In the following essay, Reed studies the negative characterization of the Wife of Bath and notes that her character is of low moral standards and amuses through her baseness and bad taste.

It is odd that many have found the Wife of Bath lifelike. If she is, it is not in a way that those who see her as a marvel of naturalistic invention would accept. In common sense human terms she is absurd and grotesque, a figment of that anti-feminist gallimaufry, the Prologue to her Tale. That many take her as a triumph of Chaucer's mellow and humane art tells us more about the place of women in our tradition than about the words before us. True, Chaucer was civilized: he shared the enjoyment of his courtly, humanist civilization in baiting women and the middle classes. But we are middle class, even if we think the middle classes ought to be baited; and women are not to be baited really, for their place has changed. In short our idea of civilization is different from Chaucer's. So it can hardly be that those who talk of the mellowness and humanity that went into the Wife really mean they wholeheartedly enjoy Chaucer's curmudgeonly and old-fashioned humor; or if they do, they are less than frank about it. It seems much more likely that they have found a way of misunderstanding Chaucer. And we have other ways as well, for our different ethos has not given us a detached view of the real nature of the Wife's comedy. It has made her an embarrassment, so that, fearing for Chaucer's good name, we misunderstand her elaborately.

Here are two ways of taking the Wife, both, to my mind, ways of mistaking her. The first is Walter C. Curry's:

Though one may not be entirely prepared to accept the opinion that she "is one of the most amazing characters ... the brain of man has ever conceived," still she is so vividly feminine and human, so coarse and shameless in her discussion of the marital relations with her five husbands, and yet so imaginative and delicate in her story telling that one is fascinated against his will and beset with an irresistible impulse to analyze her dual personality with the view of locating, if possible, definite causes for the coexistence of more incongruent elements than are ordinarily found in human beings.¹

The second is Bernard F. Huppé's:
In the *Wife's Prologue* Chaucer has constructed a subtle, dramatic monologue, which presents not only a woman of such reality that time has not withered her, but also a frame of judgment, stern as it is sympathetic. The comedy of the Wife's self-portrait has an underlying pathos because the reader understands—as she does not—that the vigor of her apology covers and contains the delusion which makes her life an empty lie.\(^2\)

Clearly the attitudes of the two critics differ. One dallies with her; the other censures. But both agree in granting her character, implicitly at least, the elusive literary status of individuality. For, the first, in appreciating her complex vitality, must pretend to entertain her in her own right, and the reproaches of the second require a moral agent. However, to speak of a character having the pathos of individuality suits the case of one, like Criseyde, in a tragedy or, like Cavalcante, in Hell. Accordingly Curry is led to suggest Chaucer might have considered the Wife "his most tragic figure,"\(^3\) and Huppé to see her unregenerate nature "confirmed on the way of damnation."\(^4\)

But tragic or infernal subjectivity seem out of the question to me. I shall take the Wife as a stock figure in a varied sort of pantomime (I have no better word). And as for attitude or judgment, I shall not venture beyond the stock response such a figure and such comedy call for. This approach probably misses a lot, and it can scarcely be novel. I follow it to insist that what seems curiously antique, outworn, churlish even is the essence of the Wife's humor.

II

The Wife is a stock figure and an absurdity. If (as neither Curry nor Huppé are) we were consistent and thorough in our attempt to see the Wife in terms of higher modes of fiction, she would appear a monstrosity. But she belongs to low comedy or to pantomime, and within those modes she is lifelike. Here it is hard to speak of verisimilitude. What gives her life is the liveliness of pantomime: the stock figure of the Wife and the burlesque comedy of her *Prologue* and *Tale*, the masquerade of the world on pilgrimage, in which these are set, the narrator as impresario or master of ceremonies, all these conspire in a vivid illusion or invite our make believe.

