In the following essay, Crane investigates the Wife of Bath's attempts to define her autonomy, and she observes that many of Alisoun's ideas conflict with one another, and her quest for women's independence is unsustainable.

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* so closely illustrates the concerns of its *Prologue* that critics agree it can only be understood in relation to its assertive, female, marriage-minded narrator. But why does Alison's *Tale* resemble an Arthurian romance? Her *Prologue* is based on antifeminist tracts, marital satire, biblical exegesis—a clerical mixture from which Alison draws life and departs like the Eve of amphibians leaving the sea while carrying its salt in her veins. It would seem beyond this creature's ken to speak of ladies' gracious mercy, of quests and fairy knowledge. Only the Wife's idealizing nostalgia for her happily-ever-after with Jankyn anticipates the generic character of her *Tale*.

I argue that we can better understand the disjunction between the Wife's *Prologue* and *Tale*, and the peculiar generic makeup of the tale itself, by appealing to the works' historical situation. I am not referring to the recent critical trend that analyzes Alison as if she were a real, fully developed personality. So treated, she appears to be a "sociopath," homicidal, nymphomaniacal, a mass of bizarre symptoms (see, e.g., Rowland; Palomo; Sands). A second historicizing trend associates her trade and station with medieval land tenure laws, dower practices, and legal records, but these efforts, while valuable contextually, remove us from confronting Alison as she exists in her own language (see, e.g., Margulies; Colmer; Robertson, "'And'"). She is neither an individual (if she were, she would indeed be monstrous) nor a mirror for historical conditions but a fiction who tells a fiction.

Yet the history of cultural beliefs can contribute to an understanding of these fictions. Ideologies inform genres more directly than do economic and social conditions, and they can mediate for us between a literary text and its historical moment. Romances, for example, shape ideals of chivalry and courtesy into narratives about how to interpret and assess those ideals. This is more fully what romances do than is representing the daily life of courts. Similarly, antifeminist satire tells us little about what actual marriages were like but much about how the clergy conceived of sexuality and femininity.

*The Wife of Bath's Tale* draws heavily on romance and antifeminist satire. Alison has no existence independent of her words, but her words in their generic formations allude to social and religious convictions that have
extraliterary importance. Attending to those convictions can help us see why Alison draws on romance, why she draws on it imperfectly, and what the discourse on gentillesse has to do with the rest of her performance.

Two issues in particular--gender and sovereignty--are of concern to Alison. Both issues have intertextual subtleties of some depth, and both also have practical influence in the world. The Wife's Tale confronts the social belief that feminine power should be strictly limited, and it attempts to establish a defense of secular women's sovereignty that opposes the conventions available to Alison. She revels in the attractions of power and argues that her active desire for it is justified by the benefits she wins from it and the peace and happiness that yielding to it will bring to men. Yet her vaunted abilities as a "wys wyf" (D 231) are precisely those the satirists condemn, while her happy endings are patently illusory. The illogicalities and confusions in her narrative are commonly attributed to her error: she is a parodic or comic figure who inverts accepted morality, or a sinful one who denies Christian teaching, and therefore she cannot argue cogently. But whether or not she is comical or morally wrong, she is of substantial interest from other perspectives. Her attempt to redefine women's sovereignty is rhetorically and culturally significant, and from these perspectives Alison's apparent confusions propel her convictions beyond traditional discourses toward a realm of expression where there is as yet no language. In her narrative and logical ruptures themselves, in her destabilizations of genre, gender, gentillesse, and sovereignty, we can perceive something of what "wommen moost desiren" (D 905) as well as how inexpressible that desire is.

The kinds of power Alison designates as "sovereignty" vacillate contradictorily, in part because she confronts generic and ideological differences on the issue. Her Tale analyzes a belief that informs both antifeminist satire and romance: that gender sets limits on personal capability and social power. Both literatures develop conventions about feminine abilities, women's special knowledge in affairs of the heart and hearth, and the ways women exercise their capacity in those affairs. Chaucer's works often venture far from generic norms, but his poetry can still illustrate the conventions of these two genres regarding feminine power.

