

Comedy and satire in Chaucer's  
portrayal of the Wife of Bath

by

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## I. INTRODUCTION

But that I praye to al this compaignye,  
 If that I speke after my fantasye,  
 As taketh not agrief of that I seye;  
 For myn entente is nat but for to pleye. (ll. 189-92)<sup>1</sup>

While critics may not have taken "agrief" at the words of the Wife of Bath in her prologue in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, they have generally chosen to disregard her stated intention of "pleye." The result has been a succession of sober, often somber, interpretations of the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale which, while contributing its share of light to Chaucerian scholarship, has also cast a shadow on the gaiety which shines through the work.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this study is to examine Chaucer's comic and satiric artistry in the portrayal of the Wife of Bath in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale in order to restore in some measure appreciation for the "pleye" which Chaucer intended.<sup>3</sup>

A review of scholarship on the Wife of Bath will show that while the majority of critics take at least cursory notice of the comedy and satire in her portrayal, most of the attention has been given to the more serious aspects of the Wife's characterization in her prologue and tale.

A study of the sources of the Wife of Bath's Prologue has established Chaucer's indebtedness to antifeminist material. The antifeminist tradition can be traced back to early biblical, classical, and patristic sources which may have influenced Chaucer. Satire becomes one of the major weapons of the antifeminist writers, who attack women for their lack of obedience, talkativeness and gossiping, vanity and love of

clothes, lecherousness, and other vices.<sup>4</sup> The critical interpretations which take account of the antifeminist background of the Wife's prologue usually perforce discuss the satire, with the emphasis on which particular vice she exemplifies rather than on the methods Chaucer uses for this satire. Thus, Hugh Walker sees her prologue as a "satire upon the lascivious woman," and Frederick Tupper singles out the Wife of Bath as the representative of Pride in his scheme of having pilgrims represent the Seven Deadly Sins. Not to be outdone, John Lowes proposes that the Wife represents not just one but all seven of the deadly sins. Katherine Rogers identifies the Wife of Bath as a composite of all misogynous charges, and Samuel Tucker says that Alison represents feminine lechery, selfishness, and tyranny.<sup>5</sup>

The debate over what the target of Chaucer's satire is in the Wife's prologue also subordinates attention to Chaucer's specific comic and satiric artistry. Rogers finds that the Wife of Bath is a penetrating critic of misogyny in her remarks about misogynous clerks (ll. 688-96); therefore, Chaucer is "probably making fun of misogynists as much as of women in this character and her tale." Also, adds Rogers, the Wife's defense of marriage is "so plausible at times that he seems to be raising questions about orthodox views of marriage" (p. 83). It has been suggested by several critics that the Wife of Bath communicates Chaucer's attack upon celibacy. Robert Root's view is typical; he says that it is "quite probable" that Chaucer recognizes the "fallacy of the prevailing ideal of celibacy" and is "interested in breaking down a false idol of his day."<sup>6</sup> Trevor Whittock takes this position a step further by

arguing that the ideal of celibacy led to sexual repressions, and Chaucer's satire in the prologue is against the "sex-obsessed and guilt-ridden attitudes of medieval Christianity." The Wife, by contrast, represents "naturalness, vigour, spontaneity, joy and fertility."<sup>7</sup> When the Wife's portrayal is carried to the point that she is said to be a serious exemplar of a new morality, much of the comic spirit is missed in her prologue.

Other critics view the Wife of Bath as a character with tragic dimensions, as, for example, in Thomas Lounsbury's comment that there is an "undertone of melancholy which suggests far more than it says" in her prologue, or Root's opinion that "With all her apparent gayety, she was not happy," which he illustrates by pointing out her unhappy marriages, her vague suspicion that her way of life is not the right one, her restlessness, and her aging.<sup>8</sup> Bernard Huppé separates the Wife's comprehension from the reader's by saying that "the comedy of the Wife's self-portrait has an underlying pathos because the reader understands as she does not--that the vigor of her apology covers and contains the delusion which makes her life an empty lie."<sup>9</sup> F. M. Salter carries this theme to its ultimate extreme in arguing that the Wife of Bath is a completely tragic figure because Chaucer is preoccupied with moral questions and is a reformer with an "ever-present moralizing bent" as seen in the hag's sermon in the Wife's tale; furthermore, Salter asks how the Wife can be considered a comic figure when she has had three marriages to "old worn-out lechers and drunken sots." He suggests that what he interprets as the Wife's unfulfilled desire for children adds to her tragedy, as does

her "bluster and arrogance and garrulity."<sup>10</sup> Only critics such as Salter, who consider the Wife's characterization as predominantly tragic, totally rob the Wife's prologue of its comedy and satire, but any such direction of Chaucerian criticism requires study of the comic and satiric aspects of Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife of Bath for balance.

Still other schools of Chaucer criticism have impeded or excluded studies of comedy and satire in the Wife's portrayal. One such distraction has been between the critics who see Chaucer's characters as individuals often with psychological depths of their own and those who see them as iconographical devices. The sketches of the pilgrims in the General Prologue, for example, have elicited interest in that while they are largely typical, they are so vivid that scholars look for historical originals.<sup>11</sup> David Parker calls attention to the many contradictions in the Wife's speech and behavior, arguing that such complications imply individuality; otherwise, it is difficult to explain the Wife's inconsistencies, since "the least we can ask of an iconographical figure is that it be consistent in its symbolic austerity."<sup>12</sup> Chaucer's methods in creating an impression of reality in the speech of the Wife of Bath have been analyzed by Dorothy Everett and Edgar Duncan. Everett describes some of the structural features of colloquial speech which help give the illusion that a real individual is talking and she finds it "hard to believe that such idiosyncrasies are not echoes of some living voice to which Chaucer had listened with delight and critical intentness."<sup>13</sup> One particular phrase, "bear on hand," is traced by Duncan to show the ways Chaucer has the Wife use this phrase as a structural, thematic, and rhetorical

connective to give actuality to the narrative.<sup>14</sup>

Wayne Shumaker disputes critical appraisal of the Wife of Bath as a directly observed, realistic creation not a type by calling attention to Chaucer's reliance upon literary convention. According to his estimation, the Wife's prologue has an average of over one new literary or mythological reference to every twenty lines. Shumaker contends that Chaucer's strongest interest is in the general and that he has no profound curiosity about the individual soul; therefore, the Wife of Bath has to stand as a representative of something larger and more important than herself.<sup>15</sup> Other critics deny the Wife individuality by relating her to an archetype. Thomas J. Garbáty, for example, notes that traits which have been said to individualize the Wife (her love of travel, tendency to overdress, gap teeth) can be found in the tradition of folklore and that the Wife is related to the old bawd character of late classical comedy who can be linked to the cloth trade, and who in turn may be traced back to the old weavers of myth who control the destiny of men.<sup>16</sup>

By far the most influential body of criticism involving the belief that the Wife of Bath is a representative figure is that of the biblical exegetes. D. W. Robertson, Jr., a leading proponent of the view that Chaucer portrays his characters by means of iconographical detail, warns that "characterization" is a misleading term to use for Chaucer's work "since the aim is not to delineate character in a psychological sense but to call attention to abstractions which may manifest themselves in human thought and action."<sup>17</sup> The Wife of Bath, Robertson says, is a "literary personification of rampant 'femininity' or carnality, and her exegesis is,

in consequence, rigorously carnal and literal."<sup>18</sup> Robertson shows how the Wife's Scriptural interpretations substantiate this view of her, as she attempts to subvert the traditional hierarchy of husband over wife whose spiritual counterpart is found in Christ over the church and the spirit over the flesh. Robertson's mode of analysis opens up new vistas of the world of Christian doctrine and Scriptural symbolism. While not fatal to the comic spirit, Robertson's rigorous interpretation of the Wife of Bath does slight the comedy of the work in that this method of exegetical portrayal has been made the sine qua non of the poet's art. The danger is that in digging through the "chaff" of the story, attention to the comedy and satire will be sacrificed in order to more quickly reach the "kernel" of truth. Even if the patristic avenue of interpretation is accepted as the most valid one, it would be difficult to prove that Chaucer thought less of his fiction than the exegetical truth within it.

As is the case with the Wife's prologue, there have been relatively few studies devoted to detailing the comic and satiric methodology and values of the Wife's tale. The presumably serious nature of the hag's sermon on "gentillesse" which occupies a good part of the tale (ll. 1109-1216) may explain the serious approach taken by most critics to the tale.<sup>19</sup> Because this sermon has not been considered from a comic and satiric standpoint, as it will be later in this study, a problem arises for critics who seek to relate the Wife's prologue and tale. The most widely accepted interpretation of the Wife of Bath's tale as an extension of her character from the prologue is that the tale illustrates her doctrine that sovereignty in a marriage should belong to the Wife.<sup>20</sup> But critics



differ in their explanations of why the coarse Wife of her prologue utilizes a sermon of such moral instructiveness in her tale. James Winny cites this apparent discrepancy as an example of the failure of Chaucer's art to achieve a creative synthesis; Winny says that "Chaucer has been unable to reconcile his philosophical interests with the individuality of the story-teller, and has chosen to accept inconsistency of character in order to develop his scholarly theme."<sup>21</sup> In order to absolve Chaucer of such a literary offense, other critics, such as Helen Corsa, resort to explaining the contrast by saying that the Wife has a hidden sensitivity about her wayward condition and a belief in and a longing for higher moral ideals which surface in the tale's sermon.<sup>22</sup> Other critics resolve the issue by seeing the Wife of Bath as a character who is of higher moral caliber than has been realized. Rose Zimbardo says that the Wife merely insists on the reasonable recognition of the duality of human nature in her prologue and educates the knight on the meaning of love in her tale, while Gloria Shapiro uses the hag's sermon as the basis of her argument that there is a religious dimension in the Wife's portrayal which "makes Chaucer's Wife of Bath far more convincing as a Christian than Chaucer's Prioress."<sup>23</sup> When the emphasis falls on Alison's moral and spiritual qualities, as in these studies, the comic and satiric aspects of her portrayal are underplayed severely.