In terms of pantomime, a figure like the Wife owes her liveliness to her being a stock absurdity. Simply because they are stock figures, the pilgrims have a perennial vitality and always seem lifelike. As Dryden put it in his "Preface to the Fables," "their general characters are still remaining in mankind, and even in England, though they are called by other names than those of Monks and Friars, and Canons, and Lady Abesses, and Nuns; for mankind is ever the same, and nothing lost out of nature, though everything is altered." Certainly this seems true of comic mankind. Dryden is of course praising Chaucer's comprehensive soul, yet it sounds almost as if he were talking of the shuffling of a pack of cards. Nor is this accidental. Probably a character has to be drawn from a highly conservative pack or stock to be recognizably comic. One finds the same figures in Jonson's comedy of humors and in Anthony Powell's social comedy. Even tricks are stock. Like Chaucer's Wife, Byron's Donna Julia, caught by her husband, overpowers him with the tirade he has not had time to utter and shames him with his jealous suspicions of the truth. However, the Wife's vitality is not simply a matter of jokes' and comic figures' having long lives. Her absurdity works upon us to make her seem real. Outside fiction, when we call someone a "real character," it is a type we recognize, humorous and rather a card simply because typical. Such people may, in fact, strike us as unreal because they make play of the normal and everyday, so that we do not know whether to call them larger than life or smaller. But their very unreality makes them lively. It inveigles us into playing up to them, conspiring with them to make them real and lifelike. They are animated by the game we play with them, though we may indeed feel their life is a hoax like that of the bladders of wine Apuleius slew for thieves. Similarly in fiction, what lends such cartoon figures as the Wife their vitality is our willingness to play with them and be taken in by them. Whether demonic or genial, it is their distortion, or oddity, or exaggeration lays hold of us and makes us recognize them and endow them with life. The Wife is not a demonic figure. What is unnatural about her binds us all together in witness to her common humanity. Perhaps it is that a long comic tradition has given her standing in a rude and archaic folk sense of reality. At any rate, she is a genial humor.
Because we are involved in a comic displacement, the response she elicits from us is equivocal, and the question of how to take her becomes rather crocodilian. On the one hand we enjoy her jolly, hearty nature. On the other we know her to be, like Falstaff and Long John Silver, common and villainous. And yet, just because she is low and cunning, we find her jolly and call her human. She gains a sympathy as heartless as herself. She appeals to the Miller, Summoner, and Pardoner in us. So we like to hear of jealous old men tormented by a lively girl like her. But it also pleases us to see her done in in turn by age and nearly beaten at her own game by her last two husbands. At the same time, we are delighted to see her get off with it triumphantly.

The sympathy we accord her nature is licence, and licence was in the nature of pilgrimages. The host resembles a sort of prudent lord of misrule, and the Wife's Prologue is in the carnival spirit of the outing. Falstaff was rejected by the court and Bottom laughed out of it, both dismissed with the audience's sneaking sympathy or gratitude for the dance they led. Now obviously, since the pilgrimage was a journey to a shrine as well as a holiday and, moreover, a figure of "Thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage / That highte Jerusalem celestial" (l. 50-51), it would be fitting if Chaucer had brought such figures as the Wife to a reckoning, followed by repentance or rejection, in a grand anti-masque, or rather anti-pilgrimage, design. But nothing of the kind happens as far as her Prologue and Tale are concerned. Indeed, their happy endings are the inversion of such a proper conclusion, and misrule is left unshaken in that topsy-turvy.

Yet, if one reason for the Wife's being lifelike is that she is good fun, another is that she is a figure of execration. As a scandal she is butt as well as joker. Along with mothers-in-law, she belongs to a vulgar and perennial fund of anti-feminist jocularity. Hence Justinus in the Merchant's Tale and Chaucer in his Envoi à Bukton cite her as a dreadful warning against wives. She is a compendious type of the sort of woman-evil Dunbar, following Chaucer, treated with such sardonic relish in his Tua Marit Wemen and the Wedo. Nor is she by any means a purely medieval literary sport: one finds the same sort of material brought together in Cleopatra, for instance, or Milton's Eve, or Molly Bloom. In short, the Wife is the "Archewyf," in the guise of comic shrew. She seems to have a superindividual lifelikeness because a type figure is meant to represent a class. But the class in the Wife's case is a pseudo-class since no such woman ever trod. It is this that makes her a lively fiction. Caricature works like synecdoche. It singles out and abstracts features in such a way that the most heterogeneous individuals are categorized together, and the very absence of likeness calls forth the most vigorous and lively distortion. The Wife seems to comprise all womanhood in one person, and yet all that apparently manifold nature is shrewish and can be reduced to a single formula or humor. Her type may not be obvious in the General Prologue, but what is implied by five husbands, gat teeth, and so on is exhaustively amplified in the Prologue to her Tale. There, in the spirit of a burlesque encyclopaedia, matter drawn from clerical, Romance, and probably popular traditions is crammed into a shrew's confession. With the same perverse learning her horoscope is cast as a formula for a shrew. The formula operates by the rules of distortion or disfigurement in the unfair way that "machinery" characterizes Arnold's "Philistines." So one misses the point if one imagines her case as a hard lot dealt her by fate. Because she is bourgeoise, everything can appear under the satirical aspect of botched and botching, and the wealth of a Venerean nature is disfigured under the influence of Mars to lecherousness, nagging, cheating, bickering, and misrule. The same formula covers her Tale. The romance is under Venus but Mars spoils it, as fits the teller. This is not tragedy but bathos. Part of what animates the Wife, then, is a sly and malicious elaboration of an idée fixe, which would indeed be an obsession if it were not a comic convention.

It is not her make-up that is subtle or complex but her presentation. It does not argue some complexity of fayness in the character of that other genial humor, Bottom, if Titania falls in love with him wearing an ass's head. It is a stock incongruity of pantomime deftly handled. Similarly, the Wife's character and the comic turns we expect of her are as conventionalized as the figure of a chessman and the sorts of moves it can make. It is to the play that is made of her and the wit and finesse with which she is handled we should look for any refinements of comedy.

