

COUPLING THE BEASTLY BRIDE AND THE HUNTER HUNTED: WHAT LIES BEHIND CHAUCER'S *WIFE OF BATH'S TALE*

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It is a commonplace when teaching the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* to stress the anachronism of calling Chaucer a feminist. Yet it is also common to find Chaucer attractive for his play with gender in the gap between the book and the body,¹ nowhere better demonstrated than in the reconstitution of various misogynist diatribes into the charismatic Wife of Bath, who talks back defiantly to "auctoritee." If Chaucer is not actually endorsing the strident voice he gives to the Wife, he is certainly making play with textuality, with subjectivity, and with the construction of ideas about sexuality.² Despite the fact that the Catholic Chaucer presumably is not using the Wife of Bath to present his own views, he allows her to express radical ideas on gender theory and to tell a tale that demonstrates some of what she has theorized. The motif central to the Wife's tale (that a shapeshifting hag becomes beautiful once she gets her own way³) makes it more feasible that the Wife's tale is centrally about liberation from gender role restriction.⁴ Scholars have made the connection between Chaucer's Wife of Bath's hag and other loathly ladies, including the Irish Sovranty Hag and Dame Ragnell.⁵ Specialists in early Irish literature (the earliest extant versions) note that the motif recurs with variations.⁶ Medievalists equipped with twentieth-century theory have discussed Chaucer's hag in relation to the Wife of Bath, noting the similarities between the two and the suitability of the tale's motif to the Wife as tale teller. Many scholars have explicated the personal politics of the Wife and her tale, but no one to date has centrally interrogated Chaucer's exploitation of the motif's mechanisms.⁷

The difference between Chaucer's redaction and John Gower's contemporaneous version suggests that Chaucer is more interested in the gender role destabilization of the vehicle, the allegorical motif, than in the issues of kingship that lie at the core of most loathly lady tales. In the *Tale of Florent* Gower's focus is on his protagonist's ideal behavior as offer-

ing a model of knightly excellence. In keeping with Gower's broader agenda in the *Confessio Amantis* of commenting on kingship, this focus retains the earlier Irish tale's central theme of sovereignty.⁸ In contrast, Chaucer's foregrounding of gender exploits the shapeshifting loathly lady motif as a vehicle for examining the sphere of heterosexual power contestation. Arguably, Gower, intent on promoting ideals of masculine behavior, tells the same tale with a greater fidelity to the motif's basic purpose than does Chaucer, who plays with its slippage, ambivalence, and reversal of gender roles.⁹

The earliest appearance of the loathly lady motif comes in the figure of the Irish Sovranty Hag, an imbroglio of cultural ideas about political power contestation, in which gender roles are loosened, dissolved, and resolved.¹⁰ The loathly lady belongs in the configuration of goddesses who are transversers of stereotype, a group that includes Demeter, Hecate and Diana.¹¹ Like Diana, she is associated with water and with forests.¹² Just as it is typical that Chaucer's hag meets her knight "under a forest syde" (III 990), so too it is in keeping with the genre that he commits his act of hubris, the rape of a maiden, as he "cam ridynge fro ryver" (III 884). The wilderness backdrop is a reminder that tales of the loathly lady tend to offer a "hunter hunted" spin to gender destabilization. Evidence that the loathly lady is humbly related to a set of goddesses who expand the meaning of femininity is available in the settings in which she is found, in the hunting motif ubiquitous to her tales, and in her quasi-divine control.

The royal court, seat of patriarchal power, counterbalances the wilderness setting. Like the forest, the court is an intrinsic context for the hag, but whereas the wilderness space functions consistently in the various tales, the court marks the particular agenda of the individual author. In this way, Chaucer's external spaces signal the motif's tradition, while his court shows his craft in giving the Wife subjectivity. Even as the comedy-closure coupling of the loathly lady and the hunter she hunts down is a satisfying climax typical of the genre, the tension of conflict between the forest and the court and what they mean explodes joyfully into a radically gendered union that has learned to accept ambivalence.

In generic tales of the loathly lady, the court represents the seat of patriarchal government whereas the forest is an uncharted space where societal stricture falters.¹³ This dichotomy has a classically established discourse.¹⁴ Chaucer would have been aware of literary precedents such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, an example used by Robert Pogue Harrison to show that "the governing institutions of the West . . . originally established themselves in opposition to the forests."¹⁵ Harrison points out that there exists "at the deepest level, the enduring hostility between the institutional order and the forests that lie at its boundaries."¹⁶ The generic loathly

lady's beastliness signals that she belongs in the wilderness; her unstable flesh is chaotic like the forest. Like the figure *Natura*, she is often gigantic; her superhuman power comes from nature, that traditionally feminized locus.¹⁷ Yet, even though the loathly lady has her own narrative history, the Wife's representation is perhaps an instance where Chaucer, the king's forester, does not just follow *auctoritee*, but uses his own experience, the empirical method flaunted by the Wife as her *Prologue* opens.¹⁸ The real forest has an impressive presence. Conceivably, Chaucer appreciated that the hag takes her magic and her menace from this actual wilderness.

The earliest extant versions of the loathly lady motif, the Irish Sovranty Hag tales, follow the classical model as defined by Harrison by showing that a true king must leave his court to prove himself in the wild locus of the forest. Tales that recycle the motif consistently send the protagonist out hunting to get him in the right place for his test.¹⁹ In the *Tale of Florent* Gower retains the forest as locus for his loathly lady's introduction—Florent meets her “In a forest under a tre” (line 1528)—and in the *Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* the hag ensnares Gawain in the Inglewood forest (line 226). In the end the hag belongs to both worlds, being larger than both, with an immoderation and extravagance that test her male partner and tacitly measure him as less than herself.

The crux of the Irish Sovranty myths is that the hero must embrace and please the grotesque sexually rapacious Other in a test that turns him towards reward and becomes a metaphor for his own experience of kingship. In the *Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid* the hag spells this out to Niall as she awards him the kingdom: “I am the Sovranty . . . as thou hast seen me loathsome, bestial, horrible at first and beautiful at last, so is the sovranty; for it is seldom gained without battles and conflicts, but at last to anyone it is beautiful and goodly.”²⁰ The hag as a personification of the land lies, however, at a level beneath the surface narrative. The primary sense, the instantly engaging one, is about having sex with a woman who is “fibrous, spotted with pustules, diseased,” with “green teeth that lay in her head and reached to her ears” and “dark smoky eyes,” her “shins distorted and awry.” Furthermore, “her ankles were thick, her shoulderblades were broad, her knees were big.”²¹ Acceptance of her demand for a kiss in exchange for water from her well is as engaging for its wild eroticism as for its showing that Niall is the true king.

