

In parentheses

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Contents

CINDY L. VITTO: Controlling the Feminine Voice in <i>Cleanness</i> and <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i>	3
LOIS RONEY: “Abuse of Innocents” as a Theme in <i>The Canterbury Tales</i> : Dorigen as Instance	17
D. THOMAS HANKS JR.: Prose, but Not Prosaic: Narration in the Prose of Malory and of the Paston Family	34
JEAN E. JOST: Chaucer’s <i>Parlement of Foules</i> as a Valentine Fable: The Subversive Poetics of Feminine Desire	53
ROSS G. ARTHUR: Forget the Grail: Quests for Insignificant Objects with No Earthly Value	83
DANIEL F. PIGG: Representing the Gendered Discourse of Power: The Virgin Mary in <i>Christ I</i>	103
JULIE NELSON COUCH: Childe Hood: The Infantilization of Medieval Legend	127
MARCUS A. J. SMITH and JULIAN N. WASSERMAN: Semiotic Perception and the Problem of Chaucerian “Prejudice”	145
LIAM O. PURDON: Alys’s Formulation of Intent—or Her Killing Us Softly with Her Siren Song	187
Notes on Contributors	205

Controlling the Feminine Voice in
Cleanness
and
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Cindy L. Vitto

In Parentheses: Papers in Medieval Studies 1999



One of the earliest Christian warnings against female speech comes from St. Paul, who writes to the Corinthians: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for women to speak in the church” (I Corinthians 14:34–35).

It is not difficult to confirm that Paul’s disapproval of women’s speech remained the dominant view of authorities throughout the medieval period. Robert Mannyng, in *Handlyng Synne*, describes women who whisper in church during the sermon, while the devil sits on their shoulders, writing on a long roll of paper as fast as he can (Owst 387). The preacher John Mirk traces woman’s tendency to chatter to Eve’s garrulity in the garden of Eden. Eve’s willingness to talk showed the devil her weakness and opened the way to the loss of Paradise. By contrast, the Virgin Mary was sparing of her words. Mirk notes that the Bible records her speech on only four occasions: once to Gabriel, once to Elizabeth, once to her son in the temple, and once at the wedding in Cana. Mirk contends that these are not just Mary’s only *recorded* words, but the only words spoken by her—an ideal which proves linguistically her superiority to ordinary women (Lucas 123–24).

Controlling the Feminine Voice

Even outside the church, women were expected to remain quiet; for example, the Knight of La Tour Landry, writing a book of advice for his daughters, notes that “the wife ought to suffer and let the husband have the words, and be master, for that is her worship” (34). And the author of the thirteenth-century *Speculum Laicorum* posits an interesting analogy between women and dogs: “There are two kinds of dogs, for, some are well-bred, others low-bred. The well-bred, indeed, are silent and free from guile; the low-bred are ill-tempered and fond of barking. So is it with women...” (Owst 386–87).

These are just a few of many references to the dangers of allowing women free rein in speech—a stereotypical view which has persisted even to our own day. Considering this context, then, we should not be surprised to find that the *Gawain*-poet makes use of this motif, whether consciously or unconsciously, in his works. Specifically, I would like to examine first *Cleanness* and then *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to show how these poems illustrate the danger perceived to be inherent in the feminine voice.

For all the criticism devoted to *Cleanness*, its structure and purpose remain uncertain. If we do not make the assumption that the poem is designed to define *clannesse*, but instead look for clues in the exempla and homiletic links, it is not difficult to argue that the work deals with Judgment. Beginning with the parable of the Wedding Feast, the poem moves through various exempla drawn from the Old Testament: the Flood,

Controlling the Feminine Voice

God's visit to Abraham and Sarah, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Babylonian Captivity, ending with Belshazzar's death and the fall of his kingdom. Interspersed with the exempla, which are narrative in form, are homiletic links, often referring to the New Testament and the idea of redemption from Judgment.

If we read the poem eschatologically, we can observe a basic principle of organization: each exemplum provides an illustration of increasingly greater social disorder as Judgment draws near. An important element in that disorder is the depiction of the female, and especially her use (or non-use) of language. The poet implicitly assigns value to the female voice as a barometer of the state of humanity: as the female voice becomes increasingly prominent—usually by escaping male control—social disorder increases and humanity moves further from God.

In the first exemplum, the story of the Flood, Noah's household is shown in perfect order, indicated at the most basic level by the fact that he has a wife and sons, who likewise have wives. The members of Noah's family differ from the other antediluvians, who “controeuved agayn kynde contraré werkez” (line 266), even uniting with fallen angels to produce grotesquely giant offspring.

But an intact family structure is not the only signal that all is well within Noah's household. In addition, judicious use of language indicates the near-perfect state of this segment of humanity. Only Noah and God speak

Controlling the Feminine Voice

in this exemplum, and conspicuously absent is the traditional Noah of the cycle plays who complains of old age or an aching back as he grumbles about the burden of building an ark. Instead, Noah speaks humbly and obediently to God, limiting his words to a mere two lines.

In the same way, Noah's wife, his sons, and their wives follow his orders without question. As with Noah, the poet has chosen to ignore the traditional view of Noah's wife, a source of humor in the cycle plays because she is reluctant to enter the ark. For example, in the York play she wants to go back for her belongings, and she insists that her friends and relations must join them in the ark; in the Chester play she does not want to be taken away from drinking with her gossips; in the Towneley play she wants to finish her spinning (Woolf 135–40). Her silence in *Cleanness* emphasizes the order that reigns within Noah's household and helps explain why God has chosen to save this family.

In the next exemplum, we observe two righteous households; however, the words and actions of the females signify a loosening of the order that prevailed in Noah's time. When God visits Abraham in the form of three guests, Sarah eavesdrops on their conversation. While Noah's wife merely received her husband's orders and obeyed, Sarah (like Eve) is dangerously curious. Not wanting to be excluded from the circle of male language or power, she hides behind the door but cannot restrain her laughter when she hears the guests' pronouncement that she will conceive. (Typologically,

Controlling the Feminine Voice

of course, her reaction also contrasts with Mary's meek acceptance of Gabriel's annunciation.)

Sarah compounds her error by misusing language when confronted by Abraham and the divine guests; she denies her laughter, telling a deliberate falsehood. Most likely in deference to the hospitality they received from Abraham—and perhaps because Sarah lied merely to hide her own shame—the guests gloss over her fault. Sarah is not punished for her eavesdropping, her laughter, or her lie: but the contrast with Noah's wife is clear.

In addition, Sarah's offense invites contrast with that of Lot's wife in the continuation of this second exemplum. Lot, visited by two angels, finds himself in a position similar to Abraham's. All around him, society has given in to unnatural sexual desires—in this case, homosexuality—while Lot maintains a home with his wife and daughters, who have fiancés of their own. But the decline in the nature of humanity is demonstrated by a further decline in order in Lot's household. Sarah mocked her guests but then, ashamed, denied it; Lot's wife brazenly disobeys orders. Instructed to add neither leaven nor salt to their guests' food, Lot's wife mutters insults, going so far as to call the guests "unsauere hyne" (line 822).

Her penchant for disobedience recurs later that night, when the angels wake Lot and urge him to flee with his family. Appropriately enough, Lot's wife is turned to salt—the figure of her disobedience—when she ignores orders and looks back. Lot's daughters, however, are

Controlling the Feminine Voice

saved. Significantly, they utter no words throughout the exemplum but merely follow their father's orders, even though their fiancés have taken Lot's warning as a joke and stayed behind.

In the final exemplum, Belshazzar's feast, the poet illustrates yet a further decline in the human condition. The household we are shown—Belshazzar's court—is the inverse of the well-ordered household depicted in the opening of the poem, the parable of the Wedding Feast. We learn that the king has “a wyf,” “a worpelych quene” (line 1351), but also “mony a leman... þat ladis wer called” (line 1352). When Belshazzar holds his feast, he expressly intends that his guests will “loke on his lemanes and ladis hem calle” (line 1370). Meanwhile, the queen herself is absent from the feast, for the poet tells us (lines 1586–90) that she knows nothing of the supernatural events in the hall until, from her chamber, she hears Belshazzar raging.

Thus the very circumstances of Belshazzar's feast depict the final deterioration of household order shown in the poem and constitute a mockery of the initial parable of the wedding feast, celebrating the lawful union of man and wife. But the poet goes further in his illustration of the sad state of human affairs. In the previous exempla, female virtue was indicated by silence and obedience; in the final exemplum, once again we find a virtuous female, but humanity has declined so far that her voice is more rational, more controlled, than her husband's. Her measured words calm Belshazzar and convince him to send for Daniel, an act of obedience to

Controlling the Feminine Voice

female wisdom. In this exemplum, then, the ultimate disordered household is shown through the transfer of rational speech from male to female.

Belshazzar's irrationality is further shown by the fact that he heeds his wife's advice to send for Daniel, but when Daniel interprets the signs written on the wall, Belshazzar does nothing to avert impending doom. Noah heard God's voice and obeyed; Abraham recognized God in his three guests and treated them courteously; Lot offered hospitality and protection to the angels that visited him; Belshazzar, however, ignores both God's visible warning and Daniel's spoken one. The fact that he responds reasonably only to one voice—his wife's—shows how far humanity has declined by the final exemplum. The proper order of language has been turned upside down, even as Belshazzar turned marital decorum upside down by holding a feast to honor his concubines.

Turning now to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we find that woman's voice is as dangerous in a secular as in a religious poem. Although the work portrays Arthur's court in its youth, the seeds of its destruction are already present, and focusing on language helps to make the court's latent weaknesses more apparent. Throughout the work, Gawain's reputation (and, by extension, the reputation of Arthur's court) is associated with skill in speech and with the ability to match words and actions. Indeed, our first sign that the court has been taken aback by the Green Knight's challenge occurs when no one speaks to take up his game, causing the

Controlling the Feminine Voice

Green Knight to ask mockingly, “What, is þis Arþures hous?” (line 309). The Knight goes on to intimate that the actions of Arthur’s knights do not match their proud speech: “Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes, / Your gryndellayk and your greme and your grete wordes?” (lines 310–11).

When Gawain offers to accept the adventure, he does so in a mincing speech of twenty-one lines, overblown with courtesy and false modesty, including his far-fetched claim, “I am þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest” (line 354). It is just this exaggerated concern with language and courtesy that later exacerbates his difficulties with Lady Bercilak, who knows how to play upon his concern for reputation and how to flatter him as the best possible instructor in “luf-talkyng.” Even the servants at Bercilak’s castle declare, when they learn that Gawain is their guest, “Wich spedē is in speche vnspurd may we lerne” (line 918) and “I hope þat may hym here / Schal lerne of luf-talkyng” (lines 926–27). This is the sort of reputation which a knight of valorous deeds would not necessarily relish; indeed, Gawain’s attachment to speech and to manners puts him at risk of being identified with women, which is exactly what happens at Hautdesert—while the men spend their days hunting, Gawain is confined to the domain of the women of the castle. We see him contained within the private spaces, with limited opportunity for action: he attends mass, feasts, dances and makes merry, and sleeps. Forbidden to join the male fellowship and confined to the feminine sphere, he is obviously uncomfortable and

Controlling the Feminine Voice

awkward; within the castle, when the host is absent, his status is even lower than that of the ladies, who play with him at will. His only defense in this situation is language.

As we know, Gawain does not fare well in his battle of words with Lady Bercilak. She shames him into granting her kisses and even tempts him into breaking his agreement with Bercilak when he agrees to conceal the girdle. We can observe here a structural similarity between *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain*, with each work centered about a series of episodes that escalate in intensity. And in each series, the increasing intensity of the feminine voice signals increasing danger. As the feminine voice gradually grows stronger in the exempla of *Cleanness*, so the lady's voice in *Gawain* becomes stronger, more importunate, on each successive morning that she wakes the knight.

Critics have analyzed the bedroom scenes in various ways—by correlating the interior to the exterior action, by analyzing the nature of the test Gawain undergoes here, by reading Lady Bercilak as a typical temptress or an atypical romance heroine. Part of our problem of interpreting what is going on is precisely Gawain's problem—the lady is a master of innuendo, of ambiguity. Of all the speakers in the poem, she is the most accomplished. Although Gawain believes that his quest involves a physical challenge, the real contest is a linguistic one, and without doubt he loses (as any mortal man would; witness Adam and Eve) to the woman, who by nature has a deceiving tongue.

Controlling the Feminine Voice

A simple line count reveals that on each morning Lady Bercilak speaks more than Gawain does. In their first encounter, she speaks 49 lines, he 28; on the second day, she speaks 39 lines, he 24; on the third morning, she speaks 33 lines, he 22. Although the reported length of their conversation diminishes each time, she always speaks at significantly greater length than does Gawain, and, except for the second morning, she initiates the conversation. In each case, she is the one who speaks of love, who puts their conversation on an ironic level where words suggest but do not make explicit each speaker's real intent. Even the kisses which punctuate their conversations show the lady's increasing power—not only do the kisses increase in number, but they change from kisses which Gawain *grants* (the first two kisses, at the end of the first morning and beginning of the second) to kisses the lady *takes* (at the end of the second morning, plus all of the kisses of the third morning—one of which she coyly *demands*: “Kysse me now, comly,” line 1794). William Davenport has discussed Lady Bercilak’s shrewd timing as well; she catches Gawain off guard just when he thinks it is safe to relax. For example, she first persuades him to kiss just as she seems on the point of leaving, and she begins the discussion of love-tokens only when she appears to have given up her attempt to make Gawain her lover (188). Then, in the same way that Eve tempted Adam with the gift of knowledge, Lady Bercilak finally tempts Gawain with the gift of survival. Eve promised that eating the forbidden fruit would make Adam like God; Lady

Controlling the Feminine Voice

Bercilak promises that wearing the girdle will make Gawain impervious to mortal blows—not immortality, but nevertheless a temptation to shed his human frailty. By contrast, it is anti-climactic when Gawain’s guide later tempts him by offering to keep Gawain’s escape secret. The guide’s offer holds no danger for Gawain; it is the woman who has artfully found the words to deceive him, allowing Gawain later to place himself in the same lamentable category as Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David.

