

“She knew myn herte”: Revising Gender and Homosociality in the

Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale

by

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ABSTRACT

The Wife of Bath is arguably one of Geoffrey Chaucer’s more famous characters, and with good reason. Opinionated, sexualized, and bold, the Wife is difficult to ignore. Even though a great deal of scholarship has analyzed her character and her contributions to *The Canterbury Tales*, there are still areas that require further exploration. This thesis asserts that the Wife’s character, prologue, and tale revise the gender roles and homosociality of Fragments I and II. The *Wife’s Prologue* echoes many of the ideas featured Fragments I and II, but it does so with small twists and subversions. Her tale continues the trend, but features moments of subversion through the portrayal of gender roles, genre expectations, and same-sex relationships. Through a detailed analysis of Fragments I and II, this thesis also suggests that representations of the feminine gender and same-sex female relationships are intentionally diminished or hidden in favor of more masculine and heteronormative relationships. The Wife highlights this erasure through her depiction of her gossib Alys, whom she discusses in an affectionate but limited manner. Then, in her tale, the Wife reemphasizes the lack of attention given to women by populating her tale’s world with female characters. But, the Wife ultimately limits female homosocial interactions within this story. Nonetheless, this thesis asserts that these limited interactions between women are important to consider when reading *The Canterbury Tales* through gendered or feminist lenses. Ultimately, examining the continual emerging and vanishing of female same-sex relationships opens up a new window for scholars reading the Wife’s character or *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole.

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Chapter I: Introduction: “If I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwe!

Gender, sexuality, and fiction are all topics of intrigue and concern for many societies. Whether it is in our entertainment, education, advertisements, or social spheres, they permeate and invade almost every aspect of our lives. We interact with each regularly, finding ourselves easily drawn to (or, in some cases, repulsed by) one or the other. Such topics have always played a prominent role in society, but especially in writing.

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer, written from roughly 1392 to 1400, begins in an idyllic, naturalistic manner. But the attention Chaucer pays to nature quickly transfers to his cast of colorful characters who present even more lively stories. In *The Canterbury Tales*, a group of characters on a pilgrimage begin a storytelling contest that results in a variety of stories. Whether it is a tale revolving around the laity or the gods, issues of gender, genre, and sexuality remain at the core of these stories. Many tales and main characters delve into such topics, but the Wife of Bath’s character proves to be one of the more memorable and intriguing speakers within *The Canterbury Tales*. As one of the more fascinating travelers on Chaucer’s fictitious pilgrimage, the Wife is one of three female characters who tell a story.¹ Even though Chaucer introduces many fascinating characters on this pilgrimage, the Wife and her story easily capture an audience’s attention. In comparison to the other female speakers in this text, the Wife’s contributions to *The Canterbury Tales* are vivid, noteworthy, and ambiguous enough to warrant further consideration.

Scholarship on the Wife and on *The Canterbury Tales* is extensive, but Chaucer’s writing lends itself to innumerable readings and interpretations, especially in regard to these

¹ The Wife’s name, Alisoun, occurs regularly throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, whether in reference to her or someone else. To avoid any confusion, I will refer to the characters sharing this name as follows: the Wife (Wife of Bath); Alisoun (from the Miller’s Tale); Alys (the Wife’s close friend, mentioned in her prologue).

three topics. As Roger A. Ladd notes, there “is no real question that consensus over Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath* continues to elude critics,” and because of “the Prologue and Tale’s complex intersection of class, gender, and rhetoric, there also remains substantial critical anxiety over this material.”² The Wife is a character who demands attention from her mostly male cohort, and from medieval and modern audiences alike.

Due to the careful construction of characters and stories in the *Tales*, where each pilgrim is given a story well-suited to his or her personality or the pilgrim’s station in life, a departure from this model becomes increasingly difficult to ignore. After the Wife’s confessional prologue in which she expresses various viewpoints on her five marriages, she introduces her brief (and somewhat unexpected) tale. The *Wife’s Prologue and Tale* both feature unusual lengths, especially when compared those of the other pilgrims, who employ brevity when approaching prologues and detail when telling a story. The Knight, for example, begins his tale with only three lines. The tales that follow the Knight’s feature prologues, but all are between thirty-nine and one hundred lines, compared to the tales, which usually feature hundreds of lines. This switch in length forces audiences to pay more attention to the work and the ideas presented within each tale.

But the Wife presents a challenge to readers and scholars who seek to understand her character and purpose. She is arguably one of Chaucer’s more popular characters, as well as one of the few female characters given space to speak. Chaucer’s choice of the Wife’s topics and methods serves to make her an ambiguous character and an even more ambiguous storyteller. But, I believe it is important to consider the Wife as a storyteller, and to observe

² Roger A. Ladd, “Selling Alys: Reading (with) the Wife of Bath,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 34 (2012): 141.

the content within her contributions. As a frame tale,³ or “a story in which another story is enclosed or embedded,” *The Canterbury Tales* thrives on stories. So, I seek to delve further into the fiction of this frame tale in order to uncover the ways Chaucer uses the Wife to revise the tales of Fragments I and II.⁴ Through the *Wife’s Prologue and Tale*, the Wife revises the five initial stories and characters, allowing readers further consideration of genre, gender roles, and female relationships.

This thesis will analyze the Wife as a storyteller in an attempt to demonstrate how her role as a storyteller and her viewpoint as a woman both reveal many of the main concerns for *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole. The *Wife’s Prologue and Tale* feature numerous traces of the ideas and questions raised in the stories of Fragments I and II. Her expertise as a storyteller allows these aspects to shine. In the *Wife’s Prologue*, she attracts both sympathy and criticism from the audience – the former from the abuses the Wife suffers at her fifth husband Jankyn’s hand, and the latter due to the abuse the Wife inflicts upon some of her previous husbands. And, much like her prologue, the *Wife’s Tale* is a flurry of contradictions as it features a world dominated by women but ruled by men. Together, the *Wife’s Prologue and Tale* become a patchwork of ideas, themes, and questions that serve to incite further debate about socially acceptable views of gender, power, and sexuality.

When approaching Chaucer’s work, there are a few complications to take into consideration when writing about *The Canterbury Tales*. The first issue involves the ordering and organization of the text. Due to Chaucer’s death before its completion, the organization

³ Chris Baldick, “frame narrative,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008).

⁴ Fragments refer to the organization of *The Canterbury Tales*, which scholars have split into ten fragments. While there are a few versions, I will be using the *Riverside Chaucer*. Fragment I consists of the *General Prologue* (which I will only briefly discuss in a later section), the *Knight’s Tale*, the *Miller’s Tale*, the *Reeve’s Tale*, and the *Cook’s Tale*. Fragment II consists of the *Man of Law’s Tale*. The *Wife’s Prologue and Tale* begins Fragment III.

is by no means the author's intended final version. Second, sexuality and its various subcategories are challenging concepts to grasp since some of the terminology our society currently uses did not exist in the Middle Ages. And lastly, the medieval conception of gender is a complicated matter due to a variety of historical views and representations.

Since Chaucer died before completing *The Canterbury Tales*, and because the surviving manuscripts feature different organization of the tales, this creates a slight complication for scholars who consider and compare the stories. Larry Dean Benson notes how the ordering of the *Canterbury Tales* is "the oldest and one of the most vexing problems in Chaucerian scholarship."⁵ Separately, it is much easier to come to a conclusion about each individual tale. As a whole, scholars must contend with the fact that they may (or may not) be reading the tales out of order, which may affect the overall meaning. For the sake of this thesis, I will assume that the structure of *The Riverside Chaucer*, the standard scholarly edition, is the version that is closest to Chaucer's intentions and will base my interpretations off its structure. Moreover, due to the links between stories as evidenced through the various prologues and conversations between the pilgrims, as well as the content of the individual tales, I believe the first five tales are likely to be in a mostly correct order, and so I will treat them as such.

Second, there remains the issue of sexuality in medieval England. Views of sexuality and attraction differed from the perspectives that we hold today. Ruth Mazo Karras observes how two images of sexuality appear in most people's minds when considering medieval Europe: the first "is a vision of total repression," and the second is a more "earthy, lustful,

⁵ Larry Dean Benson, "The Order of the Canterbury Tales," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 3 (1981): 77.

playful version” where sin “is not an issue, nor is reproduction.”⁶ And both “these views of medieval sexuality are true,” although Karras notes that the former was usually associated with women, while the latter was often connected with men.⁷ Overall, sexuality was as complex an issue in the Middle Ages as it is in today’s society.

A great deal of focus is placed upon the sex, gender, and sexualities of male characters within *The Canterbury Tales*. Whether it is the Pardoner’s gender fluidity or Absolon’s femininity, representations of male characters are featured prominently. Consequently, many of the male characters draw the audience’s attention. However, this is not to say that depictions of women are entirely omitted or ignored. Women do appear, but in a different manner. The Wife is undeniably presented as a highly sexualized figure, as are a few of the minor female characters who appear in the pilgrim’s stories. But I believe there can be a more scholarly focus on same-sex relationships and the text’s representations (or lack thereof) of non-heteronormative relationships between women. One of this thesis’s contributions is to closely consider female same-sex relations and interactions.

While discussion of sexuality and heteronormativity naturally lends itself to ideas of heterosexuality versus homosexuality, I will attempt to veer away from direct references to terms such as lesbian, gay, or homosexual. Scholars assert that during the Middle Ages, these concepts, as 21st century culture understands them, were not in place. Although there were relationships and sexual activities between those of the same sex in the Middle Ages, representations of these relationships – especially between women – can be difficult to locate in literature and history. However, some medieval views of these relationships are documented in historical texts. These relationships are derided and associated with the term

⁶ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe* (Florence: Routledge, 2012), 1, 2.

⁷ Karras, 3.

sodomy, which “forced homosexuals to live in a state of outward assimilation and invisibility.”⁸ As such, embarking on an endeavor to explicitly find and label these relationships is a difficult task, and one that I will try to avoid in an effort to keep this thesis from taking on a too anachronistic (and perhaps overly ambitious) perspective.

My interest lends itself more to the sensual relationships that occur between women within *The Canterbury Tales*. As previously stated, it would be an immense challenge to find representations of two women who are clearly romantically linked. I can, however, find moments of homosociality, such as sisterhood, same-sex friendship, and mother-daughter relationships, all of which occur quite regularly. Yet, representations of women and female same-sex relationships are usually hidden or diminished in favor of those of male homosociality and heteronormative relationships. This is, possibly, due to the fact that female “interactions simply did not register on the medieval radar screen” in comparison to men and male relations.⁹ Even though occurrences of female homosociality are limited, I seek to highlight the women of Fragments I and II, and to show how Chaucer uses a female character to comment on the dismissal of such relationships.

The third and final issue that arises when writing about Chaucer’s work revolves around how gender, like sexuality, was a complex entity in medieval England. According to P.J.P. Goldberg, “medieval people wanted to live in an ordered society, and hierarchy was integral to the way they thought about order.”¹⁰ Women were, for the most part, viewed as “the weaker sex,” but Goldberg also acknowledges the amount of negotiating that took place within society, such as how a “person would never have imagined that an aristocratic lady

⁸ Vern L Bullough and James A. Brundage, *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York: Garland Pub, 1996), 176.

⁹ Karma Lochrie, "Between Women," in Carolyn Dinshaw, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 70.

¹⁰ P. J. P. Goldberg, *Medieval England : A Social History 1250-1550* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004), 3.

was inferior to a male of lower social rank” simply because she was female.¹¹ In this societal model, the ranking of gender and class were intertwined. Gender roles were further categorized and organized by a person’s roles within society.

One well known medieval organizational structure displays society as being composed of three estates – the clergy (those who pray), the nobles and knights (those who fight), and the laborers (those who work).¹² Chaucer carefully constructs characters that fall into at least one of these categories, but he also writes some who fail to adhere to these structures.¹³ Such organized society was constricted even further for women, who were regarded in terms of their relationships with men. Karma Lochrie notes “the tripartite division of medieval women” fell into three categories – maiden, wife, and widow.¹⁴

The Canterbury Tales replicates such structures for women, and ignores the opportunity to similarly categorize men in terms of women – such as the widower, the husband, and the male equivalent of a maid. Instead, women are maidens, wives, and widows. They are, almost always, defined by men. However, I argue that there are moments where these categories change and grow into something new. Despite the fact that gender and gender roles are clearly established in Fragments I and II, there are some moments of blending and fluidity among various characters. The Wife’s tale takes this further by associating femininity with strength and intelligence, while masculinity is paired with less pleasing qualities. Ultimately, the Wife’s tale both engages with this type of categorization and questions its role in society.

¹¹ Goldberg, 3.

¹² S.H. Rigby, “Society and Politics,” in Steve Ellis, ed., *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 26.

¹³ One such example being Chaucer’s fictionalized self within the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer the Pilgrim. Chaucer (both poet and pilgrim) fails to fall neatly into one category, and instead finds himself balancing on the middle strata.

¹⁴ Lochrie, 70.

In the *Wife's Prologue*, the Wife twists rhetoric and historical documents to her advantage. By rewriting the previous set of tales through her life and perspective, the Wife puts a feminine twist on previously established topics. Throughout her speech, the Wife makes some limited mentions of her good female friend Alys. The treatment of Alys reveals much in the way of the power and the ultimate rejection of female same-sex relationships. In comparison, the *Wife's Tale* allows for more considerations of genre conventions and the roles men and women play in romantic fiction. It continues to highlight representations of female homosociality, but in a manner that displays its minimized presence within *The Canterbury Tales*. In this thesis, I will uncover the ways in which Chaucer uses the Wife to revise notions of gender, genre, and homosociality within the *Canterbury Tales*. But first, I will discuss my key sources, which helped establish the groundwork for my overall topic.