Another group of interpretations diverts attention from the Wife's portrayal by concentrating on the knight of her tale. In these analyses the stress is on a very moral use of the sermon on "gentillesse" to reform the knight, a stress which also excludes much notice of the comedy

and satire in the tale. These critics argue that an important theme of the tale is the knight's conversion from, as Robert Lumiansky puts it, "a callous lawbreaker into a courteous gentleman" due to the hag's sermon.<sup>24</sup> The emphasis is therefore on the moral growth of the knight who earns his final happiness because he is a converted sinner.<sup>25</sup>

Still other interpretations focus on the tale as an allegory, apply the principles of patristic exegesis, or psychoanalyze the work. Robert P. Miller stresses the clerical role of the Wife and suggests that her tale is an inversion of a medieval exemplum (called Obedientia) which contrasts a fleshly and spiritual vision, and reveals an illusory beauty to be foul.<sup>26</sup> Glosses on the Wife's reference to the Midas story within her tale (ll. 951-82) are used by Judson Allen and Patrick Gallacher to show that the Wife does not fit her own image of herself, nor does she fit the Godly image of man.<sup>27</sup> Norman Holland takes a psychoanalytic approach to the tale, in which the fundamental contrast of the tale is between "masculine, verbal, limiting authority or 'maistrie' and feminine submission to the plenitude of experience."<sup>28</sup>

In all these various approaches to the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, Chaucer's comic and satiric artistry is either of little consequence for the analysis or it is circumscribed by being made subordinate to other concerns of the writer. Few studies have been aimed specifically at examining Chaucer's comic and satiric techniques and methods of portraying the Wife of Bath.<sup>29</sup> This paper will consider the Wife of Bath from this neglected comic and satiric perspective, and will adopt Aristotle's definition of comedy and Leonard Feinberg's definition of satire for this

analysis.

Aristotle's idea that comedy is meant to amuse, not cause suffering, has generally been accepted.<sup>30</sup> Satire is usually considered to blend a more critical attitude with humor and is commonly divided into two types: Juvenalian satire where criticism predominates and Horatian satire where humor outweighs the criticism. Often a reformatory motive of improving individuals and institutions is said to be involved in satire.<sup>31</sup> Attempts to distinguish between satire and comedy are complicated by the fact that satire uses comic techniques and methods and that there is an undercurrent of satire in most comedy as well. For often comedy partakes of what has been considered the province of satire, the exposure of someone or something to public ridicule.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the boundaries of comedy and satire are not distinct.

But the difficulties are reduced if satire is viewed from the perspective of Leonard Feinberg, who defines satire as a "playfully critical distortion of the familiar."<sup>33</sup> The essence of satire, for Feinberg, is the "revelation of the contrast between reality and pretense" in which what seems to be real is exposed as sham (p. 3). The satiric exposure which the use of playful criticism accomplishes may be distinguished from a purely comic exposure by evaluating the closeness with which the satirist pursues the object of his satire (p. 4). But this uncovering of the pretense through an intensity of pursuit beyond that found in comedy is not predicated on remaking an individual or society through the satire. A satirist's motivation, says Feinberg, is more likely to be "the aesthetic desire for self-expression" than an "ethical desire

for reform" (p. 12), which explains why a satirist does not always offer a moral lesson.<sup>34</sup> The chief appeal of satire is the pleasure and entertainment it provides the reader, whether that pleasure comes from the imaginative richness, vigor of invective, sustained mockery, or incongruity found in the narrative, or from the reader's simple enjoyment of being able to recognize the contrast between the real and the pretended (pp. 7-8). In the next section Chaucer's use of comic and satiric strategies and techniques in the Wife of Bath's Prologue will be discussed to demonstrate specifically how Chaucer's art shows the contrast between reality and pretense and brings about the pleasurable reaction of readers to his portrayal there of the Wife of Bath.

## II. THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE

The focus on the Wife of Bath from a humanistic, psychological, and iconographic point of view has in many cases obscured the comic and satiric attributes of her prologue which have long been a large part of her appeal to Chaucer's readers. The Wife's announced topic of the "wo that is in mariage" (l. 3), with its clarion call to the battle of the sexes, is rich in its potential for comedy and satire, a potential which Chaucer develops to its fullest.

Since it is often assumed that Chaucer depicts the Wife as a woman of singular honesty, at least in that she confesses all to her audience in her prologue, it may seem surprising that the major target of Chaucer's satire is her deceit and pretense with them. But, as Feinberg points out, "dissimulation is the richest source of satire" because pretense and hypocrisy are inescapable facts of life (p. 23). While the Wife of Bath flouts the religious strictures of her day by her many marriages and her usurpation of sovereignty from her husbands, she yet tries to justify herself to the audience. The Wife's dissimulation fits the pattern described by Feinberg as "man's pretense that he is always motivated by the ideal, the moral, the good, never by the actual, the immoral, the evil" (p. 23). The Wife qualifies for satiric treatment, therefore, because she has deviated from the norms of her society and because, in her attempts to justify herself, folly pretends to be common sense and even virtue. The major pleasure for the reader is in seeing how Chaucer exposes this pretense. The dissimulation is revealed to the reader by

means of a satiric monologue of the type which fits Feinberg's description: "the speaker unintentionally reveals his own defects, prejudices, and motivations while he thinks he is impressing his audience with his talents, wit, and magnanimity" (p. 245).

In the Wife of Bath's monologue Chaucer does not, for the most part, have the Wife of Bath flagrantly and brazenly defy conventional morality as if it has no worth or peremptorily dismiss Scriptural authority as invalid. If he followed this strategy with her, Alison would immediately be shown to the reader as immoral, foolish, or both, and the reader would lose the pleasure which comes from unmasking her pretensions. Neither does Chaucer have her abjectly acknowledge her guilt when faced with society's objections to her behavior, for this candor would win a sympathy which would largely preclude a comic and satiric portrayal of her.<sup>35</sup> Instead Chaucer has the Wife present an argument about marriage that, on the surface, is so plausible that even some critics believe that Chaucer is raising questions about orthodox views of marriage, seriously attacking celibacy, or aligning himself with the vanguard of a new morality. But this apparent plausibility of argument is merely a smoke screen that Chaucer sets up in front of his satire.

The comic and satiric subject of the first 162 lines of her prologue consists of Alison's self-righteous attempts to conceal her true motivations and impress her audience, while Chaucer is simultaneously exposing her dissimulation. The reader is faced with the challenge of apprehending Chaucer's strategy of exposure and uncovering this dissimulation; successful accomplishment of this task provides the major pleasure of

the satire.

The primary method of dissimulation which Chaucer has the Wife use in this first section of her prologue is the manipulation of traditional religious precepts and admonitions for her own advantage, often in order to give the impression that she still has their moral weight behind her. This manipulation can take several forms. In one instance the Wife brings up a Scriptural argument advanced by an unknown opponent against her five marriages which she drops without answering, as if it is unworthy of notice (ll. 9-13). The reader, however, apprehends the gravity of the charge against her and surmises that she ignores the text because its argument is unanswerable. In another case she objects that a text which seems to condemn her is unclear and ambiguous in meaning, and she shifts the burden of proof back onto her antagonist (ll. 14-25). The reader perceives that the text has a very obvious condemnatory meaning which the Wife ignores and that her question about the text's meaning is irrelevant and an attempt to change the subject. The Wife will also mention texts whose message she says she adheres to, while behind the words she embraces is concealed an unholy motivation which the reader detects through the double meaning of the words. Her motivation is invariably the enjoyment of the sexual act, under the guise of the more noble procreative motive, or of fulfilling the humble role she says God has assigned her.<sup>36</sup> Alison also tries to justify her position by aligning herself with the biblical "wise kyng, daun Salomon" (l. 35) who had many wives. But the reader who knows that the wives actually undermined Solomon's wisdom catches Chaucer's satiric suggestion that she would have the same

effect on her husbands. The reader also notes her inordinate interest in Solomon's sexual feats, an interest not legitimized as she hopes by calling his sexual capacity a "yifte of God" (l. 39).

Chaucer shows the boldness of her tactics of dissimulation most clearly in her appropriation of St. Paul. She claims him as an ally who has given her permission to remarry and rule in the marriage debt, but the reader notes that this ostensible moral support for her case comes from her ignoring the context of the Pauline passage she uses in lines 39-52. In the context St. Paul discourages marriage; the Wife glories in his grudging concession, disregards his admonition for self-control, and in lines 157-60 quotes only the part of the passage which gives the women power in the marriage debt--not mentioning the equal rights he assigns to the male. The reader further notes the overall incongruity of her use of the misogynous apostle who insists on the subjection of wives in his writings.

The pleasure for the reader throughout most of the first 162 lines comes with discernment of Chaucer's exposure of her dissimulating use of Scripture. A different type of pleasure is discovered when Alison abruptly sets aside her tactics of finding alleged Scriptural authorization for her sexual proclivities and next calls on what she first said she would use: experience. Experience tells us, she says, that the generative organs were not made just for elimination and to distinguish the sexes (ll. 115-24). In this section, Chaucer's use of certain techniques that are typical of satiric monologues produces the unintentional self-condemnation of the speaker.<sup>37</sup> The reader is entertained as he sees



that Alison is arrogantly proud of advancing an argument which is mundane in its obviousness and that she is blissfully unaware that she is actually exposing her folly and absurdity to the audience. Alison dramatically asks a rhetorical question and answers it with a childish truism:

Telle me also, to what conclusion  
Were membres maad of generacion,  
And of so parfit wys a wight ywroght?  
Trusteth right wel, they were nat maad for noght. (ll. 115-18)

She uses a euphemism rather than speaking forthrightly: "oure bothe thynges smale" (l. 121). Alison misrepresents the position of an imaginary opponent by stating an argument in obviously absurd terms and then refutes it when she invents unnamed opponents who naively insist "bothe up and doun" (l. 119) that the organs were made only for elimination and to tell the sexes apart, and "for noon oother cause" (l. 123). She is clearly setting these straw men up for a fall, and she triumphantly states, "The experience woot wel it is noght so" (l. 124). The ten lines of her argument compose another satiric technique, challenging an imaginary or absent opponent to stand up instantly and reply to devastating charges. The Wife's accusation that her opponents ignore experience is designed to be unanswerable by Chaucer, but not because of the persuasiveness of the argument as the Wife intends. Rather, the reader perceives that the argument cannot be answered because of its inanity, and because of the vacuousness of the puppet opponents which the Wife sets up to argue against.

When the Wife continues this argument, by saying that the genital

organs were made for both purposes, "for office, and for ese / Of engendrure, ther we nat God displese" (ll. 127-28), she is again cloaking her inclinations behind an outward show of religious impulses.<sup>38</sup> Yet there is also the comic suggestion that the Wife is saying that the sexual organs were made for both purposes only "So that the clerkes be nat with me wrothe" (l. 125). The implication is that if the clerks would not oppose her, she might argue that her experience has shown her that the sexual organs were made only for sex and not for the office of elimination at all. The idea is clearly absurd, but it forms an ironic counterpart to the simplistic view she attributes to her opponents that the organs were made for office alone. Again Chaucer has underlined for the reader the Wife's folly.