Thus in both *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the feminine voice resonates with danger. Both works rely on an episodic sequence to reach a climax. In *Cleanness*, the exempla reveal increasing disorder in the world through an increasing prevalence of women’s speech and its perversion—from Sarah’s lie to the insults of Lot’s wife to the ultimate perversion, the rational speech of Belshazzar’s queen when Belshazzar himself can do nothing but rage. In *Gawain*, language itself is shown to be dangerous, but especially so in the mouths of women. Rather humorously, from the beginning the poem touts Gawain as a master of polite conversation. However, the events of the three mornings at Hautdesert reveal the lady’s triumph in the battle of witty speech; when she traps Gawain into accepting the girdle, his pact with her supersedes the pact he has made with her husband.

Finally, analyzing *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain* as I have done, by focusing on the dangers of language, makes us aware of the poet’s own concern for the

Controlling the Feminine Voice

proper use of language. Lady Bercilak at one point refers to God as “He that spedez vche spech” (line 1292). Although humans, especially women, are apt to corrupt language and to endanger others through their speech, language itself comes from God and, used rightly, can be a blessed gift. In *Cleanness*, the poet speaks of the dishes brought in at the end of Belshazzar’s feast as “pared out of paper” (line 1408); using the same phrase, in *Gawain* he describes Hautdesert’s crenellated towers as “pared out of papure” (line 802). I like to think of his poems in the same way, as having been “pared out of paper,” each word purposefully chosen, each structure carefully patterned. Both the form and the content of these poems illustrate a firm belief in the powers—and the concomitant dangers—of language. And if women are perceived to be the weaker sex, it should come as no surprise that their language holds even greater danger, as both *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain* suggest.

Controlling the Feminine Voice

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“Abuse of Innocents” as a Theme
in *The Canterbury Tales*:
Dorigen as Instance

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hy is Dorigen such a wimp?¹ Why doesn't she stand up for herself? When Aurelius tells her the rocks are gone, she doesn't even go look. Why doesn't she? When Arveragus sends her off to the garden to meet with Aurelius, she doesn't even object. Why doesn't she?

My answer has three parts: (A) Dorigen is educable. (B) Yet she cannot deliberateate questions on grave ethical issues. (C) The reason is that, as a woman, she has been excluded all her life from serious ethical consideration.

Point A: Dorigen is an educable woman. Chaucer is quite clear that she can think and she can learn. First, she has learned well the complex rules and postures of courtly love, as evidenced by both the circumstances of her marriage and the marriage agreement itself. In the best courtly love tradition, her husband had to do many a labor, many a great emprise, had to suffer much “wo,” “peyne,” and “distresse” and had to undergo long “penaunce” before she took pity on him, and took him for her husband and her lord (V, 732).² Further, as husband, he promised her total obedience and trust, except for the “name of soverayntee,” to which she responded with her promise to be a “humble trewe wyf” (729). This is idealized courtly behavior brought to life. Whether they later live up to what they intend is a different question. My point here is that Chaucer’s

“Abuse of Innocents”

Dorigen understands some very complicated behavioral rules and tries to shape her life by them.

Second, not only is Dorigen capable of understanding and trying to live by abstract behavioral rules, she is also capable of serious philosophical speculation, as evidenced by her lament to God about the rocks. That is to say, she is capable of recognizing an apparent evil in the circumstances of her own real life, and then of reasoning back to its First Cause, of thinking about the nature of that First Cause, and about the contradictions between its nature according to the *auctoritees* (all powerful, all purposeful, perfect, loving, and wise) as opposed to the actual presence of the evil unreasonable rocks. In no way, she says, do the rocks foster man, bird, or beast. Indeed, she says, they have slain a hundred thousand men. She knows the answer taught by the clerks, that “al is for the beste” (886); but, she says, I am not able to know their reasons. (“I ne kan the causes nat yknowe,” 887.) Thus, Chaucer’s Dorigen is capable of, first, understanding and trying to abide by complicated behavioral rules and, second, of serious philosophical speculation.

She is also educable in that, when faced with a problem, she knows how to search the *auctoritees* for parallel cases. Her complaint consists of 101 lines setting forth 22 different *exempla* about innocent pagan women most of whom killed themselves for the sake of their chastity (1355–1456). Before reviewing the authorities, Dorigen says that in her circumstances she knows of no succor (aid, help, rescue) “save oonly deeth or elles

“Abuse of Innocents”

dishonour”—one of these two, she says, “I have to choose” (1359). She reviews the first three stories at length, but, as the unanimity of their agreement that suicide is her only course becomes clear, her retellings get briefer and briefer, and finally disintegrate, as she herself disintegrates, into *exempla* of extraordinarily long-suffering wives. The result of her review of the authorities is that Dorigen weeps for several days intending to kill herself until her husband comes home.

There you have Point A in my exploration of Dorigen’s wimpishness: she is an educable woman. She is capable of understanding complicated behavioral rules and attempting to live by them, as with the rules of courtly love. She is capable of sustained serious philosophical speculation, as in her lament about the rocks. And she is capable of searching through the appropriate *auctoritees* for answers to real questions.

Yet, in spite of these abilities, she is unable to reason out ethical choices for herself. In fact, she cannot even formulate clearly the ethical problem involved. She doesn’t know how. This is Point B in my argument: Although she is highly educable, Dorigen does not know how to think about conflicting moral claims. She does not understand dialectic. When Aurelius tells her the rocks are away and makes his demand upon her, her immediate reaction is that she is trapped (1341). Fortune has wrapped her in its chain (1355–56). Now, she says, I have to choose between death and dishonor, the standard moral choice for women. However, in the Franklin’s Tale, Chaucer changes the choice. Instead of keeping it

“Abuse of Innocents”

between death and dishonor, Chaucer sets it up like a *sic et non* problem, with conflicting authorities on both sides. First, Aurelius tells her she has to sleep with him; her honor is at stake. Next, the authorities tell her just the opposite: she has to commit suicide; her honor is at stake. But then her husband, surprisingly, seems to agree with Aurelius; again she has to sleep with Aurelius because her honor is at stake. The situation calls for dialectical reasoning, not obedience, but Dorigen doesn't know how. Instead, half mad with grief, she obeys her husband and heads for the garden.

Dorigen is in a real bind. Not only is she a faithful wife who wants to remain that way (Chaucer is very clear about that, 980–87), she is also a woman whose marital chastity is part of her very identity. Submitting to Aurelius is no small matter to her. And yet, even under these extreme circumstances, she cannot find within herself the ability to call a halt to the whole unsavory train of events. Why? Because she does not know how. She knows that plenty is wrong; that's why she is so upset. But she does not know how to stop the process that is going to destroy her.

Why doesn't she know how? Here comes Point C of my argument. All her life, because she is a woman, Dorigen has been excluded from serious ethical debate. She knows nothing of dialectic. She has never learned how to mediate between conflicting ethical claims; she has never learned to choose between shades of gray. “Death or dishonor” is what she has always been told; that is what her review of the pagan authorities tells her.

“Abuse of Innocents”

Yet, “adultery or dishonor” is what both Aurelius and her husband tell her. The two solutions conflict, and neither makes sense to her. Neither solution takes her seriously as a human being in her own right; neither is interested in her innocence in this case.

For at least two thousand years, women like Dorigen had been excluded from serious ethical discussions, as either subject or object. As subject, Dorigen has been taught to leave the reasoning about the rocks, that is to say, the reasoning about the problem of evil in this world, to the clerks. “To clerkes,” says she, “lete I al disputison” (890). Her soliloquy about the rocks demonstrates that she both understands the problem and knows the clerks’ conclusion (that all is for the best); but the reasoning, the rationalizing, the whole dialectical process about the grays by which a benevolent all-powerful Creator can justly allow evil rocks in his universe has been denied to her. She says, literally, “I ne kan the causes nat yknowe” (887), that is to say, I am not able to know the reasons. Why not? Because she is a woman. No Latin. No access to the treatises. No access to serious philosophical speculation or higher education.

The process of moral reasoning, of arbitrating between conflicting ethical claims, is not a natural skill. The natural skill, or at any rate the skill one sees in the uneducated and in children, is simple binary choice—black or white, good or evil, death or dishonor. Because she is a woman, Dorigen’s ethical value as a human being has been reduced by the culture in which she lives to the state of her chastity. And, what is really pitiful in

“Abuse of Innocents”

the Franklin’s Tale, what makes Dorigen behave as such a wimp, is that she agrees with this valuation. She doesn’t think of her own innocence. Instead, first she seriously inclines towards suicide, and second she seriously inclines towards adultery.

As object, Dorigen is again excluded from serious moral discussion in the tale, as were women throughout her culture. The Franklin excludes her from his concluding question, a question he puts only to the men in the company:

Lordynges, this question, thanne, wol I aske now,
Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?

(1621–22)

The word “fre” means generous, as the Franklin no doubt intends, but it also means *free* in the modern sense, i.e., not servile, not dependent, as Chaucer may also have intended. The Franklin raises the question as to which of the three men was the most generous, as indeed, to some degree they all were. Aurelius gives up his sexual claim; the clerk gives up his financial claim; and Arveragus gives up his marital claim. However, one could equally well ask which of the three was most deserving of blame? Aurelius, for example, knew all along that Dorigen had made that promise innocently,

...hir trouthe she swoor thurgh innocence,
She nevere erst hadde herd speke of apparence.

(1601–02)

“Abuse of Innocents”

Yet he was perfectly willing to take advantage of her innocence if he possibly could. Not exactly praiseworthy behavior, one might say. Likewise, the Clerk knew all along that he was participating in a fraud in order to debauch a virtuous woman, but he was perfectly willing to do so for his thousand pounds of gold. Not exactly principled, one might say again. And similarly, Arveragus apparently³ orders his wife to keep her rash promise so as to keep her “trouthe,” in spite of her obvious reluctance, in spite of their wedding vows, and in spite of his promise never to impose his “maistrie / Agayn hir wyl” (747–48). Again, not exactly the behavior of a respectful and loving husband. In short, the Franklin solicits praise for the very gray behaviors of these three men. One could just as easily solicit their blames. At the same time, he is conspicuously silent about Dorigen. Because she is a woman, Dorigen is apparently not an appropriate object for moral reasoning. Yet she is the one who suffers the most, she is the one the authorities would sentence to death or defilement, and, of them all, she is the only real innocent.

So, that is my three-part answer to the question, “Why is Dorigen such a wimp?” She is a wimp because, although she is highly educable, she has never learned how to mediate between conflicting ethical claims. The reason she has never learned is that, as a woman, all her life she has been systematically excluded from serious moral reasoning. According to the authorities she knows, the only ethical problem she is ever likely to

“Abuse of Innocents”

face has to do with her chastity, and in the event that is threatened, well, better dead than bed.

That Chaucer was “ever a friend to women” is by now a truism. One reason is that he is willing to take women seriously, that is to say, he is willing to put them in an ethical context and make them just as problematic ethically as are his men. The Prioress and the Wife of Bath are at least as interesting as any of his male figures—the one a flawed Mary figure, but with the nature and extent of her flaws endlessly debatable; the other a virtued Eve figure, but again, with the nature and extent of her virtues unresolvable. The Second Nun, at least in my opinion, is only now beginning to receive the attention she deserves. Further, not only is Chaucer willing to take women seriously, he is willing to take seriously the authoritative role models with which women were indoctrinated: the Clerk’s Tale presents us with the testing of a model wife according not only to a supposedly idealized Clerk, but according also to most of the traditional Christian *auctoritees*. The Franklin’s Tale, somewhat in parallel, presents us with the authoritative pagan views on the testing of model wives. That Chaucer finds these cultural role models for women wanting is obvious; that he finds them worthy of serious ethical consideration by his readers is another reason he has traditionally been recognized and respected as a notably feminist writer.

The title of this paper posited an “Abuse of Innocents” theme running throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. I think this is true. In fact, I think it is a motif

“Abuse of Innocents”

that runs throughout Western literature. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Nurse Ratched badly abuses Billy Bibbit. In *Great Expectations*, Mrs. Joe brings Pip up, heaven help us, “by hand.” In *Tom Jones*, tutors Square and Thwackum do their best to make Tom’s childhood miserable. Ophelia and Desdemona do not deserve their fates, nor, at least in my opinion, does Criseyde. Throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer writes of innocence and innocents betrayed. In Part I of the Knight’s Tale, Palamon speaks of cruel gods who “giltelees tormenteth innocence” (I, 1314). In the Man of Law’s Tale, while apostrophizing the wicked sultaness, the narrator says that in her was bred everything that could “confounde / Vertu and innocence” (II, 362–63). In the Physician’s Tale, in the course of advising governesses on their duties, the narrator warns that, “Of all tresons sovereyn pestilence / Is whan a wight bitrayseth innocence” (VI, 91–92). In the Clerk’s Tale, in the Second Nun’s Tale, in the Prioress’s Tale, the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale, the Melibee, the Squire’s Tale, and Parson’s Tale, Chaucer speaks of innocence and innocents. He uses the term in four ways: (1) innocence of guilt, resentment, evil thought, or wicked deed; (2) innocence of years; (3) innocence of sexual experience; and (4) innocence of knowledge, of experience of the world.

