds Chaucer's limitations in regard to creating a fully realized

secular woman, one who simultaneously upholds her duties to herself and to society. There may be a female response to the Wife of Bath, but it does not exist within the framework of the pilgrimage.

The wife who bears no children is, within the patriarchal hermeneutic, a failed woman, and Chaucer has the Wife herself admit to the Biblical command for children if a woman gives up the "greet perfeccion" of virginity (WBP 105). Alisoun's female discursive community is dismantled before it is realized; her experience and interaction with women as a group, in resistance to the patriarchy and in pursuit of female desires, exists outside the boundaries of *The Canterbury Tales*. The group of women are in her past, and in her present, in calling out to "wise wyves" she receives in response only feminine silence (through absence) and masculine assertions. The community of "wise wyves" ends with her; there can be no child to teach, and not only have the women in the Wife of Bath's life receded into the past, her own speech patterns devolve the female community into a community of one: the Wife of Bath alone.

Chaucer imagines a woman who can confront the contemporary antifeminist doctrines, claim her own verbal authority at a time when the patriarchal hegemony would see women silenced, and achieve a level of gendered equalizing within marriage. He gives women a space in which to develop. To do so requires on his part a certain radical feminism (radical in the sense of extreme rarity, not in a modern sense of radical feminism), a proto-male-feminism. He is *willing* to create in the Wife of Bath a fully functional feminist female character. Yet he remains *unable* to sustain the opposition to conventional social constructs. Chaucer's received literary tradition is rife with

antifeminist treatises (as Jankyn's "book of wikked wyves" attests), and together with the historical conventions of forcing women into subservient, silent positions, the traditions seem to prove too much for Chaucer to overcome with the Wife of Bath. In the end, she remains caught in the trap the antifeminist tradition has created for her; she can mimic and subvert the patriarchal discourse all the way to Canterbury, but she cannot exist outside of that masculine discourse. The antifeminist tradition's security rests on its past; centuries of accepted masculine authority cannot be broken on one pilgrimage. The Wife cannot break free, but she knows (and Chaucer seems to know) that when female voices form a chorus, joined by sympathetic male voices like Chaucer's, the strength of the inherited patriarchal discourse can be lessened. Each new voice weakens antifeminism, and so one is left with the feeling that the Wife of Bath will keep telling her stories, wherever she goes.

Alisoun takes advantage of the possibilities of power in her marriages because she has no other option; women are, as Gottfried points out, "at least in part, what men have made them" (216). Alisoun is what Chaucer made her, indeed, what he himself is in this context: someone who attempts to resist the overwhelming patriarchal antifeminism of the literature and society of the late fourteenth-century. Ultimately, however, Chaucer's feminism remains flawed. The Wife's failed attempts at a community of women can be imparted in part to Chaucer's maleness; he would have the Wife be a member of a supportive and instructive female lineage, but cannot conceive how Alisoun can create such a place for herself within this narrative. As a son, Chaucer *cannot* have the experience of writing through inherited female lore; he remains

entrenched in the masculine discourse of his time, mired in the antifeminist literature handed down to him. Chaucer does, however, create a community of women of a different type with the other two female narrators on the Canterbury pilgrimage. The Prioress, the Second Nun, and their respective Tales continue what Chaucer begins with the Wife of Bath: an exploration of female power and feminine responses to the male discourse. The degree to which he succeeds in his radical feminism will be shown in the following analysis of both *The Prioress's Prologue and Tale*, and those of the Second Nun.

Chapter Three

“Wandering About:” From Virginity to Motherhood With(out) the Prioress

The two female religious figures Chaucer created as narrators in *The Canterbury Tales* have not been accorded the degree of critical attention the Wife of Bath has received, and the locus of critical concentration has certainly not been towards generating a feminist understanding of either the Prioress or the Second Nun. Alisoun of Bath has indisputably dominated the critical discourse as it pertains to women in the *Tales*, but she alone cannot represent Chaucer's view of women. Though the Wife's loquaciousness commands attention within the literary environment which overwhelmingly demanded silence, forbearance and submission to male authority from women, the Prioress and the Second Nun each have their own voice as well. As women who choose to speak, they are imperative to any recuperation of Chaucer's view of women and his response to antifeminism, though they inhabit a different realm than Alisoun. They cannot inhabit the Wife's community of “wys wyvves,” but they do reveal much more than the other half of the theologically constructed binary of Woman as either Eve (contributing to the Fall of Man as the Wife of Bath contributes to the fall of men) or the Virgin Mary. As Robert Hanning notes, the patriarchal impulses either to idealize or stigmatize women “effectively dehumanize their object” and suggest a “basic inability to confront woman as person and individual” (“Eva” 581). Through the Prioress, Chaucer creates a response to the idealization of religious women, indicating an individuation of female character which confounds one-dimensional readings of the

Prioress.

Religion, Romance, and Manners: The Prioress's Balancing Act

Though she tells a traditional miracle tale of the Virgin Mary, the Prioress is much more than a mouth-piece for an exemplar of Christian martyrdom. Indeed, her very presence on the pilgrimage to Canterbury speaks to Chaucer's ability to envisage female agency even within the confines of the male dominated ecclesiastical world. In taking the vows of a nun instead of marriage vows, a woman was, as Hardy Long Frank writes, not necessarily opting for the "lesser role" ("Seeing" 229). In fact, the convent allowed women to exert a degree of control over their own governance not seen in society at large. Eileen Power writes in her study of medieval nunneries in England: "As a rule the nuns possessed the right of free election, subject to the *cong  d' lire* of their patron and to the confirmation of the bishop, and they secured without very much difficulty the leader of their choice" (Nunneries 45). The right to elect their superior gave the nuns not only a modicum of power, but also the possibility, however slim, of advancement for themselves. Though the majority of the nuns would live out their lives without acceding to a position of authority, the only prerequisites for becoming the head of a house were that the candidate "should be above the age of twenty-one, born in wedlock and of good reputation" (*ibid.*).

Once elected, a Prioress was charged with a large set of responsibilities, which Frank aptly summarizes as characterizing her as "an estate manager; a mother superior

charged with both the spiritual and physical well-being of the inhabitants of her convent” (“Seeing” 230). Not only would Chaucer’s Prioress have overseen the spiritual necessities of the convent, she would have administered the workings of the convent and the running of its holdings. Further, she would have had many dealings with the outside world upon convent business. Eileen Power points out that, though the Benedictine rule attempted to curtail interaction with the secular world, a prioress would have, in fact, exercised a surprising amount of freedom in her movements (Nunneries 69). Though the women in the convent, like their male counterparts in monasteries, were subject to the higher, masculine rule of the bishops, archbishops and, ultimately, the Pope, they managed to maintain a certain amount of autonomy, and even instigated interaction with the community at large. Boniface VIII’s Bull *Periculoso* of 1299 was considered the standard regulation upon the subject of nun’s claustration, and the Bull demanded a strict enclosure within the convent, the sole exception being the removal of a nun from the cloister due to imminent danger to others from disease (E. Power, Nunneries 344). But as Power writes, the following three centuries contained many Councils and Bishops confirming decrees enforcing the Bull *Periculoso*, and “the constant repetition of the order that nuns should not leave their convents is the measure of its failure” (ibid., 345).

The ecclesiastical authorities, however, realizing that convents did not exist in complete detachment from the community at large and that certain interaction was imperative even for the running of the cloister, instituted grants for leaves of absence for reasonable causes (E. Power, Nunneries 359), and so “excursions on convent business or for attendance at ecclesiastical ceremonies (*other than pilgrimages*) were regarded as

legitimate” (ibid., 375-6, emphasis mine), though no nun could leave her convent without another accompanying her as witness to her departure (ibid., 359). E. Power points out that despite the attempts to restrict excursions to legitimate and pressing matters, more often than not the ecclesiastical records demonstrate that most journeys were taken for pleasure and to visit friends and family (Nunneries 376-80). The specific ban on pilgrimage indicates the degree to which the Prioress exerted her own authority; the presence of Chaucer’s Eglentyne on a pilgrimage is in express conflict with the decree of the Council of York in 1195 which states: “In order that the opportunity of wandering about may be taken from them [the nuns], we forbid them to take the road of pilgrimage” (qtd in E. Power, Nunneries 373). Though I am not suggesting the Prioress flaunts the rule of her cloister, for she does have her “chapeleyne” with her, she seems to have manipulated permission for her pilgrimage, though it is forbidden, from her Bishop. In creating the Prioress as a woman with the ability to manoeuvre successfully within the bonds of masculine and ecclesiastical authority, Chaucer foregrounds not only her independent will, but also the possibility of a nascent space for female discovery. The “opportunity of wandering about” contains the potential of a much larger world, and the much larger world view that could potentially follow.

As a Prioress, madame Eglentyne would have exerted considerable power within the domain of her convent, though the authority of the Bishop would have been continually asserted by the presence of “hir chapeleyne” (GP 164), personified in *The Canterbury Tales* by the Second Nun, who would essentially have been assigned to the Prioress as constant witness to her conduct, even within the convent (E. Power,

Nunneries 62). Taken as a piece with her authority and power within her convent, her pilgrimage to Canterbury demonstrates the assertion of her own will over that of her Bishop, and of the very Benedictine Rule by which she lives. Madame Eglentyne refuses to submit herself entirely to the edicts of the masculine ecclesiastical authority, and utilizes the contemporary knowledge of exceptions to the Benedictine Rule, which she surely had, to gain access to greater mobility and freedom to access the community at large.