Key Sources

For the framework of exploring heteronormative and homosocial relations, I refer loosely to "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" by Adrienne Rich and Karma Lochrie's "Between Women." While my focus is not necessarily seeking homosexuality within the tales, due to the complications I previously discussed, I will explore homosocial relationships between women and how the *Canterbury Tales* reacts to them by promoting a more heteronormative society. From Rich, I employ some of her descriptions of Kathleen Gough's *power of men*. Rich elaborates on these powers, some being the ability to deny women sexuality, to force sexuality upon women, to confine them physically, and to use women as commodities. Rich introduces the idea of a lesbian continuum, which includes not only sexual relations between women, but the intellectual and

emotional bonding that occurs between women.¹⁵ This continuum allows for more consideration of different types of female relationships – sexual, mothers and daughters, sisters, friends, and so on – which is useful when considering the women who appear and interact throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. From Lochrie, I further her exploration of the Wife’s relationship with her Gossib, which is discussed in a limited manner in her article.

Since gender and sexuality are key elements of this thesis, Carolyn Dinshaw's groundbreaking text, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, helped me establish the groundwork for my thesis. Dinshaw’s text explores medieval sexual constructs, gender identity, and the effects of a patriarchal society through a thoughtful examination of Chaucer's oeuvre. Dinshaw reads the text as a woman’s body, and “writing is a masculine act, an act performed on a body construed as feminine.”¹⁶ For my analysis of the *Man of Law's Tale*, I refer to Dinshaw's observation of how Constance is introduced as a tale told by men: she’s a thing, a commodity.¹⁷ Moreover, when observing mothers within that tale, Dinshaw notes that the Sultanness and Donegild are not portrayed as human, but monstrous.¹⁸ For the Wife, I expand upon some of Dinshaw’s ideas of how the Wife “makes audible precisely what patriarchal discourse would keep silent,” which is the voice of the repressed and Othered woman.¹⁹

In Elaine Tuttle Hansen’s *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, Hansen reads against the idea of the Wife being a powerful, dominant female figure. Even though it is a slightly pessimistic viewpoint, Hansen’s reading is nonetheless enlightening and worth considering. She remarks how a great deal of the Wife’s prologue revolves around men: she is quoting

¹⁵ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5.4: 648.

¹⁶ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin, 1989), 14, 8.

¹⁷ Dinshaw, 95.

¹⁸ Dinshaw, 106.

¹⁹ Dinshaw, 115.

men, talking about men, and speaking to mostly men.²⁰ By citing antifeminist stereotypes, Hansen notes that the Wife is unconsciously and consciously endorsing these ideas.²¹ Some critics might cite the *Wife's Tale* as a departure from her prologue, but Hansen observes the ways in which the ending of the tale reverts to a familiar plot featuring a more “suitable alignment of the sexes.”²² Hansen notes how the magical woman of the *Wife's Tale* is a powerful entity who gives up her power by transforming into the ideal, obedient woman, much like “Constance or Griselda.”²³ Ultimately, Hansen’s detailed analysis views the Wife as not being an authentic female speaker, due to the fact that a male author created the Wife, her story, her character, and her personality.²⁴ Such a perspective is important to keep in mind, especially for a project like this, which privileges representations of femininity and women.

And since women will play a major role in this thesis, it was necessary for me to consider medieval women and how writers of that time perceived them. From Tara Williams’ *Inventing Womanhood: Gender and Language in Later Middle English Writing*, I gained an understanding of the term womanhood and the roles of females in the later medieval work. As previously stated, women typically fell into three categories—maiden, wife, and widow—which feature prominently in *The Canterbury Tales*.²⁵ Williams also explores how Middle English writers used terms like *womanhood*, *femininity*, and *motherhood* to “signal moments where the writers are particularly interested or invested in exploring new ideas about

²⁰ Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, (Berkeley: U of California, 1992), 29.

²¹ Hansen, 32.

²² Hansen, 33.

²³ Hansen, 33.

²⁴ Hansen, 35.

²⁵ Tara Williams, *Inventing Womanhood: Gender and Language in Later Medieval Writing*, (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2011), 2.

femininity” and how to define the idea of womanhood.²⁶ Williams observes the relationship between “womanhood and social power” through examples of intercession and submission in Chaucer’s work.²⁷ Williams’s observation of intercession and submission is a useful resource in my analysis of the tales, since women tend to be pushed into the background.

James Wade’s *Fairies in Medieval Romance* laid the groundwork for my considerations of the romance genre and the mysteriously magical protagonist of the Wife’s Tale. Wade remarks how “romances are always concerned, first and foremost, with the lives of men and women,” with fairies simply being intrusions upon the hero(ine)’s “world, or when these human characters are led into [the fairy] world.”²⁸ His text traces the commonalities and similarities of fairies in Medieval Romance, observing how the differences contribute to the text’s “internal folklore.”²⁹ The appearance of fairies is limited within *The Canterbury Tales*. But when readers keep Wade’s work in mind, fairies do appear in unexpected ways within Fragments I and II, especially when compared to the magical woman featured in the *Wife’s Tale*.

Finally, I draw on Dana M. Oswald’s *Monsters, Gender, and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*, for some of her ideas of monstrosity and sexuality. Oswald’s focus is mostly on Old and Middle English texts that feature obvious, physical monsters, which are clearly not easy to find in *The Canterbury Tales*. She notes that “Erasure is the primary mode of responding to monstrous and sexualized bodies in Old English,” but in Middle English texts “the problem of the monster is often solved through the narrative apparatus of

²⁶ Williams, 3.

²⁷ Williams, 52.

²⁸ James Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1.

²⁹ Wade, 3.

transformation, or metamorphosis.”³⁰ Although monstrosity itself is not a main focus of this thesis, I reference some of Oswald’s comments on Amazonian women in other Medieval texts, and I use her work when considering the overwhelmingly Othered view of women and femininity within *The Canterbury Tales*. The Othered woman appears regularly in Fragments I and II, and she is seen as dangerous, different, and consequently crossing normal social boundaries.

Before discussing how the *Wife’s Prologue and Tale* revise earlier tales, and how her character encourages different perspectives on genre, gender, and sexuality, I will first introduce some background on the genres featured in Fragments I, II, and the Wife’s contribution to the beginning of Fragment III. Secondly, I will provide a quick exploration of the initial tales, beginning with the romances and ending with the fabliaux, as a way to establish a baseline perspective on *The Canterbury Tales*’ depiction of genre, gender, and sexuality. Finally, I will follow with a detailed look at the *Wife’s Prologue and Tale* as revisions of genre, gender, and homosocial relations between women.

³⁰ Dana M. Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 16.

Chapter II: The Rules of Romance in Fragments I and II

In order to observe how the Wife revises the tales of Fragments I and II, it is necessary to first establish an understanding of the genres and stories featured in those Fragments. Since the *Wife's Tale* is a romance, I will first provide a brief introduction to the elements that make up the medieval romance genre. The medieval romance genre is far too expansive to adequately cover in a few paragraphs, but I will mention some of the highlights.³¹ After discussing this genre and the tales associated with it, I will look at the remaining tales before finally moving to the *Wife's Prologue and Tale*.

Romance is a “medieval narrative (originally in verse, later also in prose) relating the legendary or extraordinary adventures of some hero of chivalry.”³² Usually, such adventures revolve around “a knight, nobleman, king.”³³ Quests feature prominently in them, and romances may involve the supernatural – gods and fairies.³⁴ English medieval romance emphasizes “its thematic structure of balance and chiasmus,” which I take to mean that themes in romance are crossed and balanced by their opposites.³⁵ Examples of this may include winning love and later suffering from love, or initial failure (or disloyalty, dishonor) and later achievement (or loyalty, honor). Romances thrive on complications that are then transformed into obstacles that must be overcome in order to ensure that the hero ends on the opposite end of the spectrum from where he or she began.

According to Larry Dean Benson, “a romance purports to tell not something new, novel, but an old ‘storie,’ a true history of events remote in time and often place, which the

³¹ My focus leans more toward romance as shown in Fragments I and II of the *Canterbury Tales*, or as Chaucer views romance as a genre, and not as the entire realm of medieval romance.

³² “romance, n. and adj.1”. *OED Online*. March 2016. *Oxford University Press*.

³³ “romance, n.1”. *MED*. 2014. *University of Michigan*.

³⁴ Wheeler, L. Kip. *Literary Terms and Definitions: L*.

³⁵ Larry Dean Benson, “English Romance,” *The Geoffrey Chaucer Page*. Apr. 1998.

<http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/litsubs/romances/>.

romancer has learned from some reliable ‘auctor’ or ancient tradition.”³⁶ Moreover, events tend to revolve around “wonders, chance happenings, and sudden reversals of fortune.”³⁷ The content of a romance is typically less important than the portrayal of emotion or “the creation of the balanced, symmetrical structures that inform the more sophisticated romances.”³⁸

This is merely a starting point to indicate elements that may or may not appear in the first six tales. As far as stories go in *The Canterbury Tales*, only a handful fulfill such requirements, and not always to the fullest extent. There is an abundance of adaptation, creation, and elision in order to convey the desired story, and it is necessary to consider how the tales preceding the Wife’s use genre, especially romance, and the way characters are portrayed within each story.

Knight’s Tale

The Knight begins the pilgrims’ contest with courtly romance featuring betrayal, battle, and the Roman gods. In this tale, women are won, marriage is a form of conquest, and instances of lovesickness all contribute to the heteronormative dynamic that we see repeatedly in Chaucer’s *Tales*. It is a story befitting a knight, and one that is longer and more sophisticated in comparison to the tales that follow.

However, it is worth noting that some elements of the Knight’s tale fall outside the bounds of a standard English medieval romance. C. David Benson observes that:

³⁶ Chaucer, Geoffrey, and Larry Dean Benson. 1987. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin Co. 7.

³⁷ Larry D. Benson, 7.

³⁸ Larry D. Benson, 7

because it deals with knights and ladies, love and fighting, and no other obvious classification suggests itself, most critics have been content to label the tale a romance. Yet despite some surface similarities, the essence of the genre, what might be called the ‘spirit of romance,’ is absent.³⁹

Instead of setting the tale in a more magical, fairytale world, the *Knight's Tale* disrupts these expectations. He further discusses how such a “mysterious land of romance” is displayed in later tales like the Wife's Arthurian romance, but is absent in the Knight's Tale.⁴⁰ Although his story features the gods, the magical aspects are limited in the story overall. Chaucer limits the supernatural aspects of the by focusing on the creation and preservation of heteronormative relations.

C.D. Benson also acknowledges that the *Knight's Tale* fulfills one aspect of romance by portraying the aristocracy.⁴¹ Through these characters, notions of gender are established promptly in the Knight's tale. The tale begins with a man, as Theseus is introduced as quite the formidable figure:

Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,
 Ther was a duc that highte Theseus;
 Of Atthenes he was lord and governour,
 And in his tyme swich a conquerour
 That gretter was ther noon under the sonne.
 Ful many a riche contree hadde he wonne;
 What with his wysdom and his chivalrie,
 He conquered al the regne of Femenye...
 (I.859-866)

By referring to him as a duke, lord, governor, and a conqueror in the first three lines, Chaucer establishes Theseus as a remarkable Athenian leader and man with power that is incomparable: he is deemed so successful that “noon” can match his skill in leading and

³⁹ C. David Benson, “The ‘Knight's Tale’ as History,” in *The Chaucer Review* 3.2 (1968): 107.

⁴⁰ C.D. Benson, 107.

⁴¹ C.D. Benson, 107.

conquering kingdoms (I.863). Theseus's masculinity is emphasized through the repetition of *his* and *he*, which diminishes his name in favor of highlighting his extreme manhood.

Furthermore, his conquest of femininity is highlighted in the line "He conquered al the regne of Femenye," indicating that his power, the power of patriarchy, is superior to all other forms of influence and is the only true authority (I.866).

But another power is mentioned. "Femenye," a variant of "Femina, land of women", refers to the Amazons (I.866).⁴² Infamous for being legendary female warriors, the Amazons derive from Greek mythology. These women are featured among other oddities in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, a fourteenth-century text which follows the adventures of a knight who stumbles across many peculiar creatures, such as giants with one eye, people without a nose or mouth, and even some persons without heads. When considering this text, Dana M. Oswald observes how, of all the monsters in *Mandeville's Travels*, the Amazons are the only ones who transform themselves by cutting off "one breast of all female children."⁴³ She further states that "their bodies, then, serve as a warning of their *difference*."⁴⁴ They are, to outsiders, extremely monstrous due to their gender fluidity and rejection of obvious, external femininity. They are women and warriors, mothers and leaders, and entirely separate from the standard patriarchal societal structure that demands women be lesser than their male counterparts.

Yet, the Amazonian women of the Knight's Tale are, at a glance, a far cry from those of Mandeville's travels. They appear to have no obvious markings of self-mutilation, as would be expected from an Amazon, and are certainly lacking in signs of ferocity and

⁴² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Dean Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), 828.

⁴³ Oswald, 142-143.

⁴⁴ Oswald, 143.

strength. Hippolyta is the first female mentioned, and is introduced as queen of the Amazons. Theseus's marriage to her is met with "muchel glorie and greet solempnytee," while Hippolyta's sister Emelye's arrival is met with "victorie and with melodye" (I.868, 72). It is worth noting that the arrival, or Theseus's newfound possession, of these women is readily associated with terms of great renown. Hippolyta brings worldly honor, fame, and a ceremony of some religious or reverent magnitude. The latter is presumably in reference to the marriage that occurs between Theseus and Hippolyta.