The Pardoner's interruption of the Wife's prologue provides a reinforcement of the reader's certainty that she is an inveterate dissimulator. The reader recognizes the irony in the Pardoner's praise of the Wife (l. 165) and catches Chaucer's satiric point that the Wife and the Pardoner are the same sort of "noble" preacher: their preaching gives the outward appearance of pious conformity to the standards of the day while camouflaging their unclean hearts and motives. Alison's agreement to the Pardoner's request to "teche us yonge men of youre praktike" (l. 187) signals a switch in Chaucer's satiric strategy.

Up to this point in the prologue, Chaucer has been exposing the Wife's pretense by having her justify her way of life by specious appeals to experience and authority. The reader catches the dissimulation Chaucer's satiric and comic techniques reveal and enjoyment results. The

reader expects continuing untruthfulness from the Wife after her pretense of the first section, so her agreement to tell the truth now about her "praktike" comes as a surprise. Chaucer is about to utilize the satiric technique called "unexpected honesty" by Feinberg (p. 144). In this technique, too, humor is caused by distortion of the familiar, but this time the untruthful remark is expected so truth is surprising; and it is a pleasurable surprise because, as Feinberg says, the reader enjoys "the violation of an artificial restriction" (p. 144). It is not common for a woman to admit her deceptive tactics and faults as does the Wife in this second part of her prologue; women usually hide their tactics or disguise them with ostensibly honorable excuses for their actions. Therefore the Wife's confession of her dissimulating methods and of disparaging character traits in women is entertaining because she violates society's restriction. When Chaucer uses this satiric technique of unexpected honesty he is no longer directing his satire at Alison so much as at women who continue to cover up the real nature of women which Alison admits. Chaucer is thus temporarily using Alison as an instrument through which he communicates his playful criticism of female society; the reader infers Chaucer's intention and appreciates the irony in the fact that the dissimulating Wife of the first 162 lines is now taking an active role in exposing her own dissimulating tactics and the vices of women in general.

Chaucer has the Wife use unexpected honesty when she tells of her own motivations and the procedures she follows with her three old husbands: in lines 197-234 the Wife admits that she only shows her old husbands

love and respect until they hand over land and treasure to her and that she will not bother to please them except for her own profit and amusement; in lines 379-99 she reveals her tactic of falsely accusing her old husbands of making antifeminist statements against her, and confesses other tactics which put her husbands into the guilt first and give cover to her own activities; and in lines 407-50 she forthrightly admits her mercenary motives as she describes her tactic of extracting gifts from a husband before she will allow sex and divulges her methods of scolding or wheedling her husbands to induce submission to her. The Wife also discusses her tactics with her fourth and fifth husbands, disclosing how she makes her fourth husband jealous by pretending to commit adultery (ll. 481-94) and revealing the "soutiltees" that trap Jankyn for a husband (ll. 575-84). Alison candidly speaks out about women's nature when she says that "deceite, wepyng, spyynyng" (l. 401) are given to women at birth by nature; she notes that she got the better of her husbands by judiciously employing such methods (ll. 400-06). She also reveals her love for wine and declares that women's defenses are down after drinking (ll. 464-68), and she speaks openly of women's "queynte fantasye" (l. 516) of wanting what is forbidden and not wanting what is pressed on them (ll. 515-24). Other examples of unexpected honesty from the Wife of Bath are found in lines 637-40 where she confesses to her stubbornness and talkativeness and to her disobedience of her husband's order that she not go about, in lines 530-52 where she lets out the fact that she betrays all her husband's secrets to her friends, and in lines 587-92 where she admits she cried for her dead fourth husband only since it was customary and wept very

little because she provided herself with a new mate.

Chaucer does not consistently pursue throughout the rest of her prologue the satiric strategy of having the Wife serve as a mouthpiece for such overt satire on women. The unexpected honesty about the nature of women from the Wife of Bath is a major technique used by Chaucer, but he also returns occasionally to his earlier method of revealing pretense. It is the reader's ability to recognize and appreciate Chaucer's ingenuity in his changes of satiric perspective through his handling of the Wife of Bath's portrayal which provides much of the reader's enjoyment in the satire.

Soon after the Wife promises the Pardoner that she will gladly teach young men of her "praktike," Chaucer manages the narrative in a way which reiterates the dissimulation exposed in her handling of Scriptures earlier. Certainly there is dissimulation involved in the conscious methods the Wife uses to deceive, entrap, and subjugate her husbands, but the pretenses here are admitted by the Wife, and so the reader, while gaining the pleasure of the surprise from this technique of honesty, loses the game of smoking her out. However, Chaucer arranges that she reverts to her old tactic of self-justification and the pretense of righteousness in lines 235-378, and the reader again has a chance to ferret out the reality behind her pretense.

In most passages where the Wife honestly reveals her tactics of deceiving her husbands the reader is aware at once of the particular tactic that she is using. But in introducing the topic of Alison's manner of speaking to her old husband, Chaucer does not have the Wife reveal

her pretense until the very end of her long discourse to the old man. Then she finally admits that he has not said the things she accuses him of saying. Until that revelation is made, Chaucer has the Wife build up what seems to be a self-righteous case for herself and against her husband. The reader, although wary, may momentarily be taken in by her portrayal of herself as the innocent victim of a tirade against her sex brought by an old inebriated husband. However, the reader soon catches on to Chaucer's exposure of her dissimulation, and the sympathy which could be created for her having to endure such an exorbitant attack dissolves in the satiric exposure. This revelation to the reader of her pretense before she admits she made it all up is shown through Chaucer's use of irony and invective.

In this section (ll. 235-378), the Wife's exasperation about the charges made against women clearly shows that she feels such remarks are uncalled-for. But the reader perceives that Chaucer intends an irony here. Chaucer is actually showing how Alison and, by implication, all her sex do deserve the antifeminist assertions to which she objects. For example, Alison strenuously objects to the idea that "we wyves wol oure vices hide / Til we be fast, and thanne we wol hem shewe" by saying, "Wel may that be a proverbe of a shrewe!" (ll. 282-84). But the Wife has admitted earlier that after her first three husbands had given her their land and treasure, "Me neded nat do lenger diligence / To wynne hir love, or doon hem reverence" (ll. 205-06). Also, the Wife has always managed to find a mate, like the "grey goos" of line 269, even though she scoffs at this accusation here. And she is furiously chiding her husband even

as she expresses her vexation at the notion that chiding wives make men flee out of their own houses (ll. 278-81). In this way Chaucer is undercutting her pretensions with irony and satire, and exposing her defects to the reader. As a result, the reader begins to feel that the Wife's husband has some cause to say such things about her, and by the time she triumphantly reveals "al was fals" (l. 382), the reader has adopted Chaucer's satirical judgment of her rather than being sympathetic or impressed. The reader is especially not likely to be impressed by her honesty at the very end, after her dishonest attempt to create sympathy for herself through the antifeminist material.

The reader also catches on to the Wife's dissimulation, before she explains the pretense, through Chaucer's handling of invective. The Wife upbraids her old husband with a series of epithets and curses which reflect her genuinely sincere anger at the complaints against women which she attributes to him. But the reader neither cringes from the force of her anger nor shares her displeasure because he perceives Chaucer's satiric use of the invective. The irony entertains.

Taken separately, each epithet and curse that she uses against her husband could be considered satiric since, as Northrop Frye says, "Attack without humor, or pure denunciation, forms one of the boundaries of satire. . . . It is an established datum of literature that we like hearing people cursed and are bored with hearing them praised, and almost any denunciation, if vigorous enough, is followed by a reader with the kind of pleasure that soon breaks into a smile."<sup>39</sup> When the epithets and curses the Wife employs are considered for their cumulative effect, they

become very humorous and the smile breaks into even more satiric laughter. Again, as with the undercutting irony, the sympathy toward the Wife as a victim of outrageous antifeminist attacks declines and dissolves in the laughter at her expense for using such extravagant invective. The sympathy the Wife plays for is more likely to shift over to the object of the invective, the husband.

Chaucer assigns only two curses to the Wife in this section: "With wilde thonder-dynt and firy levee / Moote thy welked nekke be tobroke!" (ll. 276-77) and "O leeve sire shrewe, Jhesu shorte thy lyf!" (l. 365). He prefers to rely on epithets to communicate her anger and to provide the pleasure to the reader which vigorous invective gives. When a string of epithets is heightened by "bombast, novelty, or polysyllabic verbosity,"<sup>40</sup> as David Worcester describes it, a satiric effect is immediately produced. Consider the cumulative satiric effect of the uncomplimentary names which the Wife of Bath calls her old husband: "Sire olde kaynard" (l. 235), "Sire olde lecchour" (l. 242), "thou verray knave" (l. 253), "lore!" (l. 273), "olde dotard shrewe" (l. 291), "olde barel-ful of lyes" (l. 302), "olde dotard" (l. 331), "sire shrewe" (l. 355), "Sire olde fool" (l. 357), and "O leeve sire shrewe" (l. 365). The versatility of the vituperative variations, even when played around the repeated words of "sire," "old," "dotard," and "shrewe," permits the reader enough distance from the Wife's bluster to admire the form of the attack and lessens the empathy of the reader with the Wife's indignation.<sup>41</sup>

The animal metaphors and similes are also aimed by Chaucer at undercutting her and entertaining the reader in this section. This technique



of satiric invective is used extensively by Chaucer. The Wife says the old husband has come home drunk as a mouse (l. 246). She attributes to her old husband charges that a woman will leap on a man like a spaniel (l. 267), that a woman will always secure a mate like the gray goose (ll. 269-70), that while oxen, asses, horses, and hounds can be tested before purchase, wives cannot be until after marriage (ll. 285-91), that Alison is like a cat in her desire to show off her clothing (ll. 348-56), and that just as worms ruin a tree, a wife destroys her husband (ll. 376-77). The reader does not respond with outrage, as does the Wife, to the comparisons with animals which denigrate women. Instead, the reader sees that Chaucer has designed these analogies to reflect adversely on her bid for sympathy. The Wife's attempted deception of her audience by implying that she actually was intimidated by a drunken harangue from her old husband is undermined by the animal comparisons. The old husband is never accorded an intimidating presence in this section because of the simile with which the Wife introduces him--"Thou comest hoom as dronken as a mous, / And prechest on thy bench, with yvel preef!" (ll. 246-47). Although the accusations which the Wife says the husband has made against women are fierce enough, the image created in lines 246-47 of a timid mouse made bold only by liquor undermines the sympathy which might otherwise be accorded to a woman bullied by a drunken old husband and an overall irony is created that a man-mouse so easily overmatched is the target of such violent epithets from the Wife. When the Wife later says that her husband has compared her to a cat (ll. 348-56), the reader anticipates that a cat-like Wife will have little trouble disposing of a

drunken mouse-like husband.<sup>42</sup>

In these ways, throughout lines 235-378, Chaucer is exposing the dissimulation of the Wife of Bath who, until she finally admits "al was fals" (l. 382) and her husband is guiltless, is playing for the sympathy of the audience with her story of the extremely antifeminist statements attributed to her old husband. But sympathy here would interfere with her satiric portrayal, and Chaucer uncovers her dissimulation long before she reveals the tactic she is using through his use of irony, invective, and animal similes. The reader catches Chaucer's satiric strategy here and, far from sympathizing with her, is more likely to be critical of a woman who promises to be truthful to her audience, but tries to deceive them by building up sympathy for an affront against her which, it turns out, never took place.