The fact that she has access to a larger community than her cloister is apparent from Chaucer's description of her in the *General Prologue*.

In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest.

.....

And sikerly she was of greet desport,

And ful plesaunt, and amyable of port,

And peyned hire to countrefete cheere

Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,

And to ben holden digne of reverence.

.....

Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was,

Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas,

Hir mouth ful smal, and therto softe and reed.

But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;

It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe;

For, hardily, she was nat undergrowe.

Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war. (GP 132, 137-41, 151-7)

The Prioress's "countrefete cheere of court" was unnecessary in an atmosphere that should have been strictly regulated between prayer and the maintenance of the convent, indeed should have been nearly silent, for within the nunneries, "except for certain periods of relaxation, strict silence had to be observed" (E. Power, Medieval Women 93). To imitate the manners of the court, Eglentyne must have *known* the manners of court. She certainly did not learn them between her convent and the Tabard Inn. Further, Chaucer's use of "countrefete" suggests that madame Eglentyne was not originally drawn from the aristocracy as many critics believe, but may have been a part of what E. Power refers to as "mixture of classes" (Nunneries 11) which began to occur in the fourteenth century with the burgeoning merchant class.

Indeed, as Charles Moorman writes, the Prioress "peyned hire" to put on courtly manners "to ben holden digne of reverence" by her fellow pilgrims who are drawn, for the most part, from the lower classes of clergy, professionals and rural people (26). Though she is not their Superior, the Prioress asserts a certain superiority over the other pilgrims through her "countrefete," assuming a calculated control over other's perception of her. Whether the Prioress took pains to seem courtly and be respected because she was originally from the middle-class, as Moorman proposes, or whether she did so to assert her native aristocracy over her fellow pilgrims matters less, I think, than the fact that she asserts her feminine power at all, and does so by affecting a set of behaviours which place her within a matrix of power both aristocratic and ecclesiastical, secular and

religious.

Chaucer furthers an understanding of the Prioress's assumption of a woman's role which moves beyond the merely religious through his equation of her with idealistic romance heroines in the second portion of the Prologue to the *Tales* I have quoted above. He creates a woman who, as Hanning writes, "assumes the behaviour of another role, that of a refined courtesan, *even though it is inappropriate*" ("Eva" 585, emphasis mine). Chaucer foregrounds this other role by describing the Prioress physically as having a "nose tretys," eyes "greye as glas," a mouth "ful smal, and therto softe and reed," and a "fair forheed," which clearly associates her with the ladies of literary romance. However, Chaucer mitigates the romantic vision of the Prioress by placing these dainty features onto a woman "nat undergrowe," and by balancing the fairness of her forehead with its size, "almoost a spanne brood." Indeed, even her name cannot escape mention in a discussion of where on the continuum of Woman she exists. Though "Eglentyne" evokes an association with the typical romance heroine (Hanning, "Eva" 586), as Edward Kelly points out, an eglantine is a wild rose, which "grows to a height of eight feet: armed with stout, hooked prickles . . . the bush is tall, wide, and hardy" (365), less a tame, traditional feminine construction than an assertion of strength and freedom. Chaucer thus configures the Prioress to contain both the *possibility* of the secular feminine ideal (as envisioned by the traditional masculine imagination) and its antithesis, a strong woman capable not only of self defence, but of great personal growth. Though Chaucer's description of her appearance and manners venerates the courtly ideal, the Prioress's actions demonstrate a more autonomous spirit, and thus disallow any

assumptions based solely upon the *General Prologue*, and perhaps even begin to allow a construction of a new conception of what is “ideal.”

Along with her name, the Prioress’s speech distances her from Chaucer’s description of her as the romantic ideal. Though the Prioress’s *physical* comportment (in terms of table manners) and dainty features connote a romantic ideal of feminine nature, her speech defies that assumption. There is no “love talk” or “sensual beauty;” she has “mastered the external rather than the essence of a courtly role” (Hanning, “Eva” 587). Her love remains agapic rather than erotic (Kelly 364). Though her mastery of the externals of the female courtly role may be inappropriate, I do not believe that the Prioress’s assumption of a romantic, courtly demeanor is *irrelevant*, as Hanning posits (“Eva” 585). Though Chaucer positions the Prioress as caught between the two roles of nun and courtly lady, she is certainly not “fated to look if not silly then at least ambivalent in all she does and says” (ibid., 587).

The Marian tale the Prioress tells balances the portrait of her as a woman of the body seen in the *General Prologue*. Chaucer uses the word “ful” eleven times in his description of her, indicating a woman who shuns half measures. Her smile isn’t just “symple and coy,” it is “ful symple and coy” (GP 119). She sings the divine service “ful weel” (122), speaks French “ful faire and fetisly” (124), is “ful plesaunt” (138), and even her mouth is “ful smal” (153). Where is the ambivalence in her assertion of her feminine comportment? In the pains she takes to appear worthy of reverence? In her very presence on a pilgrimage? Yes, madame Eglentyne is a religious woman, but through the demonstration of these elements in the *General Prologue*, Chaucer *balances* the

Christian tale she tells; this balance, rather than ambivalence, connotes a portrayal of her as a woman attempting to live a full life, one beyond a representation of the Mary half of the Eve-Mary binary.

Indeed, the very portrait of the Prioress which many critics cite as evidence of her unsuitability to the religious life can be deconstructed to connect her with the Virgin Mother herself. As Hardy Long Frank points out, medieval devotees of the Virgin Mary accorded that, since childhood, she “was a paragon to the smallest detail: her nails were always clean and her nose never needed wiping. And . . . her garb was never soiled or torn, and her surroundings were ever spotless” (“Blessed Virgin” 353). In the *General Prologue*, Chaucer writes:

At mete wel ytaught was she with alle;
She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,
Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe;
Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe
That no drope ne fille upon hire brest.
In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest.
Hir over-lippe wyped she so clene
That in hir coppe ther was no ferthyng sene
Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte. (GP 127-35)

The Prioress’s fastidiousness links her to the Virgin Mary, to a woman who led a secular, if pious, life before she became the Mother of Christ. The above description of the

Prioress occurs *before* Chaucer tells of her “countrefete cheere of court,” suggesting the import of this aspect of her personality. This foregrounding of the cleanliness imagery connotes that living her life outwardly as a manifestation of her inward cleanliness (virginity), and thus her desire to embody Marian qualities, was a dominant concern of the Prioress.

Chaucer’s implication of romantic beauty in his construction of the Prioress further serves to connect her to the Virgin Mary. The Virgin, who frequently appeared “ablaze with jewels” (Frank, “Blessed Virgin” 351) and who only gained in beauty throughout her life, never aging, was never held accountable for her beauty as is the Prioress. The Virgin Mary is frequently described in literature in terms which construct her in the image of a courtly lover; her beauty did not lessen her sanctity or purity in contemporary thought, but rather was meant to reflect her “moral beauty” (*ibid.*, 350). The jewels of the Virgin align with the Prioress’s gold brooch, (which she was never meant to have according to the Benedictine Rule): the Prioress’s imitation of courtly manners can thus be seen paralleled in her imitation of the Virgin--in her apparel, manners and beauty. Indeed, “such veneration and imitation of the Virgin were not untypical of the Prioress’ calling; nuns were, after all, like their Lady, the virgin brides of Christ” (Frank, “Blessed Virgin” 354). The Prioress is thus equated not only with ladies of the court, but also with Mary, attempting, through both her worldliness and her piety, to live simultaneously in the two opposing roles allowable for women. Chaucer attempts to subvert the traditional female binary by allowing Eglentyne to embody aspects of both a woman of the world concerned with appearances and reputation, and of a pious

religious woman connected intimately with the Virgin Mary. The pilgrimage itself is what connects these two aspects, and manifests her assertion of her own power in the performance of the pilgrimage, itself a significant act of piety.

One final characteristic of the Prioress divulged in the *General Prologue* must be addressed before turning to her tale proper, that of her sympathy for mice and small dogs. This has oft been criticized and pointed to as evidence of her misdirected devotion, but I believe this sensitivity effectively establishes her affective piety and connects her to the mother in her tale.⁶

But for to speken of hire conscience,
She was so charitable and so pitous
She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous
Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.
Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde
With rosted flessch, or milk and wastel-breed.
But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,
Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte;
And al was conscience and tendre herte. (GP 142-50)

⁶Though critics have used this overt sense of sympathy and emotion as an entry into a discussion of the Prioress's possible anti-Semitism (through the juxtaposition with her distinct lack of sentiment at the killing of the Jews "by the lawe" [PrT 634]), it is beyond the scope of the present argument to do more than note that the Prioress's focus in her tale is Christian piety. The death of the Jews who, *in this context*, acted on the word of "Oure firste foo, the serpent Sathanas" (PrT 558) does not require the Prioress's sympathy. The Jews are "but pale shadows beside the overwhelming reality of the little child" (Collette, "Sense" 146). See also my discussion of the Jews as representational of masculine authority below.

