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“Myn entente nys but for to pleye”

The Game of Antifeminism
and the Wife of Bath’s
Invitation to Laughter



But yet I praye to al this compaignye,
If that I speke after my fantasye,
As taketh not agrief of that I seye,
For myn entente nys but for to pleye.

(III.189–92)¹



haucer’s Wife of Bath is undoubtedly the most famous unruly woman of medieval literature, and she has generated more debate among literary scholars than any other medieval fictional character, a debate that has focused above all on questions of gender. While some argue for viewing her as a kind of feminist *avant la lettre* because she so thoroughly attacks the antifeminist corpus, others insist that she is an embodiment of all the misogynous clichés of Chaucer’s time.² Much of the discussion on this question has centered around the intentions of the author. Could Chaucer

1. All quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

2. In an anthology of medieval texts defending or blaming women, the editors chose to place the Wife’s prologue between the two sections, for the text does both and serves “as a kind of interface” between the two traditions (Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 198–222). For a complete annotated bibliography on the Wife of Bath, see Beidler and Biebel, *Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath’s Prologue” and “Tale.”* For an overview of the debate on the Wife of Bath and a helpful bibliography, see Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 27–28.

himself have been a sort of feminist who had a sympathy and respect for women uncharacteristic of men of his time? Or did he mean the garrulous and libidinous Wife to serve as a satirical example of the reasons men must be on guard against women? Was the Wife, in effect, the victim of a joke at her own expense, a joke between Chaucer and his male readers?

It is not difficult to imagine that medieval readers might have found the Wife laughable, yet her declaration that her intent is only to play, announced early on in her prologue, invites us to consider the precise nature of the laughter she generates. Much attention has been given to how her “woman’s voice” belongs to Chaucer’s larger preoccupation with the “social contest,” but little has been done to place her contesting voice within his interest in laughter and play.³ Examining how the Wife’s laughter and playfulness intersect with Chaucer’s own use of these elements throughout the *Canterbury Tales* will help us to understand the complexity of Chaucer’s use of his female character as well as to consider what the Wife tells us about the possible uses of playfulness by women in medieval culture.

The word *pleye* as used in the *Canterbury Tales*, like our modern word *play*, encompasses several meanings. In addition to signifying the playing of a musical instrument, playing or acting a part, and flirting, it can also mean to amuse oneself and to jest or be playful.⁴ It is these last two meanings that are most relevant to the Wife’s declaration. As early as the General Prologue the Wife’s laughter and joviality are highlighted: “In felowshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe. / Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce, / For she koude of that art the olde daunce” (474–76). This portrait is ambivalent, for the statement that she can “carpe,” or find fault and complain, links her laughter with the stereotype of the quarrelsome woman. Her laughter is also linked to her sexuality since she knows the arts of sex (“the olde daunce”), is dressed in scarlet clothing, has a red face, and is “gat-tothed,” which in medieval culture signified a large sexual appetite. All of these characteristics combine to create a portrait of the

3. On the contesting social voices in Chaucer, see Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, which explores “a struggle between hegemony and counterhegemony, of texts as places crowded with many voices representing many centers of social authority” (xiii); and Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest*. The Wife’s “sense of humor” has gained the affection of many readers over the years, but it has not been examined in any sustained way.

4. From the glossary to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1277. Also see Tatlock and Kennedy’s *Concordance*.

"bad girl" whose excessive female sexuality is linked to wide-mouthed laughter and joking.⁵

The Wife's laughter is coded as feminine in its carnality, but it is also connected to the *Canterbury Tales*' larger preoccupation with communal play. Her carping is done in "felaweshipe," part of a convivial and friendly exchange. Her disposition puts her in line with the Host's invocation to the pilgrims as they set out for Canterbury that they shall tell stories and "pleye," since "confort ne myrthe is noon / To ride by the weye dounb as a stoon." He further pledges to "maken yow disport" and "doon yow som confort" (I.771–76). The Wife's ability to laugh and play, described early in the General Prologue, thus aligns her with the festive context established for the storytelling game. As Glending Olson has shown, this literature as game or play topos of the *Canterbury Tales* should be understood in the context of medieval theories of recreation whereby play is justified as a useful means of refreshing the mind, a temporary release ultimately allowing a return to seriousness and work. When Chaucer reminds his readers before the Miller's Tale that "men shal nat maken ernest of game" (I.3186), he is essentially taking up the second half of the Horatian formula justifying poetry for profit or pleasure (*prodesse aut delectare*), announcing the goal of such fiction as recreative rather than instructive, thus distinguishing it from his other fictions, but in itself useful for the appropriate space of the journey to Canterbury. This temporary space of play is illustrated in the structure of Chaucer's work, for while mirth rules over the course of the pilgrimage, and the Host castigates pilgrims for breaking the festive tone set at the beginning, both pilgrims and Host alike ultimately assent to the return to seriousness enjoined by the Parson as the journey to Canterbury reaches its final goal. Play may be enjoyed for the delight it brings, but it is ultimately justified by the ethical context provided by the recreative theory.⁶

5. Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women*, 38, notes the contrast between the Wife's loud laughter and the coy smile of the Prioress. Her observation mirrors Barreca's claim that while smiles have traditionally been viewed as becoming feminine accoutrements, laughs have not (*Snow White*, 6).

6. It is this ethical context that Olson argues distinguishes medieval theories of play from Johan Huizinga's landmark study on the play element in culture in *Homo Ludens*. Whereas Huizinga emphasizes that play is an end in itself, Olson reminds readers that while the reason for fiction's popularity may well be the innately human need for play that it fulfilled, medieval theories insisted on the specificity of the final cause of the activity (*Literature as Recreation*, 102). Olson similarly notes the parallels between the recreative theory and

But Olson also notes that Chaucer does more than simply reiterate the well-worn notion of recreative literature as solace, since he will ultimately “subject the theory of recreation, so comfortably announced and endorsed in the appropriately merry circumstances of after-dinner *confabulatio*, to the strains of human tension, to dramatize the difference between idea and motive.”⁷ It is in the context of this human tension that the other important meaning of *pleye* comes to bear. Pilgrims hide behind the excuse of play as a communal activity in their personally motivated jests or insults at the expense of others, usually those of competing social orders.⁸ Despite the storytellers’ claims that their stories or comments should not be taken in earnest, their listeners do take offense, and Chaucer dramatizes, through these exchanges, the risks entailed by using jest as a vehicle for expressing earnest intent. When the Wife begs her audience to “taketh nat agrief” what she has to say because her intent is only to play, she is serving notice that some of her listeners are not going to like what they are about to hear. That she delivers her protofeminist defense under the cover of play only renders more ambiguous the earnestness of her message. Indeed, Olson comments that for the Wife, “the line between private motives and public entertainment becomes deliberately difficult to draw” (159). How does the Wife take the stage and use the storytelling contest to promote her “private motives?” How do the competing meanings of play—festive, convivial, amusement of the public versus (tendentious) jesting of the private—complicate the Wife’s message relating to one woman’s life story and the larger story of antifeminism into which she weaves it? And for what reason does Chaucer allow his Wife to play such a game?

theories of “festive” carnival, such as Bakhtin’s study of Rabelais or C. L. Barber’s work on Shakespeare, while reminding us that such theories lack the ethical justification so explicitly and self-consciously explored by Chaucer (161–62). See also Ernst Curtius’s essay, “Jest and Earnest in Medieval Literature,” in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 417–35, which traces examples demonstrating a medieval acceptance of the mixing of jest and earnest, even within ostensibly serious works.

7. *Literature as Recreation*, 158–59.

8. Carl Lindahl, *Earnest Games*, 85, notes that in Chaucer’s London verbal insults could be prosecuted as public crimes against society. The pilgrims in the *Tales*, he argues, reflect this context in the great care they take to use rhetorical strategies borrowed from folk culture to avoid charges of defamation. He points out that the majority of insults in Chaucer’s London, and within the *Tales* themselves, are between different members of trades that had intense rivalries, such as Miller vs. Reeve, Host vs. Cook, Manciple vs. Cook, Friar vs. Summoner, Host vs. Pardoner, Wife of Bath vs. Clerk and Friar.