My focus here has been on this fourth kind of innocence—innocence of knowledge of the world—specifically, in the Franklin’s Tale, innocence of experience with appearances (1602), with problematic

“Abuse of Innocents”

people and thorny ethical issues. The MED’s definitions of this kind of innocence speak of “guileless” persons, “unsuspecting” persons, “naive, simple, or foolish” persons, and “inexperienced” persons. By the MED definitions, Dorigen is an innocent. In addition to being educable, Chaucer has characterized her as guileless, unsuspecting, naive, and inexperienced.

The question naturally arises, is this kind of innocence—innocence of worldly knowledge—a good thing? The Prioress seems to think so. So does the Physician in his tale of little Virginia. For Chaucer, however, rather than a virtue, as these two seem to think, this kind of innocence seems to indicate a defect, a deficiency, the lack of a natural good that pertains to all human beings. Chaucer is not alone in not valuing this kind of innocence. Aquinas, for example, regarded knowledge as a good thing. In his system, the more knowledge one has, the closer one is to God. By this kind of reasoning, innocent ignorance is not a good; and in the *Summa* he holds that some ignorance is culpable because it can be the cause of sinful behavior, as it almost is in the Franklin’s Tale (Ia2ae, 76, 1 & 2). The same is true for Chrétien: Perceval’s innocence about appearances, about problematic people and convoluted ethical issues is not a good thing. It is a defect. In the course of losing it, he becomes a better human being.

Perhaps Chaucer is suggesting in the Franklin’s Tale that this kind of innocence is not a good thing for women, that women like Dorigen should be taught to reason things out rather than conditioned to obey. In

“Abuse of Innocents”

brief, Dorigen is a woman of intelligence, some education, and fidelity. Yet she is, apparently, psychologically unable to reject or even question the outrageous ideas of the men in her life, not Aurelius demanding her favors, not Arveragus telling her to submit, and not the pagan *auctoritees* advising her to commit suicide, all of them claiming her honor to be at stake. For a woman like Dorigen to undergo the kind of suffering she undergoes because of a casual promise made naively in the conviction of its real-life impossibility—is this not evidence of a deficiency, a lack of common sense, an inability to protect her own integrity? Further, she is grown woman, yet she doesn’t even go to see if the rocks are really gone. Is this not evidence of an incapacitating innocence, a debilitating naiveté? Indeed, in the Christian context in which Chaucer was writing, and speaking now in terms of last things, how can women rightfully be judged as moral creatures, as all the *auctoritees* agree they will be judged, if all of their lives they are systematically excluded from learning the complicated process of serious moral reasoning (as the clerks exclude women in Dorigen’s lament over the rocks, as the pagan authorities exclude women in Dorigen’s complaint, and as the Franklin excludes women in his closing question)?

Dorigen is the emotional center of the Tale. The reader is encouraged to empathize with her throughout, with her grief, her pain, and her helplessness. I think Chaucer is also encouraging the reader to question the medieval social practices which kept women like

“*Abuse of Innocents*”

Dorigen innocent and obedient, and thereby kept them easy prey for the Aureliuses of this world, and worse.

Notes

1. For comment on Dorigen, see especially Germaine Dempster, “Chaucer at Work on the Complaint in the *Franklin’s Tale*,” *MLN* 52 (1937), 16-23; James Sledd, “Dorigen’s Complaint,” *MP* 45 (1947), 36-45; Donald C. Baker, “A Crux in Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale*: Dorigen’s Complaint,” *JEGP* 70 (1960), 56-64; Janemarie Luecke, “Dorigen, Marriage Model or Male Fantasy,” *Journal of Women’s Studies in Literature* 1 (1979), 107-21; Effie Jean Mathewson, “The Illusion of Morality in the *Franklin’s Tale*,” *MAE* 52 (1983), 27-37; Ann Thompson Lee, “‘A Woman True and Fair’: Chaucer’s Portrayal of Dorigen in the *Franklin’s Tale*,” *ChauR* 19 (1984), 169-78; J. A. Burrow, “*The Canterbury Tales I: Romance*,” in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 114-20; Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, Feminist Readings, Humanities Press International, 1991, 111-20; David Raybin, “‘Women, of Kynde, Desiren Libertee’: Rereading Dorigen, Rereading Marriage,” *ChauR* 27 (1992), 65-86; Mary R. Bowman, “‘Half as She Were Mad’: Dorigen in the Male World of the *Franklin’s Tale*,” *ChauR* 27 (1993), 239-51.

“*Abuse of Innocents*”

2. All quotations are to the edition of John H. Fisher, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977.
3. “Apparently” because whether or not Arveragus actually insists that Dorigen keep her oath is, in my opinion, debatable. Married people often misunderstand each other, even with the best of intentions. Whether or not Arveragus insists depends on one’s interpretation of *shul* in “Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay” (1474). This can be an order, as Dorigen takes it (1512-13). Or, it can be merely an acquiescence on Arveragus’s part to a decision he believes Dorigen has already made. Returning home, finding her distraught, and listening to what she says she has sworn, Arveragus mistakenly concludes that she has already decided to fulfill her oath, that that is the reason she is so upset, and, responding in accord with their marriage agreement, he agrees to follow “hir wyl” (749) even in this. That is to say, rather than ordering her to hold her trouthe, he is accepting/acquiescing to/reassuring her about what he thinks she has already decided to do. ME *shulen* is a notoriously slippery modal. The MED gives 21 pages to it. Among other things, it was used to express an order *and* it was used to express agreement with what is appropriate or right. Chaucer’s use of it here, in line 1474, takes advantage of its ambiguity: it enables him to show both of them abiding by their separate understandings of the marriage contract: Arveragus following her will in all (749), and Dorigen

“Abuse of Innocents”

obeying as his “humble trewe wyf” (758) when she heads for the garden.

The ambiguity in Chaucer’s line 1474, and thus the misunderstanding between Dorigen and Arveragus, has been hidden, unfortunately, by the punctuation in some editions of lines 1483-86. Immediately after acceding to Dorigen’s decision and (he thinks) agreeing with her that “Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe,” Arveragus bursts out weeping, as well he might since Dorigen’s apparent decision to keep her rash promise has put him in a terrible position. He forbids her on pain of death from telling anyone about this, i.e., he unequivocally *orders* her to keep the final clause of their marriage agreement reserving him the ‘name’ of sovereignty. Then he says,

As I may best I wol my wo endure,
Ne make no contenance of hevynesse,
That folk of yow may demen harm or gesse.”

(1484-86, Fisher)

Thus Arveragus, this knight who values truth above all else, is promising that henceforth he will live a lie. Not only will he endure his own woe as best he can, he also promises Dorigen that he will “make no contenance of hevynesse,” not for his own sake, but so that no one will deem or guess harm of her. What this means is that henceforth, every moment of every day, he will have to guard the expression of his face and take care that it never betrays the grief that will be coming and going in his mind and heart. Whenever in public he is with

“Abuse of Innocents”

Dorigen or looks at her or even thinks of her, or has to talk to or hear about Aurelius, or hears stories about neighbors or unfaithful wives, or listens to courtly love romances or marriage vows or jokes about cuckolds, he will have to control his countenance. Henceforth, whenever he hears the word “trouthe,” he will have to steel himself not to betray his own innermost thoughts. He will have to be always on guard. Never again will he know freedom of facial expression, the comfort, the security, of belief in his own total honesty. Never again will he be able to feel that he possesses truth. Fisher and Donaldson punctuate as above, as Chaucer wrote, so that it is Arveragus who will “make no contenance of hevynesse.” Unfortunately, Robinson, Baugh, and the new *Riverside* set the previous line off with dashes and thereby turn it into an aside: Arveragus lamenting his own woe. The result is to make Arveragus order Dorigen to “make no contenance of hevynesse.”

...I yow forbede, up peyne of deeth,
That nevere, whil thee lasteth lyf ne breeth,
To no wight telle thou of this aventurē—
As I may best, I wol my wo endure—
Ne make no contenance of hevynesse,
That folk of yow may demen harm or gesse.
(1481-86, *Riverside*)

That is, without the added punctuation Arveragus promises to conceal his own feelings to protect Dorigen. With the punctuation, Arveragus orders Dorigan to

“Abuse of Innocents”

conceal her feelings in order to protect him. Possibly this added punctuation explains the severe condemnation Arveragus has received from some critics for lack of feeling for Dorigen and overconcern with his own reputation.

Reading the whole passage in the way that I am suggesting—that Arveragus believes Dorigen has already decided to keep her vow and is seeking only his agreement that it is the right thing for her to do (*shulen*), and without the misleading editorial dashes—Arveragus’s actions become more coherent: He keeps all the terms of their marriage contract, and he gives up his truth so that his wife may keep hers.

Prose, but Not Prosaic:
Narration in the Prose of Malory
and of the Paston Family

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I was born situationally insane—and so were you. We had been conscious for quite some time prior to birth: we registered sounds, movement, perhaps moments of increased heartbeat when our universe exercised, grew excited, or took fright. We probably even had a dim sense of time: that is, we knew—it may have been all we knew—that event followed event, that heartbeat followed heartbeat. Mostly, though, we floated amidst a universe which sustained, warmed, and fed us—but we were not conscious of being sustained, warmed, or fed. We had never known the contrasting fall, cold, or hunger which would underline them. Our existences had no pattern, and needed none: all our thought was simply, “I am.” The lotus-eaters were a nervous lot by comparison.

Then came birth. Pressure and constriction, followed by light, colors, voices, abrasive touch, abrupt movement through cold space, the heartbeat gone... our entire universe went nova. Human voices woke us, and we drowned in new perceptions—went insane and screamed out our protest with vocal cords we hadn’t known we had.

Humans have been called variously the erect animals, the tool-making animals, the laughing animals, the thinking animals: we were first, though, the organizing animals. Born insane, we had to find, or construct, patterns—to organize our perceptions so that time and

Prose but not Prosaic

space, vision and sound, hunger and thirst, warm and cold, man and woman, made sense to us.

We're still trying to make sense of it all. One of the ways we academics do that is to read a lot. My Missouri-farm-raised father, by contrast, was not until recently a reader—but he is a narrator and a consumer of narratives. He structures his life, as we do ours, by narrative patterns. From nursery rhymes through fairy tales to T.V. and film, narrative gives a pattern to our lives. For example, some of us—and most of my students—think that if we fight off the ogres and save the prince or princess, we will marry him or her and live happily ever after. As Max Lüthi has suggested, that pattern structures, or did once structure, many of our lives.¹ If we don't already know that narratives structure our existence, J. Hillis Miller will tell us so. In Frank Lentricchia and Thomas MacLaughlin's *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, he suggests that

[I]n fictions we order or reorder the givens of experience. We give experience a form and a meaning, a linear order with a shapely beginning, middle, end, and central theme. The human capacity to tell stories is one way men and women collectively build a significant and orderly world around themselves. (69)

In this essay, I simply provide an extended footnote to Miller's comment as I apply it to two major works of the English fifteenth century: Sir Thomas Malory's

Prose but not Prosaic

Morte Darthur and *The Paston Letters and Papers*. The thrusts of these two works differ; I shall suggest, however, that Malory's fictions and the Pastons' facts make sense because of common narrative patterns. I discuss first a syntactic pattern, then a "courtly" pattern of display.

Syntax

Unlike our modern syntax, Medieval English syntax was *not* shaped by punctuation. Malory, and the Pastons, could not use punctuation to shape meaning. Punctuation in the modern sense only began to appear a century after Malory's death.² Since punctuation is second only to word order in establishing syntax, both the Pastons and Malory needed some system other than punctuation to make sense of their narratives. They had one at hand, as appears in the analysis of the following:

Dere housbonde I recomaunde me to yow &c
blyssyd be god I sende yow gode tydynggys of þe
comyng and þe brynggyn hoom of þe
gentylwomman þat ye wetyn of fro Redham þis
same nyght acordyng to poyntmen þat ye made þer
for yowre self / and as for þe furste aqweyntaunce
be twhen Iohn Paston and þe seyde gentilwomman
she made hym gentil chere in gyntyl wyse and
seyde he was verrayly yowre son and so I hope þer
shal nede no gret trete be twyx hym / þe parson of
Stocton toold me yif ye wolde byin here agoune

Prose but not Prosaic

[sic: “a gown”] here moder wolde yeue ther to a
godely ffurre the goune nedyth for to be had and
of colore it wolde be agodely blew or erlys [sic:
“ellys”] abryghte sanggueyn / I prey yow do byen
for me ij pypys of gold / yowre stewes do weel /
the holy Trinite have yow in gouernaunce wretyn
at Paston in hast þe wednesday next after Deus qui
errantibus for defaute of a good secretarye &c

Agnes
Yowres Paston

[Letter to William Paston I, dtd “Probably 1440,
20 April”—Norman Davis, *Paston Letters and
Papers I*, Plate II—cf. I, 26.]

We note here the simplest of narrative patterns. Agnes greets William and tells him that the gentlewoman he knows of has come on a visit, as he arranged; the gentlewoman and young John met, and she was pleasant to John; they are likely to match soon. William can safely consider buying a gown for her—and, by the way, Agnes needs two pipes of gold, the fish-ponds are doing well, she wishes William well, and she lacks a good secretary to write this letter.

We also note in this letter the simplest of syntactic patterns. Remember that Agnes was not only in default of a good secretary, but also in default of punctuation. When you don’t have punctuation to help you, as Agnes and her secretary did not, what do you do to pattern your narrative intelligibly?