Though the keeping of pets was technically forbidden, it, like the absences from the cloister, was, in the reality of convent life, an intrusion into the pious life of the convent against which the bishops were required to fight continuously (though unsuccessfully) (E. Power, *Nunneries* 305 & 307). The Prioress's defiance of the Rule of the very spiritual house she is meant to lead asserts a sense of her independence, while her extreme sympathy for the small animals conversely suggest what Hanning refers to as "an identification with small, helpless things, trapped and punished in a world ruled by men who smite" ("Eva" 588). The animals of the *General Prologue* prefigure the child in the Prioress's Marian tale, and the correlation between the animals and the "litel clergeon" murdered by the "homycide" hired by the Jews suggests the Prioress's identification with the child. She furthers this association when, in the Prologue to her tale, she humbly parallels her abilities to show proper reverence to the Virgin Mary with "a child of twelf month oold, or lesse, / That kan unnethes any word expresse" (PrT 484-5).

How, then, will the Prioress enact her faith, if she equates herself with a pre-verbal baby? Chaucer has already supplied the answer when, in the first sentence she speaks, the Prioress relates how "by the mouth of children thy bountee / Parfourned is, for on the brest soukyng / Somtyme shewen they thyn heriyng" (457-9, emphasis mine). The allusion to Saint Nicholas is reaffirmed in the tale proper when the Prioress says, regarding the piety of the "litel clergeon," "Whan I remembre on this mateere, / Seint Nicholas stant evere in my presence, / For he so yong to Crist dide reverence" (513-14). The implication is that true faith will find a way to be expressed, thus the Prioress's avowed inability to verbalize the worth of the Virgin through her miracle remains a non-

issue; the affective nature of her devotion will relate the power of the miracle.

Mothering (and) the Maligned: The Prioress's Approach to the Maternal

The Prioress's sense of identification and empathy with little animals and with the "litel clergeon" "flowers in full in her rendering of the widow's agony as she searches for her slain son" (Kelly 371). Consider the following:

With moodres pitee in hir brest enclosed,
She gooth, as she were half out of hir mynde,
To every place where she hath supposed
By liklihede hir litel child to fynde;
And evere on Cristes mooder meeke and kynde
She cride. . . (PrT 593-8)

The Virgin Mary and the widow are clearly linked through their positions as mothers of murdered sons; when the Prioress relates the frantic search for the "clergeon" the "poure wydwe" (586) performs, the powerful and pitiful suffering of the widow engages the Prioress's empathy with those who are helpless and acted upon. An identification is therefore created with not only the "clergeon's" mother, but with the Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ. The reference to Rachel serves to connect one more mother to this nexus of suffering women, and the Prioress is connected to them all through her empathy. Just as the Wife of Bath speaks of her network of women, consisting of her "gossib," "dame," and "nece," so the Prioress creates a group of women with whom she

identifies. But, like the Wife, the Prioress's female community exists only in a very specific place and time. For the Wife, that place is outside the framework of the pilgrimage, while for the Prioress, these women exist in an emotional space. The "clergeon's" mother, Rachel and the Virgin Mary are removed from the temporal and exist in an emotional and spiritual sphere that the Prioress connects to through her maternal empathy.

The importance of the *concept* of "mother" to the Prioress cannot be underestimated when the frequency of the word itself is established. In the 237 lines that comprise the entirety of *The Prologue of the Prioress's Tale* and *The Prioress's Tale*, the word "mooder," in one grammatical form or other, appears *sixteen* times,⁷ thus once approximately every fourteen lines. This concentration of "mooder" exists nowhere else in the Chaucer canon. The word appears in large number in only three other works: *The Parson's Tale* (nine), *The Man of Law's Tale* (seventeen), and *The Romaunt of the Rose* (fifteen). However, the lengths of these other works seriously militate against any equation between the tales based on a numerical comparison. *The Man of Law's Tale* contains the next largest concentration of the word "mooder," but with a tale of 1162 lines, the Prioress *still* uses the word at more than four and a half times the frequency of the Man of Law. Chaucer's foregrounding of the word creates a focus for the Tale beyond its narrative thrust. Such a concentration on one word must be taken into account

⁷Twice at line 467, and once each at 506, 510, 538, 550, 556, 593 (plural), 597, 619, 625, 641 (Latin, referring to the *Alma redemptoris*), 654, 656, 678, and 690. Though the Kennedy and Tatlock concordance counts only fifteen occurrences of "mooder," for conceptual continuity I have included in my count the Latin "*mater*."

in the contemplation of any other of the Tale's subjects (proper religious decorum, piety, martyrdom, etc), and asserts a primary position of importance to the idea of motherhood.

More than half of the Prioress's "mooder" utterances are, in fact, "Cristes mooder" or "his mooder," which would seem appropriate for a miracle tale of the Virgin Mary. However, the term "Cristes mooder" raises, in regard to the Virgin, the issue of balance with which the Prioress herself struggles. As Sumner Ferris writes:

That Chaucer's preference for "Cristes mooder" is unusual may be seen by a comparison of his practice with that of other, largely anonymous authors in the collection of *Middle English Miracles of the Virgin* Rarely do those authors prefer a single way of referring to the Blessed Virgin; when they do, it is never "Christ's mother." (244)

The Virgin is overtly praised and exalted by the Prioress, clearly demonstrating her reverence for Mary; however, by referring to the Virgin as "Cristes mooder," the Prioress "literally puts Christ first, before Mary, in the position that is theologically correct. But the expression likewise draws attention to. . . the Divine Maternity" (ibid.). Chaucer's emphasis is, therefore, not only upon the *reason* the Virgin is honoured, but also upon the *reasoning* behind it: the assertion that, though she "ravyshedest down fro the Deitee, / Thurgh thyn humblesse, the Goost that in th'alighte" (PrT 469-70), her honour derives only from Christ. By repeatedly accentuating the Virgin's connection to Christ, and thus her dependance upon Him for her honour, and despite the active acceptance of the "Fadres sapience" (PrT 472) Chaucer semantically subordinates the Virgin to Christ, the mother to the Son. Thus the Prioress's honour, reflected through virginity, can only be

just that: a shadowed reflection of the Virgin Mary's honour which, ultimately, stems from her Son.

The association of the Prioress with the Virgin Mary has been discussed above, but there remains a further connection between them, through the virginity of the "clergeon." The Prioress refers to him as a "gemme of chastite" (609), which at seven years of age should seem rather unremarkable. Directly following his martyrdom, she says "O martir, sowed to virginitee / Now maystow syngen, folwyng evere in oon / The white Lamb celestial. . . they that goon / Biforn this Lamb and syng a song al newe, / That nevere, fleshly, wommen they ne knewe" (PrT 579-81, 583-5), praising his chasteness as if, as Edward Condren writes, "his greatest achievement were not the faith and devotion that cost him his life, but the virginity which survived his ordeal" (203). The Prioress's excessive attention to his virginity, which could rightfully have been assumed, demonstrates the importance of virginity to her in regard to Marian devotion *and* the reception of the just Christian reward of Heaven. Chaucer has thus directed the focus back upon the Prioress, aligning her in her virginity with the ultimate Virgin, the mother of Christ.

The Prioress's connection with Christ's mother through their virginity, and in terms of religious reward, is complicated by the parallel between the Virgin (with Christ) and the widow (with the "clergeon"), which demands that to maintain her affiliation with Christ's mother, the Prioress must approach motherhood on some level, *which, literally, she can never do*. The emotions which possess her in response to the mistreatment of small creatures in the *General Prologue* thus seem in retrospect to be, not imitation, but

surrogate tenderness, aimed at the children she will never have. I do not believe it is a coincidence that, as Priscilla Martin states, the "*Prioress's Tale* is the only Canterbury Tale whose central character is a child" (34). The tale of the martyred "clergeon" leads me to believe not that the "Prioress is playing the role of being a woman" (Martin 31), rather that she is playing the role of being a *mother*.

As the Wife of Bath demonstrates, "woman" and "mother" are not interchangeable terms, and madame Eglentyne has always been a woman. She has pressed against male ecclesiastical authority to enter into a pilgrimage and to keep pets, she has asserted her worldly nature in her knowledge of courtly manners, and even twenty-first century discomfort with her alleged anti-Semitism can be at least partially explained through her denouncement of masculine power. The Prioress exists as "other" in a world that privileges the masculine just as Alisoun of Bath does, and, as such, the Prioress has been shown to identify with those who are maligned, oppressed, and attacked (mice, her lapdogs, the child martyr). An examination of the use of punishment in her tale, in relation to this identification with subjugated beings, further demonstrates not only the Prioress's existence as "other," but her discomfort with the patriarchy.

The Prioress's Tale contains three instances of punitive "justice:" First, the "clergeon" risks the possible punishment of being "beten thries in an houre" (542) for neglecting his primer in favour of learning the *Alma redemptoris*; the Jewish murder, at the suggestion of Satan himself, of the "clergeon" for singing his song which contradicts the Jewish "lawes reverence" (564); and the provost's retaliatory killing of the Jews. Jews would have been more of an abstract concept to the Prioress than a tangible fact, for

they had been banished in 1290, and “after a more complete expulsion in 1358, were seldom to be found” (Frank, “Blessed Virgin” 355). Though in theory Judaism was a threat to Christianity, in the practice of every day life, the larger threat to the Prioress would have come from male authority, that which would smite a dog “with a yerde smerte” (GP 149), beat a child for his devotion to the Virgin Mary taking precedence over his school books, and, in the extreme, murder an innocent child for singing a pious song. If this extraordinary violence against a child with whom the Prioress identifies is viewed in terms of that identification, as possible “displacements of the Prioress’s sense of her own victimization and her rage at male authority” (Elizabeth Robertson 152), then the “subduing of the Jews. . . illustrate[s] the triumph of an alternative, intuitive faith” (152). Thus the Prioress’s sentimentality toward her dogs does not juxtapose so harshly with her lack of pity for the Jews, because in this instance they are not merely Jews, but instead symbolize male authority.

