In the following essay, Hansen argues against viewing The Wife of Bath's Tale and Prologue as early feminist writing, but proposes that the texts permit scholars to study the role of women in the fourteenth century and their attempts to claim a type of self-definition within the limitations of language and society.

From the early fifteenth century to the late twentieth, at least one fact about the elusive Wife of Bath has never been disputed: where they agree on nothing else, her numerous commentators, like Hoccleve, take the Wife "for auctrice," as "a woman whose opinion is accepted as authoritative." Controversy over the precise meaning and value of the Wife's opinion effectively ensures her authoritative status, and now perhaps more than ever before she is a figure to be reckoned with by anyone interested in the history, both factual and literary, of women. Faced with the problem of women's absence and silence in the past, recent feminist historians and literary critics turn with enthusiasm to the Wife as a rare instance of woman as agent, speaker, and (most recently) reader. More than any other well-known literary character, she is frequently compared with historically real personages, from Christine de Pisan to Simone de Beauvoir. Where treated as a fictive character, she is often read in a sociological and historical context, as a sign of Chaucer's empathy with real women, and as a realistic, historically plausible foil to the idealized views of femininity found in prescriptive texts of the period, possibly even "a truly practicing feminist," and indubitably a survivor and a spokeswoman. A few protests have been lodged against the seemingly incurable tendency to overly lifelike readings of the Wife of Bath, as well as the related assessments of her power, autonomy, and energy as a woman. But if the Wife of Bath is merely a fictional female character, and not an attractive or "free" or even representative woman, then what more does the twentieth-century feminist critic have to say about her?

I want to answer that clearly rhetorical question in two phases here, as I reaffirm the importance of the Wife of Bath to feminist criticism and theory at the same time that I argue that we must not so readily take her as "auctrice," as a female speaker or subject or as a straightforward mimetic representation of any arguably "real" female experience. In the first phase of this argument, I offer a relatively conventional close reading of the poem,
treating the Wife and other characters as if they were psychologically verisimilar human beings from whose reported speech and actions the audience of this text identifies and interprets a living self in a social context. I read this self, however, in a way that emphasizes its powerlessness, self-destructiveness, and silencing, and I argue that the Wife's discourse in Prologue and Tale belies her apparent garrulity, autonomy, and dominance. Even at this level of interpretation she paradoxically represents, I conclude, not the full and remarkable presence we have normally invested her with, but a dramatic and important instance of woman's silence and suppression in history and in language. In the second phase of my argument, I consider the implications of my insistence on the Wife's negation for our understanding of the literary inscription of prominent cultural myths about male authors and about women, in fiction and in fact.

Part I

"But she was somdel deef, and that was scathe."  

It is hardly necessary to rehearse the reasons why the Wife of Bath might well be read as a woman who defies the stereotype of the passive, submissive, and fundamentally silent female, particularly as this ideal is celebrated in the antifeminist heroines who bracket her own performance, the Man of Law's long-suffering Constance and the Clerk's patient Griselda. Against the background they figure, the Wife stands out even more prominently as the chatterbox, the gossip, the obsessive prattler, a type prominent in medieval literature and given mythical stature in another of the Canterbury Tales, the Merchant's, when Proserpina debates the woman question with her husband Pluto and is made to proclaim: "I am a womman, nedes moot I speke, / Or elles swelle til myn herte breke" (IV. 2305-06). The Wife may also be viewed as the female storyteller, overtly challenging and at the same time emulating both male authority and the male author, and presenting us with one of our earliest literary images of the female as verbal artist. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's description of the wicked Queen in Snow White might serve equally well to characterize the Wife: "a plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty, wily, and self-absorbed as all artists traditionally are." In her Prologue, moreover, which is twice as long as her Tale, the Wife lays claim to the power of language to control the behavior of others. Through verbal attack, as she alleges and demonstrates, she gained and kept the upper hand in her first three marriages. She views words, like sex and money, as strategic weapons in the war between the sexes, and she presents her verbal tactics as repayment in kind against the men in her life: "I quitte hem word for word ... I ne owe hem nat a word that it nys quit" (III. 422-25). One might well argue that she successfully frees herself and repays the whole antifeminist tradition by turning the tables on male authority, parodying its rhetorical strategies and thus revealing its prejudice and absurdity by impersonating the male voice.  