Heroines of romance tend to be more delicate emotionally and less capable intellectually than men (Dorigen's laments, Criseyde's fear, Theseus's subjection of Femenye), but their exceptional beauty inspires love and adumbrates a fineness of character that may not quite be fulfilled (Dorigen's rash promise, Criseyde's falseness). For men they are the arbiters of love, courtesy, and high sentiment. Their excellence in these matters reproduces in the emotional sphere the hierarchy of feudal relations, leading to a sublimation and refinement of passion that are metaphorically elevating (Arveragus's and Aurelius's courtships of Dorigen, the Man in Black's courtship of fair White). But the demanding standards of noble ladies, after inspiring men to improve, are complemented by the ultimate compliance that brings courtship to fruition. From the romance tradition at large it is clear that resourcefulness, sharp wit, and magical power are located in minor female figures or dangerous ones more than in heroines (La Vieille, Lunete, Morgan le Fay, Chaucer's Cassandra). The admirable women of romance wield their emotional sovereignty in ways beneficial to men and pleasurable to audiences, deferring stasis for a time but finally yielding in harmonious accord with male desire.

In contrast, antifeminist satire is nonnarrative, organized instead by an authoritative voice that rigidifies and fragments femaleness into a set of discrete exempla and negative topoi on nagging, mercenary dependence, overbearing sexuality, and so on:

And if that she be foul, thou seist that she Coveith every man that she may se,

Seeking to discourage clerics from cohabitation and sexual relations, the satirists mount an all-out attack on feminine emotional and domestic power. Significantly, romance poets and satirists agree in according women a potential for excellence in domesticity and love, but satirists make the failure of that potential a chief argument for avoiding women: contrary to what the suitor expects, a woman will not delight or comfort him. Moreover, the qualities that in romance contribute to women's emotional excellence define their unworthiness in satire. Their greater fragility manifests itself in weeping and clinging, their capacity for love leads to torments of jealousy and sexual conflict, and their irrationality tyrannizes men like a child's or a badly trained animal's: "For as an hors I
koude byte and whyne. / I koude pleyne, and yit was in the gilt, / Or elles often tyme hadde I been spilt“ (D 386-88). Antifeminists thus argue that women's emotional sovereignty is harmful, aggressive, and falsely exercised instead of imagining with the romance poets that women's sovereignty derives from native feminine virtues.

Initially, the Wife of Bath addresses the issues of gender and power as they are formulated in anti-feminist satire. As readers have long noted with pleasure, her own origin in the very texts she disputes forces her to shadowbox with herself, receiving almost as many blows as she delivers. However cleverly Alison attempts to parry satiric convictions—by celebrating the less-than-perfect life rather than accepting admonishments to perfection, by claiming that the rational male should yield reasonably to the less rational female—still the notion that women's claims to sovereignty are unjustified is inextricably woven into the generic fabric of her Prologue. Alison's shift to romance is thus a strategic one, challenging antifeminist versions of the issue by confronting them with a genre that celebrates women's emotive power instead of undermining it. Romance is the "profeminist" literature, it would appear, that can combat the negative formulations of Theophrastus and Jerome.

But her tactic comes as a surprise in view of her own textual origins and of conventional rebuttals of the antifeminist version of women's sovereignty. The Wife's character is drawn from the gender conceptions of estates literature as well as from satire, and neither of these points of origin prepares us for her romance.

Alison's "Venerien" (D 609) femaleness is more firmly rooted, as Jill Mann has shown, in her estate than in her horoscope (see also Shahar; Monfrin). Estates literature distinguishes not only among ways of life (workers, nobles, clergy) but also between men and women. Secular women are assigned to a separate female estate. This fourth estate is subdivided according to women's social status in their relations to men rather than according to professions or work in the world: women are maidens or spouses or widows; they tempt, bear children, and so on. This formulation of social identity obviously makes women's significance dependent on their relations to men, providing little justification for Alison's claims to supremacy. Nor does the presentation of her trade offer her any better justification. Alison's cloth making, mentioned only in her General Prologue portrait, turns out to have no importance in her life. Little more than a version of the spinning proverbially assigned to women along with deceit and weeping (D 401-02) as secondary sex characteristics, cloth making is not what gives Alison some measure of dominance during and beyond her marriages. Rather, her "sexual economics" extract wealth from her husbands in exchange for domestic peace (Delany). The effacement of the Wife's trade from her Prologue and Tale is a disenfranchising move that underlines her functional dependence. In keeping with estates ideology, her social identity is restricted to her wifehood, while her defense of "Marcien" hardiness and dominance (D 610) inverts antifeminist condemnations of the marital estate.