Prose but not Prosaic

Well, as you saw in the transcription, Agnes's secretary—even if not a good one—has used a simple but effective pattern. Commas, semicolons, or periods not being available, he has marked pauses chiefly with the word “and” and/or with a virgule, or slash. The next transcription contains my breaking up of Agnes's letter into the patterns created by virgules and by the word “and”:

- (1) Dere housbonde I recomaunde me to yow &c
[I assume a pause here, following the salutation]
- (2) blyssyd be god I sende yow gode tydynggys of
þe comyng and þe brynggyn hoom of þe
gentylwomman þat ye wetyn of fro Redham þis
same nyght accordyng to poyntmen þat ye made þer
for yowre self/
- (3) and as for þe furste aqweyntaunce be twhen
Iohn Paston and þe seyde gentilwomman she made
hym gentil chere in gyntyl wyse
- (4) and seyde he was verrayly yowre son
- (5) and so I hope þer shal nede no gret trete be
twyxe hym /
- (6) þe parson of Stocton toold me yif ye wolde
byin here agoune here moder wolde yeue ther to a
godely furre þe goune nedyth for to be had,
- (7) and of coloure it wolde be agodely blew or
erlys abryghte sanggueyn/
- (8) I prey yow do byen for me ij pypys of gold/
- (9) yowre stewes do weel/

Prose but not Prosaic

(10) the holy Trinite have yow in gouernaunce
wretyn at Paston in hast þe wednesday next after
Deus qui errantibus for defaute of agood secretarye
&c

Agnes
Yowres Paston

We easily follow the pattern created by “and” and virgules. It is not wholly consistent, to be sure; in the second and third word groups appear “ands” which don’t mark a pause, and in the sixth group instead of a pause marker one finds repetition of the phrase, “the goune.” Nonetheless, I repeat, this syntax is easy to follow—and though this example must seem to mark a desperately simple observation, it is central to understanding narrative patterns of the pre-punctuated ages. Word order without pause markers between clauses cannot signal meaning over long stretches of prose narrative; some sort of organizing marker is essential. Now and again, virgules, *punctūs*, or (as will appear) capitalized letters served as fourteenth- and fifteenth-century pause-markers. More commonly, however, conjunctions like “and” or adversatives like “but” work together to create what we now call a “paratactic,” or coordinated, structure for the narrative.

As soon as one hears “paratactic,” one thinks of Malory. The first thing anyone says about Malory’s style is “paratactic”—that is, coordinated. And, certainly, his style is primarily coordinated; one reads along from

Prose but not Prosaic

“and” to “and then” to yet another “and.” Many scholars have written as if that stylistic element were somehow unique to Malory. It is not. That stylistic element is simply part of the received pattern with which Malory organizes his narrative. Like the hapless secretary of Agnes Paston, he must consider how to help a reader create syntax from words which Malory cannot order with punctuation. Remember: punctuation hadn’t yet been invented. So what he does is what appears on the following, transcribed from a section of the Winchester MS, or British Library Additional MS 59678 (facsimile):

for þer was neuer worshypfull man nor
worshypfull ~~man~~ woman but they loved one bettir
than anothir and worshyp in armys may neuer be
foyled but firste reserue the honoure to god and
secundely thy quarell muste com of thy lady and
such love I calle vertuouse love // But now adayes
men can nat love vii•nyȝt but þey muste haue all
þer desyres That love may nat endure by reson for
where they bethe sone accorded And hasty heete
some keelyth And ryght so faryth the love now a
dayes sone hote sone colde thys ys no stablyte but
the olde love was nat so • for men and women
coude love togydirs vii•yerys and no lycoures
lustes was betwyxte them And than was love
trouthe and faythefulness //

(facsimile, Winchester MS, folio 435r)

Prose but not Prosaic

The syntactic pattern is not immediately clear to us, used as we are to separations made for us by modern editors. In Malory's time, though, reader response did more work in creating syntax than it does now. The next passage shows my reconstruction of the reader response a medieval reader would have given this passage; I simply show the pauses Malory's first readers would have constructed preceding conjunctions or following virgules, one punctus, and capital letters:

- (1) for þer was neuer worshypfull man nor
worshypfull ~~man~~ woman
- (2) but they loved one bettir than anothir
- (3) and worshyp in armys may neuer be foyled
- (4) but firste reserue the honoure to god
- (5) and secundely thy quarell muste com of thy
lady
- (6) and such love I calle vertuouse love //
- (7) But now adayes men can nat love vii•ny3t
- (8) but þey muste haue all þer desyres
- (9) That love may nat endure by reson
- (10) for where they bethe sone accorded And hasty
heete some keelyth³
- (11) And ryght so faryth the love now a dayes sone
hote sone colde thys ys no stablyte
- (12) but the olde love was nat so •
- (13) for men and women coude love togydirs
vii•yerys
- (14) and no lycoures lustes was betwyxte them
- (15) And than was love trouthe and faythefulness //

Prose but not Prosaic

Note that the passages as separated are almost all short—only the “sone accorded” and “soon hot soon cold” narrative pronouncements have much length to them. To repeat: I suggest that a medieval reader automatically separated the passages in her/his mind as I have done here on paper.

I further suggest that one must begin any study of “style” in fifteenth-century prose by recognizing both this pattern and the necessary reader-response to the pattern. And I must note here that we scholars have allowed ourselves to become dependent upon editions, which editors have punctuated, capitalized, and separated into paragraphs for us. And in doing so we have lost touch with the manuscripts, and thus with the patterns of fifteenth-century narrative. In an age when reader-response criticism has already bloomed and faded, we have failed to note the reader response evoked by medieval texts. The implications affect our reading of all prose prior to roughly 1600. I merely note the existence of those implications, however, and move on to one other narrative pattern common to the Pastons and to Malory.⁴

The Courtly Pattern

Now consider what Malory might call “the pattern of worshipfulness” but what I shall simply call “the courtly pattern.” Before I proceed, however, I must point out that Malory and the Pastons probably found this pattern

Prose but not Prosaic

in the same place: Malory read the same books the Pastons read.

About books: Sir John Paston III was a knight, like his father before him. He took his knighthood seriously. Karen Cherewatuk points out, in a forthcoming essay, that the Pastons owned one of the “grete bokes” which instructed knights on worshipful behavior; I note that they also owned a book which looks very like one of Malory’s sources for his *Morte*. In *The Paston Letters and Papers* one finds that Sir John Paston II left us an inventory of his books written in his own hand. The inventory dates between 1475 and 1479.⁵ Part of the inventory, listed first, is the following:

A boke had off my ostesse at þe Gorge... off þe
Dethe off Arthur begynyng at Cassab<...>.
(I,517—and see I, Plate VII)

Paston also lists “my boke off knyghthod and ther-in... off makynge off knyghtys, off justys, off torn<...> fyghtyng in lystys, paces holden by sou<...> and chalengys, statutys off weer....”⁶ The ideology of knighthood clearly interested him. It interested his son as well, as appears in part of Sir John III’s description of the marriage festivities of Margaret of York to Charles Duke of Burgundy (“the Bastard”) on the 8th of July in 1468:

[Paston opens by writing that the Bastard and twenty-three other knights have answered a

Prose but not Prosaic

challenge to joust.] they xxiiij & hym selue schold
torney wt othyr xxv the next day aftyr whyche is
on Monday next comyng and they that haue jostyd
wt hym in to thys day haue ben as rychely beseyn
& hym selue also **as clothe of gold** & sylk &
syluyr & goldsmythys werk ~~myght~~ myght mak hem
for of syche ger & **gold** & **perle** & **stony**s they
of the dwkys [sic for “Duke’s”] coort neythyr
gentylmen nor gentylwomen they want non for wt
owt that they haue it by wyshys by my trowthe I
herd neuyr of sogret plente as her is // Thys day
my lord scalys justyd wt a lord of thys contre but
nat wt the bastard for they mad promyse at london
that non ofthem bothe shold neuer dele wt othyr in
Armys but the bastard was on of the lordys that
browt the lord scalys in to the feld & of
mysfortwne an horse strake my lord bastard on the
lege & hathe hurt hym so sore that I can thynk he
shalbe of no power to Acomplyshe vp hys armys
and that is gret pete for by my trowthe I trow god
mad neuer a mor worchefull knyt And asfor the
dwkys coort as of lordy [sic] ladys & gentylwomen
knytys sqwyirs & gentyllmen I herd neuer of non
lyek to it saue kyng Artourys cort...

(Davis I, Plate VIII; cf. I, 538–39—emphasis
added)

One notes that Sir John writes that this courtly display is similar to that of Arthur’s court. Note also some comparable passages in Malory:

Prose but not Prosaic

First, in the *Book of Sir Tristram*, several tournaments take place; Lancelot and Tristram avoid fighting each other, not for fear, but out of friendship.⁷ As appears above, the Duke of Burgundy and Anthony, Lord Scales, pursue a similar pattern. They have promised not to deal with each other in arms, as Sir John III tells us. We see a pattern of noble behavior here—one which structures both fact and fiction.

This marriage passage from Sir John Paston III's letter shows, like Malory's *Morte*, an approving view of the grandeur of outward trappings. Sir John's account notes how richly clad were the jousting knights and all their company. Compare the following passage from Malory, which occurs in the section titled by Vinaver "The Vengeance of Sir Gawain." A procession is taking place, as Lancelot returns Guinevere to King Arthur:

Than sir Launcelot purveyed hym an c• knyghtis and all well clothed in grene velvet and thir horsis trapped in the same to the heelys and euery knyght hylde a braunche of olyff in hys honde in tokenyng of pees And the quene had iiiij•& xxi jantill women folowyng her in the same wyse and sir Launcelot had xij• coursers folowyng hym and on every courser sate a yonge jantylman [to fol. 465r] and all they were arayed in whyght velvet with Sarpis of golde aboute thir quarters and the horse trapped in the same wyse down to the helys wyth many owchys isette wt **stonys and perelys in golde** to the numbir of a thousande And in the same wyse

Prose but not Prosaic

was the quene arayed and *sir* Launcelot in the same
of whyght **clothe of golde** tyssew...
(facsimile fols. 464v–465r—emphasis added)

As appeared earlier, Sir John III describes courtly display with many of the same words: his jousters, and the Duke, are as

rychely beseyn, ...as **clothe of gold** and sylk and
sylur and goldsmythys werk myght mak hem; for
of syche ger, and **gold and perle and stonys**,
they want non...

(*Paston Letters and Papers*, I.538–39)

As both Sir John and Lancelot thought, such display was worthy of “kyng Artourys cort” (*Paston Letters* I, Plate VIII).

Conclusion

I have addressed syntactic and “courtly” narrative patterns shared by the Paston family writing non-fiction and by Malory writing fiction, and have presented some of the syntactic and courtly patterns shared in these two texts.

I also offer two observations. One is that Malory’s non-punctuated syntax is by necessity paratactic. That means that one must place in a broader context such outstanding studies of Malory’s syntax as Bonnie Wheeler’s “Romance and Parataxis and Malory: The

Prose but not Prosaic

Case of Sir Gawain’s Reputation” in *Arthurian Literature* XII.⁸

My second observation: Malory shares with the Pastons the view of courtly display as essential to the aristocratic life. Maurice Keen has commented at length on the social and economic importance of such display: in sum, he suggests that such parades of wealth and power reinforced in the eyes of all knights—which is to say, in the eyes of the leaders of the armed forces—the idea that success lies in emulating the aristocracy, and thus in supporting the aristocratic class. As a New Historicist might put it, display supports ideology—and ideology supports the ruling class (*Chivalry* 153–54).

In discussing syntax and courtly display in one paper, I have placed apples and oranges in the same sack. My only excuse is that these two phenomena shape much of Malory’s *Morte*, and much of the prose found in the *Paston Letters and Papers*. We still seek such patterns in our fiction and in our factual accounts, and we still believe that our lives find meaning, or make meaning, because of them.

Prose but not Prosaic

Notes

1. Lüthi writes that “[t]he fairytale makes the structural elements of existence visible”: *The Fairytale as Art Form* 78.
2. M.B. Parkes, *Pause and Effect* 50–61. For illustrations of medieval unpunctuated prose, see the transcribed passages in this essay. See also N.F. Blake’s “The Editorial Process,” where he points out that Modern English has more punctuation marks than did Middle English, with “more precise functions,” and that “punctuation is now used syntactically” (67). It was not used syntactically in the Middle Ages, but rhetorically, liturgically, or to regulate oral performance—e.g., in Gregorian chant (67–68).
3. The capitalized “And” would seem to mark a pause, but it appears in a short series rather than at the beginning of a clause. This inconsistency troubles me; “and” does appear in series throughout medieval English prose and poetry, however. I can only assume that the capital letter is a scribal error.
4. For a fuller examination of the implications of this phenomenon, see D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., and Jennifer L. Fish, “Beside the Point.”
5. John II died 15 Nov 1479 (Davis, introduction to document, *Paston Letters*, I, 516–17). The inventory which contains the book appears in I, Plate VII and in Doc. 316, I, 517–18.
6. Document 316, I, 516–18. In 1469 one William Ebesham, evidently a scribe, wrote a bill to Sir John

Prose but not Prosaic

Paston for the copying of several documents and books. One of the items reads:

“Item, as to the Grete Booke, first for wrytyng of the Coronacion and other tretys of knyghthode...”
(Doc. 755, II, 392)

Another speaks of copying “the tretys of werre in iiiij bookes”; yet another speaks of copying “the *Challenges* and the *Actes of Armes*.” A fourth mentions “*de Regimine Principum*” (Doc. 755, II, 392).