Antifeminism as Game

Toward the end of her prologue, the Wife recounts how her fifth husband, the clerk Jankyn, would read to her nightly from a compendium of antifeminist texts, a book of “wikked wyves.” Seeing that he would not desist from his readings, the Wife ripped three pages out of the book. In retaliation, Jankyn boxed her on the ear, causing her to become partially deaf. This scene stages how the antifeminist tradition accessible to the clerical elite educated in Latin could make its way to an uneducated woman’s ears. The harm that the intrusion of clerical antifeminism into the domestic sphere could do to women is described more explicitly by Christine de Pizan. In a letter to Pierre Col about the *Roman de la Rose*, Christine says that she has heard about a highly educated and respected man who, whenever he was angry with his wife, would “go and find the book and read it to his wife; then he would become violent and strike her and say such horrible things as ‘These are the kinds of tricks you pull on me. This good, wise man Master Jean de Meun knew well what women are capable of.’”⁹ The fact that Jankyn is a clerk at Oxford is significant. It was the university-trained clerks who inherited, reworked, and transmitted misogyny to society at large, for their writings were collected and used as the source not only for preachers but for individual men who commissioned collections such as Jankyn’s book of wicked wives.¹⁰ Numerous illustrations in the margins of medieval manuscripts depict jousts between clerks and women, attesting to the prevalence of this notion of women and clerks as traditional enemies (fig. 1).

Perhaps the most interesting, but often overlooked, detail relating to Chaucer’s scene is that Jankyn laughs while reading his collection: “He hadde a book that gladly, nyght and day, / For his desport he wolde rede alway; / He cleped it Valerie and Theofraste, / At which book he lough alwey ful faste” (669–72). Jankyn reads the book not only to lecture his unruly wife but also for his own “desport.” Clerical antifeminism appears here like a kind of joke passed from man to man. Indeed, a text that evokes

9. Baird and Kane, *La Querelle de la Rose*, 136. Carolyn Dinshaw has also noted the connection between the scene recounted by Christine and the encounter between the Wife and Jankyn (*Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, 130).

10. In his study of how sermons made their way into literature, G. R. Owst notes that of all parts of the *Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath’s Prologue shows the greatest debt of literature to the pulpit (*Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, 389).



Fig. 1. A friar jousting with a woman, suggesting an opposition between women and the clerical establishment that produced antifeminist tracts. Other illuminations (in this manuscript and elsewhere) show women jousting with knights in the battle of love. From a Picard manuscript of *Lancelot du Lac* (ca. 1280) (Beinecke MS 229, folio 100v). (Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.)

this male coterie of humor is Richard De Bury's *The Love of Books* (Philobiblon), written in England in around 1344. De Bury imagines books talking about women who enviously curse them because the clerks who buy books could be spending their money on hats and furs for their lady friends instead. The books note the irony of women's cursing of clerk's books, for it is what they say about women, rather than their cost, to which women should object: "And with good reason, if she could see what lies within our hearts, if she had attended our private deliberations, if she had read the book of Theophrastus or Valerius, or if she had only listened with comprehending ears to the twenty-fifth chapter of Ecclesiasticus."¹¹

11. Translation is by Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed*, 1. The original reads, "et quidem merito, si videret intrinseca cordis nostri, si nostris privatis interfuisset consiliis, si Theophrasti vel Valerii perlegisset volumen, vel saltem capitulum Ecclesiastici auribus intellectus audisset" (42–44).

The joke is on women since because they do not know Latin, they do not have the "comprehending ears" that would allow them to understand antifeminist discourse. The reference to Theophrastus and Valerius in De Bury's anecdote recalls the Wife's description of Jankyn's book: "He cleped it Valerie and Theofraste." However, in Chaucer's scene, the distinction between Latin and the vernacular, the written and the oral, is elided, for the Wife is both witness to and victim of the allegedly private joke between men, since Jankyn reads to her from the book and laughs openly in front of her.¹²

The scene then invites the question: if antifeminism is a joke between men, how can women respond to it? The Wife's earlier warning that her listeners should not take offense at her words because they are offered under the guise of "pleye" should alert us to the fact that she is ready to play the game, rendering tit for tat. But even more important, the Wife makes clear that the playing field is unequal since women have not written a history of their own:

For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
But if it be of hooly seintes lyves,
Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.
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. (688–96)

In asking who painted the lion, the Wife is alluding to a fable in which a lion and a man look at a portrait that shows a man killing a lion. If the man appears to be the stronger, it is simply because it is a man who painted the portrait and who thus controls the story about men and lions. By implication, the Wife is suggesting that women, denied access to the

12. A similar example of the split between male Latin and female vernacular in Chaucer is in the Nun's Priest's Tale, where the rooster Chauntecleer comments to his favorite hen, Pertelote: "For al so siker as *In principio*, / *Mulier est hominis confusio*— / Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is, / 'Womman is mannes joye and al his blis'" (VII.3163–66). The male fowl's comic mistranslation both points to the gap between the Latin and its transmission to the vernacular and suggests the equation of two opposite views of woman, as man's ruin and his happiness.

clerks' "oratories," have not been able to write a history of their own and thus to respond on equal footing to men's defamation of women.¹³ Furthermore, by noting that clerks only speak highly of saints but not of any other women, the Wife attacks the tradition that allows no place for the majority of women like herself who are not saints. In the Wife's use of the term "mark of Adam" we get a glimpse of how the Wife's own response will work, for with it she has slyly returned the charge made against women as the mark of Eve. More than defending women against clerk's attacks through logical refutation, she attacks the clerical establishment itself, characterizing their writing as nothing but the jealous raving of impotent clerks: "The clerk, whan he is oold, and may noght do / Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho, / Thanne sit he doun, and writ in his dotage / That wommen kan nat kepe hir mariage!" (707–10). While the Wife views the clerks' waning sexual powers as the motivation for their misogyny, Christine de Pizan later identifies the (hyper)sexuality of clerks: "And all those clerks, who said so much against them [women], were, more than other men, maddened by lust, not for a single woman only but for thousands of them."¹⁴

In addition to showing that women have not had equal access to the playing field, the Wife demonstrates how the rules of the game are always skewed against women. Women are consistently defined as excess, occupying opposite ends of a spectrum:

Thou seist to me it is a greet meschief
 To wedde a povre womman, for costage;
 And if that she be riche, of heigh parage,
 Thanne seistow that it is a tormentrie
 To soffre hire pride and hire malencolie.
 And if that she be fair, thou verray knave,
 Thou seyst that every holour wol hire have.

(248–54)

13. Sheila Delany argues that the Wife's appeal to the fable should not be taken seriously, for she naively "speaks as if lions could or some day might paint: that is her basic misreading" ("Strategies of Silence in the Wife of Bath's Recital," 53). Delany makes a compelling case that the essential alterity (bestiality) of lions undermines the logic underpinning the Wife's use of the fable, but I think Chaucer's readers could nonetheless take seriously the Wife's observation of the unequal power relations between the sexes.

14. Baird and Kane, *Querrelle de la Rose*, 36.

The Wife here declares that men don't play fair. They criticize poor women because they are costly to maintain; but rich women are also castigated because they are prideful and sullen. Men criticize ugly women because they try to seduce every man they can and because no one wants to have what other men do not want. But men criticize attractive women because they cannot remain chaste. Ranting against the extent to which all women are somehow considered problematic, the Wife declares, "Thus goth al to the devel, by thy tale" (262). Any trait ascribed to women—whether beauty or ugliness, wealth or poverty—will be used to define women as negativity. Chaucer's use of this motif is not new: it appears in earlier sources such as the *Romance of the Rose* and Jerome's *Against Jovinian*. What Chaucer does add to the tradition, however, is to stage a direct confrontation in which a woman attacks the very premise upon which discourse on women has been based.

*The Wife of Bath's Mimicry:
Deflating Masculine Pretensions*

The implication of the Wife of Bath's critique is that it is impossible for women to respond to antifeminism without implicating themselves further in it since any action they perform will be coded as deficient in some way. "Hooly seintes lives," for example, are disparagingly dismissed by the Wife as inaccessible to the majority of women and perhaps (as contemporary feminists might point out) more in the interests of men than of women since they praise feminine abnegation and self-sacrifice. Indeed, the male pilgrims react positively to such tales of "saintly" women, the Host responding enthusiastically to the Man of Law's tale of Custance, and the Clerk using his own tale of the self-sacrificing Griselda to "quite" the Wife of Bath.

So if trying to argue for women's positive qualities is a no-win proposition if all women "go to the devil," what discursive position remains for women to speak on their own behalf? This question of feminine subjectivity has been posed most notably by the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray. Irigaray argues that because the Western metaphysical tradition figures women as absence or nonrepresentability, the language they speak is not their own. The only way they can claim a subject position without

speaking “as men” is to embrace stereotypes of femininity, but in an exaggerated, playful way that disrupts or short-circuits patriarchal discourse:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the “perceptible,” of “matter”—to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of *playful repetition*, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language.¹⁵

This special kind of playing with mimesis, which readers of Irigaray generally call mimicry, is the playfully exaggerative appropriation of a pose in order to undercut it. Might we be invited to read the Wife of Bath as doing more than incarnating feminine unruliness, instead performing it?