The General Prologue is sophisticated pantomime, and it places the stock figure of the Wife on the kind of comic stage which gives her life. The pilgrimage itself, though it is also a pregnant metaphor for human life and the wayfaring of the masks of God, seems so beguilingly festive that the scene and the occasion become, as it were,
the life and soul of the Wife along with the other pilgrims. It is a masquerade of the world, for the type figures, the Wife among them, are representative of the Estates of the Realm and of Christian pilgrims. They are disguised as a crowd of people in the Inn at Southwark. I think it is this disguise we delight in when we stress the individuality of the pilgrims. Their incognito constitutes their individuality. For us this is especially true since we do not think of the world in terms of its Estates. And, therefore, it does not automatically come to us that a merchant, a lawyer, and a wife "of beside Bath" are in fact Lawyer, Merchant, and Wife. But, quite apart from this accidental shift of interest, the figures are presented to us as if they each had an individual identity. The narrator meets them as a crowd of pilgrims, and the fiction is supported circumstantially. We are told when they meet and where, and in the links between the Tales we are given a fairly detailed itinerary. Formally, we are asked to take them as living and individual. For this reason the descriptions in the General Prologue appear to individuate pilgrims. Actually most of the detail is drawn from such sources as homiletic satire and physiognomic handbooks, and so really characterizes types. Yet, as in a dream allegory, those clues to what the persons are confront us enigmatically or transparently in the form of a mask. So, at the very moment the Wife's "hippes large" are meant to reveal her boisterous and masterful disposition, they disguise her with such particularity that she seems to stand before us in the flesh. And Chaucer has accentuated the particularity of the figures by an apparent disregard for the rules of description. The seemingly unordered and casual jotting down of detail invests the pilgrims with the singularity of the picturesque. By contrast, the Theophrastan "character" creates no such illusion. That genre sets out to draw a general type of humanity--virtue, or vice, or foible, or mixture--belonging to no particular time or place. So we take even the most lifelike or circumstantial traits as illustrating a species rather than as characterizing an individual. Unlike the portraits of the General Prologue, "character" drawing does not attempt to use individual existence as a disguise for the type.6

The narrator gives the masquerade a courtly tone since his role is that of courteous master of ceremonies.7 In the discussion of pleasures in the second book of Castiglione's The Courtier, Federico Fregoso speaks of "festivity" or "urbanity" which "we see in the case of certain men who so gracefully and entertainingly narrate and describe something that has happened to them or that they have seen or heard, that with gestures and words they put it before our eyes and almost bring us to touch it with our hand."8 Urbanity the narrator certainly has. With gentle folk he is respectful, with middle class persons laudatory but patronizing, and with low characters more forthright. One finds similar gradations of tone according to class in nineteenth century novels (Scott's for instance) and in the degrees of irony employed against "Barbarians," "Philistines," and "Populace" by Arnold. More than anything else, perhaps, it is such urbanity that satisfies us that the social scene is authentic, and one kind of observation that conjures up the reality of persons is the observation of the conventions of deference and condescension. In Langland's description of the people in the field full of folk where such urbanity is lacking it seems that his world is unworlly, though, in fact, many of his types are also Chaucer's. The urbanity of the General Prologue, on the other hand, immediately suggests a sense of the world and of what people are like. It also privileges us to view the sorts and conditions of men as a spectacle or entertainment. This is the narrator's "festivity": the urbane observation of the world is a courtly game. So with the Wife of Bath, the Merchant, the Lawyer, it is their respectability he singles out for praise; through their substance and status in their various callings they are presented as if they were worthy representatives of the commons. Their respectability is of course pinchbeck: as wife, parisioner, and, perhaps, weaver the Wife is a rogue. Here the malice belongs as much to courtly satire on middle class hypocrisy as to sermons and moralities. It is made apparent only through innuendo. Granted Chaucer's audience had no need to consult commentaries on what was implied by costly headwear on Sunday or by West Country weaving, still it would have interfered with their enjoyment of their inferior's vices if the point had been made in any other than a courteously bland manner.