Alison tries another bid for audience sympathy and uses her tactics of dissimulation again in lines 609-26 where she attributes her nature to a conflict in the astral influences of Venus and Mars:

Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,  
And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse;  
Myn ascendant was Taur, and Mars therinne.  
Allas! alas! that evere love was synne! (ll. 611-14)

Guided by the stars, she says, she was never able to deny her "chambre of Venus" to a "good felawe" (l. 618), and, as befits the bold aggressiveness of Mars, she never used discretion in love but always followed her appetite, "Al were he short, or long, or blak, or whit" (l. 624). In her words is a supposed outcry against a God who crossed her stars, then condemned as sin the fact that she followed the path those stars imposed

upon her. Yet the reader recalls her deceptive nature, and remembers how she earlier shifted responsibility for her actions to the God who called her to the estate of wifehood. Here she also attempts to justify her sexual propensities, this time by claiming that she is an innocent victim of the irony of the cosmos--a cosmos created by God. From a satiric perspective, the Wife is following her personal appetite, for which a conflict in astral influences serves merely as a convenient excuse. The reader does not, therefore, lend her sympathy and his ability to discern the motives beneath her pretense of being star-crossed provides the satiric pleasure.

This same pleasure in seeing the motivations at the heart of the Wife's dissimulations is found in lines 550-62 where Alison says that since her fourth husband is away, she is free to attend evening festivals, processions, preaching, pilgrimages, weddings, and miracle plays because, "What wiste I wher my grace / Was shapen for to be, or in what place?" (ll. 553-54). There is here the self-righteous pretense that she is abroad for her spiritual well-being. But since there are sexual overtones from the words "leyser for to pleye" in line 551, and since Chaucer follows with a description of the "daliance" (l. 565) that the Wife has with the clerk in the field, the "grace" which the Wife seeks may be interpreted as the hopes of standing in grace (enjoying the good will or favor) of a young man such as Jankyn rather than the Lord. Again Chaucer satirically belies the Wife's self-justifications. Furthermore, it is obvious that to see and be seen in her "gaye scarlet gytes" (l. 559) which moths never have a chance to touch is of much importance to her

during her outings.

In lines 634-821 the comic and satiric strategy which Chaucer uses can best be explained in terms of Immanuel Kant's belief that laughter results from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. Chaucer plays on the expectations of his readers throughout this section, and the comedy is produced from the continual collapse of these expectations. At the same time, Chaucer is pointing up the self-justifying tactics of the Wife of Bath and leaving his final satiric comment on her dissimulation. The result for the reader is the pleasure in discerning Chaucer's satiric strategy even as he is being taken in by it, and in detecting Chaucer's exposure of the Wife of Bath's pretense.

Chaucer uses the Wife's habitual digressiveness as the method by which he accomplishes his comic aim. In lines 634-36 the Wife first mentions that Jankyn once hit her for tearing a leaf out of his book, a blow which made her deaf, but she immediately veers off the topic to discuss herself, and does not return to it until lines 666-68, where she promises to "seye yow sooth, by seint Thomas" (l. 666) what happened in the book incident. But, although she names the book this time at least, she soon strays off the subject again, this time to speak against clerks. At this point Alison seems as exasperated as the reader may be at her inability to get to the point, when she says, "But now to purpos, why I tolde thee / That I was beten for a book, pardee!" (ll. 711-12). By this strategy of repetition of promises to tell the story, Chaucer has built up a series of frustrated expectations in the reader, who still has not found out what happened to the Wife with Jankyn. To add to the reader's

comic plight, the long description of the book's content in lines 713-85 becomes repetitious as well, as instance upon instance of woman's perfidy to man is noted until it seems that the Wife will never get to the point of her story. The frustrating repetitiousness which has been built up finally breaks out at last in the scene of slapstick comedy which ends her prologue.

At the same time as Chaucer is dangling the reader with hints that now, at last, she will tell how and why she was made deaf, he is exposing the Wife's dissimulation as well. For each time that the Wife brings up the story she tries to solicit undeserved sympathy. In Alison's early references to the final incident, she emphasizes her injury and the indignation of being beaten for a mere book. But, during her description of the climactic struggle with Jankyn, the reader has the pleasure of uncovering her pretense. The reader sees that she incites the blow which makes her deaf not only by tearing leaves from his book, but also by hitting him into the fire. Furthermore, the Wife's deception is detected by observing the way she puts Jankyn in the wrong by accusing him of trying to murder her for her land. The accusation is irrelevant, but one which forces him to return the possessions and land to her to prove the assertion untrue. It is the dissimulation so characteristic of her portrayal (rather than the force of her blows) which gives the Wife the bridle, and "governance of hous and lond, / And of his tonge, and of his hond also" (ll. 814-15).

It is only appropriate that the deceiver should herself be deceived. The Wife of Bath feels that she has created a utopia of woman's rule at

the ending by gaining the sovereignty and mastery, after which there was no debate. She concludes:

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.  
I prey to God, that sit in magestee,  
So blesse his soule for his mercy deere. (ll. 823-27)

But it is a satiric utopia, a pretense that a satisfying way of life has been established. The reader sees the shortcomings, just as he has seen the faults of the Wife even through her self-justifications throughout her prologue. The reader is aware of the norm the Wife has violated, the norm expressed by the Parson in his tale: God did not make Eve to head Adam, "For ther as the womman hath the maistrie, she maketh to muche desray. Ther neden none ensamples of this; the experience of day by day oghte suffise" (l. 926).

In view of the "desray" which is expected from the Wife's usurpation of sovereignty, her assertion that she and Jankyn lived in mutual peace is suspect. Although the Wife is unaware of it, lines 823-25 suggest that Jankyn has triumphed after all since he at least gains a true and kind wife. Chaucer is undercutting her once more and has possibly manipulated the conclusion to provide the happy ending typical of comedy.

But as is so often the case with Chaucer there is an underlying ironic question about this "happy ending" that the reader is left to consider: just how kind can one expect any wife from Denmark to India to be? The answer to that question will depend on how serious the reader thinks Chaucer is about his satire on women in the Wife's prologue. The satire is often aimed at the Wife of Bath as a representative embodiment of

traits discernible, at least to medieval writers, in all women. But Chaucer's attitude toward the Wife is ambivalent. Chaucer never succumbs to the temptation of portraying Alison as a completely grotesque caricature of female vices, or as an object of disgust. He seems genuinely fond of her as his literary creation, however much he might personally be antipathetic to her type. The satire is often so clearly extravagant that any criticism is almost swallowed up in the humor of its presentation. While Chaucer's satirical treatment of Alison may suggest an attempt to laugh her back into line with the medieval tradition of masculine supremacy, his satire primarily gives the entertainment which is the chief appeal of satire according to Feinberg's definition. And the final effect on the reader of Chaucer's satire and comedy may well be the catharsis of laughter for all participants in the ongoing battle of the sexes.

### III. THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

The Wife of Bath's Tale has been variously approached as an allegory, a patristic exemplum, a romance, and a psychoanalytic case study, and analyzed for its relationship to its analogues and the loathly lady motif. But very little attention has been given to the tale for its comic and satiric values alone, except as they are subordinate to (and affected by) the major topic under discussion in the studies. One critic has even suggested that "at our remove from Chaucer's time, the humor seems more potential than real; Chaucer does not bring the jest to the surface. . . ."<sup>43</sup> But especially when the tale is considered in light of the portrayal of the Wife of Bath in her prologue, many comic and satiric elements come to light and take on new meaning and luster. And even if the Wife of Bath's Tale is studied apart from the character of its teller, there are many comic and satiric aspects worthy of note. This study will show how Chaucer does exploit most of the comic and satiric potential of the Wife of Bath's Tale, particularly through his use of verbal irony. This comic and satiric verbal irony, as well as dramatic irony, often has links back to the Wife's portrayal in her prologue. Also, explanations will be given of why Chaucer does not on occasion exploit some of the comic possibilities of the tale which are found in the analogues. Finally, the hag's sermon on "gentillesse" will be discussed in terms of the Wife of Bath's portrayal in her prologue in a way which knits up her characterization as a dissimulator, the primary object of Chaucer's satire in her prologue and tale.



Since sexual references and allusions have been a major means of furnishing comedy and satiric thrusts throughout the Wife's prologue, it is not surprising that Chaucer has the Wife lead into her tale with that same subject. The Wife usually is the object of Chaucer's satire, but before she begins her tale Chaucer uses her as the instrument through which a satiric jab is communicated. No sooner has the Wife named the setting of her tale than she resumes the battle of the sexes encountered first in her prologue, this time with the friars. Alison says, with sarcasm, that elves of the ancient days of King Arthur have been displaced by limiters and other holy friars who, with "grete charitee and prayeres" (l. 865), have meddled everywhere. The Wife, of course, aims her barb at the Friar of the pilgrimage who meddled with the telling of her tale by calling attention to the length of her prologue (ll. 830-31), while Chaucer is aiming at the wider mark of all friars who fit Huberd's description in the General Prologue (ll. 208-69). The Wife says that limiters walk where elves used to go, and now women can wander safely, since "Ther is noon oother incubus but he, / And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour" (ll. 880-81). Robinson explains the apparent meaning of line 881 as "the friar brought only dishonor upon a woman; the incubus always caused conception" (p. 703), which makes her words a satiric comment on the friar's lack of potency. There is also a criticism of the hypocrisy and dissimulation of the limiter who says "his matyns and his hooly thynges" (l. 876) while he is betraying himself through his actions, dishonoring women and prying about. The friars and limiters are said to search every part of the country:

Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,  
 Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,  
 Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes. (ll. 869-71)

While money is undoubtedly one object of their search, in cities and castles, there is at least the implication that they seek women to dishonor in "boures" and "chambres," the latter word calling to mind the idea that they may have blessed "chambres of Venus" with the great charity of their presence.<sup>44</sup>

The Wife is wielding Chaucer's satiric criticism of friars, yet the satire reflects on her as well. It is ironic that the Wife, whose dissimulating tactics for achieving monetary and sexual goals have been shown to be as devious and hypocritical as those of the praying, prying friars, is the agent of attack on friars. And the fact that she would pretend to take the high moral stance, looking down with a questioning eye on their behavior while ignoring her own, is consistent with her portrayal in her prologue.