To view her in this way requires us not so much to look at *what* she says as to imagine *how* she says it. As Mae West’s famous quip runs, “It isn’t what you do; it’s how you do it.” With her exaggerated hip wiggling and seductive glances, Mae West wasn’t so much *being* feminine as she was mimicking “feminine” codes of behavior.¹⁶ It is also significant that Irigaray regards laughter as one of the distinctive ways women can get around being reduced to an essentially passive feminine role. She states that women’s laughter, like their gestures, is an example of a “feminine syntax” that “resists or subsists ‘beyond.’”¹⁷ By “beyond” Irigaray seems to mean the kind of move made possible by mimicry, a playful repetition of the feminine, but which is not reduced to it because it is itself a comment about the feminine *as a performance*, thus a view from beyond or elsewhere, which recalls Cixous’s notion of women’s laughter as an “immense astral space.”

The Wife’s professed playfulness and her proclivity for laughter, in the context of Irigaray’s analysis, make it possible to see in the Wife’s unruly performance an ironic comment on the essentialist discourse on women.

15. *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 76; emphasis added. Irigaray’s terms are “mimésis” and “répétition ludique” (*Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un*, 74).

16. See the discussion of Mae West in Burns, *Bodytalk*, xiii–xvi; and Pamela Robertson’s discussion of Mae West’s “feminist camp” in *Guilty Pleasures*, 23–53.

17. *This Sex*, 134; “ce qui résiste ou subsiste au-delà” (*Ce sexe*, 132). See also *This Sex*, 163, where Irigaray suggests, “Perhaps woman, and the sexual relation, transcend it [the phallic] ‘first’ in laughter?”

One putatively feminine role the Wife embraces is that of the naive woman who understands only at a superficial level. She begins her prologue by declaring, "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage." Within the traditional medieval distinction between personal experience and written authority, this statement establishes the Wife as a stereotypical female reader who is unable to do more than understand the surface meaning of a text.¹⁸ As scholars have pointed out, the Wife demonstrates such intellectual deficiency either by omitting other scriptural passages that speak counter to her claims or citing passages out of context, twisting them to fit her purpose.¹⁹ The medieval audience (especially the well-educated men among Chaucer's readers) is thus invited to laugh at the Wife, a silly woman who is unable to read for the deeper significance of God's words.

Strictly speaking, however, the Wife's declaration that experience is "right ynogh" for her asserts not that she does not recognize that there is a difference between authoritative and experiential interpretations, but that she is happy to make do with the experiential role allotted to her. The Wife's deliberate and continual reminders that she doesn't understand the Scripture she quotes in fact begin to sound like an *exaggeration* of the trope of feminine (mis)reading. For example, when she quotes Jesus' chastising of the Samaritan woman that the man she has is not her husband, the Wife says, "What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn," but proceeds to cite a different scriptural passage: "But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye, / God bad us for to wexe and multiplie; / That gentil text kan I wel understonde" (20, 27–29). Whereas with the first declaration the Wife announces her insufficient exegetical skills, with the second she implies her willingness to choose to understand when it fits her purpose. It should also be added that if the Wife is reading Scripture self-servingly, "she is but mimicking the methods of those late glossators whom Henri de Lubac describes as 'pulverizing' the text (suppressing parts of passages, distorting and rearranging texts) to fit their schemes."²⁰ If you can't beat 'em, join 'em, the Wife seems

18. See Noakes, "On the Superficiality of Women." On the Wife of Bath as an aural reader, see Schibanoff, "Taking the Gold Out of Egypt."

19. See for example, David Reid, "Crocodilian Humor," which notes that the Wife "gives the letter a gross and ludicrous interpretation" (80). On the Wife's "selective" reading, see Delany, "Strategies of Silence."

20. Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 124. Priscilla Martin similarly argues that the Wife does not substitute her own experience for authority, but rather questions the narrow interpretation by authorities such as Jerome (*Chaucer's Women*, 217).

to say: since women have only been dealt a limited set of cards, they should learn to use them in any way possible to win the game.

If we listen to her in this way, we see her taking pleasure in playing this role because she knows her outrageousness will provoke her male listeners. Consider, for example, what happens when the Wife quotes Paul in order to confirm her assertion that wives should control their husbands:

“I have the power duryng al my lyf
 Upon his propre body, and noght he.
 Right thus the Apostel tolde it unto me,
 And bad oure housbondes for to love us weel.
 Al this sentence me liketh every deel”—
 Up stirte the Pardoner, and that anon;
 “Now, dame,” quod he, “by God and by Seint John!
 Ye been a noble prechour in this cas.
 I was aboute to wedde a wyf; allas!”

(158–66)

In her statement, “Al this sentence me liketh every deel,” the Wife brings attention to her self-serving reading, boasting of it even, as though laughing at her own brazenness. The reaction of the Pardoner, who sees the Wife’s boasts as emblematic of all that men have to fear from women, helps to stage the provocational aspect of the Wife’s prologue. Indeed, it is a few lines later that the Wife makes her declaration that she is just playing; it is the Pardoner’s indignant reaction to her speech that leads her to package her tendentious jibes against men and marriage as play. Thomas Van has in fact seen the Wife’s prologue as a calculated performance meant to irritate her captive audience:

The Wife is aware of the ready answers systematic theology has for her questions, and she is aware that the clergy and intelligentsia in the audience are aware that she is aware. This makes her feigned pluralism and obtuseness all the more irritating to those who have to listen to it, and she knows that too. She is deliberately parodying the charges against her and her sex: “You’ve always told me I’m stupid; well here I am, being stupid again.”²¹

21. Van, “False Texts and Disappearing Women in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*,” 180.

Van's description of the Wife's "feigned obtuseness" is essentially an example of mimicry, a calculated and ironic performing of the feminine role. The limitation on this reading, however, is also illustrated in Van's description, for we cannot assert that the Wife of Bath, a fictional creation, "knows" anything, even less that she is "deliberately parodying" anything. To hear her doing so requires that we choose to hear her words as spoken by a woman (her "bodytalk," to borrow Burns's term) rather than as written by her male author.

Even when we do read her words consciously aware that they are written by Chaucer, we can nonetheless imagine the male author himself having fun with the logical implications of certain assumptions underlying medieval antifeminism. In one such example, the Wife uses the cliché of the superior rationality of men against them by arguing that if men are the more rational creatures (as they claim everywhere in texts preached to women), they should better be able to bear the caprices of their wives and should give in to them: "Oon of us two moste bowen, douteles, / And sith a man is moore resonable / Than womman is, ye moste been sufrable" (440–42). Again, the Wife's strategy (as designed by Chaucer) is to reappropriate clerical clichés instead of contesting them. Rather than trying to argue that women are smart, she appears to accept women's weakness of intellect only to turn this apparent weakness to their advantage. Chaucer is obviously playing his own game with logic, but in the process, he lends his words to a female character who demonstrates that despite her overt embracing of female corporeality and experience, her mind is as sharp as that of any man.

The connection between jesting and mental acuity was well recognized throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Joubert, for example, noted that "lampoons, jeering, and mockery" are to be encouraged because they "sharpen the mind."²² That wit could be particularly useful to women is suggested by Christine de Pizan's praise of her own wit against her male adversaries in the quarrel over the *Roman de la Rose*. In response to men who dismiss her objections to the work because she is a mere woman, Christine retorts: "Please remember that the small point of a knife can pierce a bulging, swollen sack."²³ Christine challenges assumptions about

22. Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 17. It should be noted that in the context of the passage, it is evident that Joubert is thinking of joking as valuable primarily to men, who need to demonstrate the arts of civil conversation.

23. Translation is Thelma Fenster's (25), which I prefer to the translation in Baird and Kane (63), which omits the word "swollen" (*enfle*): "Veulles toy reduire a memoire que une

women's "inferiority" (their emotional rather than rational response), bringing attention to the piercing quality of her own wit, which can expose supposed male authority as empty air. This deflationary power of wit is similarly evoked in Freud's assertion that the joke (*Witz*) "is able to open our eyes to the fact that [a] solemnly accepted piece of wisdom is itself not much better than a piece of nonsense."²⁴ The Wife of Bath's wit similarly serves to expose antifeminist discourse as a "piece of nonsense."