Emelye, meanwhile, is associated with "victorie and with melodye" (I.872). The term victory brings to mind military operations and triumph against an enemy force. Emelye and Hippolyta are "broghte" to Theseus's "contree" like spoils of war (I.869). Both women are distinctly Othered by the narrator through distancing language that emphasizes their status as conquered enemies. But even though they are considered outsiders in the language of the text, they appear to have successfully assimilated into the fold of society. The ferocity of Amazonian women is textually suppressed, and the result condemns these Amazonian women to transform from their more fearsome selves to domesticated women. They seem to be very much like all other Athenian women, subservient to men and physically powerless.

However, while their bodies seem unaffected by mutilations appropriate to Amazons, they do show other signs of difference from the Athenians. Hippolyta is continually deemed a "faire, hardy queene" (I.882). Her beauty is emphasized to great extremes, and to the point where her appearance is deemed more important than any other aspect of her being. As Tara Williams argues, "Hippolyta's beauty is extraordinary--rather than certifying her femininity, it indicates her foreignness."⁴⁵ Her beauty ultimately Others her in order to explain away

⁴⁵ Williams, 21.

any differences, and further emphasizes the taming and assimilation of the Other into Athenian society.

Emelye, similarly, is portrayed as an otherworldly beauty. The text describes her as:

...fairer was to sene
 Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,
 And fressher than the May with floures newe --
 For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe,
 I noot which was the fyner of hem two...
 (I.1035-9)

The elaborate language found in the poetry of courtly love is featured in abundance, with the above passage continuing well beyond the quoted lines. With all the comparisons to nature, lilies, roses and other flowers, Emelye becomes an object for eyes only. This is emphasized further by the line “fairer was to sene,” with the implication being that the ideal woman is externally lovely, but silent (I.1035). Her appearance is all that matters; so long as she is “freshe” like a flower, she will be admired as a passive entity. Her presence is nothing more than scenery, a figure in the background of someone else’s story, completely devoid of any power or agency to claim space of her own within this tale. The language of courtly love serves to praise women as objects. In Emelye’s case, she is admired for being like a flower, to be contained in a garden or pulled unwillingly from her roots, instead of a human being with her own will and desire.

The beauty of these former Amazonians is broached repeatedly within the tale. Interestingly, although romance as a genre tends to feature fairy, none appear in this tale. However, Emelye and Hippolyta’s extreme beauty fulfills that role, as a “fairy’s beauty in romance is an essential and defining characteristic.”⁴⁶ Fairies seek to “challenge” knightly

⁴⁶ Wade, 14.

virtue.⁴⁷ Emelye fulfills this role by simply existing as an object of desire for Palamon and Arcite. This further alienates both women from the rest of Athenian society: they are magnificent in beauty, to the point of being inhuman. Their inhuman qualities are enhanced by the lack of description of Athenian women. The Athenian woman is present, but invisible, while these Amazon women cannot help but to make their presence known through their beauty. The Amazons' beauty is their only power, but such beauty ultimately traps them.

Within this tale, women are ruled and controlled by societal norms. Emelye's body is a commodity to possess. Whether it is Arcite and Palamon's love or Theseus's claim that Emelye is his sister, there is a distinct diminishment of women as beings with agency, and women's relationship with other women. Even when Emelye takes individual action, it is on the orders of another. One May morning, the season itself "seith 'Arys, and do thyn observaunce'" (I.1045). And so, she obeys this mysterious voice and acts the part of a loyal subject. Although she plans to honor May, her agreeable nature indicates how she is not only an object meant to be seen, she is also meant to honor and obey the rule of others.

Palamon's worship of Venus is similar to Emelye's, as both are called to honor a goddess:

The Sondag nyght, er day bigan to sprynge,
 Whan Palamon the larke herde synge
 (Although it nere nat day by houres two,
 Yet the larke sang) and Palamon right then
 With hooly herte and with an heigh corage,
 He roos to wenden on his pilgrymage
 Unto the blissful Citherea benign --
 I mene Venus, honorable and digne.
 (I.2209-16)

⁴⁷ Wade, 73.

After he hears a lark sing, Palamon makes his way to Venus's temple to pray and ask for help in the upcoming battle for Emelye. Such prompting from nature implies that all must be reminded to worship the goddesses, in order to ensure they are not ignored. But, Palamon's call to worship differs from Emelye's when regarding agency. Emelye is commanded by the season to worship. Palamon, however, is prompted in a gentler manner. The singing lark does not command him to do anything, but it does give him "hooly herte" and "heigh corage" (I.2013).

Alternatively, Arcite's worship of Mars is marked by more agency as he visits the temple of his own volition:

The nexte houre of Mars folwynge this,
 Arcite unto the temple walked is
 Of fierse Mars to doon his sacrificise,
 With alle the rytes of his payen wyse.
 With pitous herte and heigh devocioun,
 Right thus to Mars he seyde his orisoun...
 (I.2367-72)

Unlike Emelye and Palamon, who are ordered or subtly reminded to, Arcite is seemingly acting with no prompting. His scene is more decisive and voluntary, emphasizing the idea of importance of male figures. While Palamon and Emelye need reminders to worship the goddesses, the god Mars needs to give no gentle signs to remind his followers to act. The patriarchal order is securely established in this tale, which leaves little room for feminine power and authority.

But Emelye is not without her moments of agency. In one instance, she pushes against the patriarchal order by requesting Diana's aid to help her remain an unmarried maiden. She prays:

Chaste goddessse, wel wostow that I
 Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,

Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf.
 I am, thow woost, yet of thy compaignye,
 A mayde, and love huntynge and venerye,
 And for to walken in the wodes wilde,
 And noght to ben a wyf and be with childe.
 Noght wol I knowe compaignye of man.
 Now help me, lady, sith ye may and kan,
 For tho thre formes that thou hast in thee.
 (I.2304-13)

But, it is this virgin goddess who denies Emelye sexual and social freedom. Despite being a member of Diana's followers, Emelye is rejected by the goddess. Feminine authority is intertwined with masculine authority as Diana is powerless to disobey the will of the other gods. Diana's verdict stems from the other gods' decision and the knights' fates. Instead of aiding her follower, Diana informs Emelye that there is nothing to be done, and Emelye must serve her societal purpose by marrying the winner. For a woman who turned Actaeon into a hart in "vengeaunce that he saugh Diane al naked," she shows surprisingly little agency when asked to help one of her followers (I.2065-6).

Diana, as a huntress and a chaste "Goddesse of maydens," fails to protect Emelye from being forced into a different societal role (I.2300). Instead, she urges Emelye to no longer be sad, as "by eterne word writen and confermed," she will marry (I.2348-50). Women fail women in the face of already established rules and structures. Patriarchy is rampant, and there is no fighting it for these characters. As we shall see later, the Wife revisits this structure of helpless women and authoritative men in her tale. But instead of keeping these structures, the Wife revises them through a reversal in gender roles.

Man of Law's Tale

Romance makes another appearance in the Man of Law's Tale. This story is written in rime royal, which "consists of seven iambic pentameter lines riming ababbcc."⁴⁸ The format "rime royal served as the dominant form for sophisticated narrative poetry" in Chaucer's lifetime, and for some time thereafter.⁴⁹ The story begins with "In Surrye whilom dwelte a compaignye" (II.134).⁵⁰ The story begins with the societal view of the tale's heroine, Custance:

This was the commune voys of every man:
 "Oure Emperour of Rome -- God hym see! --
 A doghter hath that, syn the world bigan,
 To rekene as wel hir goodnesse as beautee,
 Nas nevere swich another as is shee.
 I prey to God in honour hire susteene,
 And wolde she were of al Europe the queene.

"In hire is heigh beautee, withoute pride,
 Yowthe, withoute grenehede or folye;
 To alle hire werkes vertu is hir gyde;
 Humblesse hath slayn in hire al tirannye.
 She is mirour of alle curteisye;
 Hir herte is verray chambre of hoolynesse,
 Hir hand, ministre of fredam for almesse."
 (II.155-68)

The Man of Law takes up the romantic style of the Knight's in his descriptions of Custance.

A key aspect of this specific excerpt is the first line – everything that follows is according to *every man*, and not a direct reflection of Custance herself. The voice of women is ignored, and although her introductory is complimentary, it establishes her as property of man.

Custance is the Emperor's "doghter," and all of her praises are said in the voice of all man.

⁴⁸ Larry Dean Benson, "Rime Royal," *The Geoffrey Chaucer Page*. Apr. 1998.
<http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/litsubs/style/rime-roy.html>.

Chaucer appears to have been the first to use this rhyme scheme in English poetry, a fact which marks him as a highly innovative writer.

⁴⁹ Benson, "Rime."

⁵⁰ Beginning a tale with the word "whilom," or *once*, is a trend which will appear throughout four of the five tales of Fragments I and II.

Custance is defined by masculine conceptions of feminine virtue, which forces the real Custance to the background while stories of her take the spotlight.

Chaucer allows further recycling of not only ideas, but lines. The Man of Law states that “Nas nevere swich another as is shee,” which is reminiscent of the Knight’s description of Theseus and how “That gretter was ther noon under the sonne” (II.159, I.863). The difference, however, is notable. The description of Custance begins with multiple negatives, and leaves the sentence hanging in regard to meaning. The first being that she is remarkable and there is no other woman like her. The other meaning, which is intended or not, could be that she is simply unlike everyone else – she is different, Other, strange. Even more so, she is placed at the top of the social and feminine hierarchy. Her difference marks her as a paragon. The line about Theseus, however, emphasizes his greatness, especially with the inclusion of the sun: he is doubly majestic and powerful, while Custance’s power is diminished to simply being an interesting, unique person.

Much like earlier women, Custance is deemed a great beauty, and “hir goodnesse” only makes her a more endearing being to the other characters, as her “Humblesse hath slayn in hire al tirannye” (II.165). Like Alisoun in the Miller’s Tale and the Amazon women in the Knight’s tale, she becomes an object of desire, as a “Sowdan hath caught so greet plesance / To han hir figure in his remembrance” (II.186-7). The heroine, Custance, is introduced as fiction. The Man of Law admits in the prologue to his tale that “a marchant...Me taughte a tale” (II.132-3). Although this tale is promoted as a history, it is a history told from the perspective of various men who have heard the tale, and not from Custance. She is a story that merchants tell, which forces her to seem even more unrealistic and impossible. She is, in some manner, reduced to legend. Custance is a story that is shared among merchants, a

woman that has long since vanished from life and only lives on in stories. The Wife, meanwhile, tells the story of her life in her own words.

Custance's story begins with her erasure from her normal life. Her story is in constant flux as she moved from location to location. Custance is incapable of remaining. She is always on the verge of death, the object of hatred and love, to the point where her life is always in danger and she must remain on the move. Custance is a paragon of immense value, but of limited power. Jill Mann provides an argument against this notion, stating how "Constance's 'silent endurance' does not imply limpness or inertia; when attacked on board ship by a would-be rapist, she resists so vigorously that she throws him overboard 'with hir struglyng wel and myghtily' so that he is drowned."⁵¹

Yet, one must consider what the audience knows of Custance based on her appearance in this story. She is introduced as a being created by man, whether it be the common voice of men, the Man of Law, or God, and her life is tied to God and his protection, rendering her an easy victim to many foes. God's enemies, such as Satan, become her enemies. Unlike the other characters, who are introduced as people, she is a story people tell. Any strength she does show derives from man – the man, God. Throughout the entire story, Custance shows little agency on her own behalf. She is unable to stop her marriage, although she wishes to remain free, and is constantly at the mercy of others. The Wife, as we shall see, subsequently revises this instance through her portrayal of the magical Lady and the unwilling knight's marriage.

Relationships between women are marked with monstrosity and given a quick dismissal. The *Man of Law's Tale* introduces women with agency as monstrous figures – all of her mother-in-laws attempt to end her life through various nefarious means. The Sultanness

⁵¹ Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), 107.

is a “serpent under femynnytee,” imagined as a religious creature of evil due to her malicious acts.⁵² Mann claims that the “Sultanness is not only an evil woman, she is also, it seems, a *counterfeit* woman. The immediate meaning of ‘feyned’ is ‘feigning, false’ (MED 6b), but...with its implications of ‘mannishness’, and the suggestion of counterfeit in ‘serpent under femynnytee’ also activate the sense ‘feigned.’”⁵³ Women, then, are further pushed into the realm of fiction. Custance is a story to be told, and the Sultanness is a false woman.

Such monstrosity stems from her relationship with her son. Like Donegild and Alla, the Sultanness refuses to let go of her son and the power she holds over him. In the end, femininity and a mother’s affection are twisted into a corrupting force. The only positive relationship between women that appears is that of Custance’s friendship with Hermengyld, who “loved hire right as hir lyf” (II.535). Initially a pagan, Hermengyld converts to Christianity. This gives the two women a shared secret and power. When a blind man requests Hermengyld’s help in curing his sight, Hermengyld grows “affrayed” that her husband will kill her if he discovers her religious status (II.563). But, Custance “made hire boold, and bad hire wirche / The wyl of Crist, as doghter of his chirche” (II.566-7). Women, in this instance, wield God’s power, but also power over the will of other women. Custance intercedes, and encourages feminine power through masculine means. The relationship between the two women is positive, powerful, but short-lived.

This representation of female friendship is quickly ended by a knight who sneaks into the room where the two women sleep, whereupon he cuts “the throte of Hermengyld atwo” (II.600). Accused of the crime, despite “lovyng Hermengyld right as hir lyf,” Custance is almost punished for the death of her friend (II.625). Women’s love for other women is

⁵² Mann, 360.

⁵³ Mann, 102.

marked as powerful – perhaps too powerful, and therefore too threatening. Homosocial relations between women, no matter how innocent, are ultimately destroyed. By the conclusion of the tale, Custance is reintroduced to heteronormative relationships, first when she is married to Alla and later when she is reunited with her father.