The battle of the sexes, initiated here with the reference to the friar, revolves around the sex act, a theme which gains in humorous effect as it is repeated throughout the tale with comic variations. Holy friars are reputed to assault women; a noble knight rapes a maiden, then declines to fulfill his marital debt to a hag--until she changes to a beautiful woman. These series of situations and participants play off each other in the form of ironic comparisons and contrasts. It is an easy transition from a friar who assaults women, forgetting the celibacy his religious training requires, to a knight who rapes, forgetting chivalrous respect for women and his social standing.

It is generally conceded that the incident of the knight's rape of a maiden is Chaucer's own addition, since it is not found in any of the major analogues of the tale.<sup>45</sup> Critics who play up the importance of the sermon in this tale have to contend with the incongruity of starting a tale of "gentillesse" with rape. From the comic and satiric perspective, the inclusion of rape has obvious benefits. It is appropriate that the Wife would alter a story to make it more to her liking (as she does with the Midas tale later). The addition of the rape scene reflects the Wife's insatiate interest in sex and thereby, if obliquely, comments on the obsessive nature of her preoccupation with sex. The Wife is thus made to comically and inadvertently reveal her true propensities under the guise that she is telling a story. In this way the Wife illustrates what Frye calls the "ritual bondage" of comic characters to their obsessions (p. 168), and she fits Henri Bergson's description of comic characters who follow up one idea, adjusting everything to their way of thinking.<sup>46</sup>

The rape incident itself provides a further exemplification of the battle of the sexes, with a maiden under male constraint and domination as was also true with friars. The Wife sets up this issue by her choice of words, "maugree hir heed, / By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed" (ll. 887-88), and by referring to this act as "oppressioun" (l. 889).<sup>47</sup> The reversal of control in this battle of the sexes which later results provides an ironic contrast.

But indications of the ruling power of women come long before the final granting of sovereignty to the hag. A contributing factor to the comedy is the continual emphasis throughout the tale on the mastery of

woman and the abject subjection of man. Although recent critics have turned their attention to the knight as the key figure in the story, there is little textual evidence to support giving him such prominence in the narrative. After the knight performs the act of rape, he becomes a puppet whose strings are pulled by women throughout the tale and his subservience is underlined at every juncture in the plot. The very fact that the knight is a person made mechanical in the Bergsonian sense is one of the underlying bases of the comedy as the reader sees his lack of control over his own life.

The queen and "othere ladyes mo" (l. 894) ask that the knight's life be spared, and King Arthur hands over authority to the queen at the outset, foreshadowing the proper course of events from the Wife's point of view. The queen's dominion is total as she is given control of the knight "al at hir wille, / To chese wheither she wolde hym save or spille" (ll. 897-98). She reiterates this fact pointedly to the knight: "'Thou standest yet,' quod she, 'in swich array / That of thy lyf yet hastow no suretee'" (ll. 902-03). The queen poses the question he must answer of what it is that women most desire, adding in a touch of the Wife's own instructive, finger-shaking style, "Be war, and keep thy nekke-boon from iren!" (l. 906). In a year he must submissively yield his body to the court with the answer. The next affirmation of the knight's constraint comes from the Wife's words, "Wo was this knyght, and sorwefully he siketh; / But what! he may nat do al as hym liketh" (ll. 913-14). She adds:

And at the laste he chees hym for to wende,  
And come agayn, right at the yeres ende,  
With swich answeere as God wolde hym purveye. (ll. 915-17)

This statement is ironic in its suggestion that the knight actually has some free will in the matter ("he chees hym"--but the choice he must make is obvious when faced with death if he refuses the queen's offer) and it reiterates his powerlessness. His only hope to find an answer is if God will provide it; that a puppet cannot rely on himself is the comic suggestion.

The Wife's listing of the various answers which the knight receives to his question in lines 925-48 is obviously a passage satirizing women, a link to the charges against women which Alison pretends were made by her old husbands in her prologue. In keeping with the Wife's character, this passage is a satirical digression in which the Wife can't resist giving her own opinions on the answers which are given within the context of her tale.<sup>48</sup> Since she is ostensibly talking for all women, all women are the object of satirical attack here.

The Wife does not have to exhibit outrage at the criticisms of women expressed in this passage. She is not here trying to score a moral victory over old husbands to shame and deceive them, so she can afford a little unexpected honesty as she says,

He gooth ful ny the sothe, I wol nat lye.  
A man shal wyne us best with flaterye;  
And with attendance, and with bisynesse,  
Been we ylymed, bothe moore and lesse. (ll. 931-34)

Although the Wife doesn't give her opinion of the ideas expressed in lines 925-28, the desires mentioned there call to mind the Wife of her prologue as well as being vices imputed to the female sex generally:

Somme seyde wommen loven best richesse,  
 Somme seyde honour, somme seyde jolynesse,  
 Somme riche array, somme seyden lust abedde,  
 And oftetyne to be wydwe and wedde.

The Wife, of course, has often been widowed and wed, and five times has provided herself a husband--"Yblessed be God that I have wedded fyve!" (l. 44). Three husbands were good and rich, and she took care to extract gifts from them. She demands the honor of being first at the offering, and reflects happily on her "jolitee" (l. 470), her lusty nature (ll. 605-26), and her love of "gaye scarlet gytes" (l. 559). The satiric criticism of women found in lines 925-28 obviously includes Alison. Then, in lines 935-44, she elaborates the idea first expressed in her prologue when she said, "I hate hym that my vices telleth me" (l. 662). Now the satire is extended to all women as she says, "For, be we never so vicious withinne, / We wol been holden wise and clene of synne" (ll. 943-44).

The proposition that women like to be thought discreet and incapable of betraying secrets which men tell them starts out as a fairly direct satire on women in that the Wife says, "But that tale is nat worth a rake-stele. / Pardee, we wommen konne no thyng hele" (ll. 949-50). Alison speaks as if no woman will disagree with her, and the implication is that all women are indiscreet babblers of secrets, a common enough satirical accusation. The satire narrows its focus to one particular woman, Alison, when it is recalled from her prologue how she would tell everything her husband did or said to her gossip, "and to another worthy wyf, / And to my nece . . ." (ll. 536-37), whether her husband "pissed on a wal / Or doon a thyng that sholde han cost his lyf" (ll. 534-35). She boasts of how she did it so often that his face grew red and hot

with shame as he "blamed hymself for he / Had toold to me so greet a pryvetee" (ll. 541-42).

The satire on women and on Alison is continued as she tells the tale of Midas to illustrate her point. The fact that the Wife's tale of the knight has hardly begun when she digresses for another tale suits the character of the Wife of Bath, and a satiric potshot is taken at the presumably garrulous, rambling nature of women's speaking habits. Alison says that Ovid tells of how Midas had two asses' ears hidden under his hair, a secret which he kept from everyone but the wife he loved and trusted. She promised not to tell of this disfigurement, but at last she could not keep it in any longer and unburdened his secret to the water in a marsh. The tale of Midas thus substantiates the Wife's claim that women "kan no conseil hyde" (l. 980). But, as is consistent with Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife of Bath, the dissimulation which is so much a part of the Wife's nature surfaces even within her unexpected honesty. For the betrayer of Midas' secret in Ovid's story is not his wife but his barber, and the Wife is again deliberately and boldly deceiving her audience to accomplish her aim.<sup>49</sup> The boldness of her tactics of dissimulation is emphasized when she even dares to refer the audience to Ovid for the remainder of the tale, where the reader could discover her deceptive alteration of Ovid's tale if it was not already known.

This same sort of pretense to her audience that she is being honest was seen as she bent St. Paul's words to express approval of her actions. After making over St. Paul for her purposes, the alteration of Ovid's tale is a simple task indeed for the Wife. Alison earlier withheld from

the audience the fact that her old husbands never made the antifeminist rantings of which she accused them; in this manner she was stringing her audience along and deceiving them. In this way Chaucer is satirizing women's seemingly natural inclination to dissimulate, even when they are supposedly speaking in all candor and admitting vices. Rather than giving the Wife points for her honest revelations about women, Chaucer is cleverly underlining her duplicity and deception. The audience, aware of her misapplication of Ovid, sees through Alison's pretense and recognizes the humor and the implied criticism in Chaucer's exposure of her.

After the satirical digression of the tale of Midas the Wife returns to her tale and continues to emphasize the bondage of the knight, who must return after a year: "he myghte nat sojourne" (l. 987). The knight's encounter with the hag would seem to be a perfect place for Chaucer to use comic exaggeration in describing the hag in hideous detail, as is the case in analogues of the tale where her ugliness is elaborated upon.<sup>50</sup> Instead Chaucer merely says "A fouler wight ther may no man devyse" (l. 999). Since the Wife is the narrator, and since there is an implication that the Wife identifies with the hag to a certain extent and uses the hag as her agent within the tale, it is appropriate that the Wife never makes the tale comic at the expense of the hag. The hag must be ugly for the purposes of the tale, but this ugliness is not emphasized by the Wife. From the point of view of the Wife, the joke is entirely on the knight and the comedy is at his expense. Chaucer is not willing to sacrifice this integrity in his portrayal of the Wife for laughter at the hag who is the Wife's heroine in the tale.



As is often the case with Alison, the hag is in control of the situation from the beginning. The hag can provide the knight with the answer, since "Thise olde folk kan muchel thyng," as she tells the knight (l. 1004). In the analogues of the tale, the hag is later revealed to be a victim of enchantment.<sup>51</sup> But the hag of the Wife's tale is no victim; she is autonomous, as is the Wife. Out of the hag's all-knowing wisdom, she produces the answer and whispers it to the knight, saying that the proudest one of all who wears a "coverchief or a calle" (l. 1018) will not deny the truth of the answer--and certainly this would be true of the proud Wife of Bath who wears her ten-pound coverchief on Sundays (General Prologue, ll. 453-55). Then the reader is kept in suspense along with the court until the answer is given by the knight. In John Gower's "Tale of Florent" the reader is told the answer when the hag tells the hero, and the hag's request for marriage is also made known at this time.<sup>52</sup> Chaucer's revisions heighten the comedy by adding a note of suspense and surprise to the proceedings.

The women of the court, presided over by the queen, assemble to hear the knight's answer. Women are clearly in charge, and one can hear Alison's tones of approbation as she notes that "Ful many a noble wyf, and many a mayde, / And many a wydwe, for that they been wise" (ll. 1026-27) are present. The knight gives the answer that women desire sovereignty and mastery over man, and admits his bondage to the queen: "I am heer at youre wille" (l. 1042). There is a comic unanimity of agreement of the women that this is indeed the correct answer, considering that earlier the knight could not find "Two creatures accordynge in-feere"

(1. 924).