7. In *The Book of Sir Tristram* Lancelot and Tristram, because of their friendship, avoid fighting each other. As Tristram puts it after Lancelot has graciously refused to fight him,

‘And by that agayne I knew that hit was sir Launcelot, for ever he forberyth me in every place and shewyth me grete kyndenes’

(Malory 453.17–18).

(Here and throughout I use the one-volume Oxford Standard Authors edition because it is so much easier of access than the recent 3-vol. edition by P.J.C. Field and Vinaver).

This principle appears in action just a few pages later: at the tournament at Lonezep, Lancelot and Tristram meet in the mêlée. Lancelot does not know he faces Tristram, so the two trade strokes. Dinadan, aware that Lancelot does not intend to meet Tristram in arms, calls

Prose but not Prosaic

Tristram's name aloud. Lancelot's response is to cease fighting and to say,

‘A, my lorde sir Trystram, why were ye now disgysed? Ye have put youreselff this day in grete perell. But I pray you to pardon me, for and I had knowyn you we had nat done this batayle.’ (Malory 458.40–42)

8. Wheeler's observations about the effect of Malory's syntax seem to me both valid and valuable; however, where she suggests that parataxis is Malory's “preferred” grammatical and syntactic mode, and that parataxis is also Malory's “organizational strategy, preferred mode of characterisation and philosophic position” (110), one must realize that Malory shows in his writing not a preference, but rather a pattern that he shares with all other English writers of his time. That observation does not lessen the value of Wheeler's study.

Prose but not Prosaic

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Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules*
as a Valentine Fable
The Subversive Poetics of Feminine Desire

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Chaucer's initiation of St. Valentine's Day as a celebration for love-birds of all species began a remarkable tradition of wide social and cultural impact still blooming today in florists' and Hallmark shops around the world. Smitten medieval Courts eagerly implemented Chaucer's literary suggestions, instituting programs to further the already well-known practice and policy of courtly love. By the time of his death, these practices were becoming institutionalized not only in England but in France and elsewhere as well. As Derek S. Brewer points out,

A whole elaborate institution, the *Cour Amoreuse* was founded in the French Court in honour of women; its chief aim was the presentation of love poems to ladies in a kind of competition, with a prize for the best poem. The *Cour Amoreuse* first met in Paris on St. Valentine's Day 1400. In theory there were over six hundred members... mostly great lords of the realm... under the King's patronage. It was ruled by a "Prince of Love", who was a professional poet.... On St. Valentine's Day 1400, after mass, the chief ministers... met in "joyous recreation and conversation about love." Love-poems were presented before ladies, who judged them, and awarded a golden crown and chaplet for the best poem.¹

Subversive Poetics

This and other institutions in France and England—the rival orders of the Flower and the Leaf, for example—testify to the abiding interest in *fine amour* in poetry and courtly society. However, these institutions supposedly honoring women failed to endorse feminine desire. Rather, the idealizing and therefore distancing of women perpetuates their social objectification and isolation under the guise of praise. Treating women as actual persons with desire was rare indeed. Poems written especially for St. Valentine's Day, such as Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*, the anonymous *Complaynt d'Amours*, Oton de Grandson's *Le Songe Sainte Valentin*, John Gower's 34th and 35th of the *Cinkante Balades* and John Clanvowe's *Boke of Cupide*, reflect the actual social situation and attitudes endorsing this courtly construct: idealization but not acceptance of actual women.

But do all these poems in fact actually “endorse the courtly construct”? Or might Chaucer offer a strikingly revolutionary alternative in honestly presenting, and even encouraging, a strong species of feminine desire within his typically traditional context? I would suggest that Chaucer is deconstructing the hierarchical courtly convention by subversive decoding, re-inscribing feminine desire within the tradition, and thereby reappropriating feminine power. He defies convention. No doubt most Cupid poems were written for the late fourteenth-century, primarily English, Valentine's Day festivals of games in which men and women chose their love partners for the next year. Allegorized lovers,

Subversive Poetics

often represented as birds, sang of eternal and unrequited love in these complaint ballads. The poetic love-vision, often encompassing a *demande d'amour*, rehearsed the love-sick poet's dream of a May garden hosting a love debate. The discourse often asked practical amatory questions: who is the best lover? Who suffers most, she with a dead or an unfaithful lover? Who is the best mistress, a maid, wife, or widow? Who is preferable, a loyal but indiscrete lover or a discrete but possibly unfaithful one? This is the convention.

Chaucer's primary Valentine poem, the *Parlement of Fowles*, breaks certain literary *fine amour* conventions by being philosophical rather than witty. No doubt on the surface its debate form investigates the nature of "worthiness": who merits love and why? What is "*fine amour*"? These serious questions Chaucer answers from a marginalized social rather than conventional aristocratic position. Furthermore, he gives unexpected and non-traditional responses authorizing female desire and multiclassed power. If honorable love demands eternal dedication even in rejection, is the rejected suitor who truly loves eternally faithful despite that rejection? The question is explored, interestingly, by the lower, unprivileged birds; as Brewer points out:

The essence of *fine amor* was its disinterested loyalty; all the suitors have vowed eternal faithfulness as part of their claim of love. What is to happen to those who are unsuccessful? Are they to remain faithful, with the absolute certainty of no

Subversive Poetics

reward? Here is the question at the heart of the debate. (Brewer, 12)

This deeper type of theoretical and abstract philosophical *demande* rather than a practical or individualized dilemma marks Chaucer's ruminations. Simultaneously this philosophical poet is politically engaged, exploring both amatory and historically based questions of hierarchy, power, and gender.

Furthermore, while the typical *demande d'amour* offers equally qualified suitors and a difficult intellectual crux to be unscrambled, not philosophical or moral dilemmas but a rational *demande* or question, Chaucer posits a single logically and obviously "right" choice. He offers no true dilemma. His probing, then, is actually about the essence of reality and justice, not who is a better mate! Why thus play with conventions? For Chaucer, it is not sufficient to posit that for the likely historical occasion of his writing, Anne of Bohemia and Richard II's marriage—and Larry Benson has no doubt rightly reclaimed the three lost suitors and bride²—one suitor is head and wings above the others. But this simple allegory, appropriate vehicle though it may be, is too thin; Chaucer has another agenda. Statements of Chaucer's purpose by J.A.W. Bennett to offer "a variant of the common literary *topos*: the instability and duality of love"³ and by Dubs and Malarkey to find "the attainment of true poetic fusion of form and content... fleeting and obtained at great pains"⁴ ignore his involvement with history. Chaucer's *persona* reads not a

Subversive Poetics

romance, but Macrobius, “a transition to the posture of historian/redactor... Scipio’s towering vision of the place of earth and human endeavor in the total scheme of things”⁵ as Dubs and Malarkey note. Clearly this *Parlement*, so politically and culturally suggestive, so redolent with traditional and historic markers, begs for a New Historicist interpretation with a feminist slant. Just as Chaucer has used and moderated conventions and historic fact for his ends, so has he used, countered, challenged, even subverted the traditional, static, hegemonic establishment, privileging a pluralistic, sometimes marginalized perspective—a feminist and even a lesser-classed avian perspective. We may never completely unearth the vexed and often-explored folk custom of how one, or several, Saint Valentines came to be associated with amatory mating,⁶ or why blustery British Februaries came to represent hot passionate exchanges. But the real question is what Chaucer did with this historic context of Valentines, Februaries, and powerless, sexless women. Jack B. Oruch describes some of that historic contextual lore:

Chaucer and his contemporaries were of the belief enunciated by Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, in his *De arte venandi cum avibus* (thirteenth century), that “birds generally nest in the springtime”: This season has as a rule, an even temperature, which induces an abundance of blood and sperm, and an excess of these two humors arouses a desire in both

Subversive Poetics

sexes to indulge in coitus, resulting in racial reproduction.⁷

Further, Charles Muscatine notes Brewer's citation of John Trevisa's translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus's thirteenth-century *De Proprietatibus rerum* 12.1:

Among alle bestis that ben in ordre of generacioun, briddes and foules [fowlens] most honest[ee] of kynde. For by ordre of kynde males seche femalis with bisynesse and loueth hem whanne thy beth ifounden... and briddes and foules gendryngke kepith couenable tyme, for in springinge tyme whanne the generacioun cometh inne, briddes crien and singen. Males drawen to companye of females and preyen iche othir of loue and wowith by beckes and voys.⁸

Within his narrative of interiority and alterity, self and other, individual good and “common profit,” Chaucer affirms, questions, or challenges these cultural assumptions about bird and human biology, physiology, gender, and sexual desire. He thus examines the agency of the subject caught within the agency of the historic tradition, the matrix of his narrative construct.

Besides the obvious literal purpose—writing an occasional piece to celebrate Anne of Bohemia and Richard II's courtship—how did Chaucer use this politically laden vehicle to structure and further politicize his narrative? Several obvious possibilities

Subversive Poetics

hover above the Parliament, and a few more flutter along the edges. Much of the dominant ideology on which patriarchal convention rests is subtly probed: namely, the wholesale cultural adoption of *courtoisie*, of graciously granting the female certain limited control over her amatory and sexual sphere—not choice of mate, mind you, but *where* her favors will be bestowed. Historically, this might well be seen as a token effort to redress the political imbalance of power in which the female is deprived of actual or material power. Her power most blatantly lies in her ability to move the particular male now suing for her affection. He has given her this power by acknowledging his reaction to her in his oral and written wooing words. A verse from Guilhelm IX's "Mout jauzens" suggests her influence:

Per son joy pot malautz sanar,
E per sa ira sas morir
E savis hom enfolezir
E belhs hom sa beutat mudar
E-1 plus cortes vilaneiar
E-1 totz vilas encortezir.

Through her joy a sick man can become well,
And through her anger a healthy man die
And a wise man become foolish
And a handsome man lose his beauty
And the most refined become boorish
And the most boorish become refined.

Subversive Poetics

She passively learns of *his* desire, claiming that her charms have placed him in this vulnerable position, and that she has the power to “cure” him of his desire. But her desire is ignored.

This insignificant, non-threatening realm of amatory involvement is easily relegated to her, as her domain of influence, on condition that she not penetrate beyond it into the masculine realm of real, military and political authority, or of sexual desire. The patriarchal tradition demands containment. The kind of power courtly love entails is nebulous, temporary, limited, inconstant, and of doubtful value. This historic concession did not cede more authority to women in any tangible sphere, or allow greater choice of husband. In effect, women were bought off by convincing rhetoric adulating *fine amour* and the feminine although their material and intellectual condition remained subservient. They still had no real, but only illusory power.

Perceiving this political power manipulation in society, Chaucer has subversively empowered the feminine: he does it with the non-offensive subtlety and grace for which he is known. Despite his tact, he nevertheless privileges the female beyond her accepted realm of amatory attraction by mapping and endorsing a pattern of feminine desire. One way is by exploring the marginalization of female desire in actual history through allegorically depicting its converse: Anne’s brother, the Holy Roman Emperor Wenzel, patriarchal emblem par excellence, is privileged in both power and desire. Political machinations and power plays control

Subversive Poetics

the players. History shows his influence determined the marriage. Larry Benson describes the marriage-seeking emissaries of 1380, concluding “Wenzel could choose whom he wished of the three [Richard, Charles VI, or Friedrich of Meissen]. When he finally agreed that Richard should have Anne, he did not even have to offer a dowry.”⁹ What does Anne of Bohemia have to say about it? Or, in fact, Richard? Benson points to the marriage treaty explicitly privileging common profit over personal choice:

The practice of righteous rulers and the custom of just princes have always been to place the common good of their subjects before any private advantage (*privatis commodis*) whatsoever, and by this means to strengthen the commonwealth (*rem publicam munire*).... The treaty goes on to the proposed alliance between England and the Empire and then to the marriage itself, emphasizing that Anne has all the freedom of choice that Nature allows the formel (“*de eius spontanea voluntate*”) and depicting Richard, busily concerned with the good of the commonwealth (“*inter gloriosas republicae curas*”), likewise freely agreeing to the marriage.¹⁰

But the differences are obvious: it is incumbent upon Anne to accept for public benefit; and once her brother Wenzel has chosen, she has the power of negation only. The formel, of course, uses that power of negation, altogether rejecting all three choices for the moment.

Subversive Poetics

Interestingly, the medieval documents quoted above theoretically acknowledge and affirm female desire or at least complicity in mating, sexual desire and its symbolic correlate: power. But in point of fact, such power is denied in the actual political and sexual situation.