But this view of the Wife as triumphant and powerful, often accompanied by the assumption that Chaucer intends to criticize or at least poke fun at antifeminist arguments, is only partially accurate, and needs to be qualified, as other readers have suggested, by a recognition of the Wife's limitations, which the Prologue and Tale make equally clear. Despite her ability and eagerness to speak, the Wife of Bath is not essentially more free or self-determined or able to "communicate" than the good, silent woman, like Griselda or Constance, and her own words help us to understand that this is so.

Throughout her Prologue, the Wife's language reflects precisely the power differential overtly dramatized in other of the Tales, especially the Clerk's. The first 170 lines of the Prologue consist mostly of direct and indirect quotation from both biblical and patristic texts, and so they are punctuated with tags that taken together underscore the gender of official speakers and critics: "quod he," "th'apostel seith," "he speketh," "th'apostel seith," "Mark telle kan," etc. Although she begins to speak of her own "experience"--she has "had" five husbands--only nine lines into her speech she cites her first authority, and the terms in which she does are so particularly salient. "But me was toold, certeyn, nat longe agoon is ..." (III. 9), she says, that biblical injunction forbids multiple marriage. The sudden appearance of the adversative at the beginning of line 9 immediately signals the oppugnant stance she takes throughout the rest of the Prologue. The use of the passive transformation, "me was told," puts the Wife first in the surface structure of the sentence; she is indeed self-absorbed and attempts to use her words,
like her church offering, to affirm her preeminence. But in the deep structure of the sentence, "Someone told me," the Wife is the object of the verb, or in case grammar terms the "patient." Magically transformed, like the Old Hag in her Tale, the Wife takes a place in the surface structure of the sentence that disguises her fundamental status, seen only in the base sentence, as a person acted upon rather than acting, a human being whose behavior is subject to the criticism and correction of some higher authority. Furthermore, although later in the Prologue the Wife repeatedly identifies the "auctoritees" against whom she argues, the subject in the deep structure of this sentence remains unexpressed. As the audience would presumably know, the antifeminist argument that follows in the succeeding "that" clause comes from St. Jerome; but it is not clear whether the Wife has it directly from his writings or, as is more likely, from some male reader of Jerome like her fifth husband. All we learn from the Prologue is that someone, at some unspecified time in the relatively recent past ("nat longe agoon is"), told the Wife that her behavior was immoral, and she does not say who--perhaps she has forgotten or does not wish to identify a living critic, or perhaps she does not know exactly who, just as she cannot say quite when: no one told her, and everyone told her. The authority against which she rebels is not that of any single person; there is no tyrannical lord in her life as there is in Griselda's. The Wife is defending herself against a much vaguer and more mysterious force of social disapproval, powerfully unnamed and unnameable, and her later attempts to meet specific arguments are self-defeating efforts to pin down and triumph over that generalized, mystifying, and hence invincible hostility that she meets from all sides.

This crucial vagueness and uncertainty, this Orwellian mystification of the power behind language, is further reflected in the opening lines as the Wife claims that she does not fully understand the meaning, although she understands the hostility and disapproval, of the arguments against her. She goes on to cite the highest authority of "Jhesus, God and man": tellingly, the story of Jesus she relates is one that reveals not his lovingkindness, but his apparently gratuitous reproof of the Samaritan woman. The Wife's professed inability to understand the meaning of his rebuke serves both to challenge its authority and to reveal her own nebulous insecurity:

What that he mente thereby, I kan nat seyn;
But that I axe, why that the fithhe man
Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?
How manye myghte she have in mariage?
(III. 20-23)

Note that she asks her bold questions of no one in particular, and of everyone. We see again that generalized feeling that someone out there knows more than she does. Immediately afterwards, instead of rejecting authority that she does not understand or that conflicts with her own experience (whatever that may be), she proceeds to choose another "gentil" text to support her argument: "God bad us for to wexe and multiplye" (III. 28). This is all, of course, strategic on her part and very funny. It also underlines a serious truth about the nature of power in her world: God's characteristic speech act is a command; created in His image, all men, even Christ, speak sharp words to women, for reasons that are purposefully obscure and obscured; and the Wife, along with all women, is "told" by received opinion that her behavior is wrong. She struggles to understand why, she seems to want both to subvert and to be right and "good,"10 and so she asks questions and tries to find or make authorities that speak on her side, and those of us who are not horrified by her blasphemy will admire her resilience and persistence and courage. We also see, however, that as long as she accepts (or, what amounts to the same thing, attempts to invert) the basic power differential and the obfuscation of power reflected and supported by the language she uses, her struggles are in vain. This protofeminist, this "archewyf" and "auctrice" is not even as critical of her true masters, as awake to her less obvious but equally fundamental subjection, as patient Griselda.

The rest of the Prologue provides evidence that supports this reading. In telling us about her first three old husbands, the Wife quotes herself, demonstrating how she verbally attacked them and always won; but ironically, since her method was to accuse her husbands of standard antifeminist attitudes, for yet another 150 lines we are subjected (as she was) to a further deafening stream of misogynist platitudes, here from folk rather than learned tradition. The repeated "thou seist" tag again necessitated by the quotation within quotation emphasizes the fact...
that she is fighting against, and at some level knows she is fighting against, the power of male voices to control
her own behavior. Again ironically, of course, all is false; her first three husbands were not bright enough to talk
this much, but she is trying to pin down that invisible and omnipresent power that she knows will control her if she
gives it a chance. And with her fifth husband the Wife herself is aptly repaid for all her earlier deceits. She
undergoes a perverse version of wish-fulfillment—an experience she uses and revises when she tells her Tale—
when the story she invented to control her first three husbands comes true. Jankyn really does attack her, that is,
with antifeminist doctrine, this time of a learned and hence even more authoritative variety. In the final section of
her Prologue, as she describes the contents of his antifeminist miscellany by quoting from it at great length, the
Wife again gives the stronger voice in the text, as in reality, to the opposition.

One might argue that all this quotation merely shows us what a woman is up against and therefore highlights the
Wife’s victory over it, but it is also essential to remember that throughout her performance the Wife, both
consciously and unconsciously, endorses the antifeminist stereotypes she cites, proving again that, as Fredric
Jameson claims, “transgressions, presupposing the laws or norms or taboos against which they function, thereby
end up precisely reconfirming those laws.” She boasts, for instance, of her feminine powers to lie and deceive
and manipulate men, and this unwitting self-deprecation, I suggest, is not very different from the idealized
statements of victimization that “good” women, like Constance or Griselda, are willing and even eager to utter.
Both the dumb woman and the wily, witty, creative woman live in a world where protest against received opinion is
normally silenced and dialogue precluded; and so the patient and the impatient woman—the norm and the
transgression—are two sides of the same coin, able to see themselves and speak for themselves only in terms
provided by the dominant language and mythology of their culture. The Wife’s loss of hearing is caused, or so we
are told at the end of her Prologue, by her one silent action, her violent attempt to destroy Jankyn’s book, the
written word that has made her what she is. This cryptic, unsettling, and foreshortened drama of role reversal,
mock murder, and humiliation discloses the mutual degradation that marital relations entail in her world; and the
Wife’s mutilation serves as a climactic symbol of the simultaneously dumbing and deafening effect of the
dominant discourse and the social structure it enforces.