Set in this higher pantomime is the comedy of the Wife's Prologue to her Tale, which is farce. It is not surprising that she becomes a problematic and bafflingly complex creature if one looks for psychological or moral ironies, or for the sort of higher comedy one expects in a novel. She is manipulated with an entire disregard for naturalistic conventions or psychological probability. She makes sense only in terms of burlesque and knockabout comedy.
In her **Prologue**, the Wife is her own impresario. Since what is put into her mouth as illustration of the "wo that is in mariage" is a farrago of anti-feminist lore, one might expect the comedy to be at her expense and women's. Yet, even if she exposed herself as a villain, she would gain the licence self-exposure gains. Her shrew's confession is, in fact, so enormous and put with such verve that it receives a comic absolution in her listeners' entertainment. Besides, the comedy is quite as much at the expense of husbands as of wives. By a sort of reflexive irony the Wife manages to be as much jester as jest. Her slippery womanhood is the bogey of the anti-feminist or "le jaloux," so that, at the very moment she is the object of his jibes, she is the source of his chagrin. An example is the farcical scene she sketches by way of illustrating how "Baar I stiffly myne olde housbondes in honde." To forestall a jealous husband, she recites his abuse as her injury. The joke against her is that she exposes herself to her listeners as the monster in his thought. But this is also a joke on her side since her being that monster is what makes her husbands ridiculous. If she is false, her effrontery mocks them. There is a similar point to be made about her marriage to Jankin. The cruel laughter against the widow hungry for youth and served by it as she had served her old husbands cannot stand up against her final triumph. And the Wife's getting the better of the mean and callow Jankin is a better joke than what he reads her from that boring misogynist's anthology of his. So satire against women dissolves in the farce of marriage, of which she is the master spirit.

If her confession is a sermon, as the Pardoner suggests, then it is a burlesque sermon in the spirit of the "sermon joyeux." In the first place, there is the joke about the preaching woman, on whom Dr. Johnson's comment doubtless speaks with the weight of conservative opinion. Had she been, like Melibeus' wife, a lady and an allegory, the case would have been different; but, since she is a low character, her learning is slapstick. Also belonging to the burlesque tradition of anti-order--like the women's sex strike in the *Lysistrata* or the annual marriages the first wife proposes in Dunbar's *The Tua Marriet Wemen and the Wedo*--is the Wife's remedy for the woe in marriage, the rule of wives. Further, there are a number of pratfalls in the conduct of her sermon. Since her declared topic is "to speke of wo that is in mariage," one expects something of a "chanson de mal mariée" along the lines of "Oh the monotonous meanness of his lust ... / It's the injustice ... he is so unjust." But, though the Wife utters complaints of this kind, it is herself, rather than her husbands, she shows to be the source of woe. Indeed, she boasts that she has been their whip and tribulation.

In the section before the Pardoner's interruption (D 1-162), she is made the mouthpiece of a clerical sort of buffoonery. Whatever the excesses of the ascetic tradition in medieval Christianity, there was, of course, no question about the canonical status of marriage and remarriage. What the Wife does is simply to give Christian teaching a farcical twist. This is the reason for the inconsistency of the tone: sometimes a theologian seems to be speaking only to be overwhelmed by a cackle from the Wife. One need only consult I Cor. vii to see that her case is respectable in letter. But the ribald gloss she gives the letter subverts its spirit. Her treatment of her three main topics--remarriage, the states of marriage and virginity, love between husband and wife--parodies Christian edification. For, instead of rising soberly from the letter to the spirit, she gives the letter a gross and ludicrous interpretation. The result is a sort of sermon for carnival. Permission to remarry, for instance, has Paul's authority behind it. But the Wife multiplies the permission inordinately. She moves from a reasonable puzzlement over how many times Scripture seems to allow one to marry to citing Solomon's extravagant case:

Lo, heere the wise kyng, daun Salomon:
I trowe he hadde wyves mo than oon.
As wolde God it were leveful unto me
To be refresshed half so ofte as he!
(D 35-38)

The allusions to Jerome's "Epistola Adversus Jovinianum" add a rather pedantic irony. The epistle contends for a rigorously spiritual ideal of marriage. The Wife, however, converts its higher pleading into most unspiritual liberties. For instance, Jerome heaps sarcasm on those unspiritual enough to remarry: certainly remarriage is better than having more than one husband simultaneously, and, since even a repentant fornicator can be forgiven, octogamy is not damned. The Wife changes the grotesque word and sarcastic permission to a source
of rejoicing. One cannot say that the Wife disagrees with Church teaching or Jerome; rather, she plays havoc with them. Again, in dealing with the exhortation to virginity and the permission to marry, her case is Pauline enough. Indeed, it seems that she is arguing with disarming modesty that, while virginity is perfection, marriage is also a state with its own excellences even if they are inferior:

Virginitee is great perfection,
And continence eek with devotion,
But Crist, that of perfection is well,
Bad nat every wight he sholde go selle
Al that he hadde, and gyve it to the poore
And in swich wise folwe hym and his foore.
He spak to hem that wolde lyve parfitly. ...
(105-11)

Then the Wife adds her application of the teaching, and the edifying trend of her discussion collapses in the exuberance with which she embraces imperfection:

And lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I.
I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age
In the actes and in fruyt of mariage.
(112-14)

In the same way, she gives Paul's treatment of the love between husband and wife a preposterous gloss. Paul spoke of the marriage debt, and the Wife will have her pound of flesh. The burlesque is not of course an early expression, disguised by being put in a bad mouth, of "the great sexual insurrection of our Anglo-Teutonic race" or of any other protest. What is behind the play being made of church teaching is a sort of goliardic scholasticism.

