"Professional scholars," said Sherlock Holmes, "like professional detectives, are not reasoning animals. If the murder in the Wife of Bath's Prologue has not been discovered before, it is because I had never read that part of the Canterbury Tales until a fortnight ago." Holmes would not find it surprising that his case against Alison, as reported by Vernon Hall in the third volume of The Baker Street Journal, has failed to convince most of our unreasoning profession. However, the academic brief on the revelour's convenient death has grown fatter over the years, and it is now time to clear Alison's name and return her to those halcyon days when she stood accused of nothing worse than being an icon of fallen willfulness.

It would be an easy task to acquit Alison on the ground that the evidence against her is insubstantial and ambiguous. I could argue that Alison is proud of her flirtation with Jankyn because it illustrates her acquisitive "purveyance" (D 566, 570). "I holde a mouses herte nat worth a leek / That hath but oon hole for to sterte to" (D 572-73): far from plotting to get rid of a husband, she boasts that she is lining up Jankyn behind number four, doubling rather than changing her options. Further, when Alison lets slip the narrative thread--"now, sire, lat me se what I shal seyn" (D 585)--her accusers hear a sinister evasion of just how "blood bitokeneth gold" (D 581) in this case. The argument cannot be accepted without complementary evidence on what crimes are being suppressed at the five other points when Alison's narrative restarts from a dead stop (D 480-81, 563, 627, 666-68, 711-12). Has she poisoned all the men "short, or long, or blak, or whit" (D 624) that she abandons with the sudden "What sholde I seye" (D 627)? Has she bludgeoned the old clerks whose habits she is describing just before her abrupt "But now to purpos" (D 711)? A much fatter brief than we see before us would be required to validate the charge that Alison's casual narration betrays a felonious nature. Finally, I could argue that while Jankyn does taunt Alison with examples of husband murder, it is not that but the book's testimony on women's chiding and sensuality that finally moves Alison to action. Alison recognizes the validity of those charges, and she has left us a vigorous defense of her ability to scold and to seduce. But there is little to suggest that either Jankyn or his wife perceives murder to be the most pertinent and painful of his book's antifeminist accusations.

Thus Alison could be acquitted simply for lack of evidence, but that would not satisfy her accusers, whose case is one of those instances of argument from absence: what is not there is crucial. I would like to make two observations about how these gaps are glossed by those who think the Wife of Bath murdered number four. First,
critics sustain this accusation by assuming that Alison is not a literary character, a text, but rather a person who has a complete life that we can recover by conjecture. Second, the accusers refer their charge to antifeminist tracts such as Jankyn's book of wicked wives, in which the worst of the accusations against women is that they may be expected to murder their husbands. This Wife exemplifies fully what the satirical tradition tells us about wives.

Both of these components of the case against Alison are fraught with difficulties. To begin with her ontological status, imagining Alison to be capable of murder entails a naive confusion of the textual and the organic that has nothing to do with the ordinary recognition that literature strives to imitate life. Of course literary characters resemble living people, but the reality of fictional characters is enclosed in and determined by their texts. This seems so evident that I would hesitate to mention it, were it not a principle so frequently ignored in discussions of Alison of Bath: "We can easily imagine her when young. ... In her formative years she read romantic stories of the Arthurian knights. ... [But] the twelve year old bride, anticipating the realization of her girlish romantic dreams, finds herself bound in holy wedlock to an old man barely capable of making love." This fabrication is launched from details in the text but soars rapidly into the ozone of readerly imagination. Why should we connect romances with Alison's formative years; why with private reading? Because the dreamy susceptibility we might then attribute to her might lead to a disappointment so great that she might later feel murderous. Such inventions derive from the tradition that brought us The Girdhood of Shakespeare's Heroines and conjectures about what Hamlet ate for breakfast. Or in Alison's case, "Why she married her fourth husband is not clear. Can it be that she was drunk at the time?" In a court of law this would amount to inadmissible insinuation. In critical circles the work of Marshall Leicester, David Benson, and many others encourages us to acknowledge the textuality of literary characters by respecting the limits of their representation. Alison does look lifelike, but to invent more of her life than Chaucer has already given us is to take ourselves for poets.