Niall's victory is also a triumphant moment for heterosexual relationships. Niall's final evaluation of the Sovranty Hag is that she is “many-shaped,” an assessment that accepts both the double-sided nature of kingship and an expanded version of femininity. He does not declare the hag to be finally only beautiful; “many-shaped” accommodates her entire substantiation. The reformed body of the shape-changer is superlatively

beautiful (though not described with much detail), yet the beast who also inhabits her incarnates a femininity that is strong, independent, and active in its ability to desire, violate, and control. Niall earns himself a kingdom by accepting what is “many-shaped” into the union between male and female.

In another early tale, the *Corca Laidhe*, the “Lughaidh Mal” hag who awards kingship to Lughaidh Laidhe is described in terms of terrain, which emphasizes her link to the land of Ireland: “A rugged, hilly, thick, black head / [Was] upon her like a furzy mountain.”²² One might expect that since she is the land personified, her active advances would make a metaphor of the expansionist perception that the land desires to be plowed and made fertile. This would place her somewhat drearily amongst the sexualized discourse of colonialist desire.²³ However, the Sovranty Hag does not bear children. The personification does not privilege the fertility implicit in youth and beauty; instead a rampant sexuality marks the hag’s agency in mortal affairs. Whatever the drawbacks are of troping the land as woman, this is a woman who knows what she wants and will make a spectacle of herself to get it: her selfish desire is the hero’s test.²⁴ Rather than exercise her control of the water source, Lughaidh’s hag uses as sexual coercion the threat that she will transform the hunters and their hounds into monster shapes. One point of reference might perhaps be Acteon, a man out hunting who is transformed after a chance encounter with a vengeful female whose wishes must be obeyed. A second point might be the power of female subjectivity: the hag, as a goddess, controls the narrative through her power over the shape of Daire’s sons. Here exists a firm feminine redefinition of the men in the tale.

We do not know where Chaucer found the loathly lady motif. Whatever source he encountered, whatever transmutation to it had occurred, he evidently appreciated the more immediate destabilization of gender roles that springs from the loathly lady seen as a personification of the kingdom. Jill Mann pinpoints exactly what is so powerful in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* when she notes that “[t]he ‘anti-feminist’ elements . . . constitute the force behind the tale’s challenge to male domination. When the knight surrenders to female ‘maistrye’, he surrenders not to the romanticized woman projected by male desire, but to the woman conceived in the pessimistic terms of anti-feminism.”²⁵ To her observation I add that the loathly lady contributes pagan weight to this task of turning misogyny back upon itself. Acceptance of what is repulsive about women is inherent in the motif. Chaucer’s loathly lady directly relates to the Wife of Bath’s obsession with the dynamics of heterosexual commerce: the manipulation of power ratios by desire, pleasure, and frustration. Moreover, vestiges of the earlier tales’ framework brings the anagogic

force inherent in the Irish tales into the courtly English work. The sense of a deep truth, a truest truth, such as that underlying the testing of the true king, is poetically imprinted in these vestiges and brought into the Wife's field of interest in the background details of Chaucer's tale.²⁶

Before the hag appears at the forest side, manifesting herself as a dance of ladies to lure her venial knight into her clutches, the Wife sets the scene of her tale by establishing "Kyng Arthour" in apposition with a fairy queen who once danced upon "many a grene mede" (III 861), a nostalgic reminder of fairy influence over natural space.²⁷ "Greet honour" is reportedly attributed to Arthur, but the fairy queen dances "with hir joly compaignye," so that high esteem for the male is countered by something more communal, lively, and attractive for the female. The subtle privileging of the fairy queen over Arthur—syntactically, with just a little more word space and more movement—accurately establishes the oppositional pattern that the hag will develop fully. Just as the Irish Sovranty Hag takes her authority from the land of which she is a personification, so the fairy aspect of the loathly lady takes strength from outdoor space.²⁸ The opening emphasis on the female at home in the green meadow sets up a paradigm that the hag will fully realize.

Despite the acknowledgment of Arthur's reputation for honor, his court is flagrantly subverted by the Wife of Bath's subjective narration.²⁹ Once the Wife has set the stage in "th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour" (III 857), that specifically British king, she does not valorize the knights of the Round Table. Chaucer precedes Malory with a redaction that is conspicuously more sophisticated in licensing a wry female perspective. Malory's knights are often bunglers of the adventure God gives them, such as when Sir Gawain returns from his first episode with a maiden's head, having botched the principle of mercy, but Malory expresses straight-faced regret for such misadventure with a tone of authorial respect: living by the sword simply has a bit of a downside. In contrast, the Wife presents the house of Arthur as unquestionably the source of sexual "oppressioun" (III 889). The male lead is a young knight who belongs to Arthur—"And so bifel that this kyng Arthour / Hadde in his hous a lusty bachelor" (III 882–83)—and who launches the tale by raping a maiden.

This event contrasts startlingly with the Irish tales and most other loathly lady tales—for example the *Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* and the ballad *King Henry*—which begin with a knight hunting, engrossed in that aristocratic masculine pastime.³⁰ Like the forest, the hunt is a topos grounded upon actuality, but with a literary life of its own. Marcelle Thiebaut likens the hunt to "the familiar narrative framework of the Journey."³¹ This observation makes sense of the *Bildungsroman* quality of many of the loathly lady tales (arguably, Chaucer's included) in

which the male protagonist makes a journey through conflict and harrying to self-realization. In the *Wife of Bath's Tale* the motif is suppressed, although when we first meet the knight he may be riding from the river, as Christine Ryan Hilary suggests, because he is hawking for waterfowl.³² Anne Rooney notes that "The noble hunt in England was especially limited in its scope," and that "hunting manuals paid no attention to the utilitarian trapping of animals . . . for food."³³ Perhaps hawking for waterfowl is also unworthy of mention, being at a remove from the hunter, as well as less dramatic than the killing of larger animals, and thus Hilary's assumption is in keeping with literary convention. But I suspect that it is based on her sensitivity to the formula by which, in the earliest versions, the male is out hunting when he encounters the hag.