What history can show us about the Wife of Bath is less the daily working and living conditions of women than the ways men and women conceived their situations. The strong presence of antifeminist and estates ideology in the Wife's portrait and Prologue renders her claim to sovereignty intensely problematic, and a wider context of women's voices demonstrates her isolation even from her own fictive sex. It is not only male writers who pervasively assert that women's sexuality defines their situation and that men should be sovereign over women. Heloise, who is anthologized in Jankyn's "book of wikked wyves" (D 685), portrays herself in her letters as the source and, from birth, nothing but the source of Abelard's misfortune: "What misery for me--born as I was to be the cause of such a crime! Is it the general lot of women to bring total ruin on great men? Hence the warning about women in Proverbs." Submissiveness offers her a way to minimize her sex's power to do harm, so Heloise represents her love's merits to have been the extraordinary sacrifices by which "I have carried out all your orders so implicitly that when I was powerless to oppose you in anything, I found strength at your command to destroy myself. ... I believed that the more I humbled myself on your account, the more gratitude I should win from you" (Letters 130, 113). Margery Kempe, who like Heloise takes uneasy refuge from marriage in celibacy and religious self-castigation, likens Mary and Joseph's wedding to her own spiritual marriage to God, praying that like a perfect wife she "myth han grace to obeyn hym, louyn & dredyn hym, worschepyn & preysyn hym, & no-thyng to louyn but þat he louyth, ne no-thyng to welyn but þat he wolde, & euyr to be redy to fulfillyn hys wil bothyn nyght & day wyth-owtyn grutchyng er heuynes" (199).
That Margery speaks through two male amanuenses and that Heloise was educated in clerical orthodoxy by Abelard himself only begin to indicate the constraints on their self-presentation. Yet they concur, while Chaucer's Alison does not, that women should value submission and sacrifice and should watch vigilantly over their explosive sexuality. Christine de Pizan also chooses obedience as her touchstone when refuting the antimatrimonial satirists of Jankyn's book. Despite her argument in the City of Ladies that women are capable of independence, Christine counters the claims of Valerius and Theophrastus that women are domineering and unloving with examples of wives supreme in servitude—they follow their husbands to battle and exile, eat their cremated husbands' ashes or kiss the rotting corpses; they treat unfaithful husbands with love and respect; they are as constant as Griselda (117-34, 170-76). From the unlettered Margery to the highly educated and original Christine, women writers defend their sex partly by accepting cultural models of female submission.

A story of Griselda, then, would be the widely expected rebuttal to the antifeminist challenge of The Wife of Bath's Prologue. But the Clerk's Tale comes later (and differently); the Wife's Tale is another kind of rebuttal altogether.

Initially, romance provides Alison with an argument to use against the satirists. In that her Tale lacks chivalric or military adventures and features a crucially knowledgeable and capable female character, it is not a standard romance. But it does answer to the phrase Chaucer uses, according to Donald Howard (52-53n), to designate his romances, "storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse" (A 3179). True to the genre are the setting in "th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour" (D 857) and the educative knowledge by which women direct men's emotional development. Arthur's justice is tempered by Guinevere's mercy as is Theseus's by the "verray wommanhede" of weeping ladies who plead for Palamon and Arcite (A 1748-61). The old hag, like other romance heroines, has special insight in matters of love and morality that leads the knight to change for the better and to achieve happiness in love.