The Prioress’s disaffection with male authority is realized once more at the end of her tale in the Abbot, through whose agency the miracle of the Virgin mother ends. Whatever the “greyn” the Virgin places on the “clergeon’s” tongue to enable him to sing the *Alma redemptoris* may signify--eucharistic wafer, a seed, a pearl, etc.--when the Abbot removes it from the child’s mouth he is silenced. Beyond any other representations, the grain embodies the boy’s spirit or soul (Sister Nicholas Maltman 168), and though its removal signals the release of the “clergeon’s” soul toward his eternal reward, it also signifies the cessation of a miracle of the Virgin mother. Not until the martyr “yaf up the goost ful softely” (672) does the abbot fully comprehend the glory

of the miracle, and so “masculine, adult authority has been forced to its knees, taught to honor the heavenly mother by her oracle, the unlearned child” (Hanning, “Eva” 591).

The Prioress as Woman, then, exists as “other,” struggles to define herself in terms of the larger world through courtly manners, tests her own power against male ecclesiastical authority (and wins), and still fulfills her religious obligation by telling a pious Marian tale. But the Prioress as Mother, at which she plays, can never exist. The mother-child relationship of the widow and the martyred “clergeon” clearly parallels the Virgin-Christ relationship. As Carolyn Collette writes, the image of the mother and child “calls to mind the most human aspect of the most ineffable, mystical relation the world has known, the love of a virgin-mother for a God-child” (“Sense” 144). This echo of the miracle of Christ is silenced in the Prioress; though elected Mother Superior, chosen to care for the spiritual community, she cannot escape the sterile democracy of her particular kind of motherhood. Though the Prioress embodies many human aspects of the virgin-mother (she has her jewels, her virginity, fastidious cleanliness, her beauty and, foremost, her piety), as a figurative bride of Christ, the Prioress can never attain the most faithful identification with the Virgin Mary: true motherhood.

Throughout her tale the Prioress’s emotional focus connects her to both the suffering mother of the tale and the mother of Christ; indeed her focus is so stringently applied to affective piety that she considers Christian doctrine only secondarily (Collette, “Sense” 145), and “Christianity appear[s] to us refracted through a lens of motherhood” (ibid., 141). When she speaks of herself as “a child of twelf month oold, or lesse” (484), thus “reconceptualiz[ing] herself so that she may enter the fiction in the form of the ‘litel

clergeon” (Pigg 68) who lives blindly by faith, the Prioress adopts Mary’s humility and is able to find her own voice (Robertson 151). The speech act itself reveals both her piety (in its subject) and her independence (in the mere existence of speech as well as her own independence to undertake a pilgrimage), suggesting a proximity to a sense of a woman who, though relegated to one of the most restrictive positions in medieval society, attempts to reconcile herself with the world at large, and takes her power from assuming those traits from each section of female life that best suits her purposes.

However, through the literal, semantic prioritizing of the Son over the mother in her speech, the Prioress unconsciously foregrounds the one element of Mariology with which she can never truly identify, the most critical element of all. As Condren writes, while “religious life culminates in formal orders and a virginal apotheosis; femininity leads to physical consummation and motherhood. *Although Mary achieved both states, Madam Eglentyne cannot*” (199, emphasis mine). The Prioress’s attempts to assert her female power are effective, and as a woman who would have more for herself than the male ecclesiastical authority deemed appropriate, she evidences her strength of will. She has begun an assimilation of sorts of the two female worlds by entering on her pilgrimage to Canterbury. But Chaucer seems unable to allow her to remain in this position of more fully realized female potential. The Prioress is semantically bound to be at a distance from a feminist existence, from being a woman who embodies those elements of each half of the traditional binary of Woman that suit her best. The overwhelming use of the word “mooder” reinforces what are already powerful identifications between the Virgin and the widow, and through their emotionality,

between them both and the Prioress. But ultimately, it is an identification that cannot take hold, for the Prioress will remain forever barren; her labour will only ever result in words: "To telle a storie I wol do my labour" (463). These words, though powerful, do not last, for as Chaucer himself says directly following the *Prioress's Tale* in the *Prologue to Sir Thopas*, "Whan seyde was al this miracle, every man / As sobre was that wonder was to se, / Til that oure Hooste jape the bigan . . ." (691-3, emphasis mine). A few "murye wordes" (Th headlink) from the Host, and the Prioress's audience moves on, touched by her sobering story of the little virgin martyr, but ever willing to embrace whatever tale falls next upon their ears.

To state, as Kittredge does, that with the Prioress Chaucer creates a "poignant tale of thwarted motherhood" (178) is certainly reductionistic, for the author has approached so much more in this religious tale. But it is, I believe, the Prioress's thwarted motherhood which itself thwarts Chaucer's attempts to create a fully functioning and fully self-realized religious woman. The Prioress remains mired in a middle ground, too far from the Virgin Mary's experience to inhabit fully her religious position, but as the spiritual bride of Christ, close enough to feel the lack. Chaucer, though *willing*, has proven *unable* to overcome the inherited traditions which speak to the oxymoronic privileging of the dual nature of Mary, both virgin and mother. Chaucer does, however, give the Prioress the agency of speech, which he continues and expands upon with the Second Nun, to whom I shall turn my attention.

Chapter Four

The "Bisynesse" of the Second Nun: Faith and Feminism Meet Silence

The third, and final, female narrator of *The Canterbury Tales* is the Second Nun, who, in comparison with Chaucer's other female pilgrims, has received the least amount of critical attention directed toward herself and her tale. Chaucer himself restricted criticism of the Second Nun, for the *General Prologue* contains only a passing reference to her; Chaucer does not allow her the characterization of either the Wife of Bath or the Prioress. He follows his description of the Prioress with "Another nonne with hire hadde she, / That was hir chapeleyne" (GP 163-4); this is the only mention of the Second Nun outside of her own Prologue and Tale. Arguments concerning her personality and motivation are thus confounded, and Chaucer's audience enters into her Prologue with no sense of authorial bias. Even her participation in the pilgrimage lacks the agency of the Prioress's presence, because, as discussed above, a condition of the Prioress's absence from her convent was to have an attendant with her at all times. Thus, as Donald Howard writes, "the 'facelessness' of the Second Nun--the fact that she is not described in the General Prologue--serves an artistic purpose: we have no sense of her personality and so read her tale in a neutral frame of mind" (*Idea* 290).

The Second Nun's Prologue is striking for her commitment to "bisynesse," an action oriented faith which echoes through the *Invocacio ad Mariam*, the *Interpretacio Nominis Cecilie* and the tale itself. She begins by advocating "leveful bisynesse" (SNT 5) to counteract the idleness which leads to "roten slogardye, / Of which ther nevere

comth no good n'encrees" (17-18), and asserts her own "feithful bisynesse / After the legende in translacioun" (24-5) of Saint Cecile. This assertion contrasts sharply with the Prioress's claim to a "konnyng . . . so wayk" that she is "as a child of twelf month oold, or lesse, / That kan unnethes any word expresse" (PrT 481, 484-5), and foregrounds the agency of the Second Nun. Moreover, the Nun's frequent use of the first person in her Prologue, especially when in connection with action verbs, intensifies her devotion to the service of God. "I have heer doon my feithful bisynesse" (SNT 24), "To thee at my bigynnyng first I calle" (31), "That I be quit fro thennes that most derk is!" (66), "to my werk I wol me dresse" (77), "First wolde I yow the name of Seint Cecilie / Expowne" (85-6), "Now have I yow declared" (119): these personal interjections heighten the audience's awareness of the Nun's active interaction, not only with her faith, but in bringing others to God.

She is connected through her faith to the Virgin Mary, whom she invokes for aid in the telling of her tale, and also (through her speech) to Cecile, whose aggressive faith and devotion to God the Second Nun presents as righteous and excellent. She follows the Virgin's example by choosing to tell a tale of conversion and the growth of the Church, opting to spread the word of God and of Cecile, just as the Virgin Mary does not wait for men to pray to her, but, as the Nun says in the *Invocacio*, "often tyme of thy benygnytee / Ful frely, er that men thyn help biseche, / Thou goost biforn and art hir lyves leche" (54-6). And Cecile waits for no man, but uses her very wedding night to assert the primacy of her purity, wasting no time or opportunity to turn men toward the one true faith. By associating the Nun with the Virgin Mary and Cecile, Chaucer has placed his

narrator in a matrix of women who act in faith, but even more, who act unhesitatingly to pass their faith on to others, and to perpetuate the word of God.

By referring to Mary as “Thow Mayde and Mooder, doghter of thy Sone” (36) and “Thow Cristes mooder, doghter deere of Anne” (70), the Second Nun foregrounds the inheritance of faith and the passing on of spiritual wisdom. Through the telling of her Tale and the insertion of herself into the Prologue, the Nun is linked to both Mary and Cecile as a woman who would propagate a spiritual legacy. When the Nun says the following,

Thou confort of us wrecches, do me endite
Thy maydens deeth, that wan thurgh hire merite
The eterneel lyf and of the feend victorie,
As man may after reden in hire storie (32-35),

she thus destabilizes the transmission of this female saint’s life through male authorization (Arthur 219). The Nun implores the Virgin to allow her to relate Cecile’s story, thereby creating a new sense of spiritual inheritance: one which bypasses male authored texts and traditional patristic preaching from masculine voices.