The Wife’s Tale has been seen as an antidote to the use of male authority and endless quotation in the Prologue,
but on closer examination things are not really very different. For a while, the tables do seem genuinely turned:
the Tale begins with a casual rape, but the rapist is sentenced to death and the queen (thanks to the “grace” of the
king) is granted power over his life. She gives him a twelve-month and a day to find out what women want
most, and now the story sounds like the pronouns become reversed. The Knight can save his neck if he finds
out what the opposite sex really desires; the price he is asked to pay for the correct answer is one more often
expected from women: he is required to satisfy the lawful sexual appetites of someone old and physically repulsive
to his suddenly refined sensibilities. The heroine of the Tale, an Elf Queen disguised as an Old Hag, is a powerful
artist, able to transform herself and gain mastery over her husband through her wise and “gentil” (and thoroughly
orthodox) speech. But the ending of the Tale safely returns us to a more familiar plot, and a more suitable
alignment of the sexes. The rapist not only saves his life but is rewarded by the promise of an unfailingly beautiful,
faithful, and obedient wife, as the Hag who gave him the answer, who had all the power, gives it up, and
transforms herself into a Constance or Griselda. The denouement reveals that the Wife herself, at some level, has
little confidence in the female’s powers of speech. Although the Hag/Elf Queen, like the Queen in Snow White,
has the creative drive of an artist, it is thwarted and used self-destructively to transform herself into what every
man wants most, a woman “bothe fair and good” (Ill. 1241) who “obeyed hym in every thyng / That myghte doon
hym plesance or likying” (III. 1255-56). The Hag chooses that silent beauty which only in a fairy tale is anything
but fleeting and dangerous, and with the “happy ending” the heroine relinquishes her power and dissolves into
literal silence and alleged submission, the archetypal feminine transformation.

The Wife, of course, does not; she has the last word, and I think we can begin to see why that word must be a
curse on men:

And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
That wol nat be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
God sende hem soone verry pestilence!
(III. 1261-64)

The speaker who utters a curse assumes, as the Wife always does, the power of language, in a literal rather than a metaphorical sense. She wishes to injure the addressee, or the person or persons cursed, and reduces the object of her imprecation to linguistic powerlessness: there is nothing you should or can say in response to a curse, no way to ward it off, and in fact you do not even have to hear or know about it for it to be effective. Its efficaciousness depends not, however, on the speaker's power, but on the power of some external, presumably divine or supernatural force whose aid is invoked for the purposes of simply destroying the opposition and closing off communication. The curse, at once vague and all encompassing, is only a response in kind, then, to the hostility the Wife meets on all sides, and an application of the repressive training a patriarchal culture has given her in the power of language. It is by the same token not a response, but an involuntary, extra-verbal cry of anger that implicitly denies the autonomy of both speaker and addressee and undercuts the Wife's putative attempt to speak of and for herself.12

Part II

Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?
By God! if wommen hadde written stories
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.
(III. 692-96)

In any discussion of the Wife of Bath as a speaking subject, the Wife's intriguing question--who painted the lion? from whose point of view is this story being told?--requires close attention. Here the character is made to allude self-reflexively to the problem that I have been arguing is most central to feminist interpretations of this text, to the actual silence and absence of the Wife and "woman." If women had ever authored stories, she points out, they would be very different ones (although actually, as she imagines it here, they would also be much the same--equally determined, that is, by the anxieties of gender difference and the resultant competition between men and women). We thus have a female character indirectly but unequivocally reminding us at the very center of her fictional narrative not only that an author's gender always colors the written (and spoken) word, but also that this text affords no exception to the rule that women have not written the story. A male author created the Wife, and "her" teasing, playful, characteristically hostile and arguably unconscious reference to this fact mirrors and confirms what we have seen in both the Prologue and the Tale: a feminine monstrosity who is the product of the patriarchal authority she ineffectively and only superficially rebels against. It is an apparently paradoxical but finally explicable and revealing fact that the one woman in the Canterbury Tales who is so often viewed, for good or bad, as a survivor is the one who reminds the attentive listener that "she," like every female character in the male-authored text, never existed at all; in an important sense the Wife is not only just as powerless and silent, but also just as unreal, just as unrepresentable, as a saintly Constance or a patient Griselda.