Chaucer thus has two possible models, from written literary texts and from political praxis long in effect across Europe. His poem ignores the latter: Wenzel's patriarchal injunction behind Anne's marriage. Grounded in the courtly domain which by its nature accords women an ostensibly but not actually privileged status, he places the formel, a powerful agent, at the narratological core. Within the Chaucerian fiction, a Valentine garden of discoursing birds, political concerns of a male imperial register do not exist. The female is simply accorded power. She is ultimately in control of *whom*, and in fact, with Court permission, *when* she will choose a mate. Chaucer has subverted the actual facts of the marriage of Richard and Anne (clearly the outcome was not within Anne's power to determine) by creating a reality in which her courtly surrogate, one actively aggressive formel, does indeed implement her own desire. Unlike Emily in the heavily patriarchal *Knight's Tale*, deprived of even the choice of negation, the right to reject *both* Palamon and Arcite, the formel is assumed to have will, acceptance and negation, and the right to exercise it. Thus he subverts the actual political role of women by creating a female who is privileged—given rights—not marginalized. Her decision is not contingent upon power relationships

Subversive Poetics

outside her desire or a patriarchal order which must be maintained for political containment. Chaucer actively subverts Emperor Wenzel's male historical appropriation of power in the real world behind his parliamentary allegory in awarding precisely that power of conjugal choice, power and desire, to the formel, surrogate of the historically marginalized Anne. If woman's voice has effectively been marginalized, suppressed, or ventriloquized within history, in his poem Chaucer reverses this power relationship and the gender assumptions behind it by giving the formel the only voice that counts.¹¹

A second way Chaucer subverts the marginalized role of women is through the authority of Cytherea (or Venus) and Natura, goddesses notably useful to those encountering them. The poet first calls upon a powerful Cytherea, the “blysful lady swete / That with thy fyrbrond dauntest whom the lest” (113–14); as the source of his dream, she has the ability to help him recount it, he acknowledges: “Be thou myn helpe in this, for thou mayest best!” (116). The allegorical figures of the garden, alternately male and female, have no particular power advantage before the choosing game begins, although the proudly noble Venus, standing apart in dignity, receives two young lovers on bended knee begging her help. But, as Brewer suggests,

though Cupid is surrounded by in the main pleasant qualities, and may be taken as representing fashionable love affairs, some of his qualities are

Subversive Poetics

evil and treacherous; through Cupid we are led to the miseries and calamities of the temple, with its gross phallic image of Priapus, and the titillating picture of the all-but-naked Venus.¹²

Venus as Playmate-of-the-Month plays to male desire. Male sexuality is not seen as terribly appealing. The noble goddess Dame Natura, however, is seen as refreshing after the temple, what Brewer calls “a hot-house of illicit sensuality.”¹³ Nature is accorded more privilege and power than her gender generally warrants; her desire, albeit non-sexual, is privileged. Atop a flowering hill, this queen presides over all the fowles who “take hire dom and yeve hire audyence” (308). Although critics disagree as to the precise degree of potency she displays,¹⁴ Natura indubitably rules. Her will dominates. As John P. McCall claims, “Despite the press of the crowd and the huge noise, every bird finds his proper place and all grow quiet as Nature outlines ‘In esy voyc,’ the customary procedures”:¹⁵ “This noble emperesse, ful of grace, / Bad every foul to take his owne place” (319–20). When Nature commands them to heed her sentence, by her “ryghtful ordenaunce” they begin the choosing game according to station. The rules are traditional and patriarchal: males choose, and females assent or reject. When the chatty birds become disorderly, Nature

With facound voys seyde, “Hold youre tonges there!
And I shal sone, I hope, a conseyl fynde

Subversive Poetics

Yow to delyvere, and fro this noyse unbynde:
I juge, of every folk men shul oon calle
To seyn the verdit for yow foules alle." (521–25)

Her voice is firm, definitive, and unwavering, and business is conducted in what McCall calls "the stable governance of that patient Goddess, Nature."¹⁶ Although the birds are somewhat disruptive, willingly she grants them free speech while controlling their chattering, a mark of her authority. Finally she exercises her prerogative to judge, and in doing so, defies the traditional patriarchal code. The male will not have his choice of mate. Rather Nature transfers that autonomy from the masculine to the feminine domain:

But fynally, this is my conclusioun,
That she hiresself shal han hir eleccioun
Of whom hire lest; ...
Thanne wol I don hire this favour, that she
Shal han right hym on whom hire herte is set,
And he hire that his herte hath on hire knet:
Thus juge I, Nature, for I may not lye.
(620–23; 626–29)

Thus, a female in authority valorizes another female in a double reversal of power for the donor and the receiver; both are given power normally relegated to males in the patriarchal system of amatory relations. Deferring to Nature's sovereign position, the *formel* acknowledges her own and all other creatures'

Subversive Poetics

subservience, but boldly seeks to maintain her freedom of choice for a year. Desire plays a three-fold role: in the fact of the choice, in the time of its inauguration, and in its inevitably sexual fabric. Granting her wish, Nature again controls the suitors by ordering them to wait patiently and faithfully for that year. The formel eagle holds the cards.

She is accorded power in other instances as well. During the trial, Nature fondles the formel eagle, of highest station and most prestige. This linking of the two most significant females in the text enhances the status of both by mutual association. Furthermore, the royal tercel addresses the formel as “my soverayn lady, and not my fere [equal]” (416), fulfilling the conventional code of authority. The servant-lover is abjectly beholden to his courtly lady as his promises of everlasting devotion, pleas for “routhe,” and humility before her confirm. Here, of course, we have no assurance that his protestations are any more sincere than the typical idealizing / distancing of the woman in the courtly love paradigm. This is the traditional *fine amour* power usually accorded the female. Equally submissive are the two lower orders of tercels offering length of service and sincere devotion. The protocol of power relationships is here fulfilled. Males, with the power to choose or not choose the formel, pretend to relegate power to the chosen female by abjectly bowing before her; she supposedly has power over them by virtue of their infatuated devotion, but not the power to choose her mate from all possible mates. At most she has the

Subversive Poetics

right of rejection. But her power persists only as long as he remains enamored of her, as Canacee's lovesick little bird attests in the *Squire's Tale*. Not until the conclusion does Chaucer truly defy convention and accord power in another domain—not just amatory—beyond the expected and to the unexpected—to the marginalized female.

Surprisingly neglected in criticism of such a love poem as this is the topoi of eroticism and feminine desire. Chaucer's third method of privileging feminine desire is through the poetics of deferral or postponement. No doubt Chaucer has taken the humorous rather than salacious road in his Canterbury narratives where he admittedly posits feminine desire—probably as often as masculine desire. His fabliaux *femme fatales*, for example, might humorously climb into a washtub or a tree to satisfy desire. But the *Parlement* can hardly be said to treat love humorously. Here the female is taken seriously as a sexual animal; her own desires are presumed and respected. Initially the female eagle representing the feminine is given veto-power over her suitors, but that control reaches a crescendo when three vie for her hand. They actively, passionately, and publicly woo her, albeit in words rather than deeds. Her abashed blushing confirms and enhances the erotic poetic dimension; that Venus fails to understand her modest reticence suggests that Venus's erotic tendencies are of a different order: yes, more “natural” and unself-conscious, but also less subtle, more blatant than the shy but nonetheless responsive formel.

Subversive Poetics

Chaucer accords Venus her brand of sexuality too, as a foil to the formel and in her own right. Perhaps the formel's embarrassment at the public display of male desire, and her own barely repressed but undeniable reaction impels her to postpone her "marriage." She is overcome—by their impulses and her own uncontrollable reaction.

Certainly the blatantly erotic allegorized iconography of Venus' temple prepares for the dramatic words, in effect, speech acts in the sexual choice *debate*. The profession of the suitors' love is an action and a commitment, for a year if not forever. It is, in itself, both literally and symbolically, an erotic act, and in the wooing of her, an acknowledgment of the formel's desire. Specific erotic behavior follows from this profession. The traditional patriarchal social norm denies the female that profession of desire. Chaucer gives it back.

The means by which Chaucer empowers this formel through valorizing her desire is complicated. Initially, she gains authority by her ability to attract three males and thereby earns the prerogative to postpone: she plays her own game, a highly erotic deferral gesture which increases manifoldly the sexual content, tenor, and outcome of the debate. She keeps the passion of not one, but three lovers hotly burning for a year. No doubt the tripartite verbal and gestural foreplay will continue throughout the year, intensifying immediately before her choice of mate. Her wish—ironically, to postpone rather than commit to any physical desire, thus

Subversive Poetics

heightening the eroticism for all involved—is honored, respected, fulfilled. The seemingly shy, blushing formel defies the expected amatory behavior, working against the customary ritual to heighten and prolong the inconclusive and therefore smoldering sexuality; this signifies her power, sexual and otherwise. As usual, sex and power are inextricable. Furthermore, the narrator acceptingly reports Venus' brand of open sensuality alongside the formel's tantalizingly subtle, and thus powerfully controlling sexuality within this ritualized, stylized frame. That is his erotic game.

The function of Chaucer's erotic interplay is to redistribute power in the narrator's textual field. Medieval historic and literary realities play deceptive games, feigning allegiance to feminine power through courtly *fine amour* without conceding actual control; the patriarchy, fawning over idealized and etherealized women, deny real power in a tangible world where it counts. Their allegiance is a sham. Chaucer has created an alternative in which the feminine is empowered. A feminized narrator has reinscribed history or at least one literary reality, by changing the poetics of eroticism: he transfers real power of choice, in this case entailing sexual desire, not the illusory influence of *fine amour*, to the feminine, albeit still within the conscribed amatory domain.

Chaucer uses and sometimes undermines other historic givens in his *Parlement*, namely social privilege. Beginning with the aphorism from Hippocrates, patriarchal wisdom initially contextualizes the poem

Subversive Poetics

within the traditional conventional mode, the ground from which he will then deviate. The first dream sequence is an idealized but hegemonic construct apart from reality. From his grandfather Africanus, Scipio learns of Carthage and the virtue of the powerful beneficently governing the powerless for “common profyt” in order to achieve celestial bliss. Here deviators from law and convention will forever lose salvation. Scipio’s dream and its *contemptus mundi* message represent dogmatic establishment policy which Chaucer rejects in favor of his own more personal dream construct.

The harsh didactic tone of the first dream is replaced by a softer, more humane reality as Africanus visits the poet. Here a green-stoned garden gate on a warm, lusty May replaces the cold, sterile, objective cosmological locus of Scipio’s dream. The message of the first is threatening and uncompromising, filled with injunctions to labor diligently and thus merit the afterlife since the world is “dissevable and ful of hard grace” (65); the comfort of the second suggests no such distrust or resistance, no compulsion to move to another more amenable locus. The planetary dwellers’ world “Nis but a maner deth” looking toward the next world. The earthly world of the poet, a “welle of grace,” is sensuously green and fertile, a “blysful place / Of hertes hele and dedly woundes cure”(127–28). Its salvific properties starkly contrast the ominous, inhuman uncontrollable environment of the cosmos. The garden gate’s invitation of “pleyn sentence” (126) to “al good

Subversive Poetics

aventure” personally addressed to “thow redere” (132) has no parallel in the non-verbal world of singing heavenly bodies, incomprehensible to human ears. Its physical and moral dangers are replaced by emotional dangers in Chaucer’s garden: disdain, emotional distance, sorrow of love’s rejection. The historic vantage-point of the celestial dream-voyage is patriarchal and military. As David Aers observes,

The text of the dream, the dream, and the celestial instruction all come from Roman politicians and patriots for whom service of the earthly city and empire comprised the highest vocation of man.... Chaucer invites speculation concerning the relationship between self-righteous nationalistic war and ‘commune profyt’.... Such speculations would be relevant in his own society locked in the long, destructive war with France and, as the 1381 uprising made especially plain, composed of social groups whose interests were often antagonistic—whatever might be claimed in the dominant ideology which presented society as an organic body with hierarchical estates whose ends were mutual benefit and harmony.¹⁷

Scipio’s harshly masculine, male-dominated dream-world which Aers describes is contrasted to the narrator’s softer feminine, female-dominated edenic garden, and translation to the second dream generated from the first is a relief. The traumatic experience of

Subversive Poetics

the cosmological trip has wearied the poet, plunging him into his own dream, a fit transition and appropriate psychological motive for a peaceful substitute. The ambience of his dream world is much more ambiguous, making him hot and cold, fearful and emboldened, witless and powerless to leave. This personally compelling, but marginalized reality Chaucer would privilege as the reader is invited to rehumanize official authority. The Church and Innocent III as hegemonic codes offer less validity and viability than Ovid and open acceptance of Valentinian amour. Pleasure is not to be marginalized in the face of privileged order within his narratological schema.

H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. discusses other subversive or non-conventional elements, claiming in his *Parlement* Chaucer realized that “traditional and authoritative materials fail to cohere”¹⁸; thus he believes Chaucer advocated self-conscious self-limitation for the social good. Individualized pleasure, even of a hord of birds and a formel eagle, is not marginalized, but rather acknowledged and privileged, and its converse is also concretized: if the “disruptive force of individual personality,” of avian personal choice, precludes social harmony, how are we to read the disruptive social, if non-human babble concluding the tale? Why is the question of choice raised if any personal choice not made for the common profit is disruptive? David Aers likewise does not find Chaucer advocating self-conscious self-limitation. Chaucer rails against what Aers calls “the dogmatic objectivity of authoritative discourses,”¹⁹

Subversive Poetics

the world view of homogeneous universality rather than plurality. Regardless of the social class from which each bird is hatched, love itself seems to transform and ennable. Despite the adulation accorded the eagle species, as McCall suggests, “because she has no special concern for social status, Nature begins by siding with the practical judgment of the goose.”²⁰ If disharmony temporarily intrudes, it is simply a part of the multiplicity of voices which Chaucer heard and respected. As McCall observes, “Perhaps it takes a ‘president’ or goddess, like Nature, or even a department chairman, to understand that all the terrible racket can actually be part of an earthly melody. But it is.”²¹ No social class is privileged in the mêlée.

Through the doors of his dream vision, traditional allegorical figures—Youth, Beauty, Nature, Cupid, Venus—à la *Roman de la Rose*, etherealize and idealize. From this allegorical world emerge charmingly loquacious, sensuously inclined, doubly allegorized birds absorbed in the same issue as Canacee’s Falcon in the “Squire’s Tale” and Geoffrey’s Eagle in “The House of Fame”: the merits of lovers. Unlike the Nun’s Priest’s Pertelote and Chauntecleer who for all their supposed dignity never approach courtliness or discuss love, the *Parlement*’s avians, Canacee’s Falcon, and Geoffrey’s Eagle represent refined sensibility and genteel aristocratic emotions in a unique type of aristocratic bestiary. They also subversively defy hegemonic convention by their deviance from ritualized expectations and power manifestations.