Saint Cecile conforms to this new image of the ascendancy of the female voice in the *Second Nun’s Tale* with her aggressive attitude toward conversions to Christianity, especially when the audience/reader remains aware of the fact that the Tale is narrated by a woman. One religious female (the Nun) has prayed to the ultimate religious woman (Mary) to allow her to articulate the story of yet a third woman; a procession of women’s voices that, though her works are for God, heighten the focus upon Cecile’s womanhood

and her own legacy.

The tale begins with the marriage of Cecile, who “from hir cradel up fostred in the feith / Of Crist, and bar his gospel in hir mynde” (SNT 122-3). Though she allows the marriage to take place “ful devout and humble in hir corage” (131), Cecile wears a hair shirt under her wedding finery, indicating, as Collette writes, that “her intention belies her festive appearance, for the marriage she has entered into is not one she intends to consummate physically” (“Vision” 343). Cecile fully intends for both her body and soul to remain “unwemmed” (SNT 137); her challenge at this point is to transform “the social structure of marriage from within” (Arthur 220). Like the Wife of Bath, Cecile works to redefine the bonds of marriage, but in a substantially different fashion. She attempts to create a marriage which allows her the full expression of her true self; joined in purity, she and Valerian lack any “maistrye” over each other, for, as Donald Howard points out, united in “the reverse of the Wife of Bath’s voluptuous view of marriage” (“Conclusion” 229), Cecile and her husband manifest a “mutual subjugation of both their wills to the will of God” (ibid.). Though their desire for a new marital template stems from two very different belief systems, both the Wife of Bath and Cecile succeed in terms of demonstrating how women can act, apart from patriarchal dictates, and effect powerful change upon their own lives. Though Cecile’s primary concerns are maintaining her virginity and expanding the reach of the one true faith, the speed and assurance with which she collapses the traditional bonds of marriage suggests a subversion of the dominant patriarchal attitudes toward women.

An expression of female will such as Cecile’s gains even more power when

juxtaposed with another marriage in *The Canterbury Tales*: that of Emelye and Palamon in *The Knight's Tale*. Both Cecile and Emelye honour virginity, though Emelye's reasoning includes nothing more than her desire "noght to ben a wyf and be with childe" (KnT 2310). When Palamon and Arcite battle to decide upon her hand in marriage, Emelye casts a "freendlich ye" (2680) upon Arcite when it appears he will win because, the Knight says, "wommen, as to speken in comune, / Thei folwen alle the favour of Fortune" (2681-2). Her wish to remain chaste forgotten, she weeps bitterly when he dies, and, years later, when her "wommanly pitee" (3083) is called upon by Theseus, marries Palamon. Consider the following:

For now is Palamon in alle wele,
Lyvyng in blisse, in riches, and in heele,
And Emelye hym loveth so tendrely,
And he hire serveth so gentilly,
That nevere was ther no word hem bitwene
Of jalousie or any oother teene. (3101-06)

The Knight speaks of the mutual love between the two, and of course we feel Palamon's bliss because we have witnessed his suffering for the years he loved Emelye and was without her. But what do we know of Emelye? The Knight tells us she loves him, but what of her virginity and the life of the huntress she wished to live? Where is Emelye's desire and will in *The Knight's Tale*? Completely subsumed by masculine longing and male authority, Emelye is lost to Palamon's bliss. The tender love the Knight speaks of Emelye feeling for her husband lacks a sense of feminine truth, for we know who

“peyntede” *this* “leon.” This marriage lacks any sense of female agency, and upholds the traditional bonds of matrimony that Cecile so ably collapses in *The Second Nun's Tale*.

While Cecile's assertion of her own authority begins with her donning the hair shirt under her wedding robe, she first verbalizes her power through the juxtaposition of the audience's assumptions of the sexuality of wedding nights with the threat of her angel guardian. When “to bedde moste she gon / With hire housbonde, as ofte is the manere” (SNT 141-2), she says:

O sweete and wel biloved spouse deere,
Ther is a conseil, and ye wolde it heere,
Which that right fayn I wolde unto yow seye,
So that ye swere ye shul it nat biwreye. (144-7)

As Anne Eggebroten writes, these words sound much like “the excessive endearment of a stereotypical wife about to wheedle a favour” (56). Rather than ask a small favour though, Cecile overturns the traditional, masculine view of the demanding, nagging, shrewish wife by offering Valerian a choice--one which he is free to make of his own accord--but one which carries grave consequences. She speaks of the angel that stands guard over her virginity:

And if that he may feelen, out of drede,
That ye me touche, or love in vileynye,
He right anon wol sle yow with the dede,
And in youre yowthe thus ye shullen dye;
And if that ye in clene love me gye,

He wol yow loven as me, for youre clenness,

And shewen yow his joye and his brightnesse. (155-61)

Directly following her verbal endearments, the abruptness of this request to maintain her chastity is underscored by the violence of the threat to Valerian's life. Through the divine intervention of the angel, the Second Nun reminds her audience that this is a Saint's narrative, not a romance with a coy bride approaching her wedding night. Saul Brody writes that the saintly narrative encompasses only a world of absolutes, where the archetypal battle between good and evil plays out, and the audience never doubts that the resolution will be the triumph of good (114). Thus the immediacy of the threat of Cecile's angel is mitigated by the traditional assumption that evil will be vanquished. Still, the presence of death (both literal and spiritual) remains keen throughout the Nun's tale, heightening not only Cecile's faith and courage, but also her aggression.

This aggression combines with Cecile's autonomy to realize "what might be called the most feminist text in [the *Canterbury Tales*]" (Hirsh, "Second Nun" 161). Though she has always borne Christ's gospel in her mind, her marriage is the catalyst after which Cecile moves dynamically forward in her quest to enlarge the following for the "O Lord, o feith, o God, withouten mo, / O Cristendom" (SNT 207-8). Her devotion to Christ (as her spiritual groom), as opposed to Valerian (her legal groom) creates a new hierarchy to which the faithful can aspire. Unlike the Wife of Bath, Cecile's defiance of masculine authority does not stem from personal desires, but from spiritual desires, and in her reverence of Christ, Cecile finds what Lynn Johnson refers to as her power "to defy figures of familial and secular authority and to become [an] emblem of the sort of

radical reversal that transforms weakness into strength” (321). Indeed, part of Cecilie’s strength is her courage and continued assertion of Christ’s authority in the face of her physical defenselessness against the Roman prefect Almachius. She remains unwavering in her refusal to submit to his pagan idols; in fact, his refusal to see the truth of her faith merely increases her belligerence and aggression.

The focus of Cecile’s martyrdom is her adherence to and propagation of the Christian principle of one true faith. She has sent her husband to be baptized by Pope Urban I, who must remain in hiding because “Men sholde hym brennen in a fyr so reed / If he were founde” (313-14). She preaches the word of God to her husband’s brother until he, too, visits Pope Urban and accepts Christ. Consider her actions after she has been burned in the bath of flames and had her neck cut open: “Thre dayes lyved she in this torment, / And nevere cessed hem the feith to teche / That she hadde fostred; hem she gan to preche” (537-9). Her preaching is the impetus for all the action of the tale, and so the question thus arises: Is the Second Nun expressing through Cecile a “female ideology of power” (Luecke 347), or is Cecilie persecuted solely for her religion, making “her gender no disadvantage to her” (Martin 153)?

Martin writes of the emphasis on Cecile’s intelligence and points out that her “conseil” to her husband on their wedding night could have, but ultimately did not, lead to the familiar contemporary exploration of the worth of women’s counsel. Martin claims that Cecilie’s use of her intelligence “to argue and to preach is never criticised as unwomanly” (154), but how can this be so in a text in which a figure of male, secular authority (Almachius) demands “What maner womman artow?” (424)? Though he

qualifies his question after Cecile begins to play with his sense of semantics, the question remains ambiguous in a tale that includes no other women, is told by a woman, and exists within a larger group of tales that includes only three women.

Indeed, what manner of woman *is* Cecile? Certainly powerful and persuasive, she effects conversions easily and often; men are “converted at hir wise loore” (414) at a swift pace. While these could be considered demonstrations of the power of Christianity, it is interesting to note, as Sherry Reames does, that by having the Second Nun condense the conversions in her tale of Saint Cecile from his main sources, the *Passio S. Caeciliae* and the *Legenda aurea*, Chaucer dilutes the agency and power of those who are converted. In the original *Passio*, Valerian’s conversion is the result of Cecile’s teachings on baptism and his own avid questioning of her, followed by instruction in the faith by Urban. However, in the Nun’s version, the omission of the detailed teachings creates “the impression that Valerian’s conversion is something that happens to him, from the outside, and that it is enough for him to submit to it; he need not understand” (43). Reames also notes the omissions from the *Passio* to the conversion of Tiburce, who originally is so eager to be converted after learning of the “corones two” (221) that Cecile and Valerian restrain his impetuosity with an insistence upon a full understanding of the faith and the consequences of conversion. The Second Nun’s version stresses the importance of baptism so that, as Cecile says to Tiburce, “thou mowe biholde / The angels face of which thy brother tolde” (300-301). I am not suggesting that their conversions are, finally, any less meaningful than those in the *Passio*, but both Valerian and Tiburce’s conversions are preceded by a proof of the Christian faith rather

than the vision of proof being revealed *after* a conversion made in trust. The old man in white appears to Valerian, and Tiburce smells the “corones;” in these circumstances, and along with Cecilie’s persuasiveness, how could they deny the faith?

