Of a Fire in the Dark: Public and Private Feminism in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*

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Critical essay

In the following essay, Leicester develops a theory of the outward feminism of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and the private, insecure aspects of Alisoun's psyche that are unconsciously included in her female-empowered Tale. Leicester also asserts that Alisoun's Tale represents Chaucer's growing appreciation of feminist ideas.

*The Wife of Bath's Tale* is not only a text concerned with the position of women, it is a text whose speaker is a woman and a feminist--at least that is the fiction the text offers--and the body of this essay will concentrate on the Wife herself as the speaker of her *Tale*. While my own prejudices, for better or for worse, will no doubt be evident from what follows, I do not claim here to define feminism or to say what women "are" or ought to do. My interest is in the Wife's feminism as it is evidenced in Chaucer's text, and I attempt to discriminate between two versions of feminism--two possible stances women may, in their own interest, adopt in the world--that the Wife seems to embody in the telling of her *Tale*. The first of these I call "public," and identify with a polemical, reactive, and necessarily "illiberal" position that women may take toward the male world and its institutions. The second, "private," form is less easy to classify in the nature of the case, but at least in Chaucer's practice here it is at once more humanist (in the sense of being interested in what individuals can make, positively, of the culture and institutions that precede and surround them) and more humane--or at any rate "nicer." This second form, because it is always dependent on individual situations, choices, and responses, always remains problematical and open to reinterpretation. It should be clear from the outset, however, that my aim is not, or not merely, to denigrate the first kind of feminism at the expense of the second. I am concerned to show that there is a difference between the two kinds, but also to show that these forms or modes are complementary as well as opposed, that there is a dialectical relationship at work in the Wife's situation and her responses.

Though the method I adopt here is largely a version of the time-honored one of "dramatic" analysis, I am aware that "the Wife of Bath" is a fiction, a construction made from the language of the *Tale*, and that that fiction is a male poet's impersonation of a female speaker. It appears that there is some relation for Chaucer between taking a position on women--about who they are, what they want, and how they should proceed--and taking a woman's position. Though I must insist that we take the fact of impersonation seriously (and therefore refrain from too hasty an ascription to "Chaucer" of features in the *Tale* that properly belong to the narrating Wife), I do not wish to lose sight, as I think Chaucer does not, of the issue of the poet's relation to his character, and if I begin with an examination of the Wife's feminism, I will end with some suggestions about Chaucer's.
In this essay I will concentrate on the Wife's tale of the Loathly Lady, leaving her Prologue as far as possible in the background and in the shade. I do so partly for reasons of space, but also because I think the Tale deserves better than it usually gets. It often seems to be taken by critics as a mere appendage to the more brilliant Prologue, an appendage that restates the Prologue's main argument about the value of feminine sovereignty or "maistrye" in marriage in a relatively mechanical form, marred (or enlivened, depending on the critic's taste) by some "characteristic" though irrelevant touches by the Wife, like the Midas exemplum; complicated perhaps by a windy and dull (or moving and serious) pillow-lecture on "gentlesse" that does not even sound much like her; but concluding straightforwardly enough with the QED of the Knight's submission and the magical transformation at the end.²

There is something to be said for an interpretation of this sort. It is not so much wrong as incomplete, a place to start in thinking about the Tale rather than the last word. In fact, a version of this interpretation is the place where the Wife of Bath starts, in the sense that it seems to be her advance plan for the Tale. We can assume, I think, that the Wife knows before she begins the story what she intends to do with it, and that she has already decided on the changes in the plot of the traditional version that will produce the polemical feminist moral she draws at the end. This moral and the feminist ideology that goes with it are what might be called the public meaning of the Tale --her word is "apert"--and this public meaning is backed, as public meanings always are, by Authority. In this case the authority in question is that of the Wife herself. One way of looking at her Prologue--and one way she herself presents it--is to see it as a process whereby the Wife's account of her own experiences in marriage leads to her thesis about marriage in general. In this reading, her experiences allow her to say "The necessity of feminine 'maistrye' is what my life proves, and so does the story I am about to tell." Such a reading constitutes the Wife's past as past, as something that is over and done with and therefore something that can be summed up, generalized from. Her life adds up to a final meaning which the Tale merely confirms. This reading is at least in accord with the Wife's explicit or public project in both the Prologue and the Tale. Not liking the exempla that are offered to her by the male world in the guise of "auctoritee," she turns to her own experience with the intention of becoming an authority herself. Like the Pardoner, she sets out to make an example of herself. Once this is accomplished, she offers the Tale as a counter-exemplum to set in opposition to those in Janekyn's book of wicked wives and the male misogynist tradition. The tale of the Loathly Lady is itself traditional, which is to say that it is public property, and to tell it is to go public, to move beyond a local and idiosyncratic personal history and take one's place in a larger world.