The Fabliaux

The Miller, the Reeve, and the Cook tell fabliaux for their tales. A fabliau is “a coarsely humorous short story in verse, dealing in a bluntly realistic manner with stock characters of the middle class involved in sexual intrigue or obscene pranks,” usually involving a plot involving the “cuckolding of a slow-witted husband by a crafty and lustful student.”⁵⁴ As a fabliau, the *Miller’s Tale* relies on romantic features in order to parody them. Though the characters are all undoubtedly human, the ever popular role of a trickster is fulfilled not by a fairy, but by a clerk. A kiss becomes a matter for embarrassment, and trickery wins in the end. Although the *Knight’s Tale* and *Man of Law’s Tale* provide the closest comparisons to the Wife’s contributions, the comparison to the fabliaux will show us that Othered views of women persist across genres. Additionally, they reveal the inherent rejection of homosocial relations between women by prioritizing heteronormative structures while simultaneously diminishing or erasing same-sex interactions between women.

⁵⁴ Chris Baldick, “fabliau.” *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

Miller's Tale

Larry Dean Benson states that in the *Miller's Tale*, "Chaucer raises the fabliau to the level of high art; without sacrificing any of the characteristics of the genre."⁵⁵ The tale features many of the expected elements of fabliau: humor, bluntness, the cuckolded husband, and the crafty clerk. But according to Benson, the detail that Chaucer uses is unusual for fabliau, which tends to be "simplistic in plot."⁵⁶

Chaucer's elaborate writing is shown in his descriptions of Alisoun, the wife of John the carpenter in the *Miller's Tale*. In the *Knight's Tale*, which occurs prior to the Miller's story, Emelye and Hippolyta are discussed in terms of nature in their loveliness. In the *Miller's Tale*, Alisoun's beauty lies in animalistic features, which demarcate her as something Other than human. Her husband "heeld hire narwe in cage," treating Alisoun like an animal in need of domestication and control (I.3224). Such imagery is continued, as she is further described as being "wylde and yong," with a body "as any wezele" in its slenderness (I.3225, 3234). She wears an apron "as whit as morne milk," and sings "as loude and yerne / As any swalwe sittyng on a berne" (I.3236, 3257-8). This imagery continues:

Therto she koude skippe and make game,
As any kyde or calf folwyng his dame.
Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth,
Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth.
Wynsyng she was, as is a joly colt,
Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt.
A brooch she baar upon hir lowe coler,
As brood as is the boos of a bokeler.
Hir shoes were laced on hir legges hye.
She was a prymerole, a piggesnye,
For any lord to leggen in his bedde,
Or yet for any good yeman to wedde.
(I.3259-70)

⁵⁵ Larry Dean Benson, 8

⁵⁶ Larry Dean Benson, 8

Serving as a parody of courtly language, this section also develops ideas of women's roles in fiction (and by extension, women's roles within reality). She is deemed less than human, and less than animal. Instead, she is a hybrid of sorts, exhibiting multiplicity in her identity—with characteristics reminiscent of a calf, a colt, a weasel and a bird—to the point of being a creature without a single identifying name. With the comparison to “prymerole” and “piggesnye,” Alisoun’s animalism is momentarily deferred (I.3268). The former term denotes a variety of flowers, but especially primrose, daisy, cowslip, and comfrey.⁵⁷ The latter, similarly, can mean “flower,” usually in the intent of making “an affectionate epithet.”⁵⁸ In both cases, it lessens her crude animalism and reemphasizes the rules of courtly love.

Despite the affectionate switch in description, Alisoun’s excess of identities is deemed inappropriate. This is evidenced by how Alisoun’s jealous husband “heeld hire narwe in cag” (I.3224). She is too wild, too untamed, and so she is kept close and confined. Alisoun further acknowledges her husband’s distrusting nature when speaking to Nicholas, and she states that any relationship between her and Nicholas must be secret (I.3294-6). Her multiplicity in identity allows her to shift from human, to animal, to nature, and to thing. She is presented as property to be owned, like any other animal. And, because she is an animalistic figure, her callous actions against her husband mark her as monstrous. Alisoun’s sexuality translates to her physicality, representing her as being allied with nature and the environment.

Nicholas, this tale’s crafty clerk, is described as being “lyk a mayden meke for to see,” and “he hymself as sweete as is the roote / Of lycorys or any cetewale” (II.3202, 3206-7). He is feminized from the beginning with excessively sweet descriptions, but his later

⁵⁷ “prymerol(e), n1.” *MED*. 2014. University of Michigan.

⁵⁸ “pigges-nīe, n.” *MED*. 2014. University of Michigan.

actions prove to be sexually aggressive. When wooing Alisoun, Nicholas states ““Lemman, love me al atones, / Or I wol dyen, also God me save" (I. 3280-1). Taking love sickness and mocking it, Nicholas further parodies such a speech by groping Alisoun, instead of leaving it at only words. But eventually, his verbal pleadings do sway Alisoun so “hir love hym graunted” (I.3290). Instead of presenting a symbiotic relationship, their relationship is dependent on the woman relinquishing power to the man by granting him her love.

Absolon, meanwhile, is Othered in a minimalistic manner. Like Alisoun, Absolon is connected with animalistic qualities, having a reddish complexion and “eyen greye as goos” (I.3317). As far as comparisons go, his is one of a more mild temperament than Alisoun’s animalism. Absolon’s comparison to a goose brings another text by Chaucer to mind – *The Parliament of Fowls*. In this text, a goose is mockingly introduced as having “facounde gent,” but then is later mocked for being foolish and talkative (PoF.558, 569-70). Being compared to a goose, for Absolon, highlights his fluidity between being intelligent and foolish, masculine and feminine. His character is emphasized as being fluid in gender by how he sings with a “voys [that is] gentil and smal,” and sounds like “a nyghtyngale” (I.3360, 3377). In comparison to Alisoun’s untamed wildness and Nicholas’s excessive sweetness, Absolon is gentle as a bird and unsurprisingly a poor match for Alisoun’s wildness. Absolon’s attempt at mimicking such courtly language ends with disastrous results. Upon requesting a kiss, Alisoun grants it, but not in the way that is expected.

Throughout this tale, gender roles are emphasized as a sexualized woman is marked as Other. Female relationships with other women are entirely ignored in favor of heteronormative structures, and complex relations between men are deemed to be the cause of women who tempt men. Due to the focus on heteronormative relationships, homosocial

relations are almost entirely absent. The only time a group of women is mentioned occurs when Absolon “Gooth with a sencer on the haliday, / Sensynge the wyves of the parisshe faste; / And many a lovely look on hem he caste” (I.3340-2). In this instance, nothing is said of the women. However, their roles as wives and as participants in a male-dominated religious community are emphasized. They are boxed into a specific role, and subsequently brushed aside.

Reeve's Tale

L.D. Benson notes that the *Reeve's Tale*, while based on two fabliaux, was “carefully adapted to its teller and to the dramatic situation.”⁵⁹ As the Reeve took offense to the content of the *Miller's Tale*, the Reeve uses his story as an opportunity to quit the Miller. The Reeve continues the trend of allowing tricksters free rein in his story, and women continue to be displayed as a prize or commodity. In the tale, two clerks are seemingly outwitted by a crafty miller. But, the scholars are unwilling to leave without some sort of fair payment for the grain that is stolen from them, and they decide to take payment in the form of sex with the women in the miller's household, which the Wife echoes in her discussion of women.

The Reeve begins with a strong focus on gender and gender roles when he introduced his miller. The miller, named Symkin, weds a wife of “noble kyn,” while his daughter is described as having “kamus nose and eyen greye as glas,” continuing the idea of women as animals and objects (I.3942, I.3974). His wife's one redeeming quality is that she, like a horse or any other such domesticated animal, is of good stock. For Symkin's daughter, such eyes that are like glass are well suited to this character who lingers in the background of the

⁵⁹ Benson, 8.

tale.⁶⁰ Like glass, she is a transparent presence who is given no depth and simply remains in the story as an ornamentation rather than a person. Additionally, glass is fragile and breakable. It requires careful handling, and the careful handling of women is an attitude toward women that occurs regularly. Moreover, her “kamus nose” connects her to Simkyn’s appearance, who also has a pig-like nose (I.3974, 3934). By attributing Simkyn’s features to Malyne, her individualism is deemphasized as her connection to men is highlighted. Malyne may be fragile like glass, but she is also a reflection of her father.

As far as introductions go, the Reeve focuses less on genre and more on his revenge. Eventually, the Reeve does attempt a fairytale, storybook structure that the previous storytellers use about halfway through his tale. At this point, he attempts to infuse romance into the story, regardless of how well it fits. After the Miller steals the clerks’ grain, Aleyn states that since he cannot have what is owed to him, he “will have esement” by having sex with the miller’s sleeping daughter, who we learn is named Malyne (I.4186). Because of this peculiar introduction, Aleyn and Malyne’s scene is one of ambiguity and confusion. Malyne is “faste slepte” in her bed, unaware of Aleyn as “he crepte” toward her (I.4193-4). Then, she awakens, as the Reeve tells how “he so ny was, er she myghte espie, / That it had been to late for to crie,” indicating a thoroughly troubling assault she was unable to defend against (I.4195-6). Malyne’s mother experiences a similar event. The mother unknowingly climbs into the wrong bed and remains very “stille” as she prepares to sleep (I.4227). John proceeds to have sex with the wife, giving her such a “myrie” experience (I.4230). This emphasizes the fragility of Malyne and the tendency for women to be acted upon.

⁶⁰ The daughter, as readers discover later, is named Malyne. The absence of her name at the beginning of the tale further emphasizes her invisibility. *The Wife’s Tale* employs names (or rather, namelessness) in a similar manner.

The tale makes a slight turn, as “shortly for to seyn, they were aton.” (I.4197). Malyne’s potential assault is revised into a consensual interaction. However, this line is fraught with ambiguity, implying they were either in agreement due to Malyne’s giving her consent to the sexual act or in agreement that the sexual assault had been done and it was too late to refuse. The moment is strikingly oppressive, leaving Malyne little choice in the matter, and the potential for diverging perspectives.

Such perspectives are enhanced through names. Elizabeth Scala notes further connections between Aleyn and Malyne’s names, and how although their names are similar in sound and spelling, they come to represent opposing ideas - *aligned* and *maligned*.⁶¹ Man, essentially, is aligned with the patriarchal world, while the woman is at odds with it. Moreover, since Aleyn is the person who states Malyne’s name in line 4236, he is the one who forces her into the role of being a maligned being, referencing his taking her virginity, and implying that such an action ruins a woman in patriarchal society.

The connection between Aleyn and Malyne is further complicated by Aleyn and Malyne’s reaction upon waking the next morning. He bids her farewell, calling her his “sweete wight” before he leaves (I.4236). The term *wight* not only means person or living human being, but also *creature*, which is interesting to consider, as it Others women yet again.⁶² Through language, there is a continuous effort to distance man from woman. Malyne returns with surprising affection, naming him “deere lemman,” which is a gender-neutral term, and provides Aleyn with information that allows him to regain his stolen goods from her father (I.4240). In comparison to the previous statement, hers is one of intimacy, and it is entirely devoid of any distancing diction that the clerk uses. By the end of the tale, Malyne’s

⁶¹ Scala, 104-105.

⁶² “wight, n.” *MED*. 2014. University of Michigan.

name is discarded as she becomes Simkin's daughter. Aleyn brags that he "Swyved the milleres doghter bolt upright" – his confession is meant for John, but is instead accidentally directed to the miller. All romance is set aside, and Malyne's power is deemphasized further through crude and distancing language.

In the *Reeve's Tale*, women are not given space to step outside of the bounds of patriarchal society and the relationships that are expected of them. As her mother is a woman of good breeding, Malyne is a woman whose will is at the mercy of man. The Wife plays with such structures in her prologue and tale, displaying harsher realities of raptus and providing new perspectives of what makes a person good.

Cook's Tale

Money, revelry, love, music, dance, troubles – the Cook's Tale introduces a character named Perkin. In this story, Perkin knows how to party, and the Cook embodies all the livelier aspects of romance that audiences might expect to see. After all, it is not unusual to expect festivities in romance. Such activities occur in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, an Arthurian medieval romance, which begins with a pleasant feast that is interrupted with the beginnings of a quest. The Cook, however, fails to create a complete story.

As with the Knight and the Miller, the Cook continues the trend of introducing his tale with "whilom," echoing back to the fairytale structure that modern readers recognize and normally associate with the phrase *once upon a time*. However, the tale is firmly ingrained in their reality once he sets it "in oure cite," moving away from more wondrous, fantastical locations (I.4365). Or, as Larry Dean Benson states, the story of *The Canterbury Tales* moves from "the remoteness of ancient Athens to...London, and from the idealized realm of

romance to the sleaziest side of contemporary reality.”⁶³ This decisive rhetorical shift allows the audience to connect with the familiar content. In comparison to the Knight’s romance, audiences can view the Cook’s setting as being more reliable and realistic. Even though the prior two tales were more contemporary, the Cook emphasizes this further by moving from Cambridge and Oxford to a setting that all the pilgrims are likely familiar with and can easily envision: London.

The main character, Perkin, is romanticized in his appearance, which is “Gaillard...as goldfynch in the shawe” (I.4367). With his “lokkes blake, ykembd ful fetisly,” Perkin is deemed a pleasant sight (I.4369). While this flowery and naturalistic imagery is typically expected of female characters within *The Canterbury Tales*, as previously seen with Emelye and Alisoun, the male is associated with nature instead. Perkin’s connection to nature and femininity may simply be due to the lack of female characters within this tale. Or, Perkin’s association with feminine qualities may indicate that femininity is a corrupting force, and that any of Perkin’s faults are intertwined with these feminine aspects. Perkin freely plays at dice and engages in debauchery, both at the expense of his master (I.4392). He is loose with money in the same ways that Alisoun from the Miller’s tale is loose with her sexuality.⁶⁴

Perkin’s lively lifestyle is further romanticized and spoken of fondly. And although there are no knightly quests or damsels in distress, this fabliau features a different type of quest. Whether it is dancing or merriment, Perkin seeks pleasures to the point of becoming monetarily destitute. His quest begins with this lack, as Perkin’s master “bad hym go, with sorwe and with meschance,” so he does not ruin the rest of his servants by encouraging such frivolity, and so Perkin does not waste any more of his master’s gold (I.4412).