Although the audience may be meant to presume that any knight by a river is hunting fowl, as Hilary proposes, Chaucer's tale slips away from the hunt—with its resonance of fate, magic, and the testing of prowess—to displace the contestation onto the female person: the maid whom the knight rapes. The knight's hunt is transposed to the rape of the "mayde walkynge him befor" (III 886)—like a stalker he approaches from behind—in keeping with Chaucer's more significant relocation: the placing of sovereignty within the personal power politics of marriage rather than in the kingship which the word *sovereignty* literally signifies. Since the knight is a sexual predator rather than an aristocratic sportsman, the turning of the power ratio to make him a sexual victim is acutely appropriate. The rape, so inappropriate for a true hero, signals that Chaucer's tale is more interested in gender power imbalance than in the qualities that make a good king.

The Wife's subjective voice is also authenticated by her sharply critical view of the reality of knights and maidens. The Wife sees that maidens are grist for the mill in the chivalric scheme—objects with the limited option of being either rescued or raped—and her response is to rewrite the script, allowing the hag to oppress and reeducate the errant knight. Her cynicism goes so far as to displace the males from the central position and to promote instead the women of the court.³⁴ The reaction to the rape is "swich clamour / And swich pursute unto the kyng Arthour" (III 889–90) that the knight is condemned to death through "cours of lawe" (III 892). In theory, Arthur is the ultimate adjudicator, pressed by the people to punish his own, a reminder that his knights provide an elite-military system of justice. However, the last we see of Arthur is when he concedes jurisdiction over the knight to the queen, who has prayed for his "grace" in this matter for "[s]o longe," along with "other ladyes mo" (III 894–95). The sense of a full court surrounding the king and queen is thus achieved only by the inclusion of these ladies, who beg the king for control with a persistence that seems to match the earlier clamor

for his punishment. Although Arthur is named and Guinevere is not, and although his household looses the "lusty bachelor" into the countryside, it is women who people the Arthurian court interior.

The feminization of Arthur's court, and of justice, is compounded when the knight returns to either answer the riddle correctly or submit his neckbone to iron. "Whan they be comen to the court" (III 1023) to judge the knight's response, "they" are made up entirely of women: "Ful many a noble wyf, and many a mayde, / And many a wydwe" (III 1026-27) assemble. Although Gower's and Chaucer's unknown source is likely to have come through a French filtration, the sense that Chaucer's hag is related to the Celtic triple moon goddess tales is reinforced in the three stages of womanhood assembled with life-or-death power over the knight.

The head to this feminine body politic is the queen, "hirsself sittynge as a justise" (III 1028). When Arthur relinquishes the matter to his queen, his surrender is complete, and she is authorized to take over the king's power as ultimate judge. Malory's Guinevere is isolated from feminine company, never given legitimate power, and resented as a breaker of male bonds; she is a single representation in the court of the dangerous sexuality of the female species. The Wife, in contrast, places Guinevere in the seat of judgment, surrounded by a court of curious women, who "Assembled been, his answeere for to heere" (III 1029). This feminine jury will help her to decide the knight's fate. The Wife thus briskly usurps the male prerogative of justice, redistributes it to the women of the court, and puts the knights of the court in the shadows off the edge of the narrative, the spot usually reserved for the ladies.

Even in the closure of the tale, patriarchy is not restored to the court, despite the fact that the loathly lady offers her groom ultimate jurisdiction over her person, declaring somewhat excessively, "Dooth with my lyf and deth right as yow lest" (III 1248). Her problematic concession of will is made in a narrow world peopled by two who share "parfit joye" (III 1258), thus in the context of consensual sex. Is it too essentialist to assume that what is said in intimate play may not be a definitive statement on power relations, but an indulgence, equivalent to Mars allowing his lover to wear his armor during dalliance? The unequal power balance between the hag who can change shape and the knight who remains nameless is well-established by this stage; the bride hands over phallic power to a man she has selected, won, and is bedding in a private moment of pleasure, presumably so that her own pleasure will be enhanced by his empowerment. For the purposes of this tale, the court is represented by what women want; the bedchamber in which a husband is rendered as subservient as a lover subsumes the usual representation of the court, its hall, and Round Table, as the seat of masculine power.

As well as creating a sense of authentic feminine subjectivity in the Wife's assessment of the Arthurian court, her regendering is sympathetic to the Sovranty Hag's ultimate jurisdiction over the male court.³⁵

It is a curiously feminized Arthurian court, then, that commissions the knight to solve the riddle of what women most desire or else lose his head, and it is his vulnerability in this dilemma that enables the loathly lady to get him in her grasp; after the hubris of his act of rape, he must hunt more abjectly for the answer to the riddle of womanly want. The knight travels homeward, "[i]n al this care" (III 990), presumably contemplating the imminent fate of his "nekke-boon" (III 906), when, by the "forest syde," he sees a dance of ladies, to which he is drawn "In hope that som wysdom sholde he lerne" (III 994). This dance repeats the attractive energy of the fairy queen's dance upon the meadow; both celebrate the pleasure of turning flesh into a living pattern. Yet the dancing ladies prefigure the hag, and would seem to be her chosen representation of herself: a roadside attraction designed to ensnare the knight. It works. The encounter may reflect chance on the knight's part, but the hag, in her forest-side locus, is a hunter who knows her prey's predilection.

Then, before the knight "cam fully there," the dance vanishes, "he nyste where" (III 995–96). Arguably, the knight does learn "som wysdom" from the dance (which transmutes into the hag), but through a lengthier and more painful process than he anticipates. The rapist knight must go the long way round the woods to gain his wisdom, and the hag tells him this in somewhat enigmatic words, rising towards him and declaring, "Sire knyght, heer forth ne lith no wey" (III 1001). When the "olde wyf" rises to prohibit the knight from the forest, she is acting according to earlier models of loathly lady tales, in which the forest shows its feminine and magical attributes as it excludes the males from its precincts, directing them towards the hag who will test them. In the *Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid*, the well where Niall meets his hag is found by chance by brothers who are out hunting to break in new weapons in what seems a dense forest, since they have gone "far astray, every side being closed against them."³⁶ The enclosure of the landscape against the sons of Eochaid emulates the moment when Chaucer's hag advises her knight that "heer forth lith no wey"; the forest resists the young men's penetration, directing them towards the trial which it has for them. The resistance of forests, a similarity between the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the *Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid*, literalizes Harrison's observation that forests counter human justice systems.