The public world, the past, and authority are thus the determinants of the "apert" project of the Tale, which is conceived by the Wife as a statement of counter-ideology, that is, a statement in opposition to the structures of male domination she has encountered and continues to encounter in her life. The form her counterattack takes is that of appropriating the instruments or institutions of masculine power. Both the public world of storytelling and the story itself are by definition male-dominated, and the Wife, as we know, has strong feelings about that. Combative and competitive as ever, she takes an aggressively feminist public position in structuring the world of the Tale and pointing its moral. She may be said to womanhandle the traditional story, which, as a chivalric romance, is in its original form an instrument of the dominant ideology and its values, such as loyalty and courtesy, that demonstrate male superiority. E. T. Donaldson's succinct summary of the analogues brings out this ideological bias--and the Wife's subversion of it--clearly:

In the analogues the story is handled in a different style, its real point being to demonstrate the courtesy of the hero, who weds the hag uncomplainingly and treats her as if she were the fairest lady in the land; in two versions the knight is Sir Gawain, the most courteous of Arthur's followers, who promises to marry her not in order to save his own life but his king's. The lady's transformation is thus a reward of virtue. In Chaucer the polite knight becomes a convicted rapist who keeps his vow only under duress and in the sulkiest possible manner.³

As I have intimated, I take the differences between Chaucer's version of the tale and its analogues as evidence of the speaker's agency, evidence that the Wife knows the traditional version and deliberately alters it in a way that
makes the feminist message more pointed and polemical. The fact that only in her version is the knight a rapist means that only in her version is the quest for what women most desire linked specifically and logically to the knight’s character and to the question of male-female relations. Clearly this particular knight, as a surrogate for men in general, needs to learn more about women, and the plot becomes a device for forcing him to do so, putting him in a position more familiar to women, who have to cater to male desires, and giving power to women from the beginning of the Tale. This is one example of appropriation, of using what are normally masculine forms for feminine ends. Another example is the “gentilesse” speech, a form of argument that aims at breaking down the external hierarchies of power constituted by birth and possessions—“temporal thyng that man may hurte and mayme”—in favor of equality before God and individual responsibility for establishing worth and achieving salvation. This argument is traditionally egalitarian, but scarcely feminist. It is sometimes used to urge the right of lowborn men to love and woo noble ladies, but I do not recall it being used before the Wife to argue that ugly old women are good enough not only to go to the same heaven as knights but to marry them. Since in no other version of the tale does anything like this speech occur, its function as additional feminist propaganda in the altered tale is clear. Finally, of course, the sovereignty argument that is the point of the story, affirmed in open court halfway through and supplying the twist at the conclusion, is obviously a reversal of ordinary male-female power relations and an aggressively polemical appropriation of all those dreary (and nervous?) arguments about women are good enough not only to go to the same heaven as knights but to marry them. Since in no other version of the tale does anything like this speech occur, its function as additional feminist propaganda in the altered tale is clear. Finally, of course, the sovereignty argument that is the point of the story, affirmed in open court halfway through and supplying the twist at the conclusion, is obviously a reversal of ordinary male-female power relations and an aggressively polemical appropriation of all those dreary (and nervous?) arguments about women are good enough not only to go to the same heaven as knights but to marry them. Since in no other version of the tale does anything like this speech occur, its function as additional feminist propaganda in the altered tale is clear.

This reading I call the Straw Man version of the tale, both because as a critical interpretation it makes the tale easy to summarize and dismiss, and because I think the phrase describes the Wife’s open public project in telling it. She makes a straw man of the traditional tale and its hero, sets up the knight and the old story as images of masculine pretension in order to knock them over, and obviously she carries out this project. Along the way she takes advantage of the power of her temporary position as narrator or straw-stuffer to enjoy her work. She enjoys, no doubt about it, the satisfaction in fiction and fantasy of dominating the ill-bred knight and all his kind, and the pleasure of imagining herself, in the form of her surrogate the hag, magically young and beautiful again, though these pleasures are clearly marginal and incidental to the public message.

So far, I think, there will be little disagreement about the general character of the Tale and its “appropriateness” to the Wife. The problem, obviously, is what to do with the more anomalous features of it that do not seem to fit the public project, and that raise questions about the character of the speaker. It is very common to see such features, especially perhaps the “gentilesse” speech, as revealing things about the Wife of which she herself is unaware, and to use these slips or contradictions as a way of pinning down her character. Such a proceeding puts the reader in possession of “facts” about the Wife that allow the assumption of a position superior to her from which she can be fixed and placed, understood and dismissed. We know “who she is” and can proceed to construct from that an account of her past and the probabilities of her future, though it is perhaps a matter for uneasiness that such characterizations and careers range in the literature from sociopathic murderess to tragic heroine to comic embodiment of the Life Force.