⁶³ Benson, 8.

⁶⁴ Not to mention the Wife, who is also represented as a highly sexualized character.

The male gaze that features so heavily in romance is emphasized, and somewhat subverted, by the introduction of a presumably self-sufficient woman. A friend of Perkin's has a wife, who held "A shoppe, and swyved for hir sustenance" (I.4421-2). She keeps a shop for appearances, in order to satisfy the gendered norms of society, but uses her sexuality to make a living for herself. She may even, perhaps, make a living for herself and her husband, since *hir* can mean *her* or *their*. In a way, featuring a prostitute mocks the figure of the desired damsel. Instead of her beauty, it is her body that is subject to the male gaze. Additionally, because she is married to a man, heteronormative relationships are reaffirmed. Too little is said of this character to know whether or not her prostitution leads to encounters with women, but she revolves entirely around men and appearing as a normal wife. This character, who is able to provide for herself and potentially her husband by using her sexuality, is erased. She has no name, and is instead defined by her connection with men. As we shall see, the *Wife's Tale* echoes this story by highlighting the namelessness of powerful women.

Concluding and Connecting

Whether the intention is to mock the previous story or storyteller, or to expand on what was previously stated, these stories take great care to speak to one another. Women are portrayed as objects consistently in the tales leading up to the Wife's contributions. In the *Knight's Tale*, Emelye's feelings do not matter as importance is placed on women's relation to men. Custance is an entity to be had, a commodity passed across the ocean from one man to another.

In all tales, women are deemphasized while the male perspective is privileged. With five male speakers, these five tales use romantic elements in their own ways to help promote ideas of masculine authority and feminine submission. But in all, most feature a loose fairytale structure that beckons back to the past and romanticizes a woman's body. However, within this lies the tendency to make women Other – paragons like Custance, monsters like Donegild, animals like Alisoun, or simply different like Hippolyta. When women are the heroines of the tale, male characters and tricksters reclaim the spotlight. As such, it is unsurprising to find more focus on heteronormative relationships, and to place concern on them only when women are failing to remain loyal. Female same-sex relationships are ignored, diminished, or destroyed. In Fragments I and II, they are set aside in favor of heteronormative structures.

Chapter III: Lies, Wives, and Gossibs in the *Wife's Prologue*

Fragments I and II featured women as diminished presences, side characters, or Other. Female homosocial relations occurred rarely, and any traces of female homosociality was quickly diminished or erased from the text. In the *Wife's Prologue*, the Wife introduces a more feminine perspective in comparison to the previous tales. The Wife is the epitome of female sexuality and an exaggeration of the stereotypical feminine norm, both of which allow Chaucer the opportunity to rethink women and society within his stories. Although the *Wife's Prologue* rereads many of the ideas presented in the previous tales, it also challenges the norms through an examination of genre conventions, gender, and female friendship. Her discussion of sex, marriage, men, and friends are shaped by what we may call the phallogocentric nature of the previous tales, or the text's tendency toward privileging men and symbols of masculinity. The Wife's confessions serve as a reiteration of prior tales, but they also introduce alternative views of a woman's role in society and resistance against the diminishing status of female homosociality.

The Wife's character stands apart from the women featured in the previous tales. During the *General Prologue*, Dinshaw notes that the Wife is described as being "outfitted in her ostentatious garb."⁶⁵ Considering her appearance, it is easy to understand why the Wife is a character who intrigues scholars and readers alike. With a "boold" face to match her bold personality, and a penchant for keeping "compaignye in youth," she is a woman unafraid of sexuality and embracing it (I.458, I.461). She has been on pilgrimages before, traveling to Jerusalem three times in her life (I.463). The Wife is presented as being very sexualized and having a plethora of opinions. This portrayal allows her to become desire and sexuality incarnate. Such a portrayal may have been part of an attempt to disavow her views, and to

⁶⁵ Dinshaw, 114.

encourage readers to not view her as a reliable source. Both of which are encouraged by the criticism of her being “somedel deaf,” which is determined to be “scathe,” emphasizing her as being somewhat unable to listen (III.446). She is not only unable to hear, but perhaps unwilling to fully *listen*. Consequently, she is unwilling to adhere strictly to societal norms. And as far as female characters go in *The Canterbury Tales*, she is certainly the most vocal when it comes to debating topics that were previously established in Fragments I and II. Her discussion of gender roles begins Fragment III, and sets the tone for her tale.

“I speke after my fantasye”: Fact or Fiction

The Wife uses her experience and boldness to place feminine concerns at the forefront of her contributions to this pilgrimage. She begins her prologue with a discussion of marriage, experience, and authority:

Experience, though noon auctoritee
 Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
 To speke of wo that is in mariage;
 For, lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age,
 Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve,
 Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve –
 If I so ofte myghte have ywedded bee –
 And alle were worthy men in hir degree.
 (III.1-8)

The Wife speaks of the distinction between “experience” and “auctoritee” in her prologue, when discussing the woes of marriage (III.1). Although male authority has the last word, she is determined to prove that living and true experience are more valuable. And when it comes to discussing marriage, the Wife definitely has the experience to approach this topic. She claims to have been married⁶⁶ since she was twelve years old. While this age will seem extremely young to modern readers, in the Middle Ages, “couples could marry only if they

⁶⁶ The Wife has been married multiple times, but has only five husbands in total.

were old enough to have an understanding of their actions,” which girls would be deemed to have around the age of 12.⁶⁷

I believe that the Wife’s placement of this statement indicates that it is not, or should not be, considered normal or right. Heteronormative relationships are, from the beginning, subverted in a small but significant manner. Because the line appears directly after one lamenting the “wo that is in mariage,” it taints wifhood with misery (III.3). Yet, there is an odd switch in narration as the Wife thanks God for each husband, in earnest or not, hinting at the tumultuous relationships the Wife has had through the years. This marks the first of many moments where the Wife loses the thread of her initial topic and lets her thought diverge before returning to the main topic at hand.

One such divergence involves the Wife setting aside discussing her relationships in detail in favor of arguing against the societal and religious views of what makes for an appropriate marriage. The Wife has a way with words that proves to be perplexing and troubling as she manipulates religious dogma and antifeminist literature. Carolyn Dinshaw notes that “she *mimics* the operations of patriarchal discourse,” and “speaks as that Other created and excluded by patriarchal ideology.”⁶⁸ Elaine Tuttle Hansen further observes how the Wife “lays claim to the power of language to control the behavior of others,” but through citing such antifeminist literature, she is unconsciously, or perhaps even consciously, endorsing its ideas.⁶⁹ As a speaker, the Wife only fuels the confusion surrounding her intentions and effect. Unlike the previous tales, the Wife has a good sense of genre awareness, and plays to the audience in order to enhance the overall experience. Her use of patriarchal discourses helps her establish credibility in her prologue and tale, as she cites

⁶⁷ Goldberg, 26.

⁶⁸ Dinshaw, 115.

⁶⁹ Hansen, 28, 32.

sources such as the bible, mythology, antifeminist literature, and Dante. By citing multiple sources, she gives herself a certain amount of credibility, even if she does twist each text to her advantage. Her learned approach encourages readers and listeners to see how the texts and patriarchal discourse can be interpreted in multiple ways.

The Wife not only encourages interpretative viewpoints and revisions of patriarchal discourse, but also of herself. The *General Prologue* introduces her as an expert in “cloth-making,” but it is her role as a wife that is highlighted and deemed more important than the rest (I.447). She is, undoubtedly, one of the more talented and productive women on the pilgrimage, and undeniably enjoys seeking attention from others. Yet, for a skilled and experienced woman, the Wife spends a most of her time discussing the “wo that is in mariage” (III.3).

Even though the *Wife's Prologue and Tale* begin the Marriage Group, marriage is brought into question repeatedly in earlier tales, if unconsciously. The Marriage Group is a group of tales, identified by G.L. Kittredge in 1912, who notes that the Wife's “Prologue begins a Group in *The Canterbury Tales*, or, as one may say, a new act in the drama. It is not connected with anything that precedes” it.⁷⁰ The Marriage Group consists of the Wife's, the Clerk's, the Merchant's, and the Franklin's tales.⁷¹

Despite the fact that the tales of the Marriage Group clearly feature the discussion of marriage, the tales of Fragments I and II also discuss marriage. For the Knight, marriage becomes a matter of conquest between Theseus and Hippolyta, as well as Emelye's love

⁷⁰ Kittredge, G. L.. 1912. “Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage”. *Modern Philology* 9 (4). University of Chicago Press: 439

⁷¹ Scala, Elizabeth. 2009. The Women in Chaucer's 'Marriage Group'. *Medieval Feminist Forum*. 45, no. 1: 51.

The term itself was initially introduced by Eleanor Prescott Hammond in 1908, but Kittredge is quite commonly “mistakenly identified as the source for the Marriage Group.”

triangle with Arcite and Palamon. The Miller jokingly observes a man being made a cuckold by his wife, which the Reeve attempts to do so as well. Prostitution and marriage are briefly intertwined in the *Cook's Tale*, but without a longer story, it is difficult to say what would have come from that tales conclusion. The Man of Law portrays multiple marriages, as well as the failures and successes of such relationships. The Wife, however, simply readjusts the narrative by forcing marital issues and concerns to the forefront.

But, in some fashion, the Wife does not forget her experience in “clooth-making,” as this talent is displayed in another form – in the form of weaving a story together out of prior tales. Peggy Knapp observes how the Wife “is both a weaver of cloth in a place beside Bath and the weaver of a fascinating text about her life and imagination, a text which combines strands from several contending discourses.”⁷² But while Knapp only considers the Wife as an interpreter of these discourses, we should also view the Wife as an interpreter of the tales in Fragments I and II. The parallels that exist between the Wife’s life, tale, and the pilgrims who precede her are notable. Five tales, featuring heroic or otherwise witty heroes, occur before the Wife is given space to speak. But when she does speak, the connections are worth noting.

In the beginning of the *Wife's Prologue*, she speaks openly of sex. The Wife states that God “bad us for to wexe and mulitplye,” and notes how “of no nombre mencion made he” in regard to how many people a person can legally marry (III.28, 32). In her eyes, God does not encourage chastity, but the opposite. It is the duty of man and woman to marry and create the next generation, an argument that only arises because of criticism toward her multiple marriages. Moreover, she provides multiple examples of figures that had more than

⁷² Knapp, 114.

one wife, including Solomon, Abraham, and Jacob, citing them as examples of good men who married more than once (III.35, 55-56).

Her speech switches from religious topics to those of a more sexual nature. She refutes arguments that sexual organs are only for disposal of urine, stating that they have a dual purpose: for both “office and for ese of engendrure” (III.127-8). She states that if God wanted virgins, then humanity would cease to exist. Procreation demands sexual intercourse. She continues the trend of crude language started by the Miller in her discussion of man’s “sely instrument” (III.132). Her use of the word instrument not only carries sexual connotations, but in the literal sense: mentioning of tools hints back to John the carpenter in the *Miller’s Tale*. The term *instrument*, until this point, has been used in a very different manner. In the *Knight’s Tale*, it is said of Arcite “herde song or instrument, / Thanne wolde he wepe” (I.1367-8). In this line, instrument takes on a more obvious and musical meaning, which is repeated later when discussing “festes, instrumentz, caroles, and daunces” (I.1931). The Man of Law, however, uses instrument to refer to the Sultanness, acknowledging her as an instrument of Satan (II.370). The Wife refuses to refer to this term in its obvious meaning, and instead twists it to suit her topic of discussion. By comparing the body to instrument, she forces listeners to consider sexual acts as natural, and desire is in need of being acted upon.

Moreover, the Wife’s insistence on comparing women to “flour” and “barly-breed” echoes the animalistic detailing of Alisoun in the *Miller’s Tale* (III.113, 144). The term “flour,” alone, carries multiple meanings. According to the *MED*, this term may refer to flowers, transitoriness, a prize, a victory, the menstrual flow, or wheat meal.⁷³ The mocking of courtly language that appears in the *Miller’s Tale* is mimicked here, in equating women to

⁷³ “flour, n1-2.” *MED*. 2014. University of Michigan.

food. This occurs in the *Reeve's Tale*, where John and Aleyn use women as payment for the food that the miller has stolen from them. The Wife utilizes language and ideas in such a manner so she mocks not only the Knight, but all of the tales.

Her prologue is directed to a very specific audience. The crude language seems to lower it somewhat, but the content is relatable for most of the estates. She continues to speak like a rhetorician by relying heavily on pathos, ethos, and logos. Curiously, her use of pathos is not always directed toward herself, but toward many of her husbands. The one instance where she directs sympathy toward herself occurs during a scene where her fifth husband, Jankyn, reads from a book about wicked women. After listening to him read the stories of these women, the Wife “rente out of his book a leef, / For which he smoot” her hard enough to render her somewhat “deef” (III.667-8). Instead of describing the event in detail, she moves into a description of his book on wicked wives and questions such portrayals, forcing audiences to reconsider such ideas as she equates physical pain of abuse with psychological attacks through antifeminist literature. And, perhaps, the abuse women suffer through the words of men.

Upon finally describing the event and the content of Jankin's book, the Wife lies on the ground as if she “were deed,” twisting a sympathetic moment to her use while simultaneously mocking its seriousness (III.796). She puts her ability to perform on display as she increases her status as a victim, which does not necessarily increase the reality of her being victimized. Chaucer's choice to craft her as a witty woman with a few tricks up her sleeve further indicates the danger involving women, but especially sexualized women.