The forest passively directs the knight to the "olde wyf" who will save his life with her answer to the riddle, but at the cost to him of his body, which he must surrender in matrimony. The hubris of the knight's act of rape invokes the nemesis by which his own flesh is surrendered to the

humiliating role of sex object, obliged to fulfil the “queynte fantasye” (III 516) of a wise and powerful old fairy-woman. The tale hastens towards a simultaneous climax of both the narrative and the wedding night consummation.

I do not think that there is any critic who has adequately theorized on the practicalities of how literature achieves the anagogic, the way that language carries more baggage than the unpacking of tropes can account for. The loathly lady motif is elusive; itemization fails to explain fully its effectiveness. But the sense that the “olde wyf”’s physical excesses are matched by an excess of meaning is due partly to the traces of her original syncretism, which Chaucer marks in the lengthy pillow sermon at the core of his tale, when the knight is exposed to her lesson in love. Arthurian myth itself operates a Christian quest for the Holy Grail over the paganism of Merlin’s magic, so the Arthurian world is perhaps a congenial one for the hag. Indeed, her own Celtic sources as a quasi-divinity are evident in the framing to the seemingly Christian sermon in which “Jhesus, hevene kyng” (III 1181), exemplifies honest poverty.³⁷

The hag begins by responding to her groom’s lamentation about her form: “I koude amende al this, / If that me liste, er it were dayes thre” (III 1106–1107). The specification of a three-day period is provocative given that she in fact changes more quickly than this at the end of her speech; along with the folkloric propensity for the number three, Christ’s three-day resurrection is included in what three days suggests. The closure of the sermon is the hag’s decision to fulfill the knight’s fleshly desire, another flat statement of her power to transform. Thus the bedroom sermon demonstrates Christian logic within a framework of the hag’s pagan-goddess prowess.

Furthermore, her lecturing is disjunctive with the physicality of the setting, with the two in bed contemplating their first act of sex. This disjuncture is another instance in which Chaucer makes play with the gap between theory and the body, pushing the persuasive power of scholarly debate beyond where it might feasibly go. Sexual impulse tends to be more immediate than verbal argument. Although the medium of the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* is language, the narrative is driven by the semiotics of the body: repulsion from what is loathly; admiration of the manly, as when the court of ladies is won by the knight’s “manly voys” (III 1036); and celebration of the lovely bride’s beauty at the end of the tale. The irony of the pillow sermon is that its logic and Christian morality are sound, but the hag’s fleshly incongruity in the nuptial bed is highly disruptive of the somatic syntax of sex, to extend the Wife’s own sexual/textual “glose” metaphor (III 503–12).³⁸ Surely the Wife, who has theorized on desire at such length in her prologue, is to be seen as playful when her hag lectures the knight from a grotesque body that touches his own in the marriage bed.

The knight's manly voice seems to be his best attraction; he is no great thinker, being as baffled by his bride's speech acts as he is repulsed by her body. Just as he was entrapped by words whose true meaning he did not understand (the loathly lady's forest-side imperative that he plight his troth in her hand), so too when she tells him in bed that she will fulfil his "worldly appetit" (III 1218), he seems not to understand what she is saying; her verbal promise does not get much of a response from him. Only her actual transformation a little later awakens his joy and his enthusiasm. Framing the lecture in reminders of the hag's quasi-divinity, and thus of her pagan ancestry, reinforces the play between the body and the word.³⁹

The loathly lady motif, with sovereignty itself represented by the many-shaped female body, might remind us that the body is the foundation of cultural constructions of race, gender, and, arguably, identity. Indeed, shapeshifting itself is noumenal game, a fictive fleshing of the psychological, the tropic, and symbolic. The dual manifestation of the hag's body is a sign of the ambivalence she represents. Whereas the Sovranty Hag shows that the king's experience of the kingdom is both loathly and lovely, Chaucer's hag imports this double-sidedness into the marriage bed of heterosexuality. For the knight who began as a rapist, the experience of women is both loathly and lovely. His acquired lesson about giving women sovereignty has been loathly; once he has learned it, he will be rewarded with the lovely. The loathly bride offers the knight a choice, "oon of this thynges tweye" (III 1219), of two possible limitations on her performance as wife. She might be foul and old, but humble, true, and never displeasing, or young and fair and menacingly independent: she advises him that he would "take youre adventure of the repair / That shal be to youre hous by cause of me" (III 1224–25). Ignoring its glimmerings of hope, and showing no surprise over her ability to make such an extraordinary offer, he agonizes over his decision. The challenge of a difficult choice is what brings this dimwit to accept the loathly lady's demand to be both wife and love. He "sore siketh" for a solution to no avail (III 1228), then finally surrenders: "My lady and my love, and wyf so deere, / I put me in youre wise governance" (III 1230–31). The reins are in her hand.

Before the sexual act, the terms of perfect joy are set as husbandly acquiescence to wifely decision-making. Making use of a motif that attests an inherent allegorical meaning ensures that the legend "the personal is the political" is aloft as the bride secures female sovereignty in the bedroom scene that leads up to the consummation of the marriage. Yet this gendered confusion is discreetly curtained within the weft of fabrication. Confirming her own sovereignty, the hag demands "Kys me" (III 1239), but she seemingly continues speaking right until "to-morn" (III 1245), so that the kiss and the sexual act (which we may presume occurs, although we are not told this) are muffled by the chatter of language.

This is powerful language, performing the promise to be both fair and good and true, even as it acts as a distracting screen. When the speech act that begins with the command to kiss closes with another command—"Cast up the curtyrn, looke how that it is" (III 1249)—there is the revelation that something physical has occurred without the voyeuristic reader seeing how.