Subversive Poetics

In this time of social upheaval suggested above, the actual revolutionary situation marked by the Peasant's Revolt validates and informs Chaucer's political concerns. What, then, in contemporary life was his source and exemplar for women's desire which he raised to such a perfect climax of erotic deferral? Arlene W. Saxonhouse notes that in the early middle ages, Augustine's view of sexuality, which must be transcended, and *femina* (defined by her body) which must be controlled, is negative.²² Vern L. Bullough comments that "Sex in the early Christian church was usually equated with women... who were looked upon as the source of all male difficulties."²³ Nevertheless, eventually feminine power began to emerge: "Woman's new assertiveness, or at least her prominence, created tensions between the progressive and reactionary elements in early Christianity... only relieved by the reassertion of the traditional masculine view of the position of women."²⁴ Women take on even greater import with the power of three great French noblewomen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Marie of Champagne, and Blanche of Castile. Mary Beard notes that:

As Eleanor began her active public life when she was fifteen on her marriage with Louis VII in 1137, and as her granddaughter Blanche of Castile, wife of Louis VIII... mother of Saint Louis was actively wielding her imperious scepter in France till the time of her death in 1252, the era of their

Subversive Poetics

regal influence extended over a century of demiurgic history in France and England.²⁵

The new-found power of the Queens of Love, as well as cultural changes accepting feminine authority, undoubtedly extending to the realm of sexuality, must have affected Chaucer more than a hundred years later. Their open endorsement of the sexual is itself miraculous. Eleanor S. Riemer finds a softening when Italy's commercial revival in the late middle ages first gave increased legal and economic rights to middle- and upper-class women; but soon male retrenchment in the form of dowry laws curtailed women's power.²⁶ Marion A. Kaplan claims,

In early modern France and England... the need to save for the dowry resulted in later marriages among artisans and peasants... [as] young women had to wait for their [parents'] deaths... or had to work until they themselves accumulated enough money or goods. Both alternatives seem to have raised the average age of marriage.²⁷

And the age of sexual fulfillment. Yet feminine desire, possibly stronger with age, was no doubt a potent and influential social force. Perhaps the emotional zeal and passion that fired fourteenth-century mystics endorsed eroticism in its more usual form of feminine desire as well as its extended manifestation of mysticism.

Subversive Poetics

Ultimately, with proper respect for station, each bird in “his owne place” in Nature’s field, is hierarchically aligned: “the foules of ravyne / Weere hyest set” (320, 323–24); the small worm-eating birds followed; seed-eating fowls sat next on the green; “water-foul sat lowest in the dale.” But they do not remain in that orderly procession of upper-class decorum and refinement of speech. They say what they think. When and how they choose. And without denying Nature her prerogative to rule, they are allowed the freedom of speech—the song they have not waited to be given. This is Chaucer’s politicized, socially disruptive statement.

But power properly belongs to the Valentine queen, the formel eagle, double symbol of Anne of Bohemia and all her gender. The suitors’ wooing dialogue replete with courteous phrases “of merci and of grace” to “my lady sovereyne,” offers high-born gentility, and pledges of long service and deep devotion. Equally vocal, and thereby empowered, however noisy, are the less aristocratic birds vying for their beloveds. But their empowerment wanes in the heat of passion engendered by the formel’s sexual power. Through it, she potently controls both masculine and feminine desire, privileging her own erotic waiting game.

The *Parlement* is a fine concatenation of successes. As Larry Benson notes,

no other Valentine Poem made so happy a use of the idea... of enlivening the dreariest of winter months with an occasion redolent of spring... [by]

Subversive Poetics

an association of love with Saint Valentine's Day... as *The Parliament of Fowls*, and none approaches it in richness of texture and complexity of theme.²⁸

The realm of sexual as well as gender politics must be seen as part of the power machinations by which Chaucer upset the Valentine applecart of his too staid patriarchal world. His subversive privileging of feminine desire, both substantial and erotic in its foreplaying deferral, is an effectively subtle means of countering an all-too-patriarchal stronghold on courtly *fine amour*.

Notes

1. Derek S. Brewer, ed., *The Parlement of Foulys* (New York and London: Barnes and Noble and Nelson, 1960), p. 4.
2. Larry D. Benson, "The Occasion of the *Parliament of Fowls*" in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, MI.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), pp. 123–144. Benson re-examines the historic foundation for the avian allegory, dismissing previous objections to the Anne-Richard hypothesis and reasserting its legitimacy.
3. J.A.W. Bennett, *The Parlement of Foules: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957) p. 26.

Subversive Poetics

4. Kathleen E. Dubs and Stoddard Malarkey, “The Frame of Chaucer’s *Parlement*,” *Chaucer Review* 13 (1978), p. 18.
5. Dubs and Malarkey, p. 21.
6. Jack B. Oruch perhaps does the most convincing job. In “St. Valentine, Chaucer, and Spring in February,” *Speculum* 56 (1981), pp. 534–65, Oruch systematically surveys the most significant candidates of thirty possible Valentines from the fourth to sixteenth centuries and their potential amatory associations. He accounts for a February date by noting that the Shepherd’s Calendar c. 1503 defines “Primetime,” the Spring of the year, as February, March, and April.
7. Oruch, p. 553.
8. Charles Muscatine, Explanatory Notes to *Parlement of Fowles*, in *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) p. 999, n. 310. All quotations are from this edition.
9. Benson, p. 137.
10. Benson, pp.131–32.
11. Ironically, this occasional poem is to honor the new couple! Yet there is no reason to think Chaucer would subvert the historical marriage, only Anne’s lack of control over it.
12. Brewer, p. 20.
13. Brewer, p. 20.
14. John P. McCall, “The Harmony of Chaucer’s *Parlement*,” *Chaucer Review* 1 (1970), pp. 22–31, sees Nature as powerful and in control.
15. Mc Call, “Harmony,” p. 24.

Subversive Poetics

16. McCall, p. 23.
17. David Aers, “The *Parliament of Fowles*: Authority, the Knower and the Known,” *Chaucer Review* 16 (1981), pp. 1–17.
18. H.M. Leicester, Jr. “The Harmony of Chaucer’s *Parlement*: A Dissonant Voice,” *Chaucer Review* 9 (1974), p. 21.
19. Aers, p. 5
20. McCall, p. 25.
21. McCall, p. 29.
22. Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Women in the History of Political Thought: Ancient Greece to Machiavelli* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1985); see especially “St. Augustine: Women in the City of God,” pp. 135–40.
23. Vern L. Bullough, *The Subordinate Sex: A History of Attitudes toward Women* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 98.
24. Bullough, pp. 101.
25. Mary R. Beard. *Woman as Force in History* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), pp. 214–15.
26. Eleanor S. Riemer, “Women, Dowries, and Capital Investment in Thirteenth-Century Siena” in *The Marriage Bargain: Women and Dowries in European History* ed. Marion A. Kaplan (USA: Haworth Press, 1985), pp. 59–79.
27. Marion A. Kaplan, “Introduction,” *The Marriage Bargain: Women and Dowries in European History* (USA: Haworth Press, 1985), p. 6.
28. *Riverside Chaucer*, Larry D. Benson, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 383.

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Forget the Grail:
Quests for Insignificant Objects
with No Earthly Value

Ross G. Arthur

In Parentheses: Papers in Medieval Studies 1999

Fevery Fall, all around the world, teachers of medieval literature face new eighteen-year-old minds eager to be informed about The Grail. As they walk back to their offices, they meet new colleagues, tell them that they are teachers of medieval literature, and hear “You know, I’ve always been fascinated by The Grail.” They open a new theoretical work on narrative structure and find that the author has “covered” the Middle Ages by including a few paragraphs on The Grail: they know that they would be considered hopeless empiricists if they asked “Which text about which quest for which grail?”

I have no axe to grind with the Grail, with Grail-narratives or with Grail-scholars. The impetus for my choice of the “Forget the Grail” rhetorical strategy was a consideration of the First Continuation of Chrétien’s *Perceval*, which does just that. Although its ostensible purpose is to complete the Grail-narrative, it forgets the Grail for thousands and thousands of lines, telling us stories of characters who have nothing to do with the Grail. Other roughly contemporary texts show a similar lack of concern with the goals of their central quests. The eponymous hero of *Jaufre* spends thousands of lines trying to find and punish the villain Taulat, but when he finds him the battle is over in a few short lines, and the poem carries on for thousands more: the really interesting things happen in the subsidiary episodes.

Forget the Grail

Sometimes it is the character who is forgetful: Gawain sets out to avenge Raguidel without the lance he knows must accompany the successful avenger. In *La Demoiselle à la Mule*, the goal is rather silly: the maiden wants to recover a bridle for her mule. Scholars soon renamed the text *La Mule sans frain* to make the bridle seem important. But why does the damsels need a bridle for her mule, when it seems quite rideable without one? How did she happen to lose it in the first place? Why does Gawain receive no reward for returning it to her, although she promised a kiss “and the other thing” to the man who got it back for her? A skilled poet—or a skilled critic—might produce a poem which answered all these questions, on the basis of this poem’s fragmentary hints about rivalry between sisters, spells cast on the ancestral castle, and possible sexual puns: but this poet did not.

The bridle and the Grail—for the First Continuator if not for Chrétien—are what Alfred Hitchcock calls “McGuffins.” The McGuffin, in a Hitchcock film, is the code book, the key, the secret spy papers, the bomb, the missing old lady that everyone wants to find, or to keep hidden, for the next ninety-five minutes. The bridle, the stag’s foot, the villain, or the abducted queen holds the audience’s attention and focusses the protagonist’s aspirations for four hundred or four thousand rhyming octosyllabic couplets. The poet’s interest was, and the critic’s focus therefore should be, in the process, not on the goal. Let us deflect the critical gaze and privilege sections of the text which have been called “preliminary

Forget the Grail

episodes” and details which have been overlooked or called “minor.” Let us also forget criteria based on “individual poetic excellence” and “literary influence,” and attend indiscriminately to *Caradoc* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, short romances such as *La Mule sans frain* and *Le Chevalier à l’Épée*, Breton lais such as *Tyolet* and *Desiré*, longer adventure romances such as *Meraugis, Raguidel, Yvain, L’Âtre Perilleux, Erec, Jaufre, Lancelot* and *Lanzelet*, and longer and shorter romantic romances such as *Amadas et Ydoine* and *Gliglois*. This corpus is far too large for a proper literary study, and much of it lies outside the realm of mainstream literary analysis: but for a mythic analysis—and by “mythic” I mean an analysis of the sort of narrative patterns which Levi-Strauss called “machines for the suppression of thought”—the body of texts available is barely sufficient.

These texts form a group because, whether the protagonist is on a “quest” for a particular McGuffin or not, whether the object in question is inherently valuable or not, whether its possession is a prerequisite to the possession of something desirable or not, the narrative itinerary includes at least one stopover for the hero in a moment of total disempowerment. The reflexes of this disempowerment are metaphoric or metonymic death or castration. At some point or points in his career, prior to his becoming an active, empowered, individualized dominant male, the hero must become passive, impotent, nameless, mad, emasculated and/or dead. Successful fulfillment of this obligation leads to the acquisition or

Forget the Grail

re-acquisition of dominating power, but through a kind of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* “logic” whose precise functioning we are not invited to examine. Like any society’s version of “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do,” the mystifications in this pattern point to a hegemonic lie.

In both *Caradoc* and *Mule*, the hero takes part in what has come to be known as a “beheading game.” An enchanter arrives at Arthur’s court and challenges one of the knights to exchanges *colees*, blows to the neck. Caradoc accepts, and beheads the intruder, who picks up his head and demands a return engagement next year. The fateful day arrives, Caradoc stretches out his neck, and the enchanter does not behead him. In *Mule*, after Gawain has entered a strange revolving castle, he is similarly challenged by a giant churl, who allows his own head to be cut off but then does not cut off Gawain’s head the next day. In each case, after this non-event, the protagonist is changed. Before the test, Caradoc is considered a perfect young knight, but only because he is expert at hunting with hawks and hounds and bows and arrows, at playing chess, at wearing fur-lined cloaks and at speaking eloquently. After the first half of the game, the poet tells us that Caradoc had an adventure-filled year and performed many deeds of prowess, although he shows us none of them. When the second part of the game is complete, neither the poet nor the enchanter explains why such a game was devised. Rather, our interest is deflected toward his reason for not striking Caradoc: he reveals that he is

Forget the Grail

Caradoc's natural father. On one level, all the events which follow this event could just as easily have followed a simple revelation of paternity, with no beheading test at all; but shortly afterward, Caradoc initiates the process of becoming his own man, not beholden to any father for his status, by punishing both the enchanter and his adulterous mother. For the three nights following the marriage of Caradoc's legal parents, the enchanter had lain with Caradoc's mother and enchanted her husband so that he slept with a greyhound, a mare and a sow; now Caradoc walls up his mother in a tower and forces the enchanter to have sex with a greyhound, a mare and a sow. By submitting to the threat of decapitation, Caradoc has been granted the power to dominate, and that power is expressed in the ability to dominate his parents' sexuality. Later, his sphere of domination is enlarged, as he rescues the woman who will become his wife from a would-be rapist and then wins everyone's respect in a lengthy Round Table tournament.