Alison manipulates her romance with an eye to antifeminist assertions, using her new genre to attract validity to the version of women's sovereignty condemned by antifeminist writers. For that sovereignty is not identical in romance and in satire. Wives of satire seize tangible economic and physical terrain by force and subterfuge: "I have the power durynge al my lyf / Upon his propre body, and noght he"); "Atte ende I hadde the bettre in ech degre / By sleighte, or force, or by som maner thyng" (D 158-59, 404-05). Ladies of romance control men's devotion not by force or even by their own volition but by reason of their excellence (Dorigen, Criseyde). The Wife's Tale, in referring to romance conventions, implies an equivalence between the unjustified tyranny of satire's wives and the meritorious supremacy of romance heroines. Clearly, there is no Dorigen or Criseyde in her story. The hag is aggressive, manipulative, and sexually demanding in the best satiric vein, but her high and magical attributes--as queen of fairies, as goal of a quest for life, as moral guide, and finally as love object of the knightly hero--obscure her antifeminist connections and work to validate her active exercise of power.

But while romance dignifies the claim to women's sovereignty in this Tale, frequent antifeminist touches paradoxically vitiate the romantic elevation Alison seems to desire. The answers proposed to Guinevere's question catalog feminine weaknesses, from "Somme seyde wommen loven best richesse" to "we kan no conseil hyde" (D 925, 980). The violence of sexual relations through Alison's Tale and the animal metaphors for women (limed like birds, kicking like galled horses, booming like bitterns) answer to the satiric conviction that women are profoundly irrational, sensual creatures.

One explanation of this difficulty in the narration is that the Wife is incapable of sustaining the romance mode; she cannot help slipping back into the antifeminist attitudes from which she herself was drawn. For other critics, the "restrained idiom of the Tale proper ... suggests that a courtly narrator has replaced the Wife" or that Chaucer speaks directly in some passages (Winney 23). These explanations place Alison's Tale beyond her control and make its antifeminist elements no more than inopportune and debilitating interruptions of a standard romance. We would do better to accept that the Wife of Bath is the voice Chaucer assigns to Prologue and Tale alike and to

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hear her out. Alison is not a person constrained by plausibility but a fictional voice that knows and can perform whatever is useful to dramatizing the interests attributed to it. Her tendency to slip from the realm of satire into romance and back again is worth considering as her move, one suited to her concern with women's sovereignty.

Alison's transitions between satire and romance betray the incongruity of the two generic visions and, consequently, their shared inadequacy to her argument. The knight's trial culminates this process of recognition. Several shifts that may have seemed involuntary, from queenly power to proverbial foibles, from fairy illusion to all-too-solid flesh, are here recuperated in a full return to romantic sensibility. The hierarchical display of Guinevere's assembly of judgment evokes fictional love courts, with the "queene hirself sittynge as a justise" (D 1028), and the answer she and her ladies accept from the knight seems to tally with courtly conventions about women's superiority in matters of the heart. Yet the hag anticipates that the ladies will not gladly admit the knight's answer; even "the proudeste" will simply not "dar seye nay" (D 1017-19). Echoing her suspicion, the knight concludes his answer insistently: "This is your mooste desir, thogh ye me kille" (D 1041). The implication of resistance marks a disparity between satiric sovereignty, actively claimed and energetically wielded, and the passive, apparently unwilled sovereignty of women in romance. To force the queen's ladies into accepting that "Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee" (D 1038) is to confront the romance vision that has dignified women's power with Alison's fiercer vision that women consciously seek and enjoy it.

The Wife's return to a satiric conviction at this point underlines the insufficiency of either conventional discourse for dramatizing a worthy sovereignty of secular women. Satire denies their worth. Romance seems a genre in which women's excellence brings power, but the appearance proves false. A heroine's strength lasts only for the temporal and fantastic space that delays her submission and demonstrates the capabilities of her suitor. Her mercy and compliance are the necessary closure to her aloof independence and her ability to command devotion. In a historical study of marriage practices, Georges Duby concludes that the Old French poetry of adultery and love service is based on a "fundamentally mysogenous" conception of woman as merely a means to male self-advancement: "Woman was an object and, as such, contemptible" (Medieval 14, 108).11 Eugene Vance corroborates Duby's historical analysis by connecting early lyrics of adultery to romances of proud ladies: throughout, love's poetic expression is typically "le combat érotique," an aesthetic of antithesis recognizing the violence that is veiled by the mystified perfection of fine amor (548; see also Bloch 153-56).