Rather than present an earnest defense of women, the Wife favors sarcasm and irony, through which she can ridicule men's pretensions to teaching, glossing, and preaching by exposing their self-serving motives. Whereas the Wife has been accused of being a self-serving misreader, many of her sarcastic comments serve to show that it is in fact men who use the authoritative tradition for their own purposes, the implication of her pointed question, "Who peynted the lion?" Such rhetorical questions are indeed typical of her sarcastic voice that interrogates her adversaries while insinuating her own response. Christine de Pizan also leveled rhetorical questions against her male adversaries. Ridiculing the hypocrisy of Jean de Meun's defenders who argue that the poet's use of words for the genitalia are natural and therefore not obscene, she asks, "But you, who argue in so many ways that they should be named by their name and that Jean de Meun's Reason spoke truly, I ask you sincerely—you who are his special disciple, as you say—why don't you name them openly in your writing without tiptoeing around the matter?"²⁵

Such rhetorical questions put the adversaries' methods on trial. It is not the content of the message so much as the motive behind the message that is criticized. For example, the Wife mocks the pontificating of men's sermons against their wives, admonishing one of her older husbands, "Thou comest hoom as dronken as a mous, / And prechest on thy bench, with yvel preef!" (246–47). In showing her husband's pompous preaching to be hypocritical, she challenges the validity of anything he might say. This recall's Christine's deflation of Jean de Meun's "erudition" through her

petite pointe de ganivet ou cotelet peut percier un grant sac plain et enfle de materielles choses" (Hicks, *Le Débat sur le "Roman de la Rose,"* 25). For a full discussion of Christine's use of wit against her adversaries, see Fenster, "Did Christine Have a Sense of Humor?"

24. Freud, *Jokes*, 57.

25. The translation is by Fenster, "Did Christine Have a Sense of Humor?" 26. The passage may also be found in Baird and Kane, *La Querelle*, 123; for the original French, see Hicks, *Débat*, 123.

ironic praise of his great and difficult adventures: "Quel lonc procès! Quel difficile chose! / Et sciences et cleres et obscures / Y mist il la, et de grans aventures!" [Oh what a long affair! How difficult! The erudition clear and murky both that he put there, with those great escapades!] (ll. 390–92).²⁶ Such ironic praise exposes the great author's writing as overblown. Similarly, the Wife brags to her audience how she would talk back to one of her first husbands: "After thy text, ne after thy rubriche, / I wol nat wirche as muchel as a gnat" (346–47). In referring explicitly to the text and heading of the medieval manuscript ("thy text," "thy rubriche"), the Wife reduces to gnat size not just her husband's lecturing, but written authorities as a whole. A similar deflation occurs when the Wife characterizes Jankyn's quotations of his books as "proverbes" and "olde sawe" (660). She has in effect likened Jankyn's appeal to centuries of male authorities to keep his wife in line to the spouting of old wives' tales. With her wit, the Wife not only disregards the teaching of her husbands, but undermines it by showing it to be hypocritical and pretentious.²⁷

I would like to pause here to consider a common reading of the Wife of Bath that may appear somewhat analogous to my own, but differs in an important respect. Many have seen carnivalesque impulses in the *Canterbury Tales*, the Wife being a particularly clear example, representing the licensed disorder of the unofficial world in contrast to the official world of the authorities, such as the Clerk. Whereas the Wife represents the material realm with her large hips, scarlet clothes, loud speech and laughter, the Clerk is gaunt, poorly dressed, silent, and somber. The two figures look remarkably like the two figures of Carnival and Lent shown battling in visual representations of the period.²⁸ By extension, the Wife's literal, aural

26. *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours* (translation is Fenster's [32]); Baird and Kane, *La Querelle*, 37.

27. Others have observed the deflating power of the Wife's wit. Priscilla Martin suggests that her laughing and joking represent "the dreaded female 'tee hee' at male pretension" (*Chaucer's Women*, 219). Alan Spearman has argued ("How He Symplicius Gallus") that the Wife's failure to accurately use the names of her written sources can be seen as a calculated satire on men's foolishness, suggesting, for example, that in using the name "Symplicius" to refer to "Sulpicius," the husband who left his wife discussed by Walter Map and Valerius, the Wife is not simply making a mistake, but deliberately playing on the word *simple* in its meaning of uneducated, ignorant, and foolish.

28. For the association of the Clerk with Lent and the Wife with Carnival, see Jon Cook, "Carnival and *The Canterbury Tales*," especially 179–89. This distinction between the lean, unlaughing scholar and the fat, laughing woman recalls Laurent Joubert's observation that scholars are less likely to laugh because studying weakens the blood, whereas women and the foolish have more moisture, which is conducive to laughter (see the introduction).

experiential use of the text is meant to contrast with the Clerk's allegorical, written, authoritative glossing. Indeed, Bakhtin argues that in carnival rituals women generally represent the material bodily principle and are positively charged:

Womanhood is shown in contrast to the limitations of her partner (husband, lover, or suitor); she is a foil to his avarice, jealousy, stupidity, hypocrisy, bigotry, sterile senility, false heroism, and abstract idealism. The woman of Gallic tradition is the bodily grave of man. She represents in person the undoing of pretentiousness, of all that is finished, completed, and exhausted. She is the inexhaustible vessel of conception, which dooms all that is old and terminated.²⁹

Bakhtin's description reminds us both of the Wife's bodily energy and her voice that mocks masculine pretension. However, the notion of the carnivalesque does not adequately account for the Wife's playful manipulation of her own speech. Whereas Bakhtin aligns women with pure carnality (however positive) and opposes her to masculine reason (however negative), the Wife's critique of authoritative discourse undermines this neat dichotomy. The Wife does embrace the bodily principle by boasting of her sexual appetites. But she does more than this, for she embraces her carnality in such a way that it ironically critiques and destabilizes the discourse that claims to distinguish between female corporeality and male rationality.³⁰

Wit and Women's Wisdom: Pragmatic Play

The Wife's witty attacks bring us to the etymology of the word *wit*. In Middle English, the word meant knowledge, wisdom, or understanding. It was only sometime during the sixteenth century that we have attested examples of the word being used in the way we now understand it—to make cleverly humorous remarks. The Wife herself uses the word to refer to a special kind of innate women's knowledge: "For al swich *wit* is yeven

29. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 240.

30. See Sarah Kay's argument, based primarily on an analysis of Jean de Meun's *Rose*, that "changing attitudes towards the problem of knowledge between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries trouble the equations between femininity and carnality, and between masculinity and the mind or spirit, which are extensively invoked in classical and patristic writing to justify the subordination of women to men" ("Women's Body of Knowledge," 211).

us in oure byrthe; / Deceite, wepyng, spynnyng God hath yive / To wommen kyndely, whil that they may lyve" (400–402). The practicality of the Wife's "know-how" (to deceive) is explained a few lines later when she tells her audience how she would get the best of her husbands by using her "wit." But given the Wife's characterization as a laughing woman who herself announces her "intent to play," the connection between knowledge, understanding, cleverness, and the ability to amuse is already implied. In her text, a "wise" woman is one who knows how to view the world with a sense of humor, from "beyond," playfully putting it to her own uses.

Such strategic wit of course was one of the traits most often coded as feminine in the Middle Ages. In sermons of the time, preachers reminded their parishioners, "Who was strengre than Sampson, wyser than Salamon, holyer than David? And ȝit thei were al overcomen by the queyntise and whiles of women."³¹ The medieval topos of women's wiles being passed from mother or godmother to daughter is clear in the Wife's remark that she learned how to lie from her mother: "I folwed ay my dames loore, / As wel of this as of othere thynges moore" (583–84). Here, the clever tricks of women are represented as a special knowledge that older women teach younger women, and so the Wife of Bath likely appeared to many of Chaucer's readers as yet another cautionary example of how men should beware women.

The Wife makes no apologies for her wiles, rather boasting that they are a particular form of women's wisdom. Describing the various strategies she used to play on her husbands fears and emotions, she declares:

Now herkneth hou I baar me proprely,
Ye wise wyves, that kan understonde.
Thus shulde ye speke and bere hem wrong on honde,
For half so boldely kan ther no man
Swere and lyen, as a womman kan.