When the brothers refuse to sacrifice to the pagan idols, they “losten bothe hir hevedes” (398), sandwiched between more conversions. As Hirsh writes, both men respond to the prefect’s accusations boldly in the *Legenda aurea*, while in the *Second Nun’s Tale*, “Hir soules wenten to the Kyng of grace” (399) quickly and voicelessly. Hirsh posits that the brothers’ lack of vocal agency in Chaucer’s version lends drama to Cecile’s trial, and indeed, “the brothers do not preempt her audacity” (“Politics” 132). By disallowing the brothers a verbal rebuttal and focusing instead on their “sad devocioun” (397), the Nun fosters the tension between Almachius (and his pagan traditions) and Christian faith, thus accentuating Cecile’s boldness when she opposes the prefect.

Cecile is outspoken and uninhibited, and, as Luecke notes, Almachius’ demand “What maner womman artow?” provokes from Cecile “her most dramatic hour and her most aggressively public assertion” (335). During her trial, Cecile shows no fear because:

“Youre myght,” quod she, “ful litel is to dreede,
For every mortal mannes power nys
But lyk a bladdre ful of wynd, ywys.
For with a nedles poynt, whan it is blowe,
May al the boost of it be leyd lowe.” (437-41)

Cecile's awareness of the reward everlasting for true Christians and her disdain for the prefect's spiritual blindness allow her the courage to debate Almachius, though he holds the power to end her earthly life (and even this power becomes suspect).

Further, as Paul Beichner points out, Chaucer's translations of his sources from the Latin effect a sharpening of the conflict between Cecile and Almachius, as well as a heightening of the dialogue to emphasize Cecile's censure of her judge (202). When she is told "Chees oon of this two: / Do sacrifice, or Cristendom reneye" (458-9), "the hooly blisful faire mayde / Gan for to *laughe*" (461-2, emphasis mine), which should be translated from the Latin as "smile" (*surridens*), and would indicate a more "private internal amusement" (Beichner 202). To laugh aloud at a figure of secular authority demonstrates Cecile's aggression, and mocks the very male authority who has the power over her physical life. Almachius' demands are a test of her faith, but as Cecile concedes to no authority but God, the prefect's threats instill no fear and enforce no action. She further castigates Almachius by using adjectives which in the source material modify his statements, to modify the man himself (*ibid.*, 203). Thus Almachius becomes, in Cecile's words, "A lewed officer and a veyn justise" (497), his obtuseness foregrounded and Cecile's belligerence heightened.

The prefect's power, which as Cecile clarifies "ne mayst but oonly lyf bireve" (482), does not encompass both the "power and auctoritee / To maken folk to dyen or to lyven" (471-2) that he believes himself to have. Indeed, Cecile calls into question even his ability to end life, for while he instructs his men to "Brenne hire right in a bath of flambes rede" (515), she remains untouched, though she sits in that bath for a night and a

day. Cecile cannot burn in this fire, for the Second Nun has already said that she is “brennyng evere in charite ful brighte” (118). Her very religious fervor allows her to ask for, and receive, respite from the flames. Almachius’ servant then makes three attempts to behead her, but “for no maner chaunce / He myghte nought smyte al hir nekke atwo” (527-8), and so she, like the Prioress’s virgin martyr before her, continues to give voice to her faith, though Cecile produces spiritual conversion, while the “litel clergeon” did not. For three days she preaches with her neck “ycorven,” until, with her last words, she bequeaths her house to Pope Urban and embraces Christian action and fruitfulness when she says:

I axed this of hevene kyng,

To han respit thre dayes and namo

To recomende to yow, er that I go,

Thise soules, lo, *and that I myghte do werche*

Heere of myn hous perpetuelly a cherche. (542-6, emphasis mine)

As Collette writes, Cecile’s death “is not a capitulation to her torturers, nor is it imposed by the limitations of the flesh; it is, rather, regulated by her wisdom” (“Vision” 347). By submitting herself to God’s will in life, she dies to a *new* life.

Cecile prays that by establishing a church of her house she may continue to engender faithfulness and, through the example of her life, lead others to conversion and the one true faith. In her life she spreads the word of Christ well; Arthur refers to Pope Urban’s praise of Cecile’s fruitfulness in “her gathering of converts after she is impregnated with her vocation by Christ” (220):

“Almyghty Lord, O Jhesu Crist,” quod he,
“Sower of chaast conseil, hierde of us alle,
The fruyt of thilke seed of chastitee
That thou hast sowe in Cecilie, taak to thee!
Lo, lyk a bisy bee, withouten gile,
Thee serveth ay thyn owene thral Cecile.” (191-6)

The spreading of the Christian seed is an apt metaphor to connect the martyr of the tale to the Virgin Mary, both of whom bore the fruit of the word of God. Cecile renounces physical motherhood, and instead becomes the “spiritual mother of Valerian and Tiburce and a host of other converts” (Reames 40), her religious fecundity leading to what V.A. Kolve refers to as the “multiplication and the growth of a family” (151), a spiritual family begotten from the seed of chastity sown by Christ in Cecile. Johnson states that Cecile’s “family” owes no loyalty to any earthly kinship line, and that “like a spiritual *mater familias*, she gives her goods to her “children” and asks Urban to make a church of her house” (326), having faith in the continuation of the word of Christ.

However, the extreme concentration of conversions cannot continue; without Cecile, her house becomes a church “In which, into this day, in noble wyse, / Men doon to Crist and to his seint servyse” (552-3). There is no mention of her church being known for the number of Christians baptized there, or for miraculous visions of the divine which, in this tale, led to the first two conversions. In her life, Saint Cecile is “lyk a bisy bee,” effecting Christian revelations wherever she speaks and preaching to her followers. But it is interesting to note that once the men have been baptized, they make

few contributions to the faith. Valerian and Tiburce have received the glory of God; indeed, "It were ful hard by ordre for to seyn / How manye wondres Jhesus for hem wroghte" (358-9). But the speed with which they are captured and killed allows scant time for them to work their own wonders of conversion for Jesus. Though Maximus and his men are touched by the faith of the martyrs, they too die swiftly, condensing their own ability to be spiritually fruitful.

Reames writes that the way Cecile moves on from her converts and "drops them entirely as soon as they have declared their willingness to die" suggests that their work in this life is done (52). Contrasted with Cecile's three day period of grace, in which she, though mortally wounded, continues to preach, her converts, especially Valerian and Tiburce, become barren, able to accept the multiple bounties of Christ but not the burden of actively and aggressively expanding Christ's reach into the earthly world as Cecile advocates through her own actions. Though she has succeeded in creating her ideal marriage and asserted her moral authority over traditional masculine leadership, Cecile (and the Nun who tells her tale) faces the same problem as does the Wife of Bath: how will their knowledge survive beyond them?

Cecile, pure in her faith, responds to marriage by attempting to restructure it from within, rejecting physical motherhood for a spiritual fecundity which has the potential to touch many people's lives. She embraces what David Raybin refers to as "both literal and figurative disembodiment" (205), and welcomes the abandonment of the body in death through martyrdom, which echoes the Second Nun in her Prologue. The Nun prays to Mary that through her good works she may be "quit fro thennes that most derk is"

(SNT 66), and asks for the light of the Virgin to touch upon her soul, which is troubled by the “contagioun” of the earthly body, and by “the wighte / Of erthely lust and fals affeccioun” (72-4). Indeed, as Rebecca Stephens writes, contemporary beliefs stemming from Augustinian thought perceived the female body as a “defect” to overcome in the search of spiritual fulfillment, which leads to the Nun’s celebration of “Mary’s triumph over the sin of the female body,” which the Virgin accomplished by bearing the Christ-child (51). The Nun reverences Mary’s purity when she prays to her in the *Invocacio*: “thou, Virgine wemmelees, / Baar of thy body - and dweltest mayden pure - / The Creatour of every creature” (SNT 47-9). The three women in the *Second Nun’s Prologue* and *Tale* thus attain a sense of unity in their devotion to Christ through good works and virginity.

However, as I argued earlier in regard to Mary, the Nun foregrounds the inheritance of faith by referring to the Virgin as both “Cristes mooder” and “doghter deere of Anne” (70), thus privileging the very position that neither she nor Cecile can ever attain. Hirsh writes that the Nun’s voicing of the mother-daughter theme insists “on the relevance of her gender” (“Second Nun” 169), and while I agree that the Nun asserts through her tale the vital importance of the female role in life, when Hirsh states that the Nun does so without “relinquishing her authority and power” (ibid.), I must aver that this is *precisely* where the Nun relinquishes the possibility of ever attaining a truly authoritative female position.

Through references to female familial bonds, the Nun gives feminine power over to those whose offspring are more than spiritual. Though the Nun gives voice to a truly

feminist Cecile, who reconfigures marriage, confronts established masculine power, argues logically against pagan traditions, and repeatedly asserts not only her faith but also her voice, when Cecile dies, her church passes into the control of male authored power. Cecile gains her authority from God, and acts to further the one true faith. The Nun speaks of this powerful woman, a *feminist* woman, and though her behaviour is a function of the miraculous, Cecile's female power remains intact as long as she lives. In telling a Saint's story, even one with such potential for female emancipation, the Nun remains faithful to her position within the church, but though she chooses to relate this particular tale of feminine power, there is no further word from the Nun after the bold assertion of female potential dies with Cecile. Like in her marriage, there is a grave fracture between appearance and intention. While Cecile's intention is for her work to be continued perpetually through her church, what actually manifests is a lapse into male power, and a religious institution that, though its faithful followers remain to do Christ's service, does not reflect the "faithful business" of propagating conversions.