It seems to me, however, that if the Wife does have a public feminist agenda in the Tale, she may also have conscious attitudes about the role she plays in order to carry it out, and that these attitudes are to be elicited precisely from her voicing of the message, from the ways she comments on, revises, ignores, or otherwise deploys the elements of the Tale. The matter of what else the Wife gets out of telling the story, whether fantasies of rejuvenation or of power, begins to touch on a set of themes and ideas that are at work in both the Prologue and the Tale in dialectical tension with their “apert” public and authoritative ones. I have so far reserved these issues, but it is obvious what they are, since the categories are those of the Wife herself: the private (“privy”) world and Experience. The Straw Man version of the tale, with its doctrinaire feminism and oppositional stance, has something a little too static and structural about it, something other critics besides myself have found a little uncomfortable. My real point, however, is that the Wife does too. Her public project does not really do justice to the complex and dynamic character of the now of speaking in both Prologue and Tale, the sense of ongoing life and discovery that cannot be totally reduced to an order or an argument, cannot be shut up in forms or completely subjected to authority, even the Wife’s own. In the Tale this set of concerns is registered first by the Wife’s relative...
lack of interest in polemical closure: having set up the straw man, she is oddly dilatory in knocking him over, in getting on with the demonstration. She spends the first hundred and twenty lines, a good quarter of the Tale, not telling it. Instead she pursues what we might call her private interests.

The most famous example of this tendency is the Midas exemplum, in which the tale of the Loathly Lady vanishes utterly for thirty lines--more if you count the introductory matter--and we find ourselves in the middle of a completely different story about Midas's ass's ears and his wife's inability to keep them secret. The occasion of this digression is the knight's quest to discover what women most desire, and as the Wife lists the variety of opinions he encounters we can feel her losing interest in the quest--whose outcome is a foregone conclusion--and getting interested in the question. The old story and its old-time Arthurian world are simply dropped in favor of matters of more immediate interest. Just as it is more fun for the Wife at the beginning of the Tale to take a shot at the Friar's virility in retaliation for his disparagement of her Prologue than to linger over the romantic world of "fayerie," here it is more interesting to her to consider the variety of possible answers to the question than to give the "right" one. Her voice moves into the present tense, she includes herself among the women whose opinions are being solicited, she indicates that she finds some of them better than others: "Somme seyde that oure hertes been moost esed / Whan that we been yflatered and yplesed. / He gooth ful ny the sothe, I wol nat lye."8

The Midas exemplum itself, though superficially unflattering to women and apparently totally unconnected to the story, is actually a reflection of the Wife's impatience with masculine foolishness, and it has a certain relevance to the development of the romance. It is, after all, not just any secret that the wife of Midas finds herself unable to contain, but one that a great many women, including the Wife of Bath, have had occasion to notice: "Myn housbonde hath longe asses erys two!" Pope, who borrowed the Wife's revision of Ovid for the Epistle to Arbuthnot, saw quite clearly what the message was:

Out with it Dunciad! let the secret pass,
That secret to each fool, that he's an ass;
The truth once told (and wherefore should we lie?)
The queen of Midas slept, and so may I.

This is a secret women have to conceal all the time, especially about their nearest and dearest. The exemplum focuses strongly on the genuine anguish of Midas's queen. She is a woman bound by ties of trust and affection--ties she herself acknowledges--to a man who loves her, and with whom her own reputation is involved. But he is still a fool:

He loved hire moost, and trusted hire also;
He preyede hire that to no creature
She sholde tellen of his disfigure.
She swoor him, "Nay," for al this world to wynne,
She nolde do that vileynye or synne,
To make hir housbonde han so foul a name.
She nolde nat telle it for hir owene shame.
But nathelesse, hir thoughte that she dyde,
That she so longe sholde a conseil hyde.
(III 958-66)

This is not the sort of secret the Wife herself is used to concealing, as she points out in her Prologue (III 534-42), and we have only to replace Midas's wife with the Wife of Bath, and Midas himself with, say, husband number four, or with Janekyn at a moment when he is grinning at her over the top of his book of wicked wives (III 672), to see how graphically the exemplum records a realistic frustration and tension that the Wife knows well as a daily component of real marriages, even, or especially, good ones. But it is equally interesting to replace the queen of Midas with the queen of Arthur, who has to proceed so tactfully to rescue the young rapist from vengeful masculine justice so she can set him on the right track. The Wife puts great stress on the careful courtesy, a style
appropriate to a chivalric setting, with which the queen works to get her way. The line "The queene thanketh the
kyng with al hir myght" (III 899), in particular, seems deliberately to overstress her courtesy in order to call
attention to it. It seems to me that in the Midas exemplum the Wife evokes the real strains involved in feminine
submission to and manipulation of masculine egos that the earlier scene leaves out, while reminding us that she
herself is considerably less patient than either queen. She reacts to something she feels is missing in her original
and supplies it, but she does so only outside the framework of the story.