Transformation invites celebration. The knight's repulsion from the imminent sex act and his subsequent bliss, which are defined so clearly in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, suggest that the loathly lady functions as a personification of anxiety about maturation. A sense of good humor in the hag's construction comes in part from her configuration of the puberty transition which is mysterious until we pass through it. To some extent, the loathly lady is a rite of passage, a dreadful conduit, epiphany incarnate.

As she gratifies her own needs, the Irish Sovranty Hag's coercive sexual command works in the interest of the male of her choice.⁴⁰ Being chosen by the hag and fulfilling her demands earns her man a kingdom. Similarly, the Wife's knight finds a closure of bliss. Male fulfillment defines the same happy ending in this narrative as it does in most others, yet insofar as this fulfillment is secured at the cost of engagement with a woman who is the antithesis of the courtly lady, the text suggests that male rites of passage involve negotiation with the internal passages of the grotesque feminine body, beginning with a kiss. Despite her trade with patriarchy, the loathly lady incorporates feminist principles of control in sexually active flesh.

What interests me about representations in canonical literature of women and heterosexual relations, if I might be wildly general for one moment, is the traceability of the hook by which women are caught and subdued within marriage: their own sexuality. The urgency of the body, and the "queynte fantasye" that the Wife proposes that all women have, ensures that, both within texts and in the world outside texts, many women will engage with men in circumstances disadvantageous to themselves.⁴¹ Literary representations of women display the ingenious snares of heterosexuality. But now and then amongst canonical works one is surprised by subversion of the ritual of capture. The *Wife of Bath's Tale* provides one such moment. The openness of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* text and its emphasis on the gendered body afford the Wife of Bath a signifying surplus. She wanders from the way. She plays. The central motif of her tale—the loathly lady—has an active sexuality that somehow wriggles free of the Christian yoke of heterosexual relations and of authorial censure, offering to heterosexuality the lesson that gender roles are not the only option, and that female sovereignty may bring happiness.

The paradoxes of the beastly bride and the hunter hunted are coupled; the slippage of inversion allows a loosening of gender roles.

Revealing the workings of gender codes by dismantling them, the loathly lady is constructed from ambiguous ideas of feminine flesh. She is counter to most canonical representations of women in English literature. She is authoritative; she controls the medium of language. Feminine, she commands the masculine. She is sexually active; her will must be done. From her inception, she scrambles the semiotics of the female body, and confounds gender role restriction. Mann argues that Chaucer's "most valuable contribution" is "not any particular configuration of gender-relationships, but simply the demonstration that reconstruction is possible."⁴² Adding the significance of the loathly lady into her analysis of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* strengthens the case for how fully Chaucer destabilizes gender role restriction there. By importing the pagan goddess figure to rule over the dynamics of marriage, Chaucer goes further even than Mann's analysis allows.

The knight's response is part of the tale's redemption. Compliance with female demands is inherent in the loathly lady motif, and this aspect is what makes it so suitable for the Wife's discussion of marriage. The closure of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, in consistency with other loathly lady tales, shows that female control rewards the male once he is willing to step outside the stricture of role play. Peter G. Beidler adds to feminist criticism that "the patriarchy has through the years also done much damage to men by limiting the roles men can acceptably play."⁴³ David Townsend's epithet is that "he who lives by the phallus is castrated by the phallus," or, in other words, "the price of the phallus is the rest of the body."⁴⁴ Chaucer's rapist knight is not as heroically willing as Niall and Lughaidh Laidhe, but in the end he too finds grace. He wins all, although his newly fair bride's problematic concession of will to him *is* made in the play of consensual sex.⁴⁵ I argue that the effect of the hag's quasi-divine power negates her total surrender to her man when she is having fun with him; but I also argue that the reciprocation of role play here, the destabilization of personal power, makes that bedroom joy more "parfit."⁴⁶

The bliss that results endorses the destabilization at work. Elizabeth M. Biebel asserts that "Eradication of stringent gender roles is the key to human fulfillment."⁴⁷ That might be an oversimplification, but for many of us it holds true. Its truth is imported into the Wife's tale, and it is her expression of this truth that makes it significant that no other pilgrim surpasses the Wife of Bath in a bid for subjectivity. The rhetoric used against women is transformed to produce a lively and somehow attractive fictive speaker.⁴⁸ Priscilla Martin identifies the Wife of Bath as the character most like her author: "Of the pilgrims she is closest to Chaucer. Like her creator, she criticises through comedy, she weighs experience against authority, she is aware of the sexuality within textuality and she jokingly subverts the conventions of male authorship."⁴⁹ As the speaker who articulates the *Canterbury Tales'* loathly lady, the Wife embodies the

metafictional principle of the *General Prologue* framework: her deconstruction of canonical texts with an intention of undermining patriarchal authority carries the play of action established in the *General Prologue* into her own *Prologue*.⁵⁰ The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* engages with the issues of personal power politics as it creates her lively, garrulous character, and this energy motivates the tale. But the motif itself contains the moral that fulfillment lies in the collapse of gender roles and the acceptance of ambivalence. That is why Chaucer gives it to his Wife.

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1. See Dolores Warwick Frese and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, eds., *The Book and the Body* (Notre Dame, 1997).

2. Chaucer was a devout Catholic, and the Wife of Bath a sinner by almost any standards in his time. It is unlikely that Chaucer uses the Wife of Bath as a spokesperson for his own views on heterosexuality, but he plays so consistently with the constructions of gender and subjectivity that he surely, as Ruth M. Ames notes, "recognized the diversity as clearly as we do . . . [and] delighted in multiplicity" (*God's Plenty: Chaucer's Christian Humanism* [Chicago, 1984], 3). The Wife is Chaucer's most engaging character; he evidently enjoyed constructing her subjective voice. Furthermore, his *Retraction* acknowledges his concern over how far-reaching and effective his game with earnest might be, since he revokes amongst other works "the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne" (X 1085), a statement that allows us to regard (and to address) what might be "synne" from a strict fourteenth-century perspective as an intellectual intention of Chaucer's work, a thing of darkness that he nonetheless claims as his own. All quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987).