These researches suggest that the violent sexual relations of the Wife of Bath's Tale do not depart from romance tradition so much as exaggerate it, while the Tales presentation from the knight's point of view, its evasion of punishment for the knight, and the queen's merely contingent authority (for which she "thanketh the kyng with al hir myght" [D 899]) offer a recognizably romantic, masculine imagining. The hag's power over her "walwing" knight is anomalous, more like the power of Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight than like that of a conventional heroine. But even the hag surrenders in the end. The joyful and thoroughly fanciful resolution that fulfills the knight's "worldly appetit" (D 1218) illustrates the most romance can render. Here, as in Alison's Prologue, "her very verbalizations remain unavoidably dependent, feminine respeakings of a resolutely masculine idiom" (Patterson 682; see also Aers 143-51).

Heloise, Christine, and Margery Kempe similarly reiterate clerical wisdom about the failings and duties of their sex. One further female voice, taking a noble rather than a clerical perspective, demonstrates that modern critics are not the first to find misogyny and male violence in courtly conventions. Toward the end of his book of instruction for his daughters, Geoffroy de la Tour Landry writes at some length of his wife's opposition to his belief "that a lady or damoyselfe myght loue peramours in certayne caas." According to Geoffroy, his wife objected that men's assertions about the value of love service "are but sport and esbatement of lordes and of felawes in a langage moche comyn." Men's conventional language (drawn from courtly tradition) has no relation to their feelings, says this wife, so their declarations of love should not be trusted. Her understanding that courtly speaking is masculine rather than feminine presages modern analyses of romance. Men use this discourse against women, to make conquests: "these wordes coste to them but lytyll to say for to gete the better and sooner the grace and good wylle of theyr peramours." Nor do they undertake tasks for love but "only for to enhance
them self, and for to drawe vnto them the grace and vayne glory of the world” (Book 163, 164; Livre 246-48). In her view, then, male power does not surrender to female excellence in courtly interaction. Consequently, her arguments on the subject support Geoffroy's instructions to their daughters to restrain their sexuality and to be humbly obedient in their relations with men.

If the elevation of women in romance was understood to be chimerical and if even noble writers concur with clerical ones on the importance of female submissiveness, how is the Wife of Bath to formulate (even fictionally) an argument in defense of women's desire for sovereignty? In many ways her Tale does not manage to transcend the categories of her age, and her argument remains partial, awkward, and illogical. For example, the curtain lecture urges the knight to rise above the worldly indulgences of wealth and station, but the lecturer then fulfills his sensual desires. She rejects the social hierarchy and nobility of blood in the same speech, yet she appeals to "my sovereyn lady queene" (D 1048) for the knight's hand and promises him to become as beautiful "As any lady, emperice, or queene" (D 1246; see Haller; Murtaugh; Bolton).

There are many such confusions in the Wife's Prologue and Tales, perhaps most elusive is what Alison means by sovereignty in the first place. The power it signifies seems constantly to vacillate, but three major contradictions can be distinguished. Alison sometimes associates sovereignty with economic gain, "wynnyng" (D 416), yet she seems to win nothing from her fourth husband, gives up her gains to Jankyn, and makes the hag speak eloquently against the significance of wealth. At other points, coercion, including physical domination, renders Alison's metaphor "myself have been the whippe" (D 175) very nearly literal, but she moves easily from coercion to accommodation with Jankyn as does the hag with her knight. And finally, her conception of sovereignty seems to demand the trust or the high opinion of her husbands. “Thou sholdest seye, 'Wyf, go wher thee liste ... / I knowe yow for a trewe wyf, dame Alys” (D 318-20), she instructs her old husbands, and Jankyn fulfills her desire in acceding, "Myn owene trewe wyf, / Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf" (D 819-20). Nonetheless, the Wife cheerfully undermines her demand for trust and respect by asserting and demonstrating that women are untrustworthy: "half so boldely kan ther no man / Swere and lyen, as a womman kan" (D 227-28).