The Wife's Tale is also burlesque, though in a more subdued way. The opening broadside against the Friar makes it clear that a mock-romance is to follow. There are several points where the anti-feminist jocularity of her Prologue breaks in and romance lapses into bathos. Moreover, the Tale as a whole lends itself to a sly untuning. In skeleton it consists of two problems, the second being the consequence of solving the first. By promising to marry the beldame the knight learns the answer to the riddle the court of women have set him and saves his life. But fulfilling his promise means taking an undesirable wife, and that confronts him with a second problem. If one divides the story in two, each part containing a problem, then the second part is a mirror image of the first. In both parts there is a problem about women, and in both cases the solution is women's rule. In other respects the second part inverts the first. Whereas the knight rapes the maiden in the first part, the hag makes advances upon him in the second; and the fatal success of his answer to the first riddle is righted by the happy outcome of his answer to the dilemma the hag puts to him. This pattern invites structural analysis: it is figured upon polarities of masculine dominance (crudely featured in the knight's rape) and feminine (featured in the riddles as well as the beldame's compelling the knight to wed and take her in his arms). Through the miraculous transformation of the beldame the Tale resolves the polarity in favour of women's mastery, which is a rather equivocal combination of Mars and Venus, male and female. The transformation mediates between other polarities such as age and youth, ugliness and beauty, and, presumably, low birth and high, and poverty and plenty as well. But this beautiful impossibility is an equivocal solution to the knight's dilemma. The romance is sphinxlike: to fail to solve the problems would be disastrous, but the correct answer brings with it an ambiguous good fortune. This equivocal nature of the Tale is apt for burlesque and, as the Wife tells it, one senses that she is in ambush behind the beautiful impossibilities of romance. In her mouth, what is Cinderellalike in her Tale is gargoyleed.

Clearly the Tale is a courtly one. The sovereignty of women is an article of courtly love, and the transformation of the beldame into a beautiful young woman makes her eligible for the love of a knight. But the Wife is not courtly, and the courtly game is garbled because she is let loose on it. Possibly Chaucer envisaged in her a fourteenth century Emma Bovary, whose imagination courtly romance had excited. The point had, after all, been made in the
tag about Rome's being undone by romances. At any rate, it is clear from the portrait of the Prioress and from the 
Franklin’s Prologue and Tale that Chaucer knew how to adapt courtly matter to the sort of comedy of manners in 
which uncourtly people aspire to courtly fashions. However, the Wife's imitation is closer to the kind of travesty 
one finds in Bottom's play, "Pyramus and Thisbe," and, as there, the courtly joke seems rather heartless. The 
burlesque intention would be clearer if some courtly version of the Wife's Tale had been current. Possibly Gower's 
"Tale of Fiorent" furnished the high analogue that the Wife brings to confusion. At any rate, the courtly doctrine of 
women's sovereignty, which the Tale illustrates, is also the Wife's peculiar concern. In her Prologue she made 
out that her supremacy was the law of love, and that under it her shrewishness was gentled. This might well be a 
domestic parody of the woman's place according to the conventions of courtly love. Remembering this, one finds 
in the part played by women in her Tale more of the rule of wive's than of ladies' grace; and her marriage to 
Jankin returns a quizzical echo to the happy ending of her Tale. What excludes the Wife from romance is 
represented in the beldame. Both are base born. The Wife is neither young nor beautiful; the beldame is old and 
ugly. The Wife may be well off as a burgher's widow, but surely she is not as rich as a lady; the beldame is poor. 
So it is hard not to spy the Wife behind the beldame's lecture and miraculous transformation. Indeed the lecture 
reminds one of the exegetical mischief of the Wife's Prologue. On "gentillesse," for instance, the beldame's 
argument is irreproachable. The theme "nobilitas sola est atque unica virtus" is a commonplace of the Romance 
tradition. And yet it is as if a game of croquet were being played with flamingoes and hedgehogs. The fine 
sentiments were never intended as a plea for a Loathly Lady. On the three other points (poverty, old age, and 
ugliness) her lecture is, I think, to be taken as comic gate crashing. Poverty, old age, and ugliness were banished 
from the garden of love, so arguments in favor of their admission, even the serious one on poverty, disconcert the 
rules. Finally, just as the Wife’s glossing of authorities in her Prologue gave sober matter a ludicrous twist, so the 
envoy to her Tale sends romance widdershins.

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. ...
(1257-60)

III

Faced with antic comedy of the Wife's sort, one usually looks for a didactic purpose, either critical or edifying, to 
justify one's enjoyment. But I am at a loss to find any such moral strategy camouflaged in the Wife's Prologue or 
Tale.