3. Chaucer's version (ca. 1390) is central for the purposes of this discussion, but the archetype of the loathly lady is found in a range of texts from the late medieval period: the *Corca Laidhe* (ca. 1390), which consists of the poem "Lughaidh Mal" and the prose passage "Lughaidh Laidhe and the Other Sons" ("Appendix A to The Genealogy of Corca Laidhe," *Miscellany of the Celtic Society* [Dublin, 1849], 67–79); the *Coir Anmann* (*Coir Anmann. Fitness of Names*, trans. Whitley Stokes and E. Windisch, in *Irische Texte* III. 2. [Leipzig, 1887], 285–444.); the *Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid* (14th cent.) ("The Death of Crimthann Son of Fidach, and the Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedon," trans. Whitley Stokes, in *Revue Celtique*, ed. E. Ernault, J. Loth, and G. Dottin [Paris, 1903], 24:172–207); John Gower's *Tale of Florent* (lines 1386–93), in *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck (Toronto, 1997); several ballads from Francis James Child's collection ("The Marriage of Sir Gawain," "King Henry," "Kempy Kay," "Kemp Owyn," and the "Knight and the Shepherd's Daughter") in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (New York, 1882); and the *Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* (ca. 1500) in *Middle English Verse Romances*, ed. Donald B. Sands (New York, 1966), 323–25. I call the shapeshifting hag the "loathly lady" after the Wife of Bath's knight's marriage-night, between-sheets complaint: "Thou art so loothly . . ." (III 1100). Sands also uses this label in his preface to *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*.

4. Jill Mann, considering the "surrender of Maistrye," notes that Chaucer's tale "legitimises the female desire for 'maistrye' . . . by making it the just response to male oppression" (*Geoffrey Chaucer* [New York, 1991], 91).

5. Among the detectives who chart this terrain are Francis James Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*; Arthur C. L. Brown, *The Origin of the Grail Legend* (Cambridge, Mass., 1943); Sigmund Eisner, *A Tale of Wonder: A Source Study of The Wife of Bath's Tale*

(Wexford, 1957); G. M. Maynadier, *The Wife of Bath's Tale: Its Sources and Analogues* (London, 1901); and Bartlett J. Whiting, in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (New York, 1958), 223–68. Scholarly opinion is that all extant works that use the motif have evolved from earlier oral forms, pagan and irretrievable. Eisner itemizes “[n]ine extant tales” that “are relevant to the loathly lady theme,” noting, however, that only in three is the heroine “the hideous Sovereignty” (17). These three are “Lughaidh Mal,” “Lughaidh Laidhe and the Other Sons” or the *Coir Anmann*, and the *Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid*. The shape-changing hag belongs to an interconnected tribe of other female Irish figures. The network established by scholars in the early twentieth century has not been pursued by recent critics.

6. See Maire Bhreathnach, “The Sovereignty Goddess as Goddess of Death?,” *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 39 (1982): 243–60; Joanne Findon, *A Woman's Words: Emer and Female Speech in the Ulster Cycle* (Toronto, 1997); S. F. Gallagher, *Woman in Irish Legend, Life and Literature* (Totowa, N.J., 1983); Maire Herbert, “Mythology in Early Irish Literature,” in *Women and Sovereignty*, ed. Louise O. Fradenberg (Edinburgh, 1992), 264–75; C. L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880–1935* (New York, 1993); Prionsias Mac Cana, “Aspects of the Theme of the King and Goddess in Irish Literature,” *Études Celtiques* 7 (1955–56): 76–114; and Maire Cruise O’Brien, “The Female Principle in Gaelic Poetry,” in *Woman in Irish Legend, Life and Literature*, ed. S. F. Gallagher (Totowa, N.J., 1983), 26–37. Roger Sherman Loomis foregrounds “the resemblance between the Grail Bearer and the Sovranty of Ireland” (*The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol* [Cardiff, 1963], 49).

7. Useful readings of the tale's personal politics include David Aers, *Community, Gender and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360–1430* (London, 1988); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, Wisc., 1989); Margaret Hallissy, *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows: Chaucer's Women and Medieval Codes of Conduct* (Westport, Conn., 1993); Lee Patterson, “Experience Woot Well It Is Noght So’: Marriage and the Pursuit of Happiness in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*,” in *The Wife of Bath*, ed. Peter G. Beidler (Boston, 1996), 133–54; and David S. Reid, “Crocodilian Humor: A Discussion of Chaucer's Wife of Bath,” *Chaucer Review* 4 (1970): 73–89.

8. I am indebted to Elizabeth Passmore, who, in a presentation at the Thirty-Seventh International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Mich., 2002, entitled “Once Upon a Time: Introductory Themes in the Irish and English Loathly Lady Tales,” demonstrated that Gower focuses on Florent's ideal behavior as a model of knightly excellence in keeping with the earlier Irish tale's central theme of kingship.

9. Susanna Fein observes that the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is “a story of sovereignty designated by gender,” in which “Chaucer has blended together old notions of fairy shape-shifting with intriguing ideas about female sexuality” (“Other Thought-worlds,” in *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown [Oxford, 2000], 332–48, at 337). This essay endorses Fein's view by investigating those old notions more fully so that Chaucer's selective recycling of their exploitation of gender becomes more apparent.

10. All quotations are from O'Donovan.

11. This is not a new idea. Loomis declares that “the mysterious Loathly Damsel of Arthurian romance . . . can claim descent from the shape-shifting Demeter and Hecate,” which he expands to “Isis, Europa, Artemis, Rhea, Demeter, Hecate, Persephone, Diana; one might go on indefinitely” (*The Grail*, 296, 301).

12. See Lucy Allen Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* (1903; repr. New York, 1960), 278–79.

13. Medieval representation of the wilderness affords a haunting psychological quality. Julius E. Heuscher notes the psychological meaning of the forest motif as “a threshold toward another aspect of human existence” in which one enters “the confrontation with the forces from the unconscious” (*A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales* [Springfield, Ill., 1974], 301). Heuscher expresses in twentieth-century terms what seems evident in medieval text, although the terminology has changed. Ann Haskell, considering Chaucer's use of gardens and “wild woods,” proposes that “the ideal garden [is] the locus for man and woman in their first age, their prime, but the woods, by contrast, represents wisdom and age, extending to the end of life, the natural end of age, which is death. . . . [I]t also

represents the death of the ideal, the prime, the first age" ("Chaucerian Women, Ideal Gardens, and the Wild Woods," in *A Wyf Ther Was: Essays in Honour of Paule Mertens-Fonck*, ed. Juliette Dor [Liège, 1992], 193–98, at 198. This reading of the forest as a place of lost innocence is apt to its site as the hag's terrain, although her overthrow of ideals enables a new model of heterosexual accord.