The Wife is the embodiment of dangerous, especially with her words. The longer she speaks, the more challenging it becomes to believe her history and statements. Instead, some

of her statements twist into challenges that prompt societal changes in regard to women and marriage. The Wife has an unusual relationship with honesty and a repetitive concern for it throughout her prologue and tale. In the *Wife's Prologue*, she states "But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye," "I shal seye sooth," and again mentions how no man can "swere and lyen, as a womman kan" (III.27, 195, 228). By continuing to refer back to truth, she hints at possible dishonesty. Additionally, *belief* and *believe* become equally important to the Wife of Bath. There is an anxiety over truthfulness, of her words, of "auctoritee" authority, and of the pilgrims and their tales.

This sense of dishonesty further complicates her prologue when she is interrupted by the Pardoner. In response to him, she states:

"Abyde!" quod she, "my tale is nat bigonne.
 Nay, thou shalt drynken of another tonne,
 Er that I go, shal savoure wors than ale.
 And whan that I have toold thee forth my tale
 Of tribulacion in mariage,
 Of which I am expert in al myn age --
 This is to seyn, myself have been the whippe --
 Than maystow chese wheither thou wolt sippe
 Of thilke tonne that I shal abroche.
 Be war of it, er thou to ny approche;
 For I shal telle ensamples mo than ten.
 (III.169-179)

She urges the Pardoner to not yet lament the woes of marriage, as her tale has not yet begun. Instead, she urges the pilgrims to drink up, literally and figuratively. Her opinions are compared to ale, indicating they may or may not be pleasant, and the more you have the more difficult it becomes to think straight. This comparison gives her power not only over her words, but over her audience. She claims a space for the feminine perspective, and refuses to abandon it. Chaucer further emphasizes the power the Wife has by letting her refer to herself as "whippe" in her marriages. Such imagery sparks ideas of the phallus, but also of

abuse – physical or verbal. This is quite a difference from the timidity of Emeyle, the agreeable nature of Custance, or the glass-like presence of Malyne. In comparison, the Wife is a force to be reckoned with. Such a speech concludes in an almost cheerfully threatening manner.

The Pardoner interrupts her again, asking her to “Telle forthe your tale; spareth for no man, / And teche us yonge men of youre practice” (III.186-7). He demands that she move on to the story and implies a great deal about her sexuality. Her response is agreeable, at a glance:

"Gladly," quod she, "sith it may yow like;
But yet I praye to al this compaignye,
If that I speke after my fantasye,
As taketh not agrief of that I seye,
For myn entente nys but for to pleye.
Now, sire, now wol I telle forth my tale."
(III.188-193)

The Wife agrees to move on in the passage above, admitting to speaking to her whim and that she means no harm. But then, she seemingly disregards his wishes by continuing to speak at length about her life as a wife. Her true tale does not come until much later. Her intent is only “to pleye,” to amuse herself and presumably her audience. Yet, the Wife’s form of amusement derives from the pain or frustration of others—and these *others* are usually men. Such a statement does not fit with her previous and forthcoming subjects, which question, mock, and criticize patriarchal discourse and structures.

However, if audiences take her prologue as fiction instead of autobiography, the meaning shifts. After all, the lines preceding this interruption consisted of the Wife musing on marriage, virginity, and religion. Immediately following the Pardoner’s interruption, she moves onto the topic of her various husbands and life as a wife. She compares her story of

husbands and marriage to ale, lending her discussion a blurred sense of reality. The Wife claims that when she is done, they can decide whether or not they agree with her views. Yet, it may also be that they may decide whether or not they believe confessions, or if she is simply recycling information from Fragments I and II.

Another connection occurs with the number five, as five tales are told by five male speakers in Fragments I and II. This mirrors the Wife's insistence that she has had five husbands during her life so far. But despite all of her previous husbands, she is only able to describe one in great detail - the clerk, Jankin. Jankin was formally a clerk from "Oxenford," much like the Miller's Nicholas, who hails from the same area (III.527, I.3187). But even though the Wife speaks little of her other husbands, she mentions how her fourth was a "revelour" (III.453). This hints back to the Cook's Tale, and how the hero of that tale "was cleped Perkyn Revelour" (I.4371). Moreover, the Wife mentions having a few older husbands, like Alisoun does with John in the *Miller's Tale*. Real or not, the Wife's relationships with men become the focal point of her pre-story.

"She knew myn herte": An Abundance of Alisouns

Yet, of all the Wife's relationships, the one she has with her gossib, also named Alys, is the most positive and consistent. She introduces Alys as she begins discussing her fifth (and most recent) husband:

My fifthe housbonde – God his soule blesse! –
 Which that I took for love, and no richesse,
 He som tyme was a clerk of Oxenford,
 And hadde left scole, and wente at hom to bord
 With my gossib, dwellynge in oure toun;
 God have hir soule! Hir name was Alisoun.
 She knew myn herte, and eek my privetee,

Bet than oure parisshe preest, so moot I thee!
 To hire biwreyed I my conseil al.
 (III.525-33)

The fact these women share the same name is significant. In a sense, they reflect one another. On the other hand, it indicates the intense connection bonding the two women. But even more so, the Wife names Alys as her gossib (III.529). Mary Carruthers argues that "Middle English godsib means not 'one's own godparent,' but 'the godparent of one's child.'"⁷⁴ She further observes that although the meaning of gossib is defined as the "one's sponsor at baptism or confirmation, a godparent" in the *MED*, there is no textual evidence to prove the former.⁷⁵

Since the Wife makes no unambiguous mention to having children, and Alys is not described enough to necessarily argue that she is the Wife's godmother, I choose to acknowledge an alternative medieval definition for the term *gossib*. The Wife states that Alys "knew myn herte, and eek my privetee," fondly acknowledging the intimate friendship between the two women, who shared their lives and their secrets (III.529-31). Her word choice of calling Alys her *gossib* not only indicates that she is potentially a godparent to herself or her children, but also a "close friend" or companion.⁷⁶ Although the term *companion* did not carry the connotation of two people involved romantically at this time, Chaucer's portrayal is worth noting.⁷⁷ The Wife, a highly sexualized and extremely loquacious character, claims to have a close female friend who knows her well, a friend she dearly cares for. Alys is likely one of the few, if only, characters to know the Wife fully.

⁷⁴ Mary Carruthers, "Clerk Jankyn At Hom To Bord/With My Gossib, " *English Language Notes* 22.3 (1985): 15

⁷⁵ Carruthers, 16.

⁷⁶ "godsib, n2." *MED*. 2014. University of Michigan.

⁷⁷ According to the OED, it was not until around 1535 when it was used to indicate a romantic relationship within the Bible.

Yet, her discussion of Alys abruptly concludes as the topic transitions into a discussion of heteronormative marriage.

The Wife continues to say that Alys knew her secrets “Bet than oure parisshe preest” (III.532). This creates a distinct separation between women and religion. By saying that Alys knew the Wife better than the parish priest, it is implied that, for men, women are unknowable. Men are unable to understand them, but women can know another woman’s heart fully. Such a friend encourages deviant behavior. Instead of fulfilling a loyal housewife role, the Wife is given freedom to spill her husband’s secrets and engage in flirtations with another man without having to confess to the church. But of course, the Wife’s visits with Jankyn are initially done with Alys. She states that “That Jankyn clerk, and my gossyb dame Alys, / And I myself, into the feeldes wente” (III.548-9). Women, in this sense, create the pathway to marriage. Alys enables the Wife to expand her social and sexual power by not only encouraging the Wife’s outing with Jankyn, but accompanying her. Yet, Alys seemingly vanishes from the text and from this excursion as the Wife turns to discussing her success in snaring Jankyn.

Even though the relationship the Wife has with Alys is described in a limited manner, enough is gleaned from her descriptions to acknowledge a potentially intimate friendship between these two women. Chaucer uses their relationship to emphasize the importance of female companionship and relationships, and as a way to highlight the impressive absence of such representations in the *Canterbury Tales* so far. Despite the Wife’s exuberant outbursts on all things related to men and marriage, her affection for Alys seems more honest than her discussions of her husbands – whom she mocks or portrays as cruel, even as she claims to love some of them.

Chaucer's hesitant display of such same-sex relationships indicates an uncomfortable feeling surrounding women who are genuinely affectionate toward other women. When the Wife is speaking of men sexually, this is accepted, normalized, and even promoted as the main topic. But when speaking fondly of Alys, such an intimate female friendship is pushed outside out of fear for the idea of non-heteronormative relationships. There is a constant desire throughout the first three Fragments of *The Canterbury Tales* to tear women away from each other in order to place them into heteronormative relationships or situations. This is further highlighted in the *Wife's Tale*, which is set in a world populated almost exclusively by women, despite featuring a male protagonist.

Chapter IV: A “land fulfild of fayerye” in the *Wife’s Tale*

Whatever expectations Chaucer encourages readers to form while considering the Wife’s prologue are shattered upon the introduction of her tale. Her prologue is bluntly opinionated on matters dealing with religion, marriage, and sexuality. Due to the fact that the Wife speaks so openly of sex and of cuckolding her husbands, readers are likely left believing they are about to hear or read another fabliau. Nonetheless, Chaucer’s portrayal of the Wife of Bath and her tale challenges the ideal model of living, especially in comparison to the previous stories. Thus far, many of the tales reflect the teller. The Knight tells a sweeping story of chivalry and battle. The Miller favors a fabliau that his class can find amusing and entertaining. This trend continues with the Reeve and The Cook, while the Man of Law tells a lengthy tale that is appropriate to his well-read nature. The stories suit the speakers and their lifestyles.

The Wife, however, ignores such convention. Instead, she “disrupts this pattern” by choosing to tell “a romance rather than a fabliau,” the latter genre being the one most readers would likely expect from her.⁷⁸ But such a genre is, according to Carolyn Dinshaw, “a form relegated to women.”⁷⁹ By telling a romance, she is taking back the narrative from the Knight and Man of Law, rewriting it according to feminine ideals. The ideas of her tale coincide with those introduced in her prologue. She continues her discussion of diminishing female homosocial relations in her portrayal of the Lady and the Queen, and mocks the Othered view of women through the Lady and her knight, as I will discuss below.

As the Wife leads into her tale, Tison Pugh notes that instead of “accepting fabliau and romance as genres bearing prescriptive tropes and ideologies, Alison reconfigures their

⁷⁸ Tison Pugh, “Queering Genres, Battering Males: The Wife of Bath’s Narrative Violence,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 33.2 (2003): 115.

⁷⁹ Dinshaw, 126.

prescriptive elements to accommodate her own desires.”⁸⁰ In her stories, “heteronormative male authority is repositioned and queered to meaninglessness because no place exists for male authority within these reconceived narrative forms.”⁸¹ Yet, while such male authority is somewhat set aside, much of what occurs in the tale states otherwise.

With many of Chaucer’s tales, it becomes easy to see patterns evolve. The Knight’s tale begins with “Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,” a fairytale-esque structure the Wife mimics and revises with her opening:

In th' olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,
Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.
The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,
Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.
This was the olde opinion, as I rede;
I speke of manye hundred yeres ago.
But now kan no man se none elves mo,
For now the grete charitee and prayeres
Of lymytours and othere hooly freres,
That serchen every lond and every strem...
(III.857-67)

But while four of the five initial tales feature “whilom” in their introductory lines, the Wife diverges from the “whilom” tradition in favor of “In th’ olde dayes” (III.857).⁸² Such a change marks a departure from the conventional story structure of beginning with *once* as the Wife instead makes the connection to her reality more immediate. This alteration allows her tale to become more historical and less fictitious. Additionally, the repetition of *olde* disassociates the present with the past, and engages the ideas that follow with antiquated times. With the former tale, the Knight’s ideology is informed by such “olde” ideals of chivalry and romance. The Wife revises romance and chivalry by melding old days with new

⁸⁰ Pugh, 118.

⁸¹ Pugh, 119.

⁸² The Reeve does not begin with *whilom*, but does use the term later on, once the story picks up pace and action.

ideas, the natural with the supernatural, and a structured storyline with chaotic interruptions. By opening in such a highly fictionalized manner, set during “th’olde dayes of the king Arthour,” the Wife assures that readers will see this well-known figure and associate him with ideas of romance, thereby lending the story a touch of authority.

The Wife further emphasizes the relatability of her story through mentions of nature and nation. Nature and nation take center stage, with mentions of “this land,” “many a grene mede,” and “strem[s]” taking over the setting (III.859, 861, 867). “Britons” become accessible and familiar counterparts for the audience, as nature becomes very lush, green, lively, and present. Through the Wife, there is a unification of “the whole geography of Britain, King Arthur, and a lost magical past.”⁸³ The blame, for the loss of such a time and place, is thrust onto the shoulders of the “lymytours” and their forceful claiming of the land fairies used to roam. The Wife’s critical views of religion and authority arise in these figures. They are an invasive presence that erases that which does not align with their beliefs, such as fairies and magic, much in the same way that women are abused by patriarchal discourse. Such fairies have been erased from the present, thrust into history as magical beings with more power than women in the Wife’s reality hold. The Wife speaks of the elf-queen and “hir joly compaignye,” invoking a feminine and supernatural spirit from the introduction of her tale (III.860). These women are mystical and supernatural, not to mention incredibly joyful. But the Wife notes that this “was the olde opinion, as I rede” and further observes how it was hundreds of years ago when such supernatural creatures walked the earth (III.862-3). Such free-spirited women, left to the rule of a queen, are made into

⁸³ Patricia Ingham, “Pastoral Histories: Utopia, Conquest, and the Wife of Bath’s Tale,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44.1 (2002): 35.

myth. But, as previously discussed, the appearance of friars marks the invasion of male authority on society.