The Tale is not a criticism of the standards of courtly love. Courtly love was a high and fantastic game, quite 
conscious of its being so. The Wife belongs to the game by making an anti-game of it. Whether one thinks of the 
game as a love game or a social game, the Wife's intrusion is confounding. But her parody is necessary to high 
manners, for they ask to be aped in order to establish their authority by laughing at the low imitation. And in the 
love game, itself a parody (of sacred love), played in scorn of marriage and in jeopardy of Reason and Nature, the 
Wife's role is like that of the Duenna of Jean de Meun. It is to blow the gaff on the game, not by being the mouth-
piece of Reason or Nature, but by being a spectre of rogue womanhood, and so a remedy of love.13

As for the Prologue to her Tale, which is farce, its end is topsy-turvy and bathos. As a satire on women it simply 
lacks moral weight. Juvenal's "Sixth Satire," by contrast, apart from its sheer invective splendor, is concerned with 
the superfluities of the age; and Pope's "Epistle II" of the characters of women conveys a paradoxically generous 
recognition of their human nature. Further, the Wife's comedy also lacks anything that would pass for a serious 
discussion of marriage in more recent literature. To my mind, this is true of the other Tales of the so called 
Marriage Group as well. The Franklin's romance about "gentillesse" is really too slender to be a mirror for middle 
class marriages. Ethically, the Parson's Tale doubtless says all there is to be said on the subject. But to discover 
in the Wife's exposure of married vice an oblique lecture on married virtue goes against the decorum of farce.
Besides, it sounds like cant. However, it does not follow that, because the Wife's pantomime fails to be didactic or some high mode of imitation, it is anti-moral. A moral ethos is necessary if its inversions are to be funny. Similarly, like the Feasts of Fools and of Asses, the burlesque sermon depends on the decorum it overturns. It would be quite as absurd to find a heretic or immoral intention in such topsy-turvy as it would be to find an edifying one.

Comedy of the farcical mode, whose end is solely the preposterous conclusion, may leave one uneasy. The ridiculous as a form of imitation rather than of satire and the grotesque in which there is no allegory are attended by a kind of licence and by a primitive and undignified conviviality, which are disturbing. No doubt the study of literature is inherently priggish, but the Wife's world is crooked, the comedy of her marriages is as cruel and banal as those of a Punch and Judy show, and Chaucer's urbanity is a way of feasting upon the base and the ugly. And yet one cannot dismiss the Wife as unacceptable to modern taste, nor relegate her to the medieval world with the explanation that her pantomime belongs to an age of stricter hierarchies and more robust conventions. For one thing, if one rejects her in this way, one actually reinstates her as good fun, for the antic is only improved in the guise of the antique. For another, all comedy, in one form or another, involves the trite, the banal, and the indecorous; and, since the Wife incorporates these so generously, she can hardly go out of season. It is also simply in the nature of urbanity to play upon the gross, the distorted, and the cruel. Necessarily one's attitude to such comedy is ambivalent; that is what tickles one.

The comedy of the **Wife's Prologue** and **Tale** is a coarse joke and can and ought to be enjoyed on those terms. But is it nothing more? Antic comedy is, in fact, a mimetic mode in its own right, though one is used to finding it subservient to satire, or slander, or parable. In order to show one way in which it is an imitation, and not simply a revel or celebration of folly, I shall attempt to relate it to the courtly and religious ethos of Chaucer's age. In the most general terms, given a Realist and aristocratic frame of mind, whether we care to characterize the Wife by flesh, or womanhood, or Third Estate, she confronts us with a mischievous reality, or rather with the abortion of reality since she brings form to confusion. Like neoplatonic matter, which is mere privation of form or void stuff--the essentially grotesque as it were--antic comedy is naughty because it is naught, mischievous because envious of form and value, derisive because displaced. So the Wife's comedy of parody, inversion, and bathos is a mode of imitating the intractable and base anti-reality of the world and experience. And our genial and creaturely involvement with that anti-reality is expressed in our ambivalent attitude, and in the special licence antic comedy, like Erasmus' Folly, demands.

More specifically, one can relate the Wife's antic humor to religious attitudes. It is obvious from her **Prologue** that clerical satire had a share in shaping her bugbear womanhood. However, the scurrility and ridicule of the tradition, like Lear's madness, took in more than women. The usury of her bed is an image of the precious bane that rewards love of the flesh, and her misrule looks like an emblem of the fate of those who love the world. "So Bromyard, comparing Worldly Fortune to a contrary wife, reminds his hearers how 'sometimes it is literally depicted thus upon the walls in the form of a woman turning a wheel with her hands, who, as most often happens, shifts the wheel contrary to the wishes of him who is propelled on it or sits upon the top.'"14 I do not, of course, wish to suggest Chaucer is contributing to De Contemptu Mundi satire, but he draws upon its pantomime possibilities. If the bouleversements of fortune, the illusions of the world, the deciduousness of the flesh are bathos and confusion, they can find expression in the farce of the "Archewyf."