(224–28)

This bold declaration shows the Wife to fit the medieval type of the sinner loving the sin, meant to implicate her even deeper in the satirical portrait made of her. Another way to hear her declaration, however, is as a mimicking of the cliché. Since, as the Wife has said, women are condemned no

31. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, 385.

matter what they do, they might as well use their allegedly feminine skills to their advantage. When the Wife discusses her relationship with her first three older husbands, she admits that she pretended that her husbands had said bad things about women in order to make them feel guilty and therefore give her what she wanted: “Lordynges, right thus, as ye have understonde, / Baar I stifly myne olde housbondes on honde / That thus they seyden in hir dronkenesse; / And al was fals, but that I took witesse / On Janekyn, and on my nece also” (379–83). This confession shows her unabashed manipulation of her husbands, but it also contains certain implications: if the Wife’s calculated lie was effective in getting her husbands to atone for their nasty comments about women, it was precisely because they evidently could imagine making those sorts of statements. The Wife’s lies work because, as the Wife knows, husbands would not be surprised to be told they were saying such things about women since, as the scene with Jankyn and that recounted by Christine de Pizan suggest, husbands often repeated antifeminist platitudes to malign their wives. The Wife has thus repackaged antifeminist rhetoric as a whole to use against specific men and has actually done so by impersonating male voices.³² She has taken control of the dominant discourse on women and put it to her own uses, beating men at their own game, which makes her “a pragmatic, worldly entrepreneur.”³³

It should be noted that such pragmatic deception, when used for proper ends, was not always censured by the medieval clerical establishment. Some medieval preachers in fact advocated that women use their wiles when open confrontation with their husbands proved ineffective for settling household troubles. A late-thirteenth-century compilation of Latin sermons by Peregrinus addresses the issue of wives whose husbands are unjust and unreasonable. In one charming parable, the text suggests that women emulate the female squirrel. After both male and female squirrel have hoarded their stock of nuts for the winter, the male sometimes ungratefully bars the female from entrance and hogs the nuts for himself. The female squirrel must then dig a little hole from underneath the tree roots so she can gain access to the nuts from below. Peregrinus advises women in his audience likewise to sneak behind their husbands should their husbands behave unfairly, but he forbids them “to make large holes,” to go too

32. This point has been made by Susan Crane, who, along with Dinshaw, explicitly connects the Wife to Irigaray’s concept of mimicry (*Gender and Romance in the “Canterbury Tales,”* 116).

33. Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest*, 118.

far in their stratagems. The anecdote of the squirrel reflects the wider emphasis in medieval sermons concerning marriage on "pragmatism and experience" and "reciprocity and mutuality."³⁴ Wives can use trickery pragmatically when the husband has failed in his duty to allow mutual and reciprocal considerations to form the basis of the marriage bond. The self-serving Wife is obviously not using her special wisdom for the sake of greater marital harmony, but like the female squirrel, she is faced with males who are not entirely model husbands either. The first three were far older than she was, and apparently prone to drunkenness, the fourth was a lecher, and the fifth, Jankyn, a misogynist with a hot temper. Although most medieval readers probably felt that the holes she made were too large by far, many may have recognized that some devious digging was justified. Moreover, the squirrel analogy could be applied not just to domestic disputes, but also to the public realm of discourse, for the Wife's extensive quotation of antifeminist texts describes not the specific circumstances of individual husbands, but an entire masculine discourse that claims that all women go to the devil. The Wife is thus pragmatic in that she makes do with the conditions she has inherited, attempting, through playful mimicry, to control the discourse meant to define her. The notion of comedy as psychological control is indeed a useful way to view the Wife, for since she has little control over the antifeminist tradition disseminated by clerical culture, she can seek relief from its harm by controlling it, and her masculine audience, through her laughter.³⁵

I have already suggested the extent to which the Wife can be seen to goad her male audience in her mimicking of tropes of feminine misreading. Her address to other "wise wyves" might also be heard as part of her performance. Since part of the fear surrounding women's deceitfulness is that it is a trait handed down from one woman to the next, the Wife could

34. Schnell, "The Discourse on Marriage in the Middle Ages," 773–74. Some medieval preachers also used clichés of female garrulity for pragmatic ends, urging women to use their persuasive powers of speech to lead their husbands to righteousness if they were not fulfilling their moral obligations as Christians. See Farmer, "Persuasive Voices."

35. On the notion of comedy as control, see Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play*. In an analysis indebted to Bakhtin's theory of carnival and to Olson's study of literature as recreation in the Middle Ages, Kendrick argues that the *Canterbury Tales* served as a kind of therapy to lessen fears engendered by fourteenth-century calamities such as plague, famine, war, and social unrest by providing the sense of control that could be gained from play. Surprisingly, Kendrick does not include gender in this list, and her brief discussion of the Wife centers on her tale and not at all on her prologue (126 and elsewhere).

be seen to be waving this fear in the faces of her male listeners. There are only two other women in the Wife's audience on the way to Canterbury: the Prioress and the Nun. It is other men such as the Host, the Clerk, the Friar, and the Pardoner who respond to her, not these women. Her appeals to women appear, in this light, as a further goading, an extravagant flourish on her performance as unruly woman.

What of Chaucer's readers? Although information on Chaucer's medieval readers is limited, there is a general consensus that the tales were known at the court of Richard II, at which women would have been present.³⁶ It is possible that the tales might also have made their way to women outside of the court, a possibility evoked in poems by Skelton in which bourgeois women know of the Wife of Bath and even view her as their spokeswoman. Moreover, invocations to women readers within the *Canterbury Tales* suggest that Chaucer expected that his tales would be read or heard by women. In the envoy to the Clerk's Tale, in which Griselda patiently endures her husband's humiliating tests of her fidelity, the Clerk asks the "archewyves" (or quintessential women) to ignore the example of Griselda and to defend themselves with their "crabbed eloquence" and not let their husbands dominate them (IV.1195–1204), an allusion to the Wife of Bath's own verbal art. This professed interest in women's responses is both an indication of Chaucer's awareness of women's potential rejection of the message concerning Griselda's submissive patience and a playful, double-edged response to women's own readings. On the one hand, by urging women to follow the example of the Wife of Bath, the Clerk seems to be placing himself on women's side, urging them not to let men abuse them: "Ne suffreth nat that men yow doon offense." Indeed, he voices considerable sympathy for Griselda as she endures the harsh treatment by her husband, which he at several points characterizes as excessive. On the other hand, by repeatedly appealing to clichés of feminine garrulity, he effectively hints that women are incapable of following Griselda's example, and we can imagine Chaucer's anticipating the stir the Clerk's words would create among the women in his audience. To their ears, the ironic praise of the Wife may have sounded like a backhanded insult, or at least a playful tease meant to provoke them.

Although women's actual responses to Chaucer's Wife are lacking,

36. See the four articles in "Chaucer's Audience: A Symposium" in the *Chaucer Review* 18, no. 2 (1983).

there is evidence that men thought she could potentially set a bad example for their own wives. In John Lydgate's "Mumming at Hertford," six wives argue that they should have sovereignty over their husbands, citing the authority of the Wife of Bath, who "Cane shewe statutes moo than six or seven" (l.169). John Skelton was also concerned about women's use of the Wife of Bath's example. In "Phyllyp Sparowe," the female narrator, Jane Scrope, summarizes the importance of the Wife as a lesson on women's authority over their husbands:

And of the Wyfe of Bath,
That worketh moch scath
Whan her tale is tolde
Amonge huyswyves bolde,
How she controlde
Her husbandes as she wolde,
And them to despise
In the homylyest wyse,
Brynge other wyves in thought
Their husbandes to set at nought.³⁷

A female authority who can turn obedient housewives into unruly ones, the Wife represents the danger of a fictional female character to unsettle the status quo.

Yet the laughter invited by the Wife's prologue does not necessarily separate along gender lines. The Wife's first three husbands are themselves a traditional butt of medieval humor: feeble old husbands too weak to pay their "debt" in the marital bed. This would make Chaucer's medieval readers unlikely to feel outrage when the Wife tricks them. Laurent Joubert, following Aristotle, emphasized that it was necessary that one not feel pity in order to laugh: "if at first we laugh, unaware of the injury, finally, struck with compassion upon learning of it, we stop laughing entirely and say with repentance: this is no laughing matter."³⁸ Men can laugh along with the Wife precisely because they have no compassion for her husbands, not only because of the husbands' advanced age, but more importantly, because they are so easily manipulated. The side we are

37. John Skelton, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Scattergood.

38. Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 20. In Aristotle's *Poetics*: "For the laughable is a sort of fault and deformity that is painless and not deadly" (49a31).

invited to take in comedy is often not right over wrong, but cleverness over stupidity. The Wife of Bath, whatever her vices, wins us over because we admire her cleverness and rhetorical dexterity, traits likely to have been admired among medieval audiences as well.³⁹ As a confirmation of medieval stereotypes of rampant feminine unruliness, she is satire, but because we can hear her manipulation of such stereotypes as clever play, she can also appear as the one in control of the comedy, the one offering up “solace” for her listeners. It is because the Wife is both jester and jest that her prologue is so variously interpreted.⁴⁰ I would now like to propose that this dual nature helps us to understand more fully the various interpretive layers of her tale as well.