Women are controlled by men in an extreme manner in the early tales, and such control features in the Wife's tale too. The Wife interrupts her own tale with an aside about Midas, and how his wife is not given any autonomous control over herself and her voice.

Unable to share the secret of her husband with anyone else, she shares with nature:

She leyde hir mouth unto the water doun:
 "Biwreye me nat, thou water, with thy soun,"
 Quod she; "to thee I telle it and namo;
 Myn housbonde hath longe asses erys two!
 Now is myn herte al hool; now is it oute.
 I myghte no lenger kepe it, out of doute."
 Heere may ye se, thogh we a tyme abyde,
 Yet out it moot; we kan no conseil hyde.
 The remenant of the tale if ye wol heere,
 Redeth Ovyde, and ther ye may it leere.
 (III.973-82)

The inclusion of this story is seemingly random, as the Wife uses it to give evidence for her observation of how women cannot hide anything. But, in a tale where knowledge is sought from women, about women, in a world populated by women, there is a surprising amount of difficulty in retrieving the correct information from women. The one character who holds it is an enigma, quite capable of hiding much of her origins and her desire to wed the knight. By interrupting her tale with a story, the Wife comments on patriarchy and how it disrupts the feminine. Additionally, Midas's insistence of silencing and controlling his wife is what leads to the spread of his secret.

Such control is further emphasized through the naming, or lack thereof, of characters. Curiously, Midas and King Arthur are the only characters within this tale to receive a name. The Lady, despite being a powerful figure in controlling the narrative, remains nameless

throughout the text, along with the initial maiden who is raped and the knight who assaulted her. For every character, excluding two, names are discarded, and the focus is placed instead on their roles within society. The Wife forces a majority of the characters to become nameless, and this authorial choice reveals the underlying transformation she hopes to make within her reality. In her tale, women are not only transformed into equal partners, but ones with further mastery over men. Privileging the name of King Arthur creates an expectation for a heteronormative society, a world where kings marry queens and knights rescue women who later become a consolation prize.

The namelessness of female characters within the *Wife of Bath's Tale* beckons to the pilgrimage and the invisibility of women: on the pilgrimage, in the tales, in society. It acknowledges the lack of authentic female perspectives, and the extreme amount of focus placed on men and masculine matters. The women, meanwhile, only serve to appear as wives, widows, or maidens, further highlighting the incredibly androcentric world, due to the fact that all three roles are defined by a woman's relationship with men. Such absence and diminishing of feminine same-sex relations becomes more apparent as the stories continue, and I will discuss such relationships later on.

Beautee and the Beast: Subverting Gender Roles

Names continue to play a role, as the inciting incident of this story is one involving the rape of an unnamed maiden who is attacked by the story's hero, the knight:

And so bifel that this kyng Arthour
 Hadde in his hous a lusty bachelere,
 That on a day cam ridynge fro ryver,
 And happed that, allone as he was born,
 He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn,
 Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed,

By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed;
 For which oppressioun was swich clamour
 And swich pursute unto the kyng Arthour
 That dampned was this knyght for to be deed,
 By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed.
 (III.882-92)

Although the presence of a raptus scene may seem startling to present day readers, “such an inclusion is not overly shocking, as rape does occur in medieval literature.”⁸⁴ But, “unlike the rapes of Arthurian romance, this rape does not occur deep within the romance forest, but in a closer and more familiar landscape near the water-meadows in which the knight goes hawking.”⁸⁵ Nature, and civilized nature, becomes a place of possibility for good and evil. Balance between good and evil is unsettled in this location, causing the path home to become a part of the wild. I agree with this notion, and further note that knight’s hunting trip mirrors his assault on the maiden, as both acts are completed without much thought for the victim, only for the predator’s desires. Civilization, or the knight, is destroying nature and women.

The knight’s portrayal is far more monstrous than what would normally be expected. The knight, “allone as he was born,” is a man unaccustomed to women. By stating he is alone as the day he is born indicates he had no parentage, as if he merely sprouted up from the earth by his own accord. Whether or not it is by choice, this knight is unused to society, and his actions reveal this in a grave manner.

For a story that revolves around one young woman’s sexual assault, she makes a surprisingly brief appearance. The Wife places her focus on her protagonist, and allows readers or listeners to view this story from his perspective, effectively ignoring all other characters. The knight, “by verray force,” rapes a young maiden. His act is deemed an

⁸⁴ Corinne J. Saunders, “Woman Displaced: Rape and Romance in Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Tale,” in *Arthurian Literature* 13 (1995): 115.

⁸⁵ Saunders, 125.

“oppressioun” worthy of him losing his life. Male desire, previously privileged in tales like the Knight’s, the Miller’s, or the Reeve’s, turns into something aggressive and in need of being restricted, much in the way that feminine desire was contained in Fragments I and II. Yet, while the constriction of women in those tales was encouraged, such limiting of feminine power is given more weight and importance.

When reading this tale from the knight’s perspective, it creates some disturbing revelations. Chaucer writes that the knight “saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn, / Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed, / By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed” (III.886-8). The maid’s appearance is marked by the fact that the knight “saugh” her walking before him, causing her introduction to the tale to seem invasive as she enters his space, and he enters hers. Moreover, the fact that she is a “mayde” emphasizes her status as a lone woman who is unmarried, and it does little to emphasize any status she may or may not have due to her lineage. The knight, however, is associated with King Arthur’s court, giving him a more entitled air, which does little to lessen the severity of his actions.

Reminiscent of the story of Malyne, and her possible rape, the *Wife’s Tale* takes this scene and revises it in its most extreme manner. By making her rape victim an anonymous maiden, she makes it possible for it to quit the Reeve’s tale and the belief that a woman would so easily turn from desiring no sexual contact to falling in love instantly. While Malyne becomes a character after her sexual encounter with Aleyn—due to the fact that he uses her name for the first time, thereby giving her an identity—the Wife keeps her sexual assault victim nameless and silent. Additionally, the transformation of the knight from rapist into husband is almost a complete reversal of transforming Malyne from maiden to potential rape victim.

The vanishing of this maiden emphasizes how the oppressive nature of patriarchal structures and society is writing women out of their own lives. The taking of her maidenhood emphasizes that is she is no longer a virgin, but also that she was forced into the role of a wife without being wed. Her identity is intertwined with her relation to men. By taking her maidenhood, she becomes a nonentity in society—a woman with whom no one knows what do. And so, she is ignored and placed into the background. Even though the characters are disgusted by this assault, “the victim of the rape is forgotten” and “displaced by the knight’s learning process.”⁸⁶ In comparison, the Wife’s cyclical movement between wife and widow is highlighted and discussed at length.

The inclusion of raptus brings forward a connection to the historical matter of Cecily Chaumpaigne’s raptus and Chaucer’s role. Although it is difficult to determine whether or not Chaucer committed any assault or kidnapping, Chaucer clearly played some sort of role in the act. Derek Pearsall states that Chaucer made efforts in raising money, presumably in an effort to pay back Goodchild or Grove, the other men involved in Cecily’s case.⁸⁷ Moreover, he brought a large number of powerful and influential friends with him to court, and seemingly worked quite hard to keep himself distanced from the event overall.⁸⁸

Regardless of the historicity of this event, the inclusion of raptus makes this scene all the more important to consider. The maiden is never named, never speaks, and in some fashion, never actually appears in the text. The reader is told of this event, but does not receive a first-hand account. Chaucer’s messy history with raptus forces this scene, and the unnamed maiden, to be of great importance. As a man accused of rape or abduction, the way he portrays Malyne and the raped maiden displays two different perspectives. With Malyne,

⁸⁶ Saunders, 117.

⁸⁷ Pearsall, 136.

⁸⁸ Pearsall, 135.

she is shown as being accepting of the assault. The raped maiden, meanwhile, is treated with dignity and her assault is given the appropriate, negative response.

Maydes, Wifs, and Widwe's: Highlighting Female Homosociality

As Susanne Sara Thomas notes, the Wife's story features a quest that "is not the search for an object, like the Holy Grail, but for a single word. That word turns out to be *sovereynetee*."⁸⁹ Yet, despite the importance of the word in this tale, "the term *sovereynetee*, oddly enough, occurs only once in the tale."⁹⁰ Still, even though the Wife's knight is given a task appropriate to his knighthood, the roles attributed to men and women are complicated and confused in this story.

The knight spots a mysterious group of women when searching for the answer to the Queen's question of what women desire the most:

In al this care, under a forest syde,
 Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go
 Of ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo;
 Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,
 In hope that som wysdom sholde he lerne.
 But certainly, er he cam fully there,
 Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where.
 No creature saugh he that bar lyf,
 Save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf --
 A fouler wight ther may no man devyse.
 (III.990-9)

A large gathering of women attract the attention of the knight as he continues on his quest.

He "drow ful yerne," hoping they might impart some wisdom. But as he reaches the area, the women vanish, leaving only an elderly woman. The dancing women are, presumably,

⁸⁹ Susanne Sara Thomas. "The Problem of Defining *Sovereynetee* in the Wife of Bath's Tale." *The Chaucer Review* 4.1 (2006): 87.

⁹⁰ Thomas, 88.

fairies.⁹¹ Their movement suggests merriment, sensuality, and an overall naturalized being. They are connected to the forest, appreciate it, and the forest protects them in aiding their vanishing act. But even more so, these “ladies foure and twenty, and yet mo” are a rare example of women interacting with other women. Of all the tales, this is the largest gathering of women to be featured in the *Canterbury Tales* thus far. Yet, little is known about them, reflecting the lack of awareness and knowledge of women and same-sex relations.

The Lady, unseen by the knight, is a representation of truth – lingering in the background, unseen until you move past the rest, disbelieved until proven true. It is never explicitly stated that she is one of the faerie, but it does seem unusual and highly coincidental that she is present with the desired answer precisely when the knight is most desperate. It is more likely that she is one of the faerie folk, and her first transformation is becoming the wise, older woman who knows his reasons for wandering. However, while the faerie women were dazzling and enticing enough to draw the knight in, she provides contrast by being a foul sight to him.

Her advanced age gives her the appearance of experience, reflecting the fact that only she knows the answers the knight desires to have. While all other minor female characters fail to give him the correct answer he needs to save his life, this old wife is erudite enough to discern the truth of what women desire wholeheartedly. She manipulates the situation, demanding that “the nexte thyng that I requere thee / Thow shalt it do, if it lye in thy myght” in return for her wisdom (III.1010-1). She demands authority over the knight, and over his actions, to which he agrees.

⁹¹ There is a chance that they are simply women. However, due to the fact that they “vanysshed” upon the knight’s approach, and the fact that the Wife sets this story in a world where magic existed, it is likely that they are fairies or some other type of magical entity.

In comparison to the Lady, the dancing women are representative of the male fantasy, or the ideal feminine. Their disappearance signifies the erasure of such notions. They pull the knight out of reality momentarily, and then thrust him back into it when they vanish. They easily draw the knight's attention, a temptation that serves to only disrupt and distract him from his quest. Paralleled by the maiden who walked on a path alone, these women are grouped, and therefore, acquire more agency and power. As he enters the green, they vanish. Such vanishing may be chalked up to the supernatural and nothing more. These women are seemingly only worthwhile to further the plot by allowing the knight to meet the Lady. The Lady's origins are questionable, and her powers are curious. Taking into consideration her sudden appearance after the dancing women vanish, I choose to read her character as a fairy.⁹²

The Lady's role within this tale is complicated by her power and how she uses it. She is considered by some to be a Loathly Lady, which is "a traditional ballad figure, an apparently ugly woman whose beauty is restored when at last she has found a husband and the enchantment laid on her is dispelled."⁹³ But usually, a Loathly Lady is transformed by love, and not through her own actions. Whether she is a Loathly lady, fairy, or an old wife, the Lady does not quite fit the norm that is associated with the romance genre. Fairies typically fall into two categories: the dangerous fairies who test knightly courage, and the fairy mistresses who "fulfill the desires of their chosen knights."⁹⁴ Wade further observes that:

⁹² Or, if she not not entirely fairy, then I view her as a representative who fulfills a fairy's role within the genre (a role that Hippolyta and Emelye fulfilled in the *Knight's Tale*).

⁹³ "Loathly Lady." *In The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, edited by Knowles, Elizabeth. : Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁹⁴ Wade, 109.

The fairy woman of the ‘Wife of Bath’s Tale’ straddles both roles: when the knight successfully passes her test on ‘gentillesse’ she uses her shape-shifting abilities to release him from the ban of marriage to an old hag (that is, from being both *out-lawed* and held *within the law* by her sovereign exception), but it is precisely this release that works to provide the kind of erotic fulfillment, typical of fairy mistresses, that would be impossible in the ordinary human world.⁹⁵

While the fairy-like women of the *Knight’s Tale* served more as rewards, the *Wife’s Tale* emphasizes that women are not only commodities to be won like Emelye, Hippolyta, Alisoun, Malyne, Custance, and perhaps the Cook’s fictional prostitute. Instead, women are provided with the agency to transform not only themselves, but other people – or more specifically, men. The knight becomes emblematic of the feminine as gender roles are flipped. He represents the stereotypical “damsel in distress” as he is forced into a marriage with the Lady. His ability to be a knight is in shambles, leaving him a mere man. The marriage gives him new purpose, new role. Males move from bachelor to husband, forcing the male sex to become the submissive. Yet, the Lady upends any feminine dominance by becoming submissive in the end, which I will discuss in detail in the last part of this thesis.

The Lady’s character not only highlights the power of women within society, but their lack of acknowledgment in regard to female same-sex relationships. In all of the previous tales, female relationships are either ignored or diminished. Emelye and Hippolyta, sisters and Amazons, do not interact directly with one another. The only direct interaction is between Emelye and Diana, and their topic revolves around Emelye’s impending marriage. Alisoun has no feminine friends, as her only companions are male due to her husband’s

⁹⁵ Wade, 109.

jealousy and fear. Malyne and her mother only interact with men and not with each other. Custance, similarly, interacts with mostly men, and her rare interactions with women are tainted by jealousy or ultimately death. Similarly, the Cook only displays male relationships, and leaves his female character in the background of the tale.