Why does Alison constantly alter and even cancel each of her versions of sovereignty? The solution is not that women's desire for power is nothing but a desire for love. Love is a relatively simple matter for her, something she often gets from men. In contrast, sovereignty vacillates confusingly even in love's presence: with the "daungerous" Jankyn and knight (D 514, 1090), it works to perpetuate love, as if it were analogous to integrity or merit, but in her four earlier marriages it tyrannizes or substitutes for love, as if it were mere self-interest. The Wife's casual manipulation of her old husbands' devotion--"They loved me so wel, by God above, / That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love" (D 207-08)--suggests that the question of power precedes and subsumes the question of men's love: it is sovereignty that "worldly wommen loven best" (D 1033). The object of this fundamental love is elusive, and its elusiveness partly accounts for its desirability, in accordance with Alison's psychological principle "Forbede us thyng, and that desiren we" (D 519). Female power, in any form, is the most heretical of her desires (Howard 252; Aers 143-46), unsustained in any of the conventional discourses on which she draws. Looking beyond those discourses necessarily leaves the Wife inarticulate, even about the meaning of the sovereignty she imagines. She desires to validate the forbidden but can hardly formulate what it is.

Still, her very failures of articulation make gestures that indicate what the worth of female power might be. Alison signals the direction of her desire through a series of poetic transformations. The hag's physical metamorphosis is only the most dazzling of many mutations demonstrating that genres, genders, and words themselves are not fixed phenomena but fluid media through which new potential can be realized.

Romance is the appropriate form for confronting an unknowable desire. Its "strategy of delay" holds narrative "on the threshold before the promised end, still in the wilderness of wandering, 'error,' or 'trial'" (Parker 5, 4). This fantastic space permits traditional medieval romance to imagine, however contingently, a kind of female sovereignty that Alison manipulates, as we have seen, to justify the willed power condemned in antifeminist satire. But in that very manipulation, she recognizes the illusoriness of women's power in romance and cracks the Tale's
generic frame. Neither romance nor satire can answer Alison's longing, and her vacillation expresses her desire to pass beyond their limits.

Women also cross gender lines in the Wife's Tale. The barber in Midas's story becomes a wife; the ladies' court of judgment replaces Arthur's; and the hag comes to speak like a cleric, while her husband submits with wifely meekness to her "wise governance" (D 1231). These substitutions make women the active movers of plot, as they are not in conventional romance, where they may inspire chivalric activity but where that activity is itself the source of change and growth. Gender displacements extend to the fairy realm, as the "elf-queene with hir joly compaignye" (D 860), who are all feminine when the knight encounters them (D 992), seem to metamorphose during Alison's introduction from "joly" dancers to potent incubi threatening women in the Arthurian countryside. The knight-rapist and the king both move from having power to surrendering it, while women throughout the Tale move themselves into male purviews. Does this plot's exclusion of chivalric adventures echo and reverse the Prologue's effacement of Alison's cloth-making profession, emphasizing the dependence of men on women in the Tale? Even the comic victory of friars over fairies in the Tale's first lines is vitiated when the fairy wife's pillow sermon demonstrates her intimate knowledge of religious texts. Reassigning women to positions of authority traces the path of their transgression in the narrative itself. The power they exercise is not always benign or even admirable, since worthy female sovereignty is a concept Alison cannot fully articulate, but the gender shifts themselves loosen the bond between maleness and power that makes female sovereignty inconceivable.

In the lecture on gentillesse and poverte, we are taught that even words are unfixed, because the categories they designate can be reconceived from changed perspectives. Gentilesse is not, as the knight thinks, a question of "nacioun" and "kynde" (D 1068, 1101), of merit determined by blood alone. Rather, "he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis" (D 1170). This familiar clerical topos restricts and relativizes the second estate's claim to superiority by emphasizing the disjunction between supremacy of birth and the moral supremacy over which the church has special authority (see Duby, Three). So alien does this argument seem to Alison's views on female sovereignty that some critics treat it as a mere interruption: "it is in fact addressed to the audience. Chaucer apparently wished to include such a discourse at this point" (Jordan 89). But in that it challenges fixed categories, the speech on gentillesse and poverte is of a piece with the Tale's other instances of transformation and is appropriate to an old hag who can so easily redefine herself as beautiful and young.