Something similar happens with the issue of the quest itself. If the Wife gets involved in the question of what
women most desire, and drops the story in order to pursue it, this suggests that the question is hardly settled for
her except for polemical purposes. The "right" answer is always hedged. The hag remarks that there is no
woman, however proud, "That dar seye nay of that I shal thee teche" (III 1019, emphasis added), and when the
knight announces the answer the ladies who judge him are similarly cagey. They do not say he is right, they just
don't say he is wrong: "In al the court ne was ther wyf, ne mayde, / Ne wydwe, that contraried that he sayde, / But
seyden he was worthy han his lyf" (III 1043-45, emphasis added). In fact, the queen gets exactly what she asks
for, "An answere suffisant in this mateere" (III 910), that is, an answer that suffices, one that will do rather than
one that is definitive. The reason for this is, as the Wife knows and demonstrates by her digressive interest in
the "wrong" answer, that the question is an impossible one and the quest for a single answer is a fool's errand
anywhere outside a story. In reality--in experience--different women want different things, and the same woman,
like the Wife herself, may want different things at different times.

What we are seeing here is a developing tension between the public and authoritative functions of the Tale as
dolemical feminist propaganda and a more complex set of experiential interests that do not seem to fit the public
plot very comfortably. The doctrinaire feminist argument of the Tale is acceptable as a position for women in
general, and the Wife certainly does not disagree with it, but it is not very responsive to the detail and nuance of
her own situation, and therefore it does not interest her very much. When she introduces herself into the Tale in
the figure of the hag, she does so in a way that, while never losing sight of the public message and her status as
an authority, focuses increasingly on a set of "privy" and experiential concerns of her own that come to constitute a
subtext running underneath and in some tension with the "apert" surface.

The description that accompanies the entrance of the hag into the Tale is a compact portrayal of the Wife's sense
of her own career as she has developed it in the Prologue, and makes most sense when it is read in reference to
that development:

And in his wey it happed hym to ryde,
In al this care, under a forest syde,
Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go
Of ladies foure and twenty, and yet mo;
Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,
In hope that som wysdom sholde he lerne.
But certeinely, er he cam fully there,
Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where.
No creature saugh he that bar lyf,
Save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf--
A fouler wight ther may no man devyse.
(III 989-99)

As I have already suggested, in order to constitute herself as an authority the Wife has to give her experience a
definitive shape and meaning from which she can generalize, and this means that her past is behind her, over
and done with. It disappears as experience in a way that makes her feel that her life is finished. Her famous lines
on her youth, "But, Lord Christ! whan that it remembreth me," leading to the reflection "That I have had my world
as in my tyme" (III 469-73), are followed immediately by a meditation that conveys her sharp awareness of the
sad difference between now and then:
But age, alas! that al wole envenyme,  
Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith.  
Lat go, farewell! the devel go therwith!  
The flour is goon, ther is namoore to telle;  
The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle.  
(III 474-78)

This pattern, this set of feelings, is recapitulated in the description of the hag. The four and twenty dancing ladies are connected with the dance of feminine freedom from the "limitacioun" of friars and other masculine trammels, a freedom associated with the elf-queen and her "joly compaignye" at the dawn of time and the beginning of the Tale. But they are also associated with the Wife's youth--"How koude I daunce to an harpe smale" (III 457)--and with her richly variegated experience of life and love, the "olde daunce." Her memory swirls and dances with all the women she has been until they vanish away, she knows not where, and leave her all alone as she has become, as she is now. The analogues often spend time having fun with the comically grotesque ugliness of the hag: "Then there as shold haue stood her mouth, / then there was sett her eye,"¹¹ and so forth. The Wife's more reserved refusal to describe her is also more inward, suggesting not what can be seen but what is felt. I think her words here will bear the inflection: "A fouler wight ther may no man devyse," that is, "If you, the men who look at me as I speak, think that I am decayed, what must I feel, who know what I was--no mere description will do justice to that." It is no wonder that the hag tells the knight, "Sire knyght, heer forth ne lith no wey" (III 1001).¹²