Yet Alison's accusers explain her crime by inventing for her an extratextual history and psychopathology whose slender relations to the text are attributed to Alison's guilty self-concealment. For Beryl Rowland, even the Wife's abrupt narrative transitions "suggest a pathological state"; concerning the "oother compaignye in youthe" (A 461), Rowland notes that "precocious sexual experience may create in a woman a trauma which makes her hate all men. ... Hence the obvious satisfaction that Alys expresses at her winnings, and the contempt which she shows for men's desires." Donald Sands, analyzing the Wife as a "psychiatric case," discovers that she suffers from "a disorder which recent psychiatric texts label a sociopathic personality disturbance, an illness characterized by antisocial reaction, dyssoical reaction, and usually addiction (in Alys's case, probably to alcohol)." If the Wife of Bath were a living creature, she would indeed look bizarre, but the work of psychiatrists would not help us to handle her. Could we galvanize her into life, she would appear, like Frankenstein's monster, an alien being horrifically different from ourselves. Refusing to notice the irreducible Otherness of art, Sands aligns Alison with Charles Manson while Rowland diagnoses her as a nymphomaniac. Taking Alison to be a real woman thus sustains an argument that she is disturbed enough to commit murder, just as can inventing for her a tragically disappointed girlhood. But these moves misapprehend the kind of reality that fictional characters enjoy. Alison does not have a complete existence "before" or "behind" the poetry. She exists as her spoken text calls her into being. However lifelike the poetry makes her, we should not imagine that she has a still deeper life that we can recover by any stretch of critical ingenuity.

Indeed, and ironically, taking the Wife of Bath's Prologue as an instance of "the human psyche responding to circumstance" leads Alison's accusers to assessments as negative and extreme as those of the exegetical critics against whom they often define their endeavor. For D. W. Robertson and his followers, Alison has little or no relation to living women; she is instead an "iconographic figure" of carnality, "the mouthpiece of a clerical sort of buffoonery," "an allegorical figure representing human carnality." The exegetical critics believe that Chaucer draws an iconic Alison to further a philosophical argument, whereas the critics who accuse her of murder believe we should think of her as a disturbed woman--"the emasculating bitch, the frigid nymphomaniac, the Sadistic..."
I would argue that pressing her into an iconic frame and inflating her to fully human proportions distort alike her fictional identity and deprive her of her true existence as a literary character. This hidden affinity between exegetical critics and those who accuse Alison of murder raises my second objection to the accusation: It necessitates an impoverished account of what Chaucer is doing in the Wife of Bath's Prologue. As one who could countenance the murder of her husband, Alison would be not just guilty of a great crime, she would embody the worst of the antifeminist charges detailed in Jankyn's book. Her accusers share this conviction with those who call her an icon. Rowland defines Alison in terms of medieval commonplaces and asserts that Chaucer's task is to make the commonplace "credible." Sherlock Holmes assures us that it is "obvious that the Wife is one of Chaucer's contributions to those satires against women beloved of the Middle Ages. ... If, then, Chaucer was holding the Wife up as an example of what a woman should not be, it should not surprise us if he made her willing to cause the death of a husband." If D. W. Robertson's theory of iconographic figures did not forbid the invention of a romantic girlhood or a criminal psychopathology for Alison, he might well have agreed that she shares homicide with her sisters in the tradition of clerical satire. For both sets of critics, the Wife is another exemplum for Jankyn's book, a wicked wife indeed.