Earlier the knight has plighted his troth to the hag (1. 1009) in promise to do the next thing she requires of him if her answer is accepted at court. It is therefore ironic that plighting his troth is precisely what the hag requires--in marriage to her. Calling for the "mercy" of "my sovereyn lady queene" (1. 1048), the hag asks that he fulfill his pledge and marry her. It is ironic, though understandable, that although the knight has just said that women desire sovereignty, he is hardly willing to put it into practice with the hag. The knight's reaction is, of course, comic in its desperation: "For Goddes love, as chees a newe requeste! / Taak al my good, and lat my body go" (ll. 1060-61). There is further irony in the fact that he hardly realized that he would literally have to "yelden" his body "in this place" (1. 912) as the queen had requested--and to a hag, at that. The hag's equal determination to marry is expressed in the exaggeration of her reply:

For thogh that I be foul, and oold, and poore,  
I nolde for al the metal, ne for oore,  
That under erthe is grave, or lith above,  
But if thy wyf I were, and eek thy love. (ll. 1063-66)

Considering that she has just saved him from death, his reply is ironic: "'My love?' quod he, 'nay, my dampnacioun!'" (1. 1067). He goes on to protest that one of his birth should be so disparaged. But again, the Wife's narration emphasizes his lack of choice:

But al for noght; the ende is this, that he  
Constreyned was, he nedes moste hire wedde;  
And taketh his olde wyf, and gooth to bedde. (ll. 1070-72)

The audience sees that the puppet is again being dangled by its strings, and amusement results. The humorous precipitousness with which the

Wife's narration puts the knight in bondage to wed, and has him take the hag to bed in line 1072 reminds the reader of the quick marriage of the Wife to Jankyn where there was also an age disparity, although Jankyn presumably was a more amenable bridegroom. The telescoping of lines 1071-72 from marriage to bed is indicative of the Wife's interest in this aspect of the marital relationship.

The Wife next shares a joke with her audience when she says that some might say she doesn't describe the joy at the wedding feast because of laziness; but the truth is "ther nas no joye ne feeste at al; / Ther nas but hevynesse and muche sorwe" (ll. 1078-79). Despite the humor of these lines, this section has been criticized as being "far removed from the Wife's ribald sense of fun."<sup>53</sup> It could be argued that even more comedy could be provided by playing up this unlikely pairing in marriage by an elaboration on the wedding feast here, thus providing more ribald fun which would be more typical of Alison. But again, as in the description of the hag's ugliness upon meeting the knight which Chaucer eliminates, the "ribald sense of fun" would have to be at the expense of the hag, which would be out of keeping with the Wife's empathic identification with the hag in the tale. The analogues which do describe preparations for the wedding rely on the ugliness or cantankerousness of the hag to create the humor. In Gower's "Tale of Florent," the hag is cleaned and dressed for the wedding, but it is said that "with no craft of combes brode / Thei myhte hire hore lockes schode" (ll. 1749-50), and

when sche was fullliche arraied  
And hire atyr was al assaied,  
Tho was sche foulere on to se. (ll. 1757-59)<sup>54</sup>

In "The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell," the hag, Ragnell, insists on riding openly into court with King Arthur, putting him to shame, and she makes Gawain pledge his troth in the presence of all the knights. All feel sorry for Gawain because of her great ugliness--she has teeth as long as bores' tusks, for example. Ragnell insists that there be a large wedding, open to the public with High Mass as well. Although she is richly arrayed at her wedding, "So fowlle a sowe sawe neuere man, / Ffor to make a shortt conclusion" (ll. 597-98), and at the wedding feast she gorges herself, and breaks her meat with her long fingernails: "Therefore she ete alone" (l. 609).<sup>55</sup> Obviously, describing the events leading up to the wedding and including a wedding feast would provide an opportunity for much comedy. But Chaucer stays true to his conception of the Wife of Bath, and keeps the comedy focused on the hapless knight's predicament.

In Chaucer's version the Wife says only

For prively he wedded hire on the morwe,  
And al day after hidde hym as an owle,  
So wo was hym, his wyf looked so foule. (ll. 1080-82)

Although not as elaborate as the sources, this brief passage provides its own special comedy, with the emphasis on the knight. Chaucer's use of the comparison of the knight to an owl is certainly apt in that an owl hides from the sun by day, and the knight would prefer not to be seen with his new bride. But it is also an ironic comparison in that the owl is active and a predator by night, while being active and predatory with the hag is the last thing the knight wants. There is also another association with the owl which provides an interesting comparison. Rowland

says that the owl came to be regarded in bestiaries and homilies as "a representative of unclean sensuality" (p. 40). Considering the knight's crime of rape, this application is also appropriate.

Chaucer and the Wife continue to spotlight the knight's reluctance with his new wife. She says that the knight has great woe in his mind "Whan he was with his wyf abedde ybrought" (l. 1084). Although it was customary for wedding guests to put a couple to bed, there is a slight intimation in the word "ybrought" that he came to bed not entirely of his own volition and desires, in comic and ironic contrast with the earlier incident in which he raped the maiden "maugree hir heed, / By verray force" (ll. 887-88). The audience is meant to laugh with the Wife at the knight who "walweth" and "turneth to and fro" while "His olde wyf lay smyllynge everemo" (ll. 1085-86). The joke is on the knight as the Wife describes how the hag, who clearly has the upper hand even now, taunts the knight. The questions the hag asks him are asked in Alison's own tones of questioning insistence:

O deere housbonde, benedicitee!  
 Fareth every knyght thus with his wyf as ye?  
 Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures hous?  
 Is every knyght of his so dangerous? (ll. 1087-90)

The knight, of course, had not been "dangerous" (sparing) with the maiden he raped, which provides the jab of comic justice in her words. The hag then reminds him of things he would prefer to deny if he could: "I am youre owene love and eek youre wyf; / I am she which that saved hath youre lyf" (ll. 1091-92). She berates him for his treatment of her, and with an innocence that is comic asks, "What is my gilt? For Goddes love,

tel me it, / And it shal been amended, if I may" (11. 1096-97).

The comedy of this section centers on the knight's failure to pay his marriage debt. The bed has always been the battleground of the sexes for the Wife of Bath, so its use here is appropriate to the teller. This scene has comic and satiric reminiscences of her prologue in that Alison has been a young wife who can be "dangerous" in paying her debt to an old husband. Her implied criticism of the knight in the tale for not fulfilling his debt is therefore a satiric reflection on her hypocrisy. She has had little interest in sexual relations with an old husband, despite the obligations of the marriage debt: "And yet in bacon hadde I nevere delit" (1. 418). So she would chide her husband (just as the knight chides the hag for being old, ugly, and low-bred). She could be sparing of her body, like the knight--until a "raunson" was made. But at least the Wife would then "suffre hym do his nycetee" (1. 412), which is more than the knight is willing to do with the hag.

The knight finally states his objections to her:

Thou art so loothly, and so oold also,  
And thereto comen of so lough a kynde,  
That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and wynde. (11. 1100-02)

After expressing her ignorance, comic in its ostensible innocence, that this has been the cause of his unrest in bed, the hag gives the knight a sermon. The most telling point in the sermon from the hag's point of view is her assertion that true "gentillesse" does not come from ancient possessions but from the pursuit of noble deeds. This statement is not so much a reply to his objection to her base birth as it is a reflection on the knight, who committed the ignoble deed of rape. There is an

overall comic incongruity in the fact that this sermon on "gentillesse" is preached in bed, and by an old hag. But the location of the sermon is typical of the Wife of Bath, since the bed has long been a favored place of hers for both sex and instruction (she schools old husbands in how to give her gifts to receive sexual favors there). The setting is also appropriate in that the Wife attempted to ensnare Jankyn with a dream about a bed, and the Wife will have the hag capture the knight in bed.

The sermon as a whole is a praiseworthy expression of social and moral norms of Chaucer's time. Therefore, critics have had some difficulties reconciling the sermon with the coarser aspects of the Wife's portrayal in her prologue. It is not necessary to consider this apparent discrepancy an inconsistency of character due to an artistic fault. Nor is it necessary to ferret out indications from her prologue that the Wife has a hidden morality which comes out in the sermon in her tale. The ostensible incongruity does not even have to be explained as an intended comic irony.<sup>56</sup> By this time the reader should be wary of accepting the Wife's portrayal without scrutiny. The reader remembers Alison's clever pretense that Scripture justifies her behavior, her shrewd use of anti-feminist materials against her old husbands by pretending they have abused her with them, her pretense of adultery to make her fourth husband jealous, her finagling of mastery from Jankyn by pretending he intends to kill her for her land, and, within this tale, her change of Midas' barber into a wife for her purposes. After remembering all this, the reader should suspect that the Wife may again be employing a dissimulative

strategy through her use of the hag's sermon.

Far from revealing her hidden inclinations toward morality, the Wife's use of the hag's sermon is Chaucer's satiric comment on her amorality, at best, and her immorality, at worst. The Wife has shown that she will use any means available to accomplish her purposes, whether it be by twisting Scripture or using antifeminist complaints for her benefit. Within her tale, the Wife has the hag use noble sentiments to trap the knight into turning over sovereignty which should rightfully be his. In a manner similar to the way in which she gained the moral advantage over her old husbands by shaming them for their outrageous remarks, Alison gains the moral advantage over the knight through the hag by reversing his objection to the hag's low birth back upon him to shame him for his lack of "gentillesse" in raping the maiden--while pointing out that the hag possesses the "gentillesse" that he lacks. Once this moral advantage is won by the hag, the Wife immediately expands its moral weight to secure an unlawful mastery over man. Dazzled by the wise morality of the hag's sermon and presumably ashamed of his behavior, the knight says, "I put me in youre wise governance," (l. 1231), after being offered the choice of having her old, foul, and humble or young, fair and of dubious fidelity. The hag's moral advantage, hitherto confined to the issue of "gentillesse," has now been accepted by the knight as sufficient grounds for leaving up to her the specific choice with which she has presented him. The hag then sets the trap the Wife has laid for the knight: "'Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie,' quod she, / 'Syn I may chese and governe as me lest?'" (ll. 1236-37). The trap snaps shut as the knight



replies, "'Ye, certes, wyf,' quod he, 'I holde it best'" (l. 1238). His recognition of the hag's moral advantage within the sermon has been mindlessly extended to include her right to make the decision about the choice he is offered and, finally, to her right to make all the decisions and have all the sovereignty in the marital relationship.