Now in public terms this is a range of experience with which courtly romance does not deal, and the only answer the form has to the problems of the passing of the "flour," especially in a woman, is magic, that is, fantasy, like the transformation at the end of this story. Those problems are relegated to what happens after stories like this one are over, when, as we know, they lived happily ever after. The Wife does not believe in magic of this sort, any more than she believes that real men deal with the prospect of marrying old and ugly women with the courtesy and equanimity of a Sir Gawain, and part of what she is doing in her description of the wedding and the wedding night is to confront a genre that has no room for her and other women in her situation with the fact of herself. One can feel the glee with which she appropriates the rhetoric of courtesy, "smylynge everemo" (III 1086), and baiting the knight (and the self-gratulatory masculine conventions he stands for so shakily) with a blank-eyed rehearsal of official ideals:

"Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures hous?  
Is every knyght of his so dangerous?  
I am youre owene love and eek youre wyf;  
I am she which that saved hath youre lyf,  
And, certes, yet ne dide I yow nevere unright;  
Why fare ye thus with me this firste nyght?  
Ye faren lyk a man had lost his wit.  
What is my gilt? For Goddes love, tel me it,  
And it shal been amended, if I may."  
(III 1089-97)

The knight's heartfelt response shows how much the Wife thinks such chivalric courtesy is worth in the face of real-life decay: "'Amended?' quod this knyght, 'allas! nay, nay! ... / Thou art so loothly, and so oold also'" (III 1098-1100).

The hag replies that she could amend all this, and in the story she can, since she has magical powers. If that were all the Wife was interested in, the Tale might now proceed to its conclusion in the assertion of mastery and the pleasures of fantasy. But because she does not believe in magic, the Wife refuses the temptation to fantasy that the Tale offers, puts it off to a brief moment at the very end, and proceeds to digress, that is, to take over the Tale and turn it forcibly toward what I see as a more tough-minded examination of her own situation and its
potentialities. The speech on "gentilesse," "poverte," and "elde" is notable for the diminished image of human possibility it presents throughout, for its constant stress on the inadequacy of earthly hopes and earthly power:

Ful selde up riseth by his branches smale
Prowesse of man, for God, of his goodnesse,
Wole that of hym we clayme oure gentillesse;
For of oure eldres may we no thyng clayme
But temporel thyng, that man may hurt and mayme.
(III 1128-32)

In the face of all this human weakness, the speech consistently urges a stoic position. Boethius and Seneca are prominent in it. The burden especially of the account of poverty is "Stop striving for impossible goals and the fulfillment of petty human desires." "He that coveiteth is a povre wight, / For he wolde han that is nat in his myght" (III 1187-8). Instead, embrace your weakness, understand it, and make of it an occasion of virtue. True "gentilesse" lies not in human glory but in gentle deeds, and the hateful good of poverty leads a man to know his God. The Wife of Bath uses the mask of the hag, as an image of her own diminished powers and vanished "flour," to try out this rhetoric, to see what the bran is worth. As a version of herself, the hag functions as a kind of worst-case scenario for the Wife: "Suppose I never get married again, suppose I am old and ugly and my life is essentially over; suppose that the energy of my youth is gone forever and that there is nothing left from now on but the downward slope to death. What resources of self-respect and dignity remain to me?" If all she has left is her wisdom, she can at least use it to guide her into old age, where it may be necessary for her to adopt a more conventional style of life and attend to the needs of her soul.

If it feels like there is something a little disingenuous about this position, and if a less respectful paraphrase of it might be "Well, I can always get religion," this is probably because we know the Wife too well by now to be entirely convinced by the more pious version. My real point, again, is that the same is true of her, and that the inadequacies for her of this passive, static, and renunciatory position are part of what she discovers in the very act of trying it out. The best evidence of this is the emergence of a counter-message in the "gentilesse" digression itself, a "privy" subtext that affirms something very different from its "apert" argument, and in fact subverts it. This first shows up in what I call the torchbearer simile, the rhetorical treatment of a formal argument that is in itself clear and easy to make. Boethius does it in a brief sentence: If "gentilesse" were a gift of nature it would always be the same everywhere, "sicut ignis ubique terrarum numquam tamen calere desistit," as fire is always and everywhere hot. This is the Wife of Bath's version:

If gentillesse were planted natureely
Unto a certeyn lynage doun the lyne,
Pryvee and apert, thanne wolde they nevere fyne
To doon of gentillesse the faire office;
They myghte do no vileynyre or vice.
Taak fyr, and ber it in the derkeste hous
Bitwix this and the mount of Kaukasous,
And lat men shette the dores and go thenne;
Yet wolde the fyr as faire lye and brenne
As twenty thousand men myghte it biholde;
His office natureel ay wol it holde,
Up peril of my lyf, til that it dye.
Heere may ye se wel how that genterye
Is nat annexed to possessioun,
Sith folk ne doon hir operacioun
Alwey, as dooth the fyr, lo, in his kynde.
(III 1134-49)
The point to notice here is how the image of the fire is detached from the argument, slightly displaced from logical sequence, and foregrounded in a way that makes the argument itself hard to follow because the image is so detailed and so compelling, so much more developed than what surrounds it (or, I might add, than it is in any of its sources). This foregrounding makes the voice seem fascinated by the image of the fire flaming out in isolation and darkness, and this effect of fascination is independent of the place of the image in the argument. Its bright energy is affirmed over against all the conventional rhetoric of human weakness that surrounds it, and this is one key to its source and meaning.

Another key is the associations that fire has taken on in the Wife's Prologue and elsewhere in the Tale, which find their way into this image:

For peril is bothe fyr and tow t'assemble:
Ye knowe what this ensample may resemble.
(Ill, 89-90)

If fire is initially and fundamentally associated with sexuality for the Wife, it also acquires an aggressive dimension in the intimations of sexual threat that her free use of her sex sometimes takes on:

He is to greet a nygard that wolde werne
A man to lighte a candle at his lanterne;
He shal have never the lasse light, pardee.
Have thou ynogh, thee thar nat pleyne thee.
Thou liknest [women's love] also to wilde fyr;
The moore it brenneth, the moore it hath desir
To consume every thyng that brent wol be.

As the second example here suggests, fire comes to be associated with what is uncontrollable, especially by masculine limits and standards. It is something that breaks through and consumes the oppressions of male decorum, as in the case of Midas's wife:

Hir thoughte it swal so soore aboute hir herte
That nedely som word hire moste asterte;
And sith she dorste telle it to no man,
Doun to a mareys faste by she ran--
Til she cam there, hir herte was a-fyre.
(Ill 967-71)

Fire has, then, for the Wife, far more than conventional connotations of inexhaustible energy, linked not only with sexuality but also with her self-assertion and sense of independence, with everything at the core of her that makes her aware of her own vitality. If that vitality is presented in more negative and destructive terms earlier in the poem, presented more as men see it when they try to smother it, here in its more inward manifestations it takes on a more positive sense as an image of the Wife's freedom even in the midst of constraint. Her private attraction to the image of the torch is an index of her resistance to the darkness, to the message of human weakness and decay that surrounds the fire and the woman. What is important about this upsurge of inner fire is that it happens spontaneously, and it happens now, in the act of speaking. The Wife rediscovers as she speaks that her resistance, her energy, her fire, is not gone at all, and has lasted beyond the decay of her youth and beauty. It is this awareness that lies behind the reservations she expresses when she comes to draw the moral consequences of the "gentlesse" argument:

Yet may the hye God, and so hope I,
Grante me grace to lyven vertuously.
Thanne am I gentil, whan that I bigynne
To lyven vertuously, and weyve synne.
The conditional mood in which this statement is cast calls attention to the fact that the speaker withholds herself from complete identification with the position expressed: "I hope God grants me the grace to live virtuously when I decide to begin" carries the implication that that time is not yet.¹⁴

There is thus little point to the sort of critical objection that notes how the Wife of Bath cannot qualify as "gentil" under her own definition in the speech, and takes this circumstance as an "irony" of which she is unaware, since this is precisely the point the Wife is affirming triumphantly in her handling of the speech.¹⁵ The content or doctrine here is neither "out of character" nor in it for the Wife. Rather, it is something that culture (masculine culture) makes available, and which the Wife is using for her own purposes--here perhaps as a kind of potential remedie amoris or "remedye of love." What the Wife reaps in this section of the Tale are the real fruits of her experience. External youth and beauty are and were, she discovers, just as deceptive as the traditional wisdom has always maintained them to be, because they worked to conceal from her the real inner sources of her vitality, the capacity for the enjoyment of life and the indomitable spirit that are still with her now that their conventional physical signs have passed. The external deprivation, the "poverte," is the condition that makes possible the discovery of inner richness. It is indeed a bringer-out of busyness and an amender of sapience, precisely because it "maketh [a man] his God and eek hymself to knowe."