Beginning with the words themselves, the hag's speech subverts the conventional meanings of gentillesse and poverte, using paradox and oxymoron to emphasize the process of reversal: the sinner "nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl; / For vileyns synful dedes make a cherl" (D 1157-58); "Poverte is hateful good" (D 1195). The direction of these reversals moves away from the concept of nobility and poverty as objective states beyond individual control, asserting instead that conscious choices determine them: "Thanne am I gentil whan that I bigynne / To lyven vertuously" (D 1175-76); "he that noght hath, ne coveiteth have, / Is riche, although ye holde him but a knave" (D 1189-90). The two processes, the semantic destabilization and the assertion that individuals can define their situations, connect this speech to Alison's wider preoccupation with sovereignty: that is the most unstable of her terms and the one she seeks most persistently to reconceive. Without a culturally authoritative recourse for her half-imagined redefinition, Alison displaces the achievement to the hag's analogous transformations of gentillesse and poverte. Perfectly in consonance with recognized authorities, yet grounded in arguments for self-determination, the hag's definitions imply that sovereignty may also be open to new and freely chosen meanings. Emphasizing the possibility, the hag's mutation into an authoritative expert enacts the claim that women can deserve power, and her husband recognizes that when he surrenders marital sovereignty to her on the basis of her moral excellence.

Like the elevation of romance, the morality of clerical exhortation is here appropriated (partially and not altogether fairly) to support Alison's defense of female sovereignty.

The hag's self-transformations culminate the various shifts and changes surrounding gender and power in the Wife of Bath's Tale. Perhaps we have not attended sufficiently to these instabilities because of Alison's air of tenacious assurance. She tackles her issue with such conviction that we expect her account to make sense, and so we resolve her inconsistencies by deciding that she is driven by nymphomania, or represents fallen willfulness,
or conversely that she rises to philosophical wisdom through the experience of her Tale. Critical conclusions about what Alison "wants" proliferate, yet it is meaningful that she does not provide a consistently readable answer. If I were attempting to wrest coherence from the Wife's preoccupation with women's sovereignty, I would argue that sovereignty's associations with and dissociations from financial gain, domestic control, sexual aggressiveness, and love are all informed by a conviction that women should not strive for equality in marriage but should, rather, refuse to wield power that they have securely won. This tactic appears to resolve the battle of the sexes into blissful reciprocity, but the Wife's envoy reveals a still-polarized combativeness that denies transcendence.

But when we make the Wife of Bath coherent, she becomes too easy to dismiss. She inscribes something more complex in her inconsistencies themselves, and it is important to consider how they too comment on gender and power. They stress that the Wife's justification of sovereignty is inexpressible in that it cannot be sustained by any conventional discourse. Whatever is compelling in her self-defense does not finally come from the language of satire or romance or moral philosophy, all of which she misappropriates. The inadequacy of her arguments, the mutability of gentillesse and sovereynetee, the shifting genders, and the flow of genres in her Tale record the impossibility of Alison's undertaking. Her own restless metamorphoses, from antifeminist creation to romancer to clerical scholar and back to militant wife in her envoy, emphasize that each tradition on which she draws denies women sovereignty. In this context, that she and her old hag do not exercise their hardwon power intriguingly contradicts their persistent desire to win it. Is this a surrender to male fantasy? Or is Alison incapable of representing the full achievement of women's power? Or is sovereignty here again to be construed as trust, rather than as economic security or coercive domination? Can her envoy sustain any one of these explanations?

More important than Alison's failure to resolve such dilemmas is the elusive longing her many transformations betray. Her insatiable desire is more forceful and preoccupying than any of her illusory conclusions. Sovereignty's redefinitions are all provisional, each canceling another, because the most Alison can tell us about her ideal of female power is that it is not present. In her present, she can only tear the inert texts that have determined her, and wish for more.