The accepted social and moral sentiments of the day should not be abused to achieve an object antithetical to other standards of Chaucer's era; the virtuous means of the sermon on "gentillesse" do not justify the end of the subjection of the knight to his wife. And true "gentillesse" would not sanction use of such a sermon to shame someone to give up the sovereignty which belongs to him by custom, law, and morality of the time. Use of the sermon for such a deceptive purpose to accomplish selfish ends fits the dissimulating tactics the Wife has used throughout her prologue. The satiric criticism thus focuses on the Wife and her agent, the hag, who use social and moral norms for a goal inimical to conventional standards, and not on the knight, who is merely a dupe who is manipulated to make the "right" decision to hand over mastery. The reader responds to the comedy found in the hag's confounding of the knight through a sermon, and to the satiric glimpse at the Wife's methodology, rather than to the knight's awakening to true "gentillesse" and to the noble sentiments in the sermon itself.<sup>57</sup>

The Wife uses the sermon in her tale as she does Scripture in her prologue, to justify her obsessions, and to win an advantage over her opponents by a show of morality. At the start of her tale she admits, "For, be we never so vicious withinne, / We wol been holden wise and

clene of synne" (ll. 943-44). It is possible that this desire might rank second only to sovereignty on the list of women's desires, for Alison. Indeed she uses the one to accomplish the other. By claiming the moral advantage and playing for the applause of the audience for her lofty stance, she thinks she is impressing her audience with her "talents, wit, and magnanimity," while (through the satiric monologue form) she is, as Feinberg's definition continues, actually revealing her own "defects, prejudices, and motivations" (p. 245). The satiric perspective exposes the dissimulation in her pretense to the higher grounds of morality. This pretense is inadvertently unmasked when the hag, after her very elevated sermon and before she offers the choice, guarantees the knight the pleasures of the flesh: "But nathelees, syn I knowe youre delit, / I shal fulfille youre worldly appetit" (ll. 1217-18). The Wife's own interest in delight and worldly appetite emerges here, and comically negates the moral instructiveness of the sermon.

After all the Wife's maneuverings to achieve sovereignty for the hag in the marriage with the knight, it is ironic that the hag promises to be both fair and good, and "good and trewe / As evere was wyf, syn that the world was newe" (ll. 1243-44) and that after the hag transforms herself into a beautiful young woman, the Wife adds, "And she obeyed hym in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng" (ll. 1255-56). More than likely this turn-about does not really make much of an impression upon first reading. Happy endings are expected in comedies, and the reader might merely nod in approval at the Wife's words about the couple's conciliation at the end. As in the prologue, Chaucer provides a hint

that the proper relationship of man and wife has been restored. Chaucer's satirical attitude toward the Wife of Bath is not so intense that he cannot step back, as here, and supply what his audience would recognize as a happy ending.

But even so, Chaucer does not abandon his impish gleam of satire at the conclusion--the transformed hag will be as good and true a wife as ever a wife was since the world began; but just how good and true have wives been since Eve? And, as if to keep both reader approval for the happy ending and awareness of Alison's satiric portrayal, Chaucer adds the final touch, a mingling of happy ending and satiric invective from the Wife of Bath:

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 wol nat be governed by hir wyves;  
 And olde and angry nygarden of dispence,  
 God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (ll. 1257-64)

## IV. NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Citations from Chaucer in the text are from The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

<sup>2</sup> The predominant reason for lack of critical comment on Chaucer's comic artistry may be found in the explanation given by Howard Rollin Patch, On Rereading Chaucer (1939; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 17-18, that "there are readers who regard humor as trivial, as if comedy must always be an interlude, and mirth a little lower than the dignity of the angels." Patch poses the question of whether the sublime can be achieved through humor and quotes the words of the Wife of Bath on her fading youth (ll. 469-80) to show that sublimity is not a matter of solemnity but of vitality, "of life itself in its fullness and with all the disturbing implications that accompany it" (p. 21). But it is a measure of comedy's low esteem that Patch must justify comedy's worth by an appeal for its "sublimity" based on a passage more serious than comic.

<sup>3</sup> This study will deal with the Wife of Bath's portrayal as a separate literary entity with its own internal comic integrity, apart from her relationship with other pilgrims and their tales. While full consideration of the Wife of Bath as a comic and satiric character would necessitate inclusion of analysis of her contribution within the Human Comedy of the "Marriage Group" of tales, certain limits had to be placed on the scope of the current investigation; limiting it in this way also allows for exclusion of questions concerning the proper order of the tales. For the "Marriage Group" proposal, see George Lyman Kittredge, Chaucer and his Poetry (1915; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1927), pp. 186-211. Kittredge's belief that the stories exist for the sake of the characters (p. 155) will be assumed for this study. For commentary on the "Marriage Group," see Robinson, pp. 697-98.

<sup>4</sup> For the source texts, see "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," in Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, eds. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1941), pp. 207-22. Robert A. Pratt studies the manuscript situation of this material in the fourteenth century in "Jankyn's Book of Wikked Wyves: Medieval Anti-matrimonial Propaganda in the Universities," AnM, 3 (1962), 5-27. An analysis and comparison of Jean de Meun's Duenna (a prototype of the Wife of Bath) to the Wife, and the French influence in general may be found in Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1964). For a proposal that Chaucer also

modeled the Wife of Bath on Jean de Meun's Jealous Husband, see William E. Mead, "The Prologue of the Wife of Bath's Tale," PMLA, 16 (1901), 388-404. For a fuller rehearsal of antifeminist charges, a history of the development of misogyny in literature, and an analysis of the Wife of Bath as the best illustration of the traditional bad wife, see Katherine M. Rogers, The Troublesome Helpmate (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1966). Francis Lee Utley provides chapters on the motive forces behind medieval satire and defense of women, the genres of satire and defense, and a history of English satire and defense to 1568 in The Crooked Rib (1944; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1970). G. R. Owst, in Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1933), limits the range of the Wife's prologue considerably by insisting that it is "nothing but a series of brilliant literary variations upon . . . pulpit themes" which utilize antifeminist charges (p. 368, n. 3).

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Walker, English Satire and Satirists (London: J. M. Dent, 1925), p. 23; Frederick Tupper, "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins," PMLA, 29 (1914), 93-128; John L. Lowes, "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins," PMLA, 30 (1915), 237-371; Rogers, pp. 80-82; Samuel Tucker, Verse Satire in England before the Renaissance (1909; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1966), p. 104. Tucker's work is especially valuable for its historical placement of Chaucer in the field of satire in England.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Root, The Poetry of Chaucer (Rev. ed., Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1957), p. 233. See also Thomas Lounsbury, Studies in Chaucer (1892; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), II, 526, and Tucker, p. 105.

<sup>7</sup> Trevor Whittock, A Reading of the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 121-22.

<sup>8</sup> Lounsbury, II, 527; Root, pp. 236-37. Lounsbury also credits the poem with "gayety and humor of the highest kind" and "knowledge of human nature," but he feels the undertone of melancholy "evinces higher power still" (p. 527).

<sup>9</sup> Bernard F. Huppé, A Reading of the Canterbury Tales (Albany: State Univ. of New York, 1964), p. 108. Huppé further asserts that the Wife's assurance in her defiant statements about time (ll. 469-79) "is shown to hide a radical uneasiness, and her boisterous laughter to cover the deep-rooted loneliness of the sinner fleeing repentance" (p. 123).

<sup>10</sup> F. M. Salter, "The Tragic Figure of the Wyf of Bath," PTRSC, 3rd Ser., 48, Section 2 (1954), 1-13.

11

For example, John Matthews Manly makes possible identifications of various pilgrims with living individuals of Chaucer's time in Some New Light on Chaucer (1926; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959). While he finds no specific model for the Wife of Bath in his consideration of her on pages 225-34, he feels that the facts point to her real existence and personal knowledge of her by Chaucer. Percy Van Dyke Shelly, in The Living Chaucer (1940; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), p. 198, agrees that despite borrowings from literature, Chaucer chooses his facts out of life not his reading, as does Robinson (p. 698).

12

David Parker, "Can We Trust the Wife of Bath?" ChauR, 4 (1970), 97. The contradiction Parker notes is between ll. 811-25 and ll. 503-24 of her prologue. He suggests that, contrary to the Wife's view at the end, the happiest part of her fifth marriage is not after the quarrel when she has the mastery; the earlier passage shows her most cherished recollections of the marriage are when Jankyn is most "daungerous" to her. Parker also refers to the contradiction between the Wife's theory and practice shown by Charles A. Owen, Jr., "The Crucial Passages in Five of the Canterbury Tales: A Study in Irony and Symbol," JEGP, 52 (1953), 294-311, that her professed beliefs in female sovereignty in marriage are not followed by the heroine of the tale who finally obeys her husband just as the Wife says she is kind and true to Jankyn after she wins the mastery.

13

Dorothy Everett, "Chaucer's 'Good Ear,'" RES, 23 (1947), 207.

14

Edgar H. Duncan, "'Bear on hand' in The Wife of Bath's Prologue," TSL, 11 (1966), 19-33.

15

Wayne Shumaker, "Alisoun in Wander-Land: A Study in Chaucer's Mind and Literary Method," ELH, 18 (1951), 77-89.

16

Thomas J. Garbáty, "Chaucer's Weaving Wife," JAF, 8 (1968), 342-46.

17

D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), p. 248.

18

Ibid., p. 321. Huppé also uses this approach of patristic exegesis, in which the sentence of the story promotes the reign of charity as opposed to cupidity. For Huppé, the Wife represents the "wandering way" of one who abuses rather than uses God's gifts, while Constance of the Man of Law's Tale represents the right way. Like Robertson, Huppé concentrates on Alison's perversion of biblical texts by her ignoring Christian doctrine. Huppé seems to admit more comedy discussion into his analysis than Robertson, particularly in his attention to word-play used by the Wife,

and at one point he says, "The serious commentary with which I have surrounded her argument is not intended to suggest that it is not comic, but to strengthen the incongruity upon which the comedy is in great part based" (p. 118). Huppé's section on the Wife of Bath is found on pp. 107-35.

<sup>19</sup>Only by comparison with the courtly love tradition have critics taken much of the comedy and satire in the tale into account. But it is not necessary to use the perspective of courtly love in order to appreciate the comic and satiric aspects of the tale. The critics who have found amusing courtly love parallels and anomalies are George R. Coffman, "Chaucer and Courtly Love Once More--'The Wife of Bath's Tale,'" Speculum, 20 (1945), 43-50; Kemp Malone, "The Wife of Bath's Tale," MLR, 57 (1962), 481-91; David S. Reid, "Crocodilian Humor: A Discussion of Chaucer's Wife of Bath," ChauR, 4 (1970), 82-83; and Theodore Silverstein, "The Wife of Bath and the Rhetoric of Enchantment; or, How to Make a Hero See in the Dark," MP, 58 (1960-61), 171. But the courtly love tradition is also given consideration as a serious theme by Bernard F. Huppé, "Rape and Women's Sovereignty in the Wife of Bath's Tale," MLN, 63 (1948), 378-81.