The passage on the painting of lions reminds us, in other words, that the Wife's actual failure to speak of and for herself or "woman" is a symptom of the impossibility of her doing so, by virtue of her gendered exclusion from the role of storyteller. This reminder ensures at every level the Wife's and woman's negation, as even the most wordy and verisimilar of female characters is (de)constructed by the text as that which is not actually speaking and not actually being represented, that which stands outside the bounds of language and literary convention altogether. And it is precisely this fact, I contend, that makes the Wife of Bath an important figure for feminist analysis.

Understood as a construction of the text, the fact that, as Marshall Leicester has put it, "there is no Wife of Bath"13 need not lead us to conclude that this character is another instance of woman's power or powerlessness, in...
history or in literature, or of the author's feminism or antifeminism. Instead, it can help us to read this complicated, convoluted text for the insights it affords us into the ways and means by which the literary tradition has maneuvered within, accounted for, and profited from the socio-gender system as we know it. In particular, I would stress the way in which my reading challenges two cultural myths: the myth of "Chaucer"'s special sympathy or empathy with women, and the myth of gender difference itself, to which Chaucer's works give such prominence.

To address the first point, the vexed question of Chaucer's apparent fellow-feeling for women, I want to consider two arguments that seem to support the notion that Chaucer sympathizes not merely with his female characters, but with the particular insights of late twentieth-century feminist criticism into the social construction of "woman." First, the position of the feminine exemplified by the Wife—a position finally outside the bounds, as we have seen, of the representable—may be viewed, like all marginal positions, as a potentially subversive one. Above all, the enforced silence of women and the impossibility of representing a "real" female speaker threatens both the author's control and the audience's ability to understand the character and the poem: the evanescence of the Wife and "woman"'s position marks the limits, in other words, of both representation and interpretation. To argue that we can never know "who she is" because she is "not anyone" seems to state the obvious and beg the question, but it also calls into question the effectuality of precisely the kind of reading--or its opposite--that I have offered in the first part of this essay. Viewing the Wife as a psychologically verisimilar, speaking self, such readings allow us to assume a momentary, illusory power over the character and the world, to situate ourselves, as Leicester again puts it, in "a position superior to her from which she can be fixed and placed, understood and dismissed." And it may be argued that the text itself, by inscribing the silence of the Wife as / and "woman" in the many ways I have suggested, refuses to let us rest securely and comfortably in that dominant position, and hence that Chaucer at least tacitly advocates an anti-authoritarian stance that the modern feminist reader must value.

A case might be made for Chaucer's allegedly feminist leanings, moreover, based on a related issue: the similarities between the position of women and the apparent position of the poet himself. As all readers of this poem know, the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole seems structured to highlight and even exaggerate a situation common to all (literary) texts: stories both reveal and create tellers; no tale can be interpreted except as the product of a human speaker, and yet that same human speaker behind each tale is also firmly identified as the fictional creation of yet another speaker. There is a possibility of infinite regression, a dramatization of the *mise en abyme*, and hence a fundamental and threatening absence of identifiable authority again in this situation that leads to a well-known interpretive problem: how do we know where "Chaucer the poet" (not to speak of "Chaucer the man") is at any moment? Or who, at any point, is speaking? The voice of the poet creates, at best, a slippery, ironic persona who offers us--like the Wife of Bath--someone who is not really there, only "the traces of a presence that asserts its simultaneous absence." Like the Wife: the figure of the poet and the woman, then, are alike in many ways. At the level of historical realism, they may seem particularly homologous in their (in)subordinate position. Recent scholars have suggested that the medieval poet may well be understood in terms of the ambivalent, insecure, and inferior position that he held in the fourteenth-century court; as marginalized and subordinated figures, poets and women alike may be simultaneously complicitous with and suspicious of both the ideology that tries but fails to define them and of the audience to and for whom they speak. Both the Wife and "Chaucer" tell lies that subvert the authority of the word to speak any truth at all, stories that threaten any correspondence between utterance and meaning and that undermine orthodox assumptions about the nature of intention and identity. In their silence and absence, both poet and woman stand together, by this reading, in the position of the limit of that which can be represented. And again as verisimilar selves they seem to share an ideologically sanctioned fantasy of silent submission and wordless transformation that their excessive fluency covers and belies: the "happy ending" of the Wife's *Tale*, although qualified by both her Prologue and her curse, seems oddly analogous to the poet's famous *Retraction,* problematized by its uncomfortable relation to all of the work that precedes it.