At the same time, the material from clerical satire is placed in a context of courtly badinage against women and marriage. Here one can speak of the duplicity of tone that teases the earnest reader as part of courtly flying. Flying is part of courting, and, if the Wife is an image of the canker in the rose, she is also a kind of stalking horse.15

The Wife's comedy also belongs to another tradition of courtly flying, in this case directed against the Third Estate. The Wife is both rogue and laughing stock because she is base; and the gross, the disgraceful, and the anarchic, unbound in the world of fabliaux and jig, are courtly entertainment. I suppose this might be an expression of class antagonism and a way of putting the disorderly commons in their place. And yet it is also a form of courting, for it calls for a pawky, bonhommous stance and for condescension to be entertained. Even if
she is anti-pastoral, the Wife still calls for a version of pastoral attitudes. This is not simply because the comedy of her Prologue is placed in the low life of an old and famous provincial town, but also because, like Skelton's Elinour Rumming, the figure of the Wife and her sort of low comedy belong to popular, as much as to Romance or clerical, tradition. In Sir David Lindesay's Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estatis, Solace relates of his mother Bonnie Besse,

Of twelf þeir auld sho learnt to swyfe:
Thankit be the great God on lyue,
Scho maid me fatheris four or fyue:
    But douit, this is na mowis.
Quhen ane was deid, sho gat ane vther:
Was never man had sic ane mother.
Of fatheris sho maid me ane futher,
    Of lawit men and leirit.

(162-69)

It is of course possible that both Chaucer and Lindesay drew on some folk heroine who began her career at twelve. But since Solace's lines closely resemble the Wife's

For, lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age,
Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve,
Housbondes at chirche door I have had fyve,
(4-6)

It looks as if Lindesay was indebted to Chaucer. In that case, what is relevant is how naturally Chaucer's invention passes into Lindesay's popular farce of evil counsellors and misrule. Again, if one turns to the "Carols of Marriage" in Richard L. Greene, The Early English Carols, one finds that all treat of the woe that is in marriage: of shrews, of widows, of wifely domination, expense, and unruly members. In particular 408 tells of an incident "at the townys end." Here it is the husband who is exasperated by the wife's tongue. He strikes her a blow on the ear of which, unlike Chaucer's Wife, she dies. Among the "Amorous Carols," 457 is possibly evidence of Chaucer's modifying popular tradition. At any rate, it seems to involve a Jankin and an Alysoun. The burden runs,

"Kyrie, so kyrie,"
Jankyn syngyt merie,
With "aleyson."

Greene's note suggests that "aleyson" is probably a pun on the name of the girl. There is also a fleeting resemblance of situation to the Wife's admiring Jankin's pretty legs and feet at her fourth husband's funeral. In the carol the girl is at a Yule procession and there

Jankyn at the Angnus beryot the paxbrede
He twynkelid, but sayd nowt, and on myn fot he trede.

But it would be absurd to try to establish with a few such tenuous parallels that Chaucer actually drew on popular tradition for the Wife; nor is it important. What is important is that, as the comedy of shrews in farce, interlude, jig, ballad, and mystery play makes patent, the Wife's manifold comic femininity belongs to the humor of the people. In Chaucer the popular comedy becomes sophisticated. Part of that sophistication is simply that the comedy is seen as popular and so is attended by a courtly sense of distance from low life and low comedy, and by an urbane enjoyment of them.

There is a further reason for talking of the pastoral or popular nature of the Wife's Prologue and Tale, though it is a question, not of Chaucer's individual composition, but of the literary tradition in which it was formed. That is the element of country matter, which, one might speculate, is a random survival of folk custom or of pagan belief. The
provenance of the jealous husband and lusty wife, January and May, Winter's flying with Summer is the May
Game, and possibly the folk custom persisted in the comic tradition.¹⁸ The transformation of the Loathly Lady
looks like the harvest figure of crone and maiden, or the rejuvenation of the year, or some other seal of health and
wealth; and what is rejected as superstition might be allowed to be a source of Romance.¹⁹ Yet since both motifs
crop up in inexhaustibly various shapes, the one for instance in George Eliot's Casaubon and Dorothea, the other
in Mozart's Papagena, one might wonder if one can point to anything beyond their ubiquity. Still the medieval
configurations of such matter are the grotesque and the marvellous, the farcical and the romantic. The anti-
masque humor of the Tale, which makes a sophisticated play of the quaint that recalls The Golden Ass or The
Rape of the Lock, in fact combines both. The Wife's Prologue, on the other hand, is purely farcical. Either mode,
farce or romance, is attended by the ironies of rejection and condescension since either distances or repudiates
and, at the same time, licenses what it shows.