Is the Wife of Bath's Prologue a remotivation of medieval commonplaces, a contribution to the antifeminist canon? I believe this is a partial and distorted version of the text. On this point I would like to call to the bar two character witnesses, both disarmingly affable and both more subtle than they care to appear, Dr. Watson and Geoffrey Chaucer. Watson suggests with some delicacy that Holmes suspects Alison due to his "imperfect sympathy for the opposite sex," and that Alison expresses concern for Jankyn's soul not because he was her partner in crime but "because she loved him." Watson's observation of affective states provides more reliable data than all the circumstantial evidence gathered by Alison's accusers. It is not important to my case, though it does provide evidence of a circumstantial kind, that neither Chaucer's Clerk, nor the Merchant, nor the Envoy to Bukton expresses the least suspicion that Alison is homicidal. It is important that Alison's accusers identify her fully with the misogynist tradition of clerical satire: she is "woman as her own worst enemy"; "an example of what a woman should not be." Chaucer's presentation of Alison, I submit, is more subtle than that.

To close this case, Chaucer might well testify that he does not aspire to be anthologized in Jankyn's book. Rather, he has dramatized that book's inertness, pastness, and univocal flatness, by placing it in the home of a still-fictional but comparatively reflective character who responds to its assertions about marriage. Alison's argument is notoriously illogical; she is constructed from the very tradition she opposes, and must assemble her defense of women from the clerical case against them. Chaucer seems to be asking: How would antifeminist literature sound, if the wives it describes could listen? How would the clerical authors look from the viewpoint of their own targets? At first Chaucer may have conceived the Wife of Bath's Prologue as a literary joke in which the women of satire simply talk back to their authors, but as he worked through the Prologue, Chaucer seems to have reached for more: Alison acquires emotions and reflections that have no place in the tradition, detaching her from clerical discourse and allowing her a critical perspective on it. The reflective awareness with which she speaks of the antifeminist tradition makes her Prologue far more than a mere rerun of the clerical case against women. Her searching contradictoriness does not come to rest in a final authorial judgment, and according to Leicester, "this lack of closure in the Wife's life and personality is, finally, an aspect of Chaucer's feminism." Any reading that collapses the Wife of Bath's Prologue back into the antifeminist vision of "what a woman should not be" is crucially reductive--yet the move is inherent to arguing that Alison should be suspected of murdering her revelour.

Women and men of the jury: The case against Alison rests on two false apprehensions about her Prologue. First, her accusers claim that she is essentially human in the dimensions of her life and the constitution of her psyche, so that we may conjecture about her childhood and measure her by the standards of clinical psychology. The evidence so collected is inadmissible. A second misapprehension is that Alison merely fulfills antifeminist expectations rather than reassessing the tradition. This reading is critically disingenuous. Chaucer here investigates the limits of a tradition in which "no womman of no clerk is preysed" (D 706). Let us not imitate those clerks whose first premise is that "womman was the los of al mankynde" (D 720), a homicide from the start. Let us...
rather listen to how Alison shakes the foundations of that belief, questioning its origins in celibacy and contrasting its simplicity to her own complexity. Let us now conclude our deliberations with a resounding "case dismissed."

**Notes**


2. Palomo, pp. 304-05; see also pp. 311-12 on the conjectural identification of Jankyn the clerk with Jankyn the apprentice: "Once a puppy trailing at [Alison's] heels with that stupefied adoration of the boy just discovering the stirrings of sexuality and the excitement of beauty in woman, Jankyn at twenty has become a not very scrupulous college graduate looking for an easy way to get ahead in the world, willing to exploit the aging woman he once idolized." C. David Benson discusses the methodological problems of what he calls the "dramatic theory" in *Chaucer's Drama of Style: Poetic Variation and Contrast in the "Canterbury Tales"* (Chapel Hill, 1986), pp. 3-19.


10. Sands, p. 173, connecting Rowland's articles and his own.


13. Palomo, p. 318; Hall, p. 90. Chaucer's references to the Wife of Bath are in the *Clerk's Tale* (E 1170-73), *Merchant's Tale* (E 1685-87), and "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton" (lines 29-30).


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