Notes

1. I use the term ideology not to disparage but, rather, to describe a set of interrelated beliefs that informs a particular way of life and works to validate that way of life in its attempts to win and maintain a place for itself in the world. On relations between history, ideology, and romance see Jameson; Shahar; Crane.

2. Robinson's notes list the connections between such passages and the works of Theophrastus, Jean de Meun, Matheolus, Jerome, and others. In this discussion I am claiming a "clerical" and "satiric" sensibility for these writers and their works, even for those who were not themselves clerics (e.g., Ovid) and for works that are not satires in the full generic sense, because anti-feminist writing was so fully integrated into the medieval tradition of clerical satire. Some scholars prefer the term anti-matrimonial to antifeminist, but the strategy of the tradition is to speak against marriage by speaking against women. On the WBP [Wife of Bath's Prologue] and another kind of clerical satire, the sermon joyeux, see Patterson.

3. Many critics have noted Alison's conflation of sex and gain in her marriages. It is also important that, in the dynamic of these marriages, Alison does not herself produce the wealth she deploys. Wealth is something inert that she wins from men by subterfuge and force, not something she generates by cloth making.

4. Her distance from models of womanhood may contribute to exegetical interpretations that her Prologue and Tale are not so much about femininity as about "the problem of willfulness" or "carnality": see Koban; Robertson, Preface 317-31. If the text has a tropological level on which the interactions of pure moral qualities can be analyzed, it nonetheless also makes literal statements with which I am concerned.
5. The ideas of Heloise anthologized in Jankyn's book are probably those against marriage that Abelard reports in the *Historia calamitatum* (*Letters* 70-74), adapted in Jean de Meun's *Roman de la rose* (vol. 2, lines 8729-58; *Romance*, pp. 177-78).

6. See also Margery's account of her own marriage to God (87).

7. For editions of Christine's French text in preparation, see Richards's introd. xxv.


9. See also *The Legend of Good Women* G 317-444 (Alceste, "so charitable and trewe" [G 434], rescues Chaucer from the God of Love's punishment) and Ruggiers 208. In the following discussion I assume that Arthur's queen in *WBT* [*Wife of Bath's Tale*] may be called Guinevere and that the old hag is the "elf-queene" of line 860.

10. According to Malone, "If the tale befits her, it does so by contrast, not by likeness" (489). My argument owes much to Leicester, "Art."

11. See also 12-15, 105-10. Green draws a similar conclusion on the social implications of later courtly poetry.

12. Mary Carruthers proposes that *WBT* opposes "courtesy-books" like Geoffroy's.

13. Some scholars relate the speech on *gentillesse* to Alison's "social class, the new rich, resentful of the claims of the old rich" (Colmer 329; see also Carruthers; Howard 105-06), but her class and professional origins are suppressed so markedly in favor of her estate and sex that the latter categories should have more to do with the speech than the former. Nor is the topos "he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis" to my knowledge ever a bourgeois one for medieval writers; rather, when it appears outside clerical contexts, its use is to sustain the nobility's separateness by adding moral criteria to those of birth: see Vale 14-32; Specht 104-08.

14. According to Koban, the speech is one of the *CT*'s "crystallizing utterances" in which Chaucer educates us in "humanizing truths" (227-28; see also Winney 24).

15. Only by accepting that the knight has listened to his wife and been changed by her words can we explain the difference between "My love? ... nay, my dampaciu!" (D 1067) and "My lady and my love, and wyf so deere, / I put me in youre wise governance" (D 1230-31). Unless he is "glosing" her like Jankyn (D 509), which is unlikely in view of his thoughtful sigh (D 1228), the hag has talked him into loving and respecting her.

16. See Gallacher; see also Rowland; Palomo; Sands; and n. 4 above.

17. Chaucer's dramatization of an undecided Alison is remarkable not least in refraining from authorial judgment, a gesture Leicester attributes to Chaucer's own character: "This lack of closure in the Wife's life and personality is, finally, an aspect of Chaucer's feminism" ("Of a Fire" 175).

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