Who Gets the Last Laugh? The Wife of Bath's Tale

As most readers have noticed, the lesson of the Wife's tale parallels the theme of the story of her own life: women's quest for mastery over their husbands. In her tale, a romance set in “th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,” a knight who has raped a woman receives his punishment from the queen: rather than put him to death, the queen grants him one year in which to find the answer to the question, “what thyng is it that wommen moost desiren.” After nearly a year of asking the question only to receive a bewildering number of contradictory answers, the knight comes upon an ugly old woman who offers to give him the answer on the condition that he give her anything she wants. The knight accepts. When the knight tells the queen the answer—women most desire to have sovereignty over their husbands and their lovers—his answer is judged correct by all the women in the kingdom. The old woman now claims her price: he must marry her. However, the knight, horrified at his fate, is granted a choice on his wedding night: either he can have his wife ugly but faithful or beautiful but unfaithful. He leaves the decision with her and, in doing so, she

39. Lindahl, *Earnest Games*, argues that in medieval culture, like other oral cultures where the spoken word has considerable power, “the ability to deliver insults that are subtle and clever is regarded as an art as well as a survival skill” (96), and furthermore notes that all the characters in the *Canterbury Tales*, like citizens of Chaucer's own London, have to appeal to the crowd in order to win favor (108).

40. Reid, “Crocodilian Humor,” 79, notes that the Wife “manages to be as much jester as jest,” but he neglects the Wife's playfulness, ultimately arguing that Chaucer intended for readers to condemn her.

magically transforms so that he will have her both beautiful and faithful. The man learns, as did the Wife's own husband, Jankyn, that domestic mastery, no matter what the authorities say, is best left in the hands of wives.⁴¹

While there is general agreement that the tale is a fitting one because its message of female sovereignty accords with the Wife's own view, it has been less clear why she chooses to tell a romance, not a genre one would expect from the bourgeois Wife. Indeed, it is probable that the tale originally intended for the Wife was a fabliau now generally attributed to the Shipman, in which a woman deceives her husband, profiting both sexually and financially. Why did Chaucer change his mind? What possibilities are offered by the romance that are not by the fabliau? One possibility is that the romance she tells is meant to bring attention to the genre itself. By foregrounding the unchivalric nature of the putative hero, the knight-rapist, and by substituting feminine power for masculine power, Chaucer, through the Wife, is also in some sense pointing to the subservient roles of women in traditional romance and then reversing them.⁴² But I would like to suggest that the Wife's choice of a romance is also part of her intent to play and that it is her performance of the tale, rather than the content alone, to which we should pay close attention. Perhaps the lesson of the tale is not as obvious as it seems.

Let us examine closely the way the Wife concludes her tale. Once the knight has given over the power to his new wife, she announces the benefit of this submission for her husband: "For, by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe— / This is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good" (1240–41). Although the wife now has sovereignty in the relationship, she does not invoke the image of the woman "on top" but rather now becomes the ideal wife, for from then on "she obeyed hym in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng" (1255–56). This ending parallels closely the outcome of the fight between the Wife and her own husband, Jankyn. After Jankyn has "given her the bridle," she says, "After that day we hadden never debaat. / God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde / As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde, / And also trewe, and so was he to me" (822–25).

41. The primary authoritative source on men's rule over their wives, used in subsequent texts of the antifeminist literary tradition, comes from the New Testament: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is head of the church" (Eph. 5:22–23).

42. On the Wife's choice of a romance, see Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play*, 124.

The ultimate lesson of the Wife's prologue and tale seems to be that if men can learn initially to allow their wives to have power, a sort of natural equilibrium will be restored in which a woman's desires will be in harmony with those of her husband. From this perspective, it appears that what the Wife truly wants is not mastery but equality.⁴³

Given the Wife's exposé of men's tyranny over their wives and her own tenacious recalcitrance, this image of marital harmony and domestic parity looks suspiciously neat: it sounds too good to be true. But perhaps that is precisely the point. Indeed, immediately following her rosy portrait of married bliss of the knight and lady she concludes with a flourish that is not so sweet:

And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende
 In parfit joye; 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! (1257–64)

With her curse on domineering and stingy husbands, the wife reverts to the voice of the unruly woman, repeating that the desire that matters is women's, whether material or sexual. There is thus a gap between the message in which the two lived happily ever after in mutual obedience and desire, and the Wife's afterword, in which the supremacy of feminine desire and domination is bombastically reinstated. The Wife's reversion to her first voice, erupting in midline, comically interrupts the controlled voice that claims that the couple lives "in parfit joye."

But how might we interpret this gap? How does it shape our interpretation of the moral of her story about the wisdom of old women? One possible reading is that the Wife has unwittingly undone the lesson of her own tale. Trying to teach men to obey women by holding out the promise

43. This point has been made by Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 125. Also see Schnell's "Discourse on Marriage in the Middle Ages," which argues for the necessity of distinguishing between discourses on women and discourses on marriage, the latter of which emphasizes the importance of compromise by both husbands and wives and targets the unreasonableness of both genders.

of pure bliss, the Wife can't help herself, and reverts to her natural feminine unruliness; in doing so, she demonstrates to her male listeners that such bliss can only be illusory given women's innate desire to dominate. The Wife has made herself the comic object of her own speech. But the curse could also be viewed as itself a kind of joke she plays on her male audience. Ensnaring her male listeners, the Wife has coyly offered a vision of male bliss obtained from ultimately pliant and faithful wives, only to deliver a one-two punch in which she reasserts the typically unruly female demand of the submission of husbands. This ending that gives and takes away in fact echoes other tales told in the *Canterbury Tales* and thus is evidently a procedure Chaucer enjoyed having his pilgrims do.⁴⁴ As the Clerk asks women to ignore the message of his own tale with his humorous envoy, the Wife similarly undoes her own message with her bombastic curse. Her curse, in my reading, far from showing her to be reverting to a putatively natural unruliness, shows her to be playing on the trope of female unruliness itself.

There are two observations to make if we interpret the Wife's curse in this way. First, we might consider the Wife's playful shift in register as itself the lesson of the tale, the abrupt change in voice allowing her to contrast the fantasy world of romance and its happy ending with the actual limitations that make such a world impossible. In her tale, the errant knight is swayed by the old woman's arguments and allows her to decide for the both of them. By implication, the tale asserts that men can learn from women in a way that works to the advantage of both sexes. The otherworldly setting of Arthurian romance precisely underscores the idealistic aspect of this vision in which female wisdom wins out over male ignorance. The advocating of feminine stratagems, suggested in the bulk of the Wife's prologue, might well be a more pragmatic solution than wishing that men would listen to women. With a laugh, the Wife once again asserts her strategic embrace of the stereotypical role of feminine misrule assigned to her.

Second, the Wife's curse could be read as part of the Wife's outrageous and provocative performance. Seeming at first to offer men a utopian vision of marital bliss, the Wife allows her own persona of the unruly woman to have the last laugh, and knows that this will get a rise out of her

44. Kendrick notes that in the *Canterbury Tales* it is common to find comments at the end of tales undoing their message (*Chaucerian Play*, 118).

captive audience, who now see that they have been tricked.⁴⁵ Her tale, like her prologue, is ultimately about control, and her laughter is what enables her to step beyond the position defined for her by the male authorities.

Does the Wife's parting curse mean that readers should discount the apparently serious lesson about marital cooperation implicit in her tale? Does her joky persona compromise her challenge to authority preached in her prologue? Certainly a risk of trying to make a serious argument with a playful voice is that the seriousness of the argument will be missed. This is the implication of a comment made by one of the brothers in the Pardoner's Tale: "Bretheren, takk kep what that I seye; / My wit is greet, though that I bourde and pleye" (VI.777–78). The conjunction "though that" establishes a clear opposition between "wit" or wisdom on the one hand and jokes or play on the other. In the Middle Ages, curses were one of the forms of marketplace humor and could be used to show familiarity between individuals.⁴⁶ The Wife's use of invective might then be seen as part of her "festive" mode of interacting with her fellow pilgrims.⁴⁷ The Friar's and Pardoner's interruptions of her speech could similarly be seen as a festive rendering of tit for tat. The Friar, although not explicitly characterized as playful in the General Prologue, is described as "wantowne" (pleasure seeking, jovial) and "merye" (208), and the Pardoner, although not noted to be playful, is certainly an arch performer. When the Pardoner interrupts the Wife early on in her prologue, saying, "I was about to wedde a wyf; allas!" perhaps he, too, can be heard to be playing the role allotted to him, just as the Wife's subsequent admonishment to him to shut up and her warning—"thou shalt drynken of another tonne, / Er that I go, shal savoure wors than ale" (170–71)—could be heard as playfully abusive market speech. Seen in this light, the interruptions of the two men and the Wife's own sharp retorts make the Wife's performance look more like game than earnest, more bent on entertaining her audience than on instructing them.