Of course, Cecile's tale passes on through the Second Nun, which further intimates the importance of the female gender. The Nun relates the tale of Saint Cecile herself, without relying on male sanction, and gives her audience a vision of a woman who controls her own future, effects radical change in the lives of most men she comes into contact with, and has no fear of secular patriarchal authority. Indeed, excepting Almachius' one question ("What maner of womman artow?"), Cecile's womanhood remains unchallenged, which I believe confirms Hirsh's assertion that this tale is the most feminist text within *The Canterbury Tales*. Moreover, within the confines of her

tale, the Second Nun, through Cecile, seems a true feminist; she has taken on the powerful role of mediator. As Cecile mediates the conversion of the men around her, so the Second Nun mediates the retelling of the Saint's life (Arthur 227-8). The Nun has accessed a female lineage, and her speech voices a sense of women's lore, and an importance of female experience.

These connections between women both in and outside her tale, however, are ultimately shown to be the proof which causes the feminism of the tale to falter. Chaucer has created a female narrator to whom he attaches no authorial bias; we enter the tale open minded, and what we find is a narrator who identifies with a strong, defiant, and faithful woman. The Nun demonstrates "a female ideology of power" (Luecke 347) and encounters no disapproval, from either her fellow pilgrims or the author, but when viewed with the knowledge that Cecile's church rests, finally, with male ecclesiastical authority, this ideology is revealed as powerless. Cecile's power arose from her faith in Christ, not from the institution of the church. The Second Nun lives within the very strict, hierarchal, male centred church into which Cecile's power faded. As Luecke notes, "it is admissable to allow [her] the language of power because ultimately [she is] powerless" (ibid.). Just as Cecile's good works ended as her church lost her female aggression and active faith, so does the Second Nun's relation of the martyr's life end with her. The Nun speaks no more, and there is little hope of another woman grasping onto the sense of female power seen through the tale. The Nun tells a tale of a Saint, who lives in reverence to the Virgin Mary and Christ; who will carry on the Nun's legacy when her voice is stopped? The Wife of Bath? Clearly not; thus Chaucer's feminist

creation fades into nothing.

Though spiritually fruitful, both the Second Nun and the saint with whom she identifies have relinquished their physical ties to womanhood, and, though powerful in nature, Chaucer has limited their potential for feminism by disallowing them perpetuity. Both the Nun and Cecile impart the importance of motherhood through their reverence of the Virgin Mary, and while they can continue her spiritual work on earth they can not generate it. Their power ends with themselves. The Nun can speak, but to whom? Chaucer once again attempts to create a woman who is fully realized in all her power and spirituality, but, finally, cannot escape the reality that men will silence women, be they wives, nuns, or saints. Without children, and specifically female children, Chaucer's feminism is lost – there is no recuperation of a community of women, and there is no instructive and supportive female lineage. Chaucer remains unable to envision writing an inherited female lore, mired in the masculine discourse of the fourteenth-century.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Opening into the *Tales* and Shutting Down the Missing Potential

I ended the discussion of the Second Nun in the previous chapter by referring to inherited female lore, specifically Chaucer's inability to envision an instructive lineage of women, and it is this idea to which I return to conclude this thesis. Just as the Wife of Bath searches for a community of women to carry women's stories forward, the Second Nun struggles to insert herself into a lineage which she herself cannot carry on. As characters within the framework of the pilgrimage, the Wife of Bath, the Prioress and the Second Nun depict the closest Chaucer comes in *The Canterbury Tales* to a verisimilitude of female experience. Furthermore, by virtue of their sex and their presence on the pilgrimage in an era which strictly regulated female movement, they are demarcated from the other pilgrims and constitute a group which deviates from the masculine norm; they are the "other." Their voices exist as a monument to female possibility, for as Robert Sturges writes, each woman "invests herself with power by invoking a tradition of powerful women of the past," thus emphasizing "the solidarity of women in a temporal line" (41). The Wife of Bath recalls her mother ("My dame taughte me . . . I folwed ay my dames loore, / As wel of this as of othere thynges moore" [WBP 576, 583-4]) and emphasizes her privileging of female discourse by speaking of her community of women (including her "dame," a "gossib," a "worthy wyf," and her "nece") and directing her speech toward "wise wyves." The Prioress calls upon the

Virgin Mother to guide her speech, and refers to the “clergeoun’s” grieving mother as a “newe Rachel” (PrT 627), connecting women in solidarity through the power of the Virgin Mary (Sturges 47). The Second Nun invokes Mary, refers to *her* mother Anne, thus foregrounding the importance of female elders to all women’s education, and relates the story of Seint Cecile, who teaches her community to follow Christ.

Though the female narrators each indicate a sense of female lineage from which they draw their tales and their strength, not one of them retains the ability to continue the legacy. Though she defends marriage (and sexuality) by saying “God bad us for to wexe and multiplie (WBP 28), the Wife of Bath’s childlessness can arguably be equated with what Catherine Cox refers to as the Wife’s belief in virginity’s “wasted potential” (30). If Alisoun sees virginity as “a state of unused capability” (ibid.), then her inability to produce a child suggests the demise of her community. The Wife speaks to “wise wyves,” but in so doing when the only other women present are nuns, she speaks into a void.

The Prioress’s repetitious use of the term “mooder” asserts the primacy of the idea of motherhood for her, as does her unusual designation of Mary as “Cristes mooder.” Semantically sublimating the mother to the son foregrounds the Virgin’s dependence upon Christ for her honour, and indicates that the Prioress will only ever be able to *reflect*, through her own virginity, the Virgin’s honour and wisdom; she remains unable to *reproduce* the power of a community of mothers who, in her tale, gain a sense of authority “through the inclusion of a powerful mother who teaches female lore” (Sturges 48).

By invoking the Virgin Mary, the Second Nun begins to establish a tradition of women; as Sturges writes, “a female storyteller calls on a female Muse for the poetic authority to tell the story of a female saint” (49). Cecile educates her community through her faith, and is powerful in her ability to confront traditional masculine authority, but she is shown effecting conversions of men, not women. The “Cristen folk” (535) referred to are ostensibly both men and women, but this can only be assumed, as the conversions in the *Second Nun's Tale* are strictly male. The inclusiveness of Cecile's faith eventually fails womankind, as her Church passes at her death into masculine control and, though the church's members continue to serve Christ, they cease to provoke conversions in “feithful bisynesse.” Cecile is dead, beyond her story, her ability to teach has ended, and so, the Second Nun must realize, has the succession of women who passed on their sense of authority and wisdom. Cecile now exists as a Saint's narrative, and although it may evoke wonder, it cannot create new faith in the fashion of Cecile herself.

Of the three female narrators in the *Tales*, the Second Nun tells her tale last, and once female potential has died with Cecile, the Nun does not speak a word. She has accessed a female lineage, but cannot advance it. Chaucer did not create a fourth female narrator; there is no one else to carry on the dialogue. The female discourse of the *Tales* ends with the Nun, and ends emphatically with the reversion of Cecile's Church to traditional male authority, the same patriarchal ecclesiastical institution the Nun knows herself to live within.

By focusing on the Wife of Bath, the Prioress and the Second Nun, I do not mean

to assert that there are no other tales that can be read within the framework of Chaucer's attempted feminism. Indeed, the *Franklin's Tale* approaches feminism from within the boundaries of marriage. In their revisioning of marriage, Arveragus swears as a knight to Dorigen that "nevere in al his lyf he, day ne nyght, / Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie / Agayn hir wyl, ne kith hire jalousie / But hire obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al" (FranT 746-9), which demonstrates that not only does he recognize that a woman has her own will, but that, as Margaret Hallissy points out, he admits the possibility that "traditional male dominance / female subordination does not necessarily lead to joy for all concerned, that the condition of will-lessness prescribed in the conduct books is as unnatural for women as for men" (36). Indeed, as the Franklin says,

Love is a thyng as any spirit free.

Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee,

And nat to been constreyned as a thral,

And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal. (FranT 767-70)

The marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen consists of an interior sense of equality which defies the traditionally advocated patriarchal hierarchy of gender within male-female relationships. Even once Dorigen's speech has brought about a crisis in their marriage, Arveragus remains faithful to his vow to respect his wife's will. By virtue of Arveragus' belief in the value of Dorigen's speech, he insists she fulfill her promise to Aurelius. She has pledged to love Aurelius if he can remove the rocks from the coast, and he appears to have done so. While it is through Aurelius' and Arveragus' sense of honour that the situation is happily resolved for the couple, Dorigen's aversion to "been a wikked wyf . .

. hir trouthe she swoor thurgh innocence” (1599, 1601) is acknowledged, and so must the redefinition of virtue practiced in their marriage. As Hallissy points out, Arveragus encourages his wife to demonstrate the traditionally male virtue of “trouthe,” while he demonstrates the “female” virtue of sacrifice by calmly insisting Dorigen remain true to her vow to Aurelius (40). Though Arveragus swears Dorigen to secrecy “up peyne of deeth” (FranT 1481), he still avows the preeminence of keeping “trouthe.” Their marital innovation--however imperfect--creates another space for feminist criticism to enter into the domain of the *Tales*, and so masculine admission (if only partial) of a woman’s free will joins into the debate begun by the Wife of Bath.