But here the provocative analogy between poet and "woman," "Chaucer" and Wife, may break down in a way I find particularly interesting, and the case for Chaucer's sympathy or empathy with women becomes at best moot.
The Wife's curse once more is telling: it functions as a commentary on her own fantasy for which we find no counterpart following the Retraction. Chaucer's strategy in the Canterbury Tales seems to involve the displacement of the commitment that speaking entails onto other voices in an attempt to remain as free of the constraints of language, as powerfully muted and unnamed and unspoken as possible. The poet does exercise (to this day, one might argue) the power of silence, and the Retraction in a sense simply reinforces that silence without deconstructing the work it ostensively "retracts." The figure of the male poet constructed by the text as a whole, then, can only caution us against thinking we can know anything at all about the author—including his sexual politics.

The Wife's curse, on the other hand, reveals that the female character created by Chaucer retains a paradoxical and fatal faith in language itself that is in practice self-destructive: invoking the power of language to destroy rather than create, she at once discloses and betrays her own commitment to speaking, validates the patriarchal authority she seeks to resist, and renounces the power of silence that the poet seems more able to exploit. From this perspective, the Wife's performance demonstrates that Chaucer's "woman" suffers from a delusion that the implied author does not reproduce. Her curse in particular serves to distinguish her quite dramatically from the figure of the male poet, and more importantly to defuse the very threat of women's silence and unrepresentability that the poet both acknowledges and strategically counters. The lesson of the poem seems to be that a naive faith in language does not serve women well because language is, according to the Canterbury Tales, an instrument for reproducing the conventions that constrain and deny both the experience of women and the representation of that experience. But this is just the lesson that the Wife, unlike the poet, is not allowed to learn or profit from: as learned in "scole-matere" (III. 1272) as any clerk, she cannot escape the convention of the happy ending that legitimates the knight's originally illicit and violent desire by subordinating and silencing the Hag/Elf Queen, any more than she can escape the need to transgress and thus reinforce the laws of language and the myths of culture that at once condemn her to speak and silence her.