However, the distinction between game and earnest in the *Canterbury Tales* is hardly so neat. The Wife's rival, the Clerk, asks his audience to

45. I read the Wife's curse very differently from Hansen, who believes that the Wife, in trying to injure her addressee with her words, shows her "naive faith in language" (*Fictions of Gender*, 39).

46. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 16–17.

47. This point has been made by Andreas, "The Rhetoric of Chaucerian Comedy," 58. Andreas notes in particular the folk tradition of the "flyting," a kind of playfully invective poetry common among Chaucer's successors.

ignore the message of his own tale, yet it is unlikely that medieval readers took earnestly his slyly playful request that women emulate the "crabbed eloquence" of the Wife rather than Griselda's patience. Such a request seems, rather, to be a calculated stifling of any objections that would be offered by women such as the Wife of Bath. His play, in other words, is a masterful control of his audience in that it anticipates and forestalls interpretations that might resist the orthodoxy of his tale of exemplary female virtue or his exegetical gloss on it. While he has played at being women's friend, he has ultimately managed to smoothly counter the Wife's unruly appeal by reassuring the men in his audience that whether unruly like the Wife or exemplary like Griselda, women can be silenced in the interests of male dominance.⁴⁸

It might be objected that such a sophisticated mastery of his audience could be attributed to the Clerk because he is presented in the General Prologue as a serious man who would "gladly learn and gladly teach," whereas the Wife's teaching, as we have seen, appears as a perverse parody of a serious clerical exemplum, a mock sermon in effect. It might also be argued that the Clerk's envoy is distinctly separated from the rest of the text (the scribal heading of "Lenvoy de Chaucer" leading some to think it Chaucer's independent composition) and thus demarcates the line between serious and play, whereas the Wife's separation between her curse and her tale is less distinct. The Clerk's move may be executed with more sophistication, as one would expect of his training in rhetoric, but the Wife's earlier declaration that her intent is to play should put us on the lookout for her game, executed though it may be in her more suitably oral mode. Her curse, like the Clerk's envoy, despite its attempt to undo its message through play, ultimately asks us to return to the truth of this message, an invitation justified in the context of medieval culture generally, where play is seen to have a measure of truth behind it. A medieval proverb asserts, "En burdant dit hom veir" (In joking there is truth).⁴⁹

It is furthermore justified in the context of the *Canterbury Tales*' preoccupation with the truth behind jests. For example, when the Host teases the celibate Monk about his wasted virility, he adds, "But be nat wrooth, my lord, though that I pleye. / Ful ofte in game a sooth I have herd seye!" (VII.1963–64). The Host both notes that, despite his jesting, he has

48. On the Clerk's strategy of preemptively silencing the voices of any women like the Wife of Bath, see Hansen, *Fictions of Gender*, 205.

49. *Proverbes français antérieurs au XV^e Siècle*, ed. Joseph Morawski, 23 (proverb 633).

spoken some “sooth” and asks that such truth, so spoken, not anger his target. Similarly, after the Host has disparaged the Cook’s unsavory business practices, he nonetheless asks him not to be angry, for “A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley.” The Cook retorts that a jest that hits too close to the truth should be considered a bad jest: “But ‘sooth pley, quaad pley,’ as the Flemyng seith” (I.4354–57). Play may announce itself as merely a bit of fun, but it often covers up anger and aggression, a dissimulation condemned by the Parson, who prefers honest anger plainly expressed: “The goode Ire is by jalousie of goodnesse, thurgh which a man is wrooth with wikkednesse and agayns wikkednesse; and therefore seith a wys man that Ire is bet than pley” (X.538). In a later passage in his discussion of anger, he describes play as a kind of double-talk: “Now comth the synne of double tonge, swiche as speken faire byforn folk and wikkedly bihynde, or elles they maken semblant as though they speeke of good entencioun, or elles *in game and pley*, and yet they speke of wikked entente” (X.643; emphasis added).

The Parson’s comment, coming as it does at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, would seem to deliver with final authority the idea that it is better to just say what one means, with forthright indignation, than to use sleight of tongue. However, the Parson, who disdains verse in favor of prose, is characterized as hostile to humor in general, towing the line of conservative clergy whereby jokers are full of sin, “for they maken folk to laughe at hire japerie as folk doon at the gawdes of an ape. Swich japeres deffendeth Seint Paul” (X.650).⁵⁰ If Chaucer has the somber Parson deliver a view so hostile to play, it is because, through the Pardoner’s preaching, he is bringing the temporary space of his festive fiction to an end.

To return to Olson’s point discussed earlier, Chaucer uses his fiction to explore the tension between play as a public activity engaged in for mutual solace and a vehicle for expressing individual grievances. The pilgrims are expected to put aside any direct attacks on their adversaries and to use only fiction to respond to fictive injuries made by other pilgrims, for, as Kendrick notes, “the player who gets angry is a spoilsport and succeeds only in making his own fall into a reality.”⁵¹ The only fitting way to “quite” one’s opponent is to answer in kind, with a tale that disguises the “truth” under the guise of fiction.

50. This is a paraphrase of Eph. 5:4.

51. Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play*, 60.

In what sense might the Wife's performance reflect this convention? One problem with answering this question is that it is hard to ascertain Chaucer's final plan for the arrangement of his tales. When the Wife was originally assigned what is now the Shipman's Tale, Chaucer probably had her interrupt the Host's request to the Parson to offer a "predicacioun" to the company, but in the shape taken by the manuscript tradition, her prologue does not overtly package her tale as a response to another teller (as the Reeve answers the Miller, for example). The content of her prologue could be seen as a response to the Man of Law's saint's life/romance of Custance (the tale that precedes the Wife's in most manuscripts) and its assertion that "Wommen are born to thraldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governance" (II.286-87). Regardless of the links between the Wife and other pilgrims that Chaucer had in mind, the arguments in her prologue suggest that she is not responding to a "fictive injury" at all, but rather to the real injury of antifeminism that has shaped her life and that of all women. This real injury, however, is indeed related to "fiction," if by fiction we mean writing about women, the books of "wikked wives" read by Jankyn for his own amusement. We have come back to my earlier question about how a woman might respond to antifeminism.

In the context of Kendrick's argument about the proper response to fictive injuries, we can ask: As the butt of the joke of antifeminist satire, how does she respond without being a spoilsport yet escape being fully complicitous with that satire's representation of her as one of that class of "wyves"? Kendrick notes that in the *Canterbury Tales* the butt of the joke achieves one of two things by channeling his or her anger in a fiction: to show "either that 'the shoe does not fit,' that he does not perceive himself in or identify with the fabliau's scapegoat, but instead with the winners; or that he does identify with the scapegoat, but only partially, for 'he' comprises more than one self, and his superior self, invulnerable, is capable of laughing along with everyone else at the inferior self mocked in the fabliau's fiction."⁵² Kendrick suggests that the Merchant may be an example of the latter since the Merchant's tale of a cuckolded husband is a way of asserting his self-esteem, or "putting himself on top" in Kendrick's words, by telling a joke on himself. When we read the Wife's prologue and tale as a response to the antifeminist satire enjoyed by men such as Jankyn, her performance of feminine unruliness looks like a way of "putting herself

52. Ibid.

on top” by telling a sort of joke on herself. This does not mean that the Wife has merely reduced herself to a joke, for by showing her understanding of the terms of the game, she demonstrates that she can manipulate them. In packaging her ranting against male authority as play, the resulting tension is that she appears both as a woman with a serious bone to pick and as a joker intent on amusing her audience by playing her allotted role.

Would Chaucer want us to read the Wife as playful jester in the way I have been suggesting, and if so, why? To argue, as I have done, that Chaucer deliberately created a witty female spokesperson for women, endowing her with the power of play, is not to assert that he did so in order to champion women. The Wife’s discourse is used by men within the *Canterbury Tales* as a cautionary reminder of the woes of marriage, and Chaucer himself joked about the Wife of Bath in a poem to his friend Bukton, teasing him about his impending marriage.⁵³ But given that Chaucer’s own play with the “earnest and game” topos parallels that of the Wife, it is likely that Chaucer uses her in a way that is more complex than a mere cautionary example against female riot. If Chaucer seems so fond of his laughing Wife, it is more because of what she allows him to get away with than for what she says on behalf of women. Chaucer uses his Wife as a kind of feminine disguise that permits him to “talk back” to important literary traditions to which he belongs. Just as men in the later Middle Ages would don female clothing both as a practical disguise and as a symbolic license for their protest against oppressive civic authorities, the Wife is used by Chaucer to respond to a tradition against which his own literary contribution must be measured and judged.⁵⁴ Chaucer is thus not so much a

53. “The Wyf of Bathe I pray yow that ye rede / Of this matere that we have on honde. / God graunte yow your lyf frely to lede / In fredam, for ful hard is to be bonde” (*Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton*, p. 656, ll. 29–32). Similarly, in the Merchant’s Tale, Justinus, counseling his brother against marriage, reminds him of the dangers of marrying: “The Wyf of Bathe, if ye han understonde, / Of mariage, which we have on honde, / Declared hath ful wel in litel space” (III.1685–87).