14. Compare Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* [Chicago, 1992]. Harrison declares that "It is not only in the modern imagination that forests cast their shadow of primeval antiquity; from the beginning they appeared to our ancestors as archaic, as antecedent to the human world. We gather from mythology that their vast and somber wilderness was there before, like a precondition or matrix of civilization, or that the forests were first" (1). Harrison's assessment, which he demonstrates with literary evidence, supports my feeling that the loathly lady emerges from the forest because her own mythology draws from a world which is primal.

15. Harrison, *Forests*, ix.

16. Harrison, *Forests*, 8.

17. See George D. Economou, *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972).

18. Chaucer had experience as a forester, serving as deputy forester of the royal forest of North Pemberton (appointed June 1391); see Martin M. Crow and Virginia E. Leland, "Chaucer's Life," *Riverside Chaucer*, xv–xxvi, at xxv.

19. See Anne Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature* (Suffolk, 1993), and Marcelle Thiebaut, *The Stag of Love: The Chase in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1974).

20. *Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid*, 201.

21. *Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid*, 197.

22. *Corca Laidhe*, 73.

23. For example, Luke Gernon, in "A Discourse of Ireland" (1620), exposes himself when he observes, "This Nymph of Ireland, is at all poynts like a yong wench that hath the greene sickness for want of occupying" (*Illustrations of Irish History, Mainly of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Caesar Litton Falkiner [London, 1904], 349).

24. Toni O'Brien Johnson and David Cairns observe that "The notion of using a female figure to embody such contradictory qualities as this sovereignty goddess does is problematic from most feminist points of view." (*Gender in Irish Writing* [Philadelphia, 1991], 3–4).

25. Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York, 1991), 92.

26. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is a *lai* in the romance genre. Louise O. Fradenburg considers whether this makes it a "regressive fantasy" and finds that, conversely, it makes the Wife seem "progressive or modern" ("The Wife of Bath's Passing Fancy," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 8 [1986]: 31–58, at 34–35). Fradenburg observes that "The very escapism of romance thus points, paradoxically, to the genre's potential as an instrument for change" (41). Sarah Disbrow conversely finds the Wife's genre to be an "antiquated fairy tale" and proposes that the Wife is intended to be "an allegorical figure representing human carnality much like her male counterpart, January" ("The Wife of Bath's Old Wives' Tale," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 8 [1986]: 59–71, at 59–60). Disbrow speculates that, by giving this tale to the Wife, Chaucer "hoped to discredit Arthurian romance" (61). However, Chaucer is building up a convincing feminine perspective when he allows the Wife to deconstruct Arthurian romance, and, since I agree with Mann's summation of the Wife as finally likeable (as January is not), I am not convinced by Disbrow's argument.

27. Angela Jane Weisl briefly notes the spatial significance of this outdoors dance, proposing that "by moving the outside inside, the friars have chased away those who lived in the natural world" (*Conquering the Reign of Femeny: Gender and Genre in Chaucer's Romance* [Cambridge, Eng., 1995], 90), although she is more interested in the temporal comparison that the Wife sets up than in the implications inherent in the interior and exterior spaces.

28. This contrasts with the mortal women in medieval literature, who are typically confined to the domestic interiors of narrative settings and are vulnerable to danger when they are found outdoors, as are, for example, Dame Herodis of *Sir Orfeo* and Guinevere (kidnapped while out on a May picnic) of Malory's "The Knight and the Cart" episode.

29. Weisl declares that *WBT* is "an essentially court-based one," since all within it speak the "language of courtly romance" (*Conquering the Reign*, 91). Granting this, the court within the poem is no ordinary one, being insistently feminized.

30. In the “Lughaidh Mal” the seven sons of Daire are all called Lughaidh, “In hopes the prophecy in them would be fulfilled” (69). Daire’s deer is immediately introduced as though bound into the prophecy: “Daire had a magical fawn as a familiar / In the shape of a yearling deer” (69). Four of the sons meet the deer, who “passed on swiftly, / Until he reached the stream” where “the fawn was slain / By the four noble and very comely youth” (71). Iteration of the youth’s nobility and comeliness counters the possibility that the slaying of a father’s familiar is loutish behavior. In “Lughaidh Laidhe” king-making begins with Lughaidh’s capture of a golden fawn. Niall, too, in the *Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid*, is a hunter out in the forest with his brothers when he encounters the hag.

31. Thiebaut, *The Stag of Love*, 21.

32. Gloss to *ryver, Riverside Chaucer*, 117.

33. Rooney, *Hunting*, 3.

34. Fein notes that in the “faery realm” of *WBT*, “[a] maternal presence supersedes the laws fixed by the king” and that “maternal justice . . . takes a more flexible view of women’s bodies” (“Other Thought-worlds,” 337): “woman with her permeable body is the archetypal shape-shifter” (340). My consideration of the Irish Sovranty Hag’s contribution endorses Fein’s interpretation of the effects of “the full force of mystical ‘femenye’” (341) on the rapist knight.

35. Fein notes that “It is almost as if, figuratively, the realm of feminine faery surrounds, womb-like, the masculine world of Arthur and his virile knights” (“Other Thought-worlds,” 340), without underscoring the Irish Sovranty figure’s control of the king as the model for this dynamic.

36. *Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid*, 197.

37. Weisl notes of *WBT* that “The female voice becomes that of justice, grace, wisdom and authority”; however, she also declares that, in the pillow sermon, the loathly lady “must ‘speak like a man’ in order to stop him [the knight] thinking ‘like a man’” (*Conquering the Reign*, 100–101). Since the earlier Irish sources establish pagan feminine power, perhaps the hag is preaching like a man not only in the Christian scheme of things.

38. Disbrow declares that “Like the foolish woman of Proverbs, the ‘olde wyf’ also packs her heresies in Christian wrappings” (“Wife of Bath’s Old Wives’ Tale,” 67). Although I disagree with Disbrow’s reading of the Wife as an allegory of carnality, I feel that she has located the sense of a split narrative, a split which I interpret differently as showing flesh in apposition to words.