Like the more local myth of this male author's special sympathy with women, the larger (and apparently contradictory) myth of woman's difference, I suggest, is promoted by the Canterbury Tales and Chaucer's other works in order to counter another threat to the male poet and his male audience: the threat that men too may be constrained and even constituted by the socio-gender system and by their sexuality, the aspect of experience most overtly affected by notions of gender.18 Through the creation of female caricatures like the Wife of Bath or her foils, Constance and Griselda, the text confirms women's difference from men and defines "woman" as a question, an issue, a conundrum. Women in Chaucer's poems, in other words, by virtue of the complexity and exaggeration of their culturally feminine traits, stand out as problems for the male characters, and for the audience interpreting the text. The chief difference I have focused on here, because it is so prominent in the text, is the constraint imposed by women's gendered position on speech itself: the fact that she is woman precedes and invalidates the possibility that the Wife or any other female character might be, like a man, a speaker. But closer inspection of the male characters in the poem reveals that they do not in fact have "free" access to speech, that they too are troubled by the issue of gender; and in fact the Tales as a whole dramatize the impossibility of constructing any self, female or male, prior to or apart from considerations of gender. I cannot begin to suggest in any detail how this claim is supported and amplified in specific cases, how it opens up, as I believe it does, interpretive space at the very center of every tale and its teller. But I ask you to think of the ways in which, for figures like the clerk, the Knight, the Monk, the Nun's Priest, and the Pardoner, for example, the broad concept of gender serves as a locus of formative and irresolvable conflict: between the individual and the group, between wife and husband, self and other, private and public, freedom and imprisonment, tyranny and servitude, experience and authority. The pilgrims (and the characters in their tales) all reveal, I submit, what is more usually presented in western culture as a specifically feminine pathology. The Wife of Bath and "woman"'s foregrounded sense of "self," riddled with contradiction. The varieties of maistrie that these fragmentary and elusive selves seek cover (more and less successfully) their unilateral and ideologically sanctioned desire to submit to someone or something that will define and recognize them and console them for their mortality.
And what I am calling, for the sake of this argument, the pilgrim's femininity is manifest, above all, in their problematic relation to language. Real and fictive women, this poem finally may suggest, are not excluded from some power of language to which men have access. As a donnée of the literary form of the Tales, pilgrims of either sex are both "speaker" and "spoken," all human beings in the world of this text are, as a pre-condition of their existence, the "kind of fiction" usually associated in western culture with women "in that they are defined by others as components of the language and thought of others." If the garrulous woman and the silent woman are, as I have argued, two sides of the same coin, it is the common medium of exchange in the pilgrim economy. Like the Wife, all of the pilgrims exhibit at some level an aggressive refusal to be silenced at the same time that they act out their communal fantasy of mute submission. From the outset, this essential contradiction in the human relation to language underlies the whole enterprise of the poem in ways that have not been adequately examined. Note, for example, how the Host's initial proposal of the storytelling game appeals to the pilgrims on two apparently incompatible counts: he offers relief for the life-threatening dis-ease of silence--"confort ne myrthe is noon / To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon" (I. 773-74; remember Constance, "doumb ... as a tree," II. 1055); and at the same time his assumption of authority simultaneously delivers them from the burden of self-expression or self-determination and robs them of their voices. "Hooold up youre hondes, withouten moore speche" (I. 783), he commands, and they silently obey.

The Wife of Bath thus tells us a great deal about the power and tenacity of the myth of feminine difference, where this myth is successfully aligned with radical instability, indeterminacy, and internal contradiction, and above all with the impossibility of becoming a speaking subject who is not also spoken. Through the text's construction of this notorious female character, these essentially human problems and anxieties are effectively displaced onto "woman," and the feminine gender is what we may usefully term "marked," in various senses of the word. In the language of linguistics, "markedness" refers to the fact that one of a minimal pair may be more specifically characterized or delimited in its usage than the other; in the minimal pair constituted by masculine and feminine in our culture, the latter, in the text as in the world, bears an identifying "mark," a visible sign and even a predestined character, it seems, of sexual difference. This markedness by virtue of gender is inscribed in English in the prominent fact of the generic masculine, and linguists educe from their study of this and other features of the language precisely what we have found in the Wife's characterization and its subsequent interpretations: "a tendency, on the one hand, to equate humanity with the male sex and, on the other hand, to assume that femaleness defines women, whose individuality becomes submerged in categorizing principles that treat all women as identical." "Femaleness defines women": so too females, marked by their gender in ways that males in western culture seem not to be, are kept within "marks," limits and boundaries that define and contain their "individuality," and the Wife turns out to be a reflection of "categorizing principles" rather than a speaking subject. Wearing and reproducing the "mark," the brand, the inscription, of the gender system as we know it, she, like any female, moreover, becomes the "mark" at which hostile forces aim, the object, the target of antifeminist attack.