The Wife, however little, attempts to emphasize such relationships, and to show what gets in the way of their success. In her prologue, she speaks fondly of Alys, and in her tale, she envisions a world populated almost entirely by women. Yet, like the women of Fragments I and II, most of them interact with male characters. Any intimate glimpses into scenes of women interacting with women are ignored or viewed at a highly removed distance. But, the one moment where a woman speaks to a woman is when the Lady requests the Queen's aid.

"Mercy," quod she, "my sovereyn lady queene!
 Er that youre court departe, do me right.
 I taughte this answe unto the knyght;
 For which he plighte me his trouthe there,
 The firste thyng that I wolde hym requere
 He wolde it do, if it lay in his myghte.
 Bifore the court thanne preye I thee, sir knyght,"
 Quod she, "that thou me take unto thy wyf,
 For wel thou woost that I have kept thy lyf.
 If I seye fals, sey nay, upon thy fey!"
 (III.1048-57)

In this first entirely female interaction, the topic at hand is utterly phallogentric. Although the Lady begins with reclaiming the knowledge she has shared with the knight, her concern turns toward him and the promise he owes her. Her discussion revolves entirely around the knight, until she finally shifts her dialogue to the knight himself, abruptly ending her conversation with the queen. The queen's justice is what the Lady requires, indicating the plight of women and how women must help one another achieve their own ends in a

patriarchal world. It is only through such justice that the knight reluctantly agrees to fulfill his promise to the Lady.

There are only “two ‘sovereigns’ in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*,” the first being Arthur’s queen and the other being the Lady.⁹⁶ Thomas notes that, despite being a ruler, the queen is less attached to the term because it is the Lady who “gives the knight the answer to the quest, the word *sovereynete*, and thereby becomes even more strongly linked to the concept.”⁹⁷ Additionally, the queen is only called sovereign by the Lady, when she pleads for the queen’s help. The queen’s sovereignty is attributed to her by a fellow woman, and upon being called this, her character falls silent and speaks no more. Although the Lady requests the queen’s help, the Lady uses her own power to achieve her desire.

Chaucer acknowledges the strengths in women, but does so in a manner indicating that their agency is tied into matters pertaining to women’s relationships with men. The Lady, who is undeniably one of the more powerful characters – magically, socially, and intellectually – is ultimately rendered powerless upon marrying the knight. Despite telling a tale where the world is populated by women, the Wife chooses to undermine female homosociality. But, it is through this distanced view of female same-sex relations that the Wife shows how powerful two women can be together. The Lady’s wish to wed the knight is granted by her queen’s authority, echoing how the Wife’s courtship of Jankyn is helped along by her gossib Alys.

⁹⁶ Thomas, 88.

⁹⁷ Thomas, 88.

Chapter V: Conclusion - "And thus they live in parfit joye"

The power of women is further emphasized by the transformation of a man. Even though the Lady is powerful enough to physically change her appearance, save the knight's life, and gain her desires, she is also skilled in the art of behaviorally transforming another being by using only her words. When the knight complains that the Lady is his "dampnacioun" and states that she is the cause of his "unreste," the Lady recites a speech powerful enough to alter his opinions (III.1067, 1104). Her argument is compelling, as she reasons how "gentillesse cometh fro God allone" and from their actions in life (III.1162). She eventually gives him the chance to prove his worth by choosing whether he prefers her "foul and old...a trewe humble wif" or "young and fair," with no assurance of loyalty (III.1220-1, 1223). This is the first moment where the wife allows the knight an opportunity to hold power over her.

Although the knight acts selfishly throughout the story, when given this control, he becomes an entirely different character when he states "My lady and my love, and wif so deere, / I putte me in youre wise governaunce. / Cheseth yourself which may be moost pleasaunce" (III.1230-2). Instead of mocking her, he is loving and kind. While the authenticity of his transformation is questionable, the Lady's words appear to have nonetheless significantly influenced the knight's perspective. His cruel vocabulary shifts into a romantic, courtly love style of speech, as his words become complimentary instead of cruel. His new perspective allows him to return sovereignty to his wife. While she began with a lusty knight, she ends with a man who is learning how to be a proper knight through her instruction. She uses transformation – or what Caroline Walker Bynum calls metamorphosis, the changing from one entity to another – to gain a husband, and further

utilizes this tool to create her ideal knight.⁹⁸ This challenge for the knight is not one of strength or brutality, feats he proved he could do in the act of raping the young maid, but one of reserve, research, respect, knowledge, and submission.

The Wife continues the unusual shift toward displaying a positive heteronormative marriage as the tale concludes:

"Kys me," quod she, "we be no lenger wrothe,
 For, by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe --
 This is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good.
 I prey to God that I moote sterven wood,
 But I to yow be also good and trewe
 As evere was wyf, syn that the world was newe.
 And but I be to-morn as fair to seene
 As any lady, emperice, or queene,
 That is bitwixe the est and eke the west,
 Dooth with my lyf and deth right as yow lest.
 Cast up the curtyn, looke how that it is."

And whan the knyght saugh verrailly al this,
 That she so fair was, and so yong therto,
 For joye he hente hire in his armes two.
 His herte bathed in a bath of blisse.
 A thousand tyme a-rewe he gan hire kisse,
 And she obeyed hym in every thyng
 That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng.
 (III.1239-56)

The Lady's transformation is perplexing in its agreeability to patriarchal structures. Oswald discusses Bernard of Clairvaux's thoughts on monstrosity, stating that "the person does not really change [in transformation]...descriptions of reform or deterioration are filled with metaphors of uncovering, unclothing, or adding....Rather, we add beastliness, covering and obscuring our humanity."⁹⁹ In connection to this tale, it seems that the Lady was always young and beautiful. The knight's perspective of women being lesser than men is what "clothed" her in such foulness. The male perspective of women was limited and biased, and

⁹⁸ Bynum, 30.

⁹⁹ Oswald, 131.

so he saw what he expected to see – a highly sexualized woman who desires him without his consent is monstrous, just as monstrous as he was to the unnamed maiden. Although the Lady begins as an opposing force to the knight, after her metamorphosis into a young maiden, “she obeyed him in every thing / That mighte do him plesance or liking” (III.1255-6). She takes this even further by praying that she “mote sterven wood” if she is not good and true to the knight, placing her wants and needs below his own (III.1240-2). Regardless, the relinquishing of her power reveals an anxiety regarding women who have agency and power. While “wommen desiren to have sovereintee / As wel over hir housbonde as hir love,” that desire does not translate into a reality within the story, nor is it promised (III.1038-9). While women are able to hold power for an unspecified amount of time, they surrender it to their male counterparts once they finally achieve it. The tale ends with the “fantasy of the perfect marriage.”¹⁰⁰ The transformation is potentially damaging, considering the knight’s previous transgressions with young and beautiful women. But, it is also limiting due to the diminishment of homosocial relations, and the power they allow women.

The Wife focuses less on the masculine and more on the underrepresentation of women and female same-sex relationships. Her story subverts the usual gender roles, as the knight becomes the damsel in distress, the Lady a hero, and the queen is portrayed as wise ruler who sets the knight on his quest for redemption. In flipping the gender roles, Chaucer uses the Wife to bring forth ideas of women can fit into society. Although women of her story are still called maidens, wives, and widows, they achieve prominence through an abundance of roles to fulfil.

Hierarchy and order ruled medieval society, but the *Wife’s Tale* encourages a multiplicity of roles and dissonance in order to achieve “parfit” happiness in the end.

¹⁰⁰ Dinshaw, 129.

Women rule in this world, holding the keys to knowledge and to freedom. Despite being set in King Arthur's time, the patriarchal world of this knight is unsettled by an overabundance of women. Women rule, women are everywhere, and yet they are all defined outwardly in regard to their relationship with men. Maidens are, simply put, the one role defined by man that is distinctly separate from man. The wife is attached, the widow was attached, and the maiden is free. The abuse of a maiden is an assault on femininity in its purest form. And with her disappearance, we see the death of the feminine, noting the repression of femininity and women within the previous tales and within society at large.

In the *Wife's Prologue*, she gives herself mastery over men, land, and her life. Within the *Wife's Tale*, the Lady has autonomy and agency, capable of manipulating the narrative and her own body until she gains her own fairytale ending. The Lady serves as a mentor, trickster, monster, savior, and wife to the knight. Her role varies, depending on what is needed from him, although her needs are also acknowledged. Her ability to be so many different things allows her more movement within the story. The queen, meanwhile, proves to be a just monarch through an act of queenly intercession. When King Arthur dooms the maligned knight to death, the queen intervenes with a challenge of her own, asserting her own power within their society. The queen, meanwhile, moves away from her role as a wife and into one as a sovereign ruler, the person with absolute power. But, ultimately, all seem to be in deference to men, and it is a fact that seems to displease the Wife.

The Wife's conclusion is slightly bitter toward men and heteronormative relationships. She states:

And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende
 In parfit joye; and Jhesu Crist us sende
 Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
 And grace t' overbyde hem that we wedde;

And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
 That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;
 And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
 God sende hem soone verray pestilence!
 (III.1257-64)

The end of her tale might return to a familiar plot with what Hansen deems a “suitable alignment of the sexes,”¹⁰¹ but the Wife does not allow a happily ever after ending to be her last word. The *Wife’s Tale* may end revolving around heteronormative structures, but the Wife’s lament forces audiences to reconsider the ideas she presented. Her ending is one of contradictions – featuring happiness over marriage and a lament for the woe that is heteronormative marriage. Instead of continuing to show the highlights of heteronormativity, the Wife prays for a curse on those husbands who fail to live up to their promise. Although the Wife wishes for young husbands, her curse upon men clouds such a wish.

The tale concludes with Chaucer giving women all of the power in the relationship, shifting patriarchy to matriarchy. It is an extreme viewpoint, and one that is unsurprisingly rejected by the other pilgrims who tell their tales following the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*.

However, the Wife’s radical views and ideas spark the themes and content for the next set of tales, and force the male pilgrims to consider – and reconsider – gender, society, marriage, and the roles of men and women within their world and within their tales. Chaucer uses the Wife to comment on the narrow window of opportunities for women, but shows them in an expanding light.

¹⁰¹ Hansen, 33.

“If wommen hadde writen stories”

The Wife may be a popular character to consider in Chaucer scholarship, but I believe there is still more to unravel and discover about her character, prologue, and tale. There is great value in observing the tales as individual stories, but because this is a collection of stories that intermingle with one another, it is also necessary to consider them in relation to one another. Considering intertextuality is especially important when reading the pilgrims as speakers, storytellers, or characters. The Wife is more than a character, she is a storyteller who is rewriting the phallogocentric narrative of Fragments I and II.

The Canterbury Tales places importance on male characters and masculine concerns, and undermines women and the relationships between women. This is unsurprising, simply because history privileges men over women. So, to see this trend continue in fiction is expected, and this diminishment forces readers to dig deeper into the female characters and homosocial relationships. The tales of Fragments I and II introduce women in a variety of ways: paragons, monsters, animals, or Other. Female characters with agency are either diminished or rewritten in order to reemphasize their relationship to men. Women shift through the cycle of being a maiden, wife, and widow. The disparity between the treatment of men and women in the *Wife's Prologue and Tale* is notable, especially when taken in comparison to Fragments I and II. Even though the Wife presents herself as being a proud wife and a fan of marriage, most of the Wife's pleasure derives from the torment she inflicts upon her husbands. Yet, it is her relationship to women that proves to be fascinating and worth noting.

In the *Wife's Prologue*, the diminishment of women in Fragments I and II is enhanced and subverted by the brief appearances of Alys, the Wife's beloved gossib. These women

share more than a name and a love for gossip. They share a secure bond that does not require extensive description or proof. By observing this relationship, and reexamining other representations of female homosociality in *The Canterbury Tales*, scholars may uncover a different perspective of gender and sociality within the world of the text. There is a small, silent power embedded in these relationships, as well as an accompanying sense of fear, as evidenced by Custance and Hermengyld's brutal separation, or the Lady and the Queen's inability to fully communicate with each other.

Women's voices are continually silenced, but the Wife makes her voice and presence known. But after her last line, she refrains from speaking and proceeds to fade into the background. Her silence throughout the remainder of the tales is striking, especially when one takes into consideration the fact that the Wife begins a new set of tales – the Marriage Group. Since there are so few female characters, it is important to pay extra attention to how they are represented and who is doing the representing. The other female storytellers within *The Canterbury Tales* are given less space to speak, and use it quite differently from the Wife.

Moreover, there are more women to consider in the remaining tales, and likely more to be discovered about the ones I have previously discussed. In particular, the relationship between Custance and her mother could be analyzed further, especially in comparison to Custance's interactions with Donegild, the Sultanness, and her father. Familial bonds between women are brushed aside, like Emelye and Hippolyta, or displayed negatively, like Custance's relationship with Donegild or the Sultanness. Moreover, these female homosocial bonds may be compared to male homosociality, which is represented in a more positive and present manner.

This thesis suggests that the Wife highlights female homosociality and the advantages it provides comparison to heteronormativity. Through the *Wife's Prologue and Tale*, the erasure of women in Fragments I and II is placed on display. In putting these diminishing relationships and characters in the spotlight, societal norms and conceptions of gender are subtly challenged. Ultimately, the Wife begins a conversation about the diminishing representation of women and female homosociality within the tales and within the world at large. The Wife is written in an ambiguous manner that leaves audiences with a series of questions and ideas about sex, gender, and social relations in medieval literature, but not all of those questions are answered.

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