One might class the Wife's comedy under the aspect of Hermes, the Trickster, in female garb, it is true. As agent
of confusion and breaker of bounds her antic humor shares his sly buffoonery. The Trickster, like C. G. Jung's
"shadow," is a type of the outcast and the base and, at the same time, "contains within it the seed of an
enantiodromia, of a conversion into its opposite."²⁰ This paradox is latent in the Wife also, witness the comic
reversals of her Prologue and the transformation in her Tale. Moreover, it is a hermetic cast in her nature that
seems to ask for "transformation, through 'finding and thieving' ... into riches, love, poetry, and all the ways of
escape from the narrow confines of law, custom, circumstance, fate,"²¹ for the Romantic transvaluation of all
values, by which cupidity becomes the root of all morality, the eternal feminine draws us upwards, and the base is
natural.

But, if one thing is clear about Chaucer's Wife, it is that she is fool's gold. So to say that she seems to ask for a
hermetic transformation certainly does not mean one can talk about her as if her antic nature had been
transformed. Nevertheless, it is only in terms of a historical revolution in literary values sympathetic to the sort of
transformation she asks for that I can explain the surprising and elaborate judgments of the Wife and the
enthusiastic press she has received in some post-Coleridgean criticism. I should say the transvaluation must be
indeed hermetic if it can find redeeming, and more than redeeming, virtues in the Wife. Either it is an extravagant
irony, or its values are somehow crooked. If irony, the account of the Wife must run in the following paradoxical
way. She is a rogue, so she is spoken of as the incorrigibly vital. Except in her own terms, she is a scandal;
therefore, she is extenuated as that epitome of the special case, the irreducibly individual. Her being becomes
secret, and, therefore, Chaucer could only have divined it by a godlike act of creative imagination; and we, who
read, can only approach her baffled and amazed. So she is enfranchised. Obviously a squinneying appraisal like
this is sheer critical waggishness. It is as if the Wife's pantomime had invaded criticism and invested her with
burlesque dignities. True, it is hard to speak of the Wife without duplicity, and some in the spirit of pantomime
have written perceptively as well as entertainingly about her; nor would one wish to spoil the sport. But one should
recognize the sport for what it is: a sort of condescending irony on the critics' part. Otherwise it becomes
imposture on the Wife's, and her upside down world is taken seriously. To my mind, those values that so approve
her roguery as fully human or find something excellent in her crookedness are askew.

To insist, on the other hand, on the penetration and seriousness of Chaucer's moral insight misses the point about
the Wife. Obviously Chaucer meant her for a bad lot, and obviously he saw to it she set everything running
counter-clockwise; so obviously, in fact, that insight is not in question. The Wife is blatant enough, and it requires
a very special stare to evade recognizing her for what she is: a fashioning of the rogue figure of wife from a more
than well worked vein of low comedy. What Chaucer's art added was range and suppleness of confusion. It is an
urbane art. That, of course, does not mean that it is pander's art. Indeed, one can see the urbanity, amidst the
festivity of the Pilgrimage, as a suspension of judgment against eternity. It does not presume to spy into that final
unmasking of the masquerade of the world. But, since it is itself one of the masks, the urbanity expresses a sense
of human finitude and of belonging to the pantomime of creaturely indignity. That, in a Christian as well as genial
sense, is the human and worldly perspective of the Canterbury Tales.
Notes

1. *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1960), p. 91. Although I disagree with Professor Curry on the Wife's character, I have found his information most helpful for my discussion of the Wife as a type figure.


3. Curry, p. 115.


7. I put this view, for what it is worth, against that expressed by E. Talbot Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," *PMLA*, LXIX (1954), 928-36, that the narrator is a buffoon. The tone is often falsely naive, but so is Pandarus', yet no one takes him for a simpleton. Buffoon and ironic man are akin, but the ironic man "lets you see all the while that he could enlighten you if he chose, and so makes a mock of you" (Francis M. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, ed. Theodore H. Gaster [New York, 1961], p. 120). One recognizes that the ironic man's naiveté is put on; it is an affectation rather than an impersonation. Socrates's enemies resented it as an air of superiority; in the case of the narrator one takes it as part of his festivity and urbanity.


12. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1963), pp. 206-31, esp. n. 6 (pp. 230-31) on the Sphinx and the observations (pp. 225-26) on Cinderella. I shall take up the trickster theme later in this paper.


15. See Francis L. Utley, *The Crooked Rib* (Columbus, 1944), pp. 30-34.


for another inviting line. This is, of course, the terrain of Shandyisms. What is important for my argument is that those elements should be recognized as "country." It does not matter whether they originate in the fertility myth and ritual of the Cambridge school. Indeed, the theories of that school might well illustrate the perennial vitality of such country matter as a source of romance and fancy.


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