An awareness of both the overt markedness and the covert universalization of the feminine in the Canterbury Tales may be helpful in explaining the obstacles that impede any search for what Arlyn Diamond aptly calls "Chaucer's Women and Women's Chaucer." On the one hand, as I have suggested, Chaucer's essentially anti-romantic conception of the engendered self and his understanding of the tyranny of linguistic and literary conventions may readily appear, especially when we are focusing on his portraits of women, like sympathy or even identification with the female characters and the feminine bind. So too the form of the Canterbury Tales (as "pluralized discourse") may seem to undermine a masculine teleology and even suggest the open-ended, plural, anti-authoritarian, "irrational" qualities of what in the late twentieth century has been called écriture féminine. And the poet's own self-dramatized and self-defensive refusal to take an authoritative stance (or any stance at all) may seem to subvert "the orthodoxies of literary and sexual authority," as Lee Patterson has recently argued, so that traditional criticism can continue to read Chaucer's invisibility, as Virginia Woolf read Shakespeare's, as a sign of the great artist's "incandescence," his aloofness from polemic and prejudice: "his grudges and spites and antipathies are hidden from us ... Therefore his poetry flows from him free and unimpeded."
But what is "hidden" is precisely what still exists, and may be found; and a feminist perspective enables us to perceive that sympathy or identification with the position of women, in the case of the *Canterbury Tales*, need in no way actually depose or disrupt the unimpeded flow of a powerful misogynistic code. The complex and contradictory myths about women in western culture, enacted so prominently and successfully by the female characters in the poem, simultaneously manage and account for the suppression of the principle worked out by the position of the feminine and thus the "individuality" and humanity of any female. We cannot expect to find a woman speaking in the poem; how could she? Why would we? "There is no Wife of Bath," and a feminist criticism that seeks no more and no less than the "authoritative" voices of women will find itself excluded from a poem by, about, and for men. As Patterson again reminds us, "the manner and mode of the Wife of Bath's appearance is the crucial move in a self-reflexive examination that occupies the poet in Fragments II and III [and I would add IV, which includes the *Clerk's Tale*], a scrutiny that is directed towards precisely the maleness of his imagination--towards, that is, his career as a poet of women."24 Women (the fact and the fiction) are central, indeed indispensable to the careers of male poets and their "efforts at poetic self-definition": this is not news. But when we focus on the centrality of the thematic of the feminine and interpret its textual manifestations as evidence of the female character's authoritative status or of the male poet's feminism or wise humanism, dispassion, or incandescence, we miss or dismiss too quickly what a feminist analysis of the *Canterbury Tales* discloses about the structures of antifeminism, about the displacement and usurpation of female silence, and about the hidden "mark of Adam," the fact that males are also constrained and constituted by gender.

Notes


12. See Margaret Homans, "'Her Very Own Howl': The Ambiguities of Representation in Recent Women's Fiction," *Signs*, 9 (1983), 186-205, for an analogous discussion in a very different historical period of the question of women's relation to language and the specific issue of what happens (in literary texts, at least) when women fail or destroy themselves in their attempts to appropriate the dominant discourse and are left to utter a 'referentless' cry of rage that takes them outside discourse.


14. Compare Shoshana Felman's discussion of Balzac's "The Girl with the Golden Eyes," in "Rereading Femininity," *Yale French Studies*, 62 (1981), 19-44: "It is thus not only the conventional authority of sovereign masculinity that Paquita's femininity threatens but the authority of any representative code as such, the smooth functioning of the very institution of representation" (32).

15. This is Marshall Leicester's reading of Chaucer's sexual politics in "Of a fire in the dark"; the quotation in the preceding sentence is found on pp. 161-62.


20. Thus Myra Jehlen describes the situation that women writers must deal with as a "precondition" to their writing, in "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism." *Signs*, 6 (1981), 575-601.


24. Patterson, p. 687.

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