39. Monica Brzezinski Potkay and Regula Meyer Evitt note that the Wife “originates in textuality, not reality,” countering the temptation to treat her as a “real woman” (*Minding the Body: Women and Literature in the Middle Ages, 800–1500* [London, 1997], 4); this observation points to Chaucer’s metafictional play without quite articulating such an idea. Medieval literature obsessively considers the body as a locus of identity. The twentieth century reinstates the body as a site of ideas. Hélène Cixous’s 1974 imperative is “Write yourself. The body must be heard.” See *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robin R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, N.J., 1991), for an overview of feminist consideration of the body, including seminal essays by Cixous (1975) and Luce Irigaray (1977), and a summation by Ann Rosalind Jones (1981). A section on desire examines textual implications of the gendered body, with essays by Irigaray, Jane Gallop, Julia Kristeva, and Eve Sedgwick.

40. Lisa M. Bitel categorizes the loathly lady as a party to what she terms “sexual healing”: “The well-known female symbols of sovereignty who wandered through the pseudo-historical tales of early Ireland were hideous, barren hags until they copulated with the right royal aspirant. At the moment of consummation the loathly ladies turned into beautiful young women and the men became kings. . . . Whatever the political morals and other symbolic messages of these stories, the vocabulary was sexual healing” (*Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* [Ithaca, N.Y., 1996], 70). Her term is not one that I would use, but I concur with her recognition that this union is restorative.

41. The *MED* gives a primary meaning of *fantasie* as ‘one of the primary wits’ or ‘imagination’ but also offers ‘preference or liking as directed by caprice rather than reason; arbitrary inclination . . . liking (for a person)’ (400), and, most pertinently here, ‘Amorous fancy or desire’ (401). Summing up “recent psychoanalytic theories of fantasy,” Claire Buck finds that “fantasy . . . is fundamental to subjectivity,” that it is “the term which sidesteps

natural accounts of sexuality," and that "Fantasy . . . is the theatre, or *mise-en-scène*, in which wishes are staged." It is a "setting for desire" ("Irigaray, H. D. and Maternal Origin," in *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Sellers [Toronto, 1991], 130). The Wife seems aware that the superimposition of the theatre of sexual fantasy over the materialistic world can be both problematic and productive for women. See also E. Ruth Harvey, *The Inward Wits: Psychological Theory in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (London, 1975), 1–2, 43–44, 59.

42. Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 194.

43. Peter G. Beidler, ed., *Masculinities in Chaucer* (Cambridge, Eng., 1998), 3.

44. David Townsend, "Heroic Masculinity in the *Waltharius*," in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York, 1997), 67–86, at 83.

45. Fradenburg points out that the Wife avoids closure in her autobiographical account of her own life, in which "Fulfillment is presented as an impossible ideal." She thus concludes that the closure of the tale "bids us see the happiness of ending, and then bids us see that happy endings are to be found only in books" ("Wife of Bath's Passing Fancy," 44). I concur with Fradenburg's sense that this end is not naively happy, but argue that what destabilizes the comic closure also offers potential for a new kind of heterosexual configuration.

46. Weisl notes that "Chaucer is both bound by the conventions and traditions of romance and determined to challenge them; he is interested in the gender dynamics ordained by the genre, yet he still wants to rattle its cage" (*Conquering the Reign*, 3). She continues: "The Loathly Lady, who is the exact opposite of the standard romance heroine throughout most of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, must become ideal for the poem to end. Once a text has engaged romance's terms, it must remain bound by them" (3). While Weisl's statements are valid within her context of genre and gender, I object that the loathly lady is not merely "ideal" at the end of the tale; the nexus of ideas which she imports makes this an instance when Chaucer is rattling the cage of the romance genre so vigorously as to alter it.

47. Elizabeth M. Biebel, "A Wife, a Batterer, a Rapist: Representations of 'Masculinity' in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*," in *Masculinities in Chaucer*, ed. Peter G. Beidler (Cambridge, Eng., 1998), 63–75, at 75.

48. See *Jankyn's Book of Wikked Wyves: The Primary Texts*, ed. Ralph Hanna III and Traugott Lawler (Athens, Ga., 1997), for some of the classic misogyny that informs Chaucer's Wife. Lee Patterson finds that "La Vielle and the Wife of Bath function in their respective poems as both agents and paradigms of resolution" ("For the Wyves Love of Bath: Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the *Roman de la Rose* and the *Canterbury Tales*," *Speculum* 58 [1983], 659).

49. Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives and Amazons* (Basingstoke, 1990), 217. Mann examines the Wife as a person in the estate of woman who is constructed from misogynist ideas of women as vain, pushy, and lecherous, and nonetheless concludes that "what ensures our admiration for the Wife is that she is fun to be with" (*Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* [Cambridge, Eng., 1973], 127). Susan K. Hagen defines the Wife as Chaucer's experiment in feminist hermeneutics ("The Wife of Bath: Chaucer's Inchoate Experiment with Feminist Hermeneutics," in *Rebels and Rivals: The Contestive Spirit in The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Susanna Greer Fein, David Raybin, and Peter C. Braeger [Kalamazoo, Mich., 1991], 105–24).

50. Introducing their anthology of feminist readings, Ruth Evans and Leslie Johnson suggest that the diversity of feminist readings is symptomatic not only of the Wife's lack of a single "meaning, but also her generation of 'signifying surplus'" (*Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect* [London, 1994], 2). See too Mary Carruthers's Afterword to "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions" in the same anthology, where she concludes that "What is extraordinary about the Wife's power is that she keeps it; no effective effort is made in the poem to restrain or squelch it. . . . She continues to bother . . ." (43). What this means, Carruthers proposes, is that "The impulse to shut the Wife up comes from her readers, whom she variously frightens, repels and attracts" (44). The Wife's "signifying surplus" certainly makes her the character most akin to her author, as Priscilla Martin proposes (*Chaucer's Women*, 217). And B. F. Hamlin shows that Chaucer gave the Wife of Bath something approaching his own horoscope, if this can be read as identification with her ("Astrology and the Wife of Bath: A Reinterpretation," *Chaucer Review* 9 [1974]: 153–65, at 158).