By the time she gets to "elde," the hag is speaking out clearly for the Wife, in words we have heard before:

Now, sire, of elde ye repreve me;
And certes, sire, thogh noon auctoritee
Were in no book, ye gentils of honour
Seyn that men sholde an oold wight doon favour, ...
And auctours shal I fynden, as I gesse.
(Ill 1207-12, emphasis added)

Elde is essentially dismissed, left for the future, because it is not yet time in the Wife's life--and that time may never come--for her to lapse into decorum, piety, and silence. No more than Janekyn with his book can those Church fathers and stoic philosophers--men, every Jack of them--tame her. As she moves into the ending of the Tale, the Wife asserts her vitality and her resistance to the deadening pressure of conventional proprieties in her treatment of the conclusion of the story. She does this, for instance, in the riddle, whose form in the analogues is a choice between having the hag fair by day and foul by night or vice-versa. The Wife of Bath's version--foul and obedient or fair and take your chances--reaffirms the sense of her own energy, independence, and impenitence that has been growing in her during the latter part of the Tale. "I'd do it all again, and I will if I get the chance."

Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,
And take youre aventure of the repair
That shal be to youre hous by cause of me,
Or in som oother place, may wel be.
(Ill 1223-26)

The extent to which the concerns and the mood generated in the subtext of the "gentilesse" speech dominate the more conventional aspects of the story is further pointed up by the Wife's handling of the final lines of the Tale, in which she drops the happy ending in the middle of a line and goes out swinging:

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'overbye hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves

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That wol nat be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
God sende hem soone verray pestilence!
(III 1257-64)

This concluding speech is a return to the public occasion of the Tale in the sense that it presents the Wife in the polemical and oppositional role that is appropriate to the general feminist message and her original battle plan for the Tale, But that public role, and even that message, are qualified by the private experience of the telling. The shrew of the end of the Tale is a straw woman, a role the Wife plays for tactical reasons that have to do precisely with the inadequacies of the public situation in which she speaks, with respect to the complexities of experience. It is clear from both the Prologue and the Tale that for the Wife "maistrye" is not really a simple mechanical reversal of male domination. In both cases, once the woman has been granted sovereignty she refrains from exercising it, and this suggests that it is primarily a tool for achieving feminine independence within marriage so that more satisfactory relations between the sexes can have a chance to develop.16

"Maistrye" is a way of making room for the possibility of love in the patriarchal world by giving women space to be responsible partners in a relationship. As only an "answere suffisaunt," it is where everything that is important about marriage begins, not where it ends. If anyone knows that "they lived happily ever after" is no way to talk about the experience of marriage, it is the Wife. Marriage is where things get harder, though potentially richer and more satisfying, not easier. But this aspect of marriage, the potential it offers for private fulfillment, is not really appropriate to the situation in which the Wife is performing. In the first place, the experience of real relationships is not something that can be conveyed in a story like this, and the Wife makes no effort to present the knight as someone who really learns something or changes his mind; he is simply coerced throughout the Tale. In the second place, and more especially, the experience of real relationships is not something that can be or that needs to be conveyed to a casually assembled group of strangers encountered on a pilgrimage, most of them males, with whom there is little likelihood of, and little reason for, intimacy. The man-eating monster of the end of the Tale and elsewhere may be a caricature of the real Wife of Bath, but as a role it is also a way of making sure that no one will try to take advantage of her--it asserts her independence and keeps it firmly in view, and it is in this sense that "maistrye" and the polemical feminism associated with it is dialectically necessary in the world as a woman finds it, as a precondition for the mutuality she might prefer. The conditions of the male-dominated public world may be said to force this position on the Wife, and its necessity shows just how unsatisfactory the public situation of women is in human terms. To make the male world into a straw man--to be forced to do so in order to fight its ubiquitous and dehumanizing public pressures--is to accept a logic of opposition and appropriation that can only drive one to constitute oneself as a straw woman.18

"But lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I." Beyond and behind the public, necessarily caricatured feminism of the "apert" narration, there is a set of "privy" experiences that constitute, for Chaucer in the person of the Wife, a deeper and more existentially responsible feminism and a more searching critique of male domination. At this level, what the Wife responds to intuitively about the story is less what it includes than what it leaves out. One of the most notably sexist things about this particular story and the courtly romance genre of which it is a part is the assumption that women have no other consequential interests beyond courtship and marriage. Men may do battle and have adventures, but the stories of the women in romance are all love stories. As we have seen, such a story has no way of handling an ugly old woman--or even an attractive but not classically beautiful middle-aged one--except by magic, and no place at all for issues like a woman's experience of age and the prospect of death. Too narrowly feminist a reading of The Wife of Bath's Tale--or perhaps I should say, a reading of the Wife as too narrow, too exclusively polemical, a feminist--runs the danger of being itself anti-feminist because, like the masculine-conditioned romance, it confines the Wife of Bath too exclusively to issues of gender and sexual relations. These issues are very important to the Wife herself; they have dominated much of her life, and they are fully represented in her Tale. But to hold her exclusively to them, or for her to do so herself, does not allow her all the other things in her life and experience, including her personhood before age and death. In fact, in her Tale we see the speaker as a woman exercising her "purveyaunce," considering her options in line with her own
philosophy: "I holde a mouses herte nat worth a leek / That hath but oon hole for to sterte to" (III 572-73). She may find her way back into marriage and the dance of relationship that has occupied and engaged her for so long, but she may not. In this open situation, she herself remains open. By the end of her Tale she has evoked her own energies in the face of what those energies have to contend with, and enacted a variety of possible responses to her situation and her unknown future. What she finds is that her experience has provided her with extensive resources for continuing to woman-handle with the authorities--with God the father, with the masculine world, and with Old Man Death--and that she need not committee or confine herself to any particular role or position except as a tactical move in whatever game she may have occasion to play. She does not need to define herself once and for all.