<sup>20</sup>For typical expressions of this view see Robinson, pp. 7-8; Kittredge, pp. 191-92; and Root, p. 238.

<sup>21</sup>James Winny, ed., The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale from the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1965), p. 24.

<sup>22</sup>Helen Corsa, Chaucer (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1964), pp. 135-49. Corsa says that "Deep beneath the acknowledged tensions that in sustained balance have given her a kind of joyous equilibrium, there is still a simple belief in romance, in the ideals of natural gentility, in the saving and transforming power of submission to love" (p. 144).

<sup>23</sup>Rose A. Zimbardo, "Unity and Duality in The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale," TSL, 11 (1966), 11-18; Gloria K. Shapiro, "Dame Alice as Deceptive Narrator," ChauR, 6 (1971), 141.

<sup>24</sup>Robert M. Lumiansky, Of Sondry Folk (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1955), p. 127. See also Joseph Roppolo, "The Converted Knight in Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale," CE, 12 (1951), 263-69.

<sup>25</sup>Whittock also utilizes the converted knight theme, but feels that the knight is rewarded because he declines to make the choice the hag offers him (ll. 1219-27). When the knight chooses neither "selfish,

egocentric choice" where "the being of one partner is sacrificed for the pleasure of the other," he has recognized her "otherness" and achieves a "charitable nobility of spirit, which involves the full recognition of other people in thought and action" (pp. 127-28).

<sup>26</sup> Robert P. Miller, "The Wife of Bath's Tale and Mediaeval Exempla," ELH, 32 (1965), 442-56. The Wife inverts this exemplum to show her antithetical belief that foulness is illusory and that sensual delights are true. The knight is "saved" when he believes what is truly foul and harmful (the hag) seems to be fair and delightful (the beautiful young woman).

<sup>27</sup> Judson Boyce Allen and Patrick Gallacher, "Alisoun through the Looking Glass: Or Every Man his Own Midas," ChauR, 4 (1970), 99-105.

<sup>28</sup> Norman N. Holland, "Meaning as Transformation: The Wife of Bath's Tale," CE, 28 (1967), 279-90. Holland alleges that the story comes out for submission not authority no matter whether one refers to the modern reader's, or medieval, or mythic, or psychoanalytic meaning. For Holland, the psychoanalytic meaning underlies all others. The child's fantasy on which the story is based is that "if I am phallically aggressive and do not submit to my mother, she will castrate me" (p. 289).

<sup>29</sup> There are several specialized studies which, while not devoted entirely to the Wife of Bath, have useful applications to the study of Chaucer's use of comedy and satire in her portrayal. These studies will be noted when appropriate during the course of this thesis.

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle defines comedy as an "imitation of baser men" who are characterized not by all vices but by the ridiculous, a subdivision of deformity. The "ridiculous" is "some error or ugliness that is painless and has no harmful effects," such as a comic mask that is ugly and distorted but causes no pain, Aristotle's Poetics, trans. Leon Golden (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 9. See also A Handbook to Literature, eds. William Thrall, Addison Hibbard, and C. Hugh Holman (New York: Odyssey Press, 1960), s.v. comedy.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Thrall, s.v. satire.

<sup>32</sup> See Wylie Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy," in Comedy, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), p. 51. Sypher says that comedy can express hatred of the alien who stirs doubts about society's beliefs; the comedian can point out this stranger to the "solid majority," isolate him from sympathy, and "cruelly expose him to the penalty of our ridicule."



<sup>33</sup> Leonard Feinberg, Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State Univ. Press, 1967), p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Many critics feel that there is no reformatory purpose in Chaucer's satire. For typical expressions of this view see Tucker, p. 98; Patch, p. 223; Root, pp. 28-29; and Rosemary Woolf, "Chaucer as a Satirist in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales," CritQ, 1 (1959), 154-55.

<sup>35</sup> Feinberg says that introspection is usually not appropriate for satire, and that "One of the reasons for the satirist's avoidance of deep insight into character is that such insight usually leads to sympathy. But the satirist does not want his reader to sympathize--he wants him to smile wryly" (p. 232). Thus a repentant Wife of Bath would not be conducive to satire.

<sup>36</sup> This is typical of her approach to the Scriptural injunction to wax and multiply (l. 28) and of her pious pretense of serviceably bestowing her "proper yifte" (l. 103) in "the actes and in fruyt of mariage" (l. 114) and using her instrument in wifehood "As frely as my Makere hath it sent" (ll. 149-50). Commentary on the Wife's use of word-play to conceal her true interest in sex may be found compiled in Thomas W. Ross, Chaucer's Bawdy (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972).

<sup>37</sup> These techniques are mentioned by Feinberg in connection with the satire of Sinclair Lewis (pp. 246-47).

<sup>38</sup> Alison's use of the word "ese" cloaks the definition she has in mind: "Pleasure, enjoyment, delight; desire; gratification (of the flesh); concr., that which gives pleasure or affords sensual gratification." The Wife's mind is not on "engendrure" at all, but the ease of sexual pleasure. See Middle English Dictionary, eds. Hans Kurath and Sherman M. Kuhn (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Univ. of Mich. Press, 1952), Def. 3, s.v. ese.

<sup>39</sup> Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 224.

<sup>40</sup> David Worcester, The Art of Satire (1940; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1960), p. 24.

<sup>41</sup> For example, the reader can appreciate the irony of the Wife's use of the word "sire" in addressing her husband; while the word can be interpreted as "master," a person of authority and therefore a title of respect, she is more than likely using the word in reference to his old age ("sire" as meaning "father") in view of the Wife's position on sovereignty.

<sup>42</sup> Beryl Rowland's Blind Beasts (Akron: Kent State Univ. Press, 1971) provides a wealth of information on the usually pejorative symbolism connected with the references to men as animals in Chaucer. While she mentions Chaucer's use of animal allusions in the passage under consideration, she does not make the particular application used in this paper.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Koban, "Hearing Chaucer Out: The Art of Persuasion in the Wife of Bath's Tale," ChauR, 5 (1971), 230. Koban does admit that reminders of the Wife as a feminist in her tale make the tale more lively and appealing. But he denies that Chaucer exploits the comic potential of the plot.

<sup>44</sup> In James Winny's edition of the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, the note for line 869 points out that the word "blessing" here is ironic because the friars were mainly concerned with "wringing money out of the faithful, by whatever means" (p. 107), and that the catalogue of places which they visit suggests their "impudent intrusiveness" (p. 108). But Winny does not connect that intrusiveness with finding opportunities for sexual advances.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Germaine Dempster, Dramatic Irony in Chaucer (New York: Humanities Press, 1959), p. 60. Dempster also asserts that the rape was added for humorous effect, to form the ironical contrast of the violence of the knight's crime with his later meekness.

<sup>46</sup> Henri Bergson, Laughter, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911), p. 185. Gordon Hall Gerould, in Chaucerian Essays (1952; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), explains the addition of the rape incident by saying that the Wife of Bath is "sex-obsessed" (p. 76), but he does not elaborate on the comic and satiric implications of the addition.

<sup>47</sup> The violence of the rape is mitigated somewhat by the humor produced by the play on words in lines 886-88 with its "mayde," "mayde," "heed," and "maydenhed," the rime riche first noted by Helge Kökeritz, "Rhetorical Word-Play in Chaucer," PMLA, 69 (1954), 949.

<sup>48</sup> Root comments on how the transition is accomplished from the story's fiction to the Wife's reality by a change of tense and the introduction of the pronoun "we," which "indicates her lively personal participation in the matter" (p. 242). "Somme seyde wommen loven best riches" (l. 925) changes to the more personal "Somme seyde that oure hertes been moost esed / Whan that we been yflatered and ypleased" (ll. 929-30), and immediacy is added by the change to present tense in "And somme seyen that we loven best / For to be free, and do right as us lest" (ll. 935-36). Everett also takes note of these changes, saying that the Wife

gradually forgets she is telling a tale and becomes conscious only of herself (p. 207).

<sup>49</sup> The story is from Ovid's Metamorphoses, and the pertinent passage is xi. 180-93 (see Bryan and Dempster, p. 265).

<sup>50</sup> In John Gower's "Tale of Florent" the hag is described in twelve lines (ll. 1678-89) which call attention to the ugliness of her nose, eyes, lips, hair, neck, and shoulders, among other things. In "The Marriage of Sir Gawaine" the hag is described in only seven lines, but she makes quite an impression--an eye is where her mouth should be and another eye is in her forehead, her nose is crooked and turned outward, and her mouth is awry. In "The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell" the description of the hag takes twelve lines (ll. 231-42) and mentions the offensiveness of her face, nose, mouth, teeth, eyes, cheeks, neck, hair, shoulders, and breasts, and concludes that she was made "lyke a barelle" (l. 242). These analogues can be found in Bryan and Dempster, pp. 224-64.

<sup>51</sup> See Bryan and Dempster for Gower's "Tale of Florent," ll. 1841-52 (p. 235); "The Marriage of Sir Gawaine" (p. 240); and "The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell," ll. 691-99 (p. 260).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., "Tale of Florent," ll. 1551-60, 1608-13 (pp. 228-29).

<sup>53</sup> Winny, p. 24.

<sup>54</sup> Bryan and Dempster, p. 233.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., pp. 255-58.

<sup>56</sup> If one accepts the premise that the Wife (through the hag) is seriously supporting the arguments presented in the sermon, comic irony would come from the discrepancy between the Wife's theory and practice, and her apparent obliviousness to this contrast. For example, the hag says in line 1187, "He that coveiteth is a povre wight," while the Wife of the prologue is shown to be avaricious of wealth in her dealings with her old, rich husbands. Lumiansky calls attention to the sharp contrast between the Wife's unethical conduct toward her husbands and the admirable rules of behavior given by the hag (p. 128), and Ropollo mentions the ironic fact that the Wife cannot qualify under her own definition of "gentillesse" (p. 269).

<sup>57</sup> This is in keeping with Feinberg's belief that the "appeal of

satiric literature lies in the pleasure it gives the reader," rather than in moral instruction, although both satire and a sermon may make the same point (p. 7). Despite the prominence given the hag's sermon in the Wife's tale, it is not the ethical instruction of the sermon which is important but the Wife's use of the sermon as a moral club, and watching her wield the hag's sermon in this manner is what gives the pleasures of satire to the reader.

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