The theme of power being created by an initial surrendering of power is found not only in *The Franklin’s Tale* and the Wife of Bath’s discourse, but also in *The Tale of Melibee*. Jill Mann refers to this theme as a “fairytale mak[ing] contact with Christian myth, and both tell the same story” (124), but I aver that, while such a creation of power might *seem* like a fairytale in terms of medieval traditions of gender and marriage, the fact of the frequency of its inclusion in the *Tales* as a whole demonstrates Chaucer’s willingness to concede the inadequacy of received traditions of gender hierarchies within marriage to deal with the female experience.

In *The Tale of Melibee*, Prudence, like the Wife of Bath, has a great knowledge of texts, and uses her understanding of the Bible to her advantage. When Melibee initially refuses to take his wife’s counsel, he uses traditional antifeminist arguments against her, arguments which she logically refutes; as Arlyn Diamond notes, before she can impart her wisdom, she must “overcome the handicap of her inferior status *vis-à-vis* her husband

. . . their relationship is a paradigm for any relationship with assigned social status, and the tale says that virtue and social position, or virtue and masculinity are not necessarily identical” (66). When Melibee and his counselors finally consent to Prudence’s wisdom, Chaucer says that “whan dame Prudence hadde herd the assent of hir lord Melibee, and the conseil of his freendes / accorde with *hire* wille and *hire* entencioun, / she was wonderly glad in hire herte” (Mel 1790-92, emphasis mine), and later, “Whanne Melibee hadde herd the grete skiles and resouns of dame Prudence, and *hire* wise informaciouns and techynges, / his herte gan encline to the *wil of his wif* (1870-1, emphasis mine). Prudence uses virtuous and persuasive speech, what Hallissy refers to as “domestic preaching,” to exert a moral influence on her husband, and the assertion of her own will stresses the emergence, however nascent, of women from the typical gender hierarchies of marriage. Chaucer emphasizes Prudence’s will with the recurrence of the pronoun “hire,” and while Hallissy mitigates this emphasis by claiming that “the will of the wife is not her own, but is the will of God for Melibee” (68), I do not believe that a concurrence with the will of God necessarily denotes the denial of free will.

Chaucer’s *Tale of Melibee* is not without its problems in regards to a feminist reading, especially in consideration of Sophie -- where is the female victim? Though it does complicate a feminist reading of *Melibee*, reconciling Sophie’s absence from the tale with its final acknowledgment of a woman’s wisdom does not disallow the possibility of a feminist interpretation. *The Tale of Melibee* thus contributes to the potential of future feminist inquiries into *The Canterbury Tales*.

These inquiries seem, like the *Tales* themselves, almost limitless in scope. Just as

Chaucer ends the *Franklin's Tale*, he opens a new dialogue, redirecting the discourse by asking the audience a question. "Lordynges, this question, thanne, wol I aske now. / Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow? Now telleth me, er that ye ferther wende" (FranT 1621-23). The Franklin's narrative has concluded, but the audience is challenged; while the question may be conventional, an open address to the audience at the close of a tale, the other pilgrims within the framework and the audience without are nonetheless charged with interpreting the story to formulate their own conclusion. The tale has questioned traditional valuations of female speech, and the worth of the question deserves to be addressed. The Wife of Bath, apparently displeased with her inability to maintain mutual reciprocity within the patriarchal state of marriage in her tale of the Loathly Lady as in her own life, voices a malediction, declaring Woman's ascendancy once more. Both her *Prologue* and *Tale* lead toward a final recuperation of female individuality and independence through mutuality in marriage, but, as Grudin notes, "closure here consists of the narrator's own commentary on her tale and a reopening of the issues of the Wife's prologue and tale" (171). Alisoun prays that "Jhesu Crist us sende / Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde, / And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde" (WBT 1258-60), and by using plural pronouns, she semantically refers back to a community of women that *we* know does not exist within the context of the pilgrimage. Until such a time as she can envision the full feminine existence she desires and that she believes to be women's due, the Wife of Bath (and Chaucer) will delight in aperture rather than closure.

The Wife of Bath cannot shed her cultural inheritance; she must fit her

experiences into the framework of her world. As Annette Barnes writes, “we are weighted creatures, whether creators or critics or silent spectators” (2), thus the Wife remains ultimately unable to free herself from the overwhelming patriarchal antifeminism of her time. The antifeminist literature, Biblical and secular, asserts a particular nearsightedness in relation to women’s lives, regarding both what these lives are like and what they *should* be like, and these ideas had consequences for real women. While in certain situations (such as a Prioress tending to the estate of her convent or a widow holding property) women were accorded a modicum of authority, the reality of the fourteenth century was that, as Sheila Delany notes, “the social conditions did not yet exist for the emancipation of women” (Writing 92). However realistic and vehement a response Chaucer creates for the Wife of Bath, he can only go so far; Chaucer cannot write the Wife out of the cultural legacy of his authorial predecessors.

While the Prioress invokes female tradition, she does not attempt to subvert masculine authority completely. Rather, she asserts a “tradition of female authority as a . . . supplement to it” (Sturges 48), not threatening male power like the Wife, but sharing in it (*ibid.*, 42). Ultimately, however, Chaucer’s focus on the Prioress’s privileging of the maternal disallows her the authority necessary to maintain her feminine power; she can never become more than a temporary facet in a female lineage, and her voice cannot outlast her life. Chaucer’s depiction of the Prioress and her tale exists, finally, more as a testament to possibility and the power of motherhood than as a portrayal of individual female authority, and so the Prioress fades into history as the recorded memory of the male author.

In the Second Nun's tale of Seint Cecile, Chaucer depicts female aggression differently than he does in the Wife's tale, validating Cecile's defiance of masculine authority by aligning it with the reverence of Christ. Indeed, her confrontations expand "from a purely domestic realm into a political one" (Sturges 49), culminating in her verbal and spiritual, though not bodily, triumph over Almachius and traditional male authority. Her triumph, however, is short lived, for as discussed in the previous chapter, her success as a female figure of power is rooted in her spirituality and embodied by her Church, a church in which "*men* doon to Crist and to his seint servyse" (553, emphasis mine). Not only is the emphasis on *male* continuance and control of Cecile's legacy, but there is a distinct lack of agency in comparison with Cecile's "faithful bisynesse." By choosing the tale of Seint Cecile, the Second Nun attempts to insert herself into the temporal line of female lore, but realizes, finally, that there can be no feminine response to the tale; Cecile is dead, and her Church subsumed by the masculine, her potential for perpetuity circumscribed by the very men doing service to Christ in her Church. The Nun is silenced, and there are no more women on the pilgrimage. Female speech has come to an end, with no recourse for reconstruction outside the parameters of the male memory and imagination.

Through his three female narrators, Chaucer explores what Robert Hanning refers to as "the paradoxes of a culture in which one half of humanity is defined not in its own words, nor by observation of its actual deeds, but by an autonomous, nonexperiential tradition of exemplary texts composed, handed on, and interpreted by a small elite drawn entirely from the other half of humanity" ("Glose" 47). Chaucer attempts to banish the

elite from his inquiry into women; he recognizes that change comes from within, and so creates three women by whose experience and authority he can envision a female discourse, a reality apart from the masculine hegemony. However, his inability to pursue the sense of female lineage which is so imperative to these women narrators ultimately indicates the flaw in Chaucer's feminism. He cannot conceive of a fully functional female character; the Wife of Bath is childless, the Prioress's focus remains on the maternal, which, to her, is the aspect of the Blessed Virgin which remains forever closed, and the Second Nun has no words to counteract the reversion of Cecile's creation to the authority of men. After privileging a female discourse, the Nun is ultimately silenced by the male ecclesiastical authority under which she lives.

The Wife of Bath asks "Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?" (WBP 692), foregrounding the need for women to tell their own stories. Marcia Landy writes that "women must fight against the virtue of silence" (19), and I believe the necessity of this fight pertains to Chaucer's narrators as well as to the modern critic. The socialization which teaches that speech is equivalent with aggression and negativity presupposes the inability of women to convey useful information and wield authority effectively. If, as the Wife states, "wommen hadde writen stories" (WBP 693), perhaps her legacy, and those of the Prioress and the Second Nun, would not have ended in silence and defeat. Chaucer attempted to write their stories, and though I believe that in so doing his feminism remains flawed--a failure of the inherited antifeminist culture to allow him to imagine a new kind of woman--he intimates the possibility of a new kind of women's literature. Though ultimately unable to "abandon the values and hierarchies he inherits"

(Diamond 82), Chaucer creates a vision of Woman that tests the boundaries of his time.

In the Wife of Bath's society, very few women wrote stories, certainly none within the context of her *Prologue* and *Tale*, but we certainly do now, and while I have written the story of this thesis, I certainly do not wish to write of Chaucer "moore wikkednesse / Than al the mark of Adam may redresse" (WBP 695-6). Though instructed (partially) by the male author Chaucer, I excuse his masculinity to take my place in the female lineage and add these few chapters to the discourse. Chaucer illuminated female potential, and although not ultimately able to realize a community of women to nurture and propagate this potential, it is for the attempt that I honour him, for the realization that possibly, just possibly, a hierarchical gendered construction of society is missing half of *its* potential.

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