This lack of closure in the Wife's life and personality is, finally, an aspect of Chaucer's feminism, since of course there is no Wife of Bath. What there is is an impersonation, a man's attempt to think himself inside a woman's head and to speak from her point of view and with her voice. While I think from the evidence that Chaucer knew a lot about women, I am not in a position to speak with authority on this topic since, like the poet, I lack certain essential experiences. But I do see that in imagining what it might be like to be a woman, Chaucer felt it important to imagine one who remained in a final sense provisional and a mystery to herself--one who had not settled her own fate, and whose inability to predict for certain what would happen to her and who she might become kept her alive to herself and to him. This is still, no doubt, a masculine projection, since I do not think he knew these things about himself either, but in allowing the Wife of Bath to be as genuinely uncertain about these matters as he was himself, I think Chaucer was trying to sustain her mystery, her possibility and her independence--I think he was trying to respect her privacy.

Notes

1. For a more extended and theoretical account of some of these issues, see my "The Art of Impersonation: A General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales," PMLA, 95 (1980), 213-24.


4. This point has not been altogether lost on critics, though they seldom seem to give the Wife much credit for seeing it too. John P. McCall, Chaucer Among the Gods (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979), uses the phrase "straw men" of the Wife's exempla, p. 139. Ellen Schauber and Ellen Spolsky, "The Consolation of Alison: The Speech Acts of the Wife of Bath," Centrum, 5 (1977), 20-34, have shown how the basis of all four of what they identify as the Wife's most common speech acts is the setting up of a proposition which is subsequently denied.

5. See, e.g., Lumiansky, Sondry Folk, pp. 126-29.

6. For the murderess and sociopath, see Beryl Rowland, "On the Timely Death of the Wife of Bath's Fourth Husband," Archiv für das Studium der Neuen Sprachen und Literaturen, 209 (1972), 273-82; Doris Palomo, "The Fate of the Wife of Bath's 'Bad Husbands,'" ChauR, 9 (1975), 303-319; and Donald B. Sands. "The Non-Comic, Non-Tragic Wife: Chaucer's Dame Alys as Sociopath," ChauR, 12 (1978), 171-82. For intimations of tragedy, see, among others, F. M. Salter, "The Tragic Figure of the Wife of Bath," Transactions of the Royal

7. So far as I can tell, the distinction between the public and private functions of the Tale was first made in Charles A. Owen's pioneering and still fundamental study, "The Crucial Passages in Five of the Canterbury Tales, A Study in Irony and Symbol," JEGP, 52 (1953), 294-311, rpt. in Edward Wagenknecht, ed., Chaucer, Modern Essays in Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 260. Owen is also one of the first to identify the element of fantasy or wish-fulfillment in the Tale, a perception that has become so common in discussions of it as to make specific citation pointless.


9. Since I do not have space or occasion here for an analysis of the Wife's Prologue, I ought perhaps to say that I consider her fifth marriage a good one. The Wife's remark "And yet in bacon hadde I seve delit" (III 418) refers not only to her dislike of old meat in a sexual sense but also to the fact that she is not much interested in conventional marital harmony of the sort for which the Dunmow Flitch was awarded (see III 217-23). From this point of view, Janekyn and the Wife are a remarkably compatible couple: they both like to talk, they both like to fight, and they both like to make love.


16. Once again a number of commentators have recognized the provisional and preliminary--what I would call the public--character of the idea of "maistrye," though once again the Wife herself has not been given much credit for understanding it. Owen, "Crucial Passages," was the first to note the importance of the hag's refusal to exercise domination. Of the several critics who have developed this perception and seen that what the Wife wants--what women want--is some form of mutuality in relationships, particularly fine accounts are given by Donald R. Howard, The Idea of the Canterbury Tales (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 254-55, and T. L. Burton, "The Wife of Bath's Fourth and Fifth Husbands and Her Ideal Sixth: The Growth of a Marital Philosophy," ChauR, 13 (1978), 34-50, esp. 46-47.


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