54. Crane, *Gender and Romance*, 130. Crane argues that the Wife of Bath is Chaucer himself, taking on the transvestite persona as a sanctioned way to disrupt the literary conventions while “taking shelter behind the identity of the less responsible and rational gender,” referring to Natalie Davis’s work on the “woman on top” (in *Society and Culture*, 149–50). Crane also sees the loathly lady’s shape-shifting ability (between beautiful young lady and old hag) as an example of how both roles are masquerades that highlight the performative aspect of both poles of femininity (88). Elsewhere, Crane suggests that the episode in which the Wife destroys Jankyn’s book echoes an episode during the uprising of 1381 in which one Margaret Starre, participating with other rebels in burning books from the Cambridge library, shouted, “Away with the knowledge of clerks, away with it.” Crane notes that the uprising “was

sympathetic feminist arguing on behalf of women as he is a male author using his female character to play his own part in a masculine culture, which as De Bury's anecdote of the talking books suggests and as Jankyn's chuckling over his book explicitly stages, is a game played between men.

Yet Chaucer is also keenly aware that he is using women in this way. When the Wife asks, "Been ther none othere maner resemblances / That ye may likne youre parables to, / But if a sely wyf be oon of tho?" (368–70), her rhetorical question brings attention to a crisis of representation in which Woman has no meaning since she is only a "vehicle to be used for thinking," to return to Howard Bloch's words. Rather than showing that Chaucer is attempting to take sides pro or contra women, it suggests his interest in the discursive methods involved in debating questions such as these.⁵⁵ While not necessarily disagreeing with the negative pronouncements on women made by those such as Walter Map, he may nonetheless be keenly aware of the precarious logic underlying many of those arguments and aware of the resistance to them that could be voiced by readers, including his own. The framing of the storytelling contest within the outer frame of the pilgrimage in fact stages reactions to the individual tales, bringing our attention to the often contentious nature of literary interpretation itself.⁵⁶ As the prevalence of the game/play topos illustrates, Chaucer

inextricably bound up with anticlerical sentiment" ("The Writing Lesson of 1381," 215). Martin also explicitly connects Chaucer to the Wife: "Of the pilgrims she is closest to Chaucer. Like her creator, she criticizes through comedy, she weighs authority against experience and experience against authority, she is aware of the sexuality in textuality and she jokily subverts the conventions of male authorship" (*Chaucer's Women*, 217).

55. See Jill Mann's discussion of the Nun's Priest's absurd apology to women readers for the misogynous words of the cock Chauntecleer: "Passe over, for I seyde it in my game. . . . These been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne; I kan noon harm of no womman divyne" (VII.3262, 3266). As Mann observes, the words are in fact the priest's, not the cock's, so that the putative apology "is revealed as merely a mechanical piece of rhetoric, an evasion of authorial responsibility, equivalent to the evasion of masculine responsibility in the antifeminist comments themselves, which try to pin the blame for the fox's actions on the hen" ("Apologies to Women," 30). Such an absurd apology, claims Mann, shows Chaucer's awareness of the devious rhetorical moves made by male authors.

56. On this point, see Olson, *Literature as Recreation*, 162. Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, claims that one of the effects of the rebellion of 1381 was to engender an acute awareness in English authors of the potential of their words reaching audiences far beyond the elite circles for which they were intended. Noting in particular the awareness shown by the Nun's Priest of potential objections by the varied members of the pilgrimage group, each with their own class, professional, and gender interests, Justice argues that the *Canterbury Tales* differs notably from Chaucer's previous fictions in that it demonstrates Chaucer's anxiety about relations of power as they pertain to control of discourse and about the limited control that he could have over his own readers.

uses play to equivocate, exempting himself from the responsibility he leaves to readers.

This is the strategy that, according to Elaine Tuttle Hansen, makes Chaucer most resemble his Clerk, who, like Chaucer, uses his female character (Griselda) in a game played between men. Noting that Chaucer speaks through his characters in a way that plays on the proximity and distance between himself and his narrator, she argues that through the Clerk, Chaucer “creates the possibility of writing about his own limitations and biases with a penetrating self-scrutiny and an ironic self-reflexivity, and hence at the same time implying that he has in some sense escaped these limits and can be caught only in the equivocal act of writing and the liberating gesture of humor.”⁵⁷ What I find particularly intriguing about Hansen’s remark is that it returns us to the notion that characters in the *Canterbury Tales* use their playful fictions to show their awareness of their limitations, by telling a joke on themselves. But whereas Hansen sees a similarity only between the Clerk and Chaucer, viewing the Wife as an unwitting victim of Chaucer’s own joke, it seems to me that the Wife is useful to Chaucer precisely because she allows him to show his awareness of his implication in a tradition of male authorship, an awareness that enables himself to step beyond it to “put himself on top.” He gives his Wife a voice that critiques the tradition to which he belongs, but simultaneously shows he is still in control, demonstrating that he can play that role, too.

More importantly, the mastery he demonstrates through his feminine disguise does not foreclose the possibility of women’s participation in this literary game. In many courts throughout Europe playful linguistic sparring between the sexes was a kind of recreation in which women participated, both receiving and returning barbed witticisms. Given this cultural context, we should imagine women readers of Chaucer’s work able to get the jokes of the sly male narrators without necessarily being silenced or offended by them. Nicola McDonald has argued, for example, that Chaucer expected women readers of the *Legend of Good Women* to catch, and laugh at, the kind of banter performed by the narrator, who, after expounding at length the examples of men who have deceived women, urges women in the audience: “Be war, ye wemen, of youre subtyl fo, /. . . /And trusteth, as in love, no man but me” (2559–61). Most readers see this

57. Hansen, *Fictions of Gender*, 206–7.

comment as ironic, since the poet-narrator has, with a wink, implicitly aligned himself with the "bad men" of the legends he has just recounted rather than with the inscribed female readers he claims to champion. But McDonald also notes that

this type of humor does not, of necessity, exclude women. Unless a chorus of knowing female laughter is imagined in reply, the joke, I think, misses its mark. Indeed, if we don't imagine an audience comprised of both men and women, both equally "in the know," then much of the poem, and especially the narrator's banter, just doesn't work. The tastes, literary or otherwise, of aristocratic, fourteenth-century women are emerging only slowly, yet there is nothing to suggest that the *Legend's* blend of compliment and comedy would have offended them.⁵⁸

The notion of women and men "in the know" is useful for imagining Chaucer's playful relationship with readers of the *Canterbury Tales*, on whom he counted to play the game along with him. It also reinforces this notion of giving and taking away, which we have seen in both the Wife and the Clerk. In this context, the Wife of Bath could be seen as part of Chaucer's game with his female readers. He gives them a woman who speaks on their behalf, who spars with her adversaries, but he takes her away, too, by having her speak against herself. Such a game may help to show that a seeming defense of women is undercut by Chaucer's irony, but does not mean that women could not "get" and laugh at his game, particularly since Chaucer also shows in his character of the Wife that he is fully aware of the biases of the tradition from which he speaks.

I have argued for the many ways in which the Wife's use of play coincides with Chaucer's own. This does not mean, however, that the Wife is nothing but play. If Chaucer's creation of his fictional Wife was not motivated out of a desire to defend women, the effect of her performance is nonetheless to bring attention to the discursive methods used to define an authoritative tradition and the logical inconsistencies they entail, thereby blurring the lines between masculine and feminine, authority and experience.⁵⁹ Whatever Chaucer's view of women, what he has dramatized is the

58. McDonald, "Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," 24.

59. See the similar observations by Hahn, "Teaching the Resistant Woman," 434; and Crane, *Gender and Romance*, 131.

notion of antifeminism as a game, one that he is very self-consciously engaged in playing. His Wife, moreover, stages a woman's potential response to this game, inviting women, like her denied access to debate at the medieval university, to respond with laughter in a world where men would not always listen to the words of a wise old woman. Whereas De Bury's books can laugh at women because of their ignorance of a tradition forged by a coterie of male authors, the problem Chaucer's preoccupation with his Wife evokes is that the terrain of women and laughter has shifted into a realm far more public, in which women, although not dealt the same deck of cards as men, are determined to join in the game.