In *La Mule sans frain*, the beheading game is similarly unmotivated and gets rather lost in a series of other tests. While Gawain is in the world beyond the court, he actively proves himself on numerous occasions. He perseveres, follows the path set for him through a forest filled with lions, tigers and leopards and then through a stinking pit filled with serpents, scorpions and other unnamed fire-breathing animals; he makes his way across a fearsome river on a bridge made of a single narrow iron plank, and then he dares to enter

Forget the Grail

a revolving castle, spurring his mule at just the right moment so that he will arrive at the wall when the door is in front of him: Kay was man enough for the first part of this trip, but turned back at the bridge. Gawain also dominates: he vanquishes two lions, which he kills, and one huge churl, whom he spares. The important thing about the beheading game is its placement, between the tests which he passes by simply enduring and the tests he passes by dominating. After he has submitted willingly to the threat of certain death, he is allowed to move to a higher level of knightly activity, to display his martial talents in battles against others: only after he has been disempowered can he be empowered. Incidentally, he gets the bridle, taking it back to court rather than accept the offer to remain as lord of the castle and its thirty-nine maidens.

Le Chevalier à l'Épée has been paired with *Mule* as a “source” of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but segregated from it as a source to a different section, the bedroom temptation. It makes rather fuller use of the possible reflexes of submission, including disarming, loss of social control, namelessness and feminization as well as synecdochic decapitation. Gawain is wandering aimlessly in the wilderness—no grail, no quest, no McGuffin at all—so out of touch with his current situation that he becomes hopelessly lost at nightfall. He spends the night with an Imperious Host, forewarned that disobedience means death. The Host commands him to go to bed with his daughter, naked so that they may enjoy each other more, and Gawain nervously obeys. In

Forget the Grail

the morning, when Gawain leaves the bedroom, he is acknowledged as the best knight who ever lived, he boldly defies his host, he is betrothed to the daughter, he is offered the lordship of the castle, and people arrive from miles around to rejoice because he has come to their land. This is what has happened in between: Gawain has surrendered his right to speak his mind and to make his own choices, as he agrees with everything his host says and does all he commands. He has removed all the external signs of his knighthood, with his spurs singled out for special mention. He has not really lost his name—though no one at the castle knows who he is at first—but he has lost his honorific title: while he is in the bedroom, the poet calls him “Gauvains,” not “Messire Gauvains.” He has been struck twice by an enchanted sword when he has tried to have his way with the daughter, first in the side—which causes him to lose all desire—and then on the right shoulder, when he tries again, motivated more by fear of scorn from other knights than by desire. He has then lain all night with the maiden, chaste in body if not in mind—and mind doesn’t seem to matter much. In the morning, the girl’s father sees the blood on the sheets and knows what has happened—a marvelously ambiguous moment. He has learned that Gawain is not dead and that he is Gawain, the best knight from here to Mallorca. Because of one of these things, or perhaps just because Gawain has not had sex with the girl—she warned him, as she had not warned any of the previous candidates—the father performs the marriage. The logic and the motivation

Forget the Grail

behind all this is unclear, but the result is not: having submitted to the power of the sword—or, rather, having passively experienced it, since willingness is not at issue, Gawain has acquired the power of the sword, which he soon proceeds to exercise, first over the daughter in bed and later over a perfidious knight in the wilderness.

When similar elements in this pattern of disempowerment occur in more than one text, the critic analyzing them frequently treats them as “borrowings” from a better-known text, usually one of Chrétien’s romances. When the seneschal Kay, who always starts the process but never completes it, has his arm broken, it is seen as a borrowing from Chrétien’s *Perceval*. When Jaufre, in his first battle after being knighted by King Arthur, has his spur sliced off, or when the mule Gawain is riding in *La Mule sans frain* has its tail cut off by the gate of the revolving castle, it is considered a borrowing from *Yvain*, where the hero loses his spurs and the back half of his horse as he rides past the guillotine gate in Laudine’s castle. An orthopedic surgeon, however, considering the number of times Kay breaks his right arm between the elbow and the shoulder would be astonished that he could lift a cup, much less wield a sword: yet each individual literary critic considering each individual text explains this away as a borrowing rather than seeking out the significance for the culture of expressing the theme of “failure to pass the initiation” through such a motif. A forensic pathologist examining all the romance knights with wounds in the neck or shoulder would send the Chief

Forget the Grail

Inspector in search of a single psychopath—possibly left-handed, given the number of times the wound is to the right side—only to learn that the wounds were inflicted by a host of different assailants, ranging from the dwarf who strikes Erec in the woods (incidentally beginning his transformation from disinterested spectator at an ersatz Arthurian adventure into the conqueror of a previously undefeated knight), to the Green Knight, to the magic sword in *Le Chevalier à l'Épée*, to the knife-wielding outraged father in *Lanzelet*, to the sword which “accidentally” wounds Yvain’s right shoulder when he swoons as he returns to the magic fountain. When we discover such repetition, or when we find the same sequence of events in Chrétien’s *Lancelot* as in *Le Chevalier à l'Épée*—hero lies in a bed, hero is wounded in the side, hero is wounded in the neck, hero lies in bed with a beautiful woman and does not have sex, then hero does have sex—then even though, or rather precisely because there are different beds, different women, different assailants, different circumstances and motivations, we seem to be confronting not purely individual poetic choices in the sphere of literature, but varying transformations of a ritual pattern of *dromena*, the “things done” to effect a transition in a “candidate” rather than events experienced by a hero, elements in a process which is efficacious *ex opere operato*, as a motiveless combination of dwarves, churls, women, fathers and renegade knights conspire to “make a man out of him.”

Forget the Grail

The set of texts I am presenting today are about initiation and education. By “education,” I do not mean the sorts of things meant by, for example, Madeleine Pelner Cosman in her *The Education of the Hero in Arthurian Romance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), p. 139–140:

Born the son of a ruler, the hero possesses inherited potential excellence which can be and is developed by education. His education consists of two or three separate periods. During the first period, the youth is cared for by a woman—his real or foster mother, or a nurse—who provides the necessary rudiments, to make the infant a marvelous boy. He is next entrusted to a male tutor for a second educational period. Instructed in endeavors which cultivate both mind and body, he is given preparation for the world in which his later adventures will take place. The curriculum of this second period consists of “liberal arts,” reading, instrumental and vocal music, law, hunting, exercise in sports, and tutelage in chivalry.... Upon leaving this second period of education and having a childhood adventure in which his learning is displayed, the hero arrives at court. Here, prior to the ceremony of his knighting, he either receives further education—his third period, under the tutelage of a courtier—or displays brilliant expertise which demonstrates his

Forget the Grail

precocious refinement and readiness for knighthood.

Rather, I mean something more like what we mean when we say, “that boy needs to be taught a good lesson.”

By “initiation,” I do not mean the sorts of things meant by Pierre Gallais in his *Perceval et l’Initiation: Essais sur le dernier roman de Chrétien de Troyes, ses correspondances “orientales” et sa signification anthropologique* (Paris: L’Agrafe d’Or, 1972), p. 28:

Un héros de roman (aussi bien persan que médiéval) est “de bonne orine”, “de bon eire” (= de bonne origine, souche, nature), et toute son “éducation” ne consiste qu’à le montrer, à le faire savoir et à le savoir soi-même (dans le cas, justement, de Perceval)—et il ne peut le savoir qu’en le faisant savoir, car un héros de roman (aussi bien médiéval qu’oriental) n’existe pas en dehors de la société.

The hero of a romance, whether Persian or medieval, is “of good origin, stock, or nature,” and all his “education” consists in showing it, in making it known and in knowing it himself (as in the case of Perceval); and he cannot know it except by making it known, for the hero of a romance, whether medieval or oriental, does not *exist* apart from society.

Forget the Grail

Rather, I mean something more like the initiations which take place each Fall in the fraternity houses on university campuses or, *mutatis mutandis*, in the thesis defenses and tenure committee deliberations taking place in adjacent offices.

The candidate in a romance is shown taking on the mission of his own free will, frequently after some other candidate has failed. Once it has begun, that mission leads to apparently subsidiary, preliminary adventures; since success in the major quest follows successful completion of these minor tests, they come to be seen as causal. The audience begins to believe that he has earned the right to the major adventure by demonstrating that he has the right stuff in each of the separate preliminary encounters with danger and temptation, but the links between the “causes” and the “effects” are kept vague. The obligation to perform the task, avoid the temptation and survive the challenge may be revealed by another character, through a “Not so fast, first you must...” kind of speech, but it is presented less as a result of any human decision than as something natural and necessary. In the real world of the young knights in the audience, however, warriors did not choose their own tasks but followed the marching orders of their lords. Their companions who failed on their missions came back dead, not merely shamed like Calogrenant or with a broken arm like Kay. When they survived their missions, even when they captured or successfully defended today’s McGuffin, they were no closer to the promised prize, marriage to an heiress with

Forget the Grail

a castle. And so the poet in the hall, in order to maintain the social balance and retain his position and his audience, was forced to exercise his talents yet again, devising a new fantasy in which a knight's adherence to duty in the face of mortal peril produces an enviable reward, in which setbacks are all merely temporary and defeats are all part of a larger plan leading to success.

The reflexes of final domination for the successful candidate are continual possession of the desirable woman, otherwise known as "marriage," and unchallenged control over castle and vassals, otherwise known as "lordship." Yvain has Laudine and her castle, Jaufre has Brunissen and all her castles, Amadas has Ydoine and her duchy, Tyolet has the Princess of Logres and her kingdom, Desiré has his fairy mistress and her realm, and Erec—aberrantly—has Enide and his own kingdom. Such rewards are so far beyond the experience of the audience that most romances stop there, as if incapable of imagining what comes next. Other texts, more insidiously, I think, promise only one night with the lady in question, or, like dozens of Gawain-romances, show the hero winning the reward or half of the reward and then losing it, not, of course, through any fault of his own. These latter texts say to their audiences, "Yes, you have endured and submitted and you have not been rewarded: but the same thing happened to the best knight who ever lived, and he didn't stop submitting and enduring."

So far, this analysis, by homogenizing a host of texts and reducing them to their abstract shared pattern, has

Forget the Grail

replicated only the first part of the romances themselves, in which the protagonist is reduced from individual knighthood to degree-zero common physical humanity; the obvious next step is the re-individuation of each text as unique reflex of the base pattern. This process should not happen too quickly: we must take note of smaller groupings first. In *Meraugis de Portlesguez*, the hero sets out on a quest to find his companion Gawain. He finds him, stranded on an island of Ladies and compelled to engage in a fight to the death with any man who arrives. Rather than kill Meraugis, Gawain pretends to decapitate him, rips off his helmet and throws it into the sea, so that the ladies watching from the castle will think that he has won the battle. Meraugis, now “dead,” enters the castle as a ghost, frightens the ladies, and locks them up. Now both men are stranded on the island, for the people with the boat on the mainland will only come over if summoned by the Lady. So Meraugis dresses himself in women’s clothing and calls them over. As he and Gawain enter the boat, the boatmen become suspicious that he is not in fact their Lady. Meraugis reaches under his dress, pulls out his sword, and says “*This is your ‘Lady’*” (“*Vostre dame est venue!... Vez la ci en ma main!... Ceste espee, c'est vostre dame/ Dont vos avrez dampnation.*” [3366–71]). Individualizing criticism can only see this as a burlesque scene, local comic relief, or, at best, as an indication of this poem’s erasure of the feminine: but this pattern of metonymic decapitation, metaphoric death and visual feminization followed by phallic display

Forget the Grail

is echoed in *Le Chevalier à l'Épée*. It has links to *Trubert*, where the protagonist disguises himself as a woman with a phallic name and impregnates the Duke's daughter, or, further afield, with the *Mahabharata* tale of Arjuna disguised as a eunuch or Statius's tale of Achilles, disguised as a woman but revealing his masculinity through his interest in sex and weapons. In *La Vengeance de Raguidel*, Gawain does not exactly lie about his name, but he allows everyone in a castle to believe that he is Kay. At one point, the Lady says to him, "Put your head through this window and smell my beautiful garden," and then reveals that there is a blade at the top prepared to slice off Gawain's head if he ever comes to the castle. Questions of "literary influence" are irrelevant: these are reflexes of an underlying social fear. Analysis on a less concrete level connects all these works to *Yvain* and *Jaufre*, where the heroine has, for a moment, life and death power over the hero, or to *Desiré*, *Amadas* and *Ydoine*, *Gliglois* and *Gautier d'Aupais*, where the hero must wait, serve, languish and—in the case of Amadas—go mad, run naked through the streets pursued by ruffians who pelt him with dung and be bitten in the right shoulder by a mastiff, before the heroine can grant him dominion. In order to capture the stag's foot and therefore the Princess of Logres, Tyolet—who for a time re-names himself "Chevalier-Beste"—is willing to ride through the perilous river and be mauled by seven lions—they wound his horse's right shoulder—and be stabbed and left for dead by a dishonest knight; when it is all over,

Forget the Grail

however, he is the lord. At the end of the day, the message is one: feminine empowerment is temporary, but masculine disempowerment is temporary.

Social, moral and spiritual romances gain when they are seen as socialization, moralizations and spiritualizations of the common raw pattern, again often in small inter-related groups. Authors made social statements in their choices regarding the agents of rescue: Yvain is resurrected by an unknown woman, Tyolet by his companion Gawain, and Amadas by his *amie* Ydoine. After the beheading test, Caradoc goes through the curriculum again. His mother and his natural father conspire to have a snake wrap itself around his right arm and slowly squeeze the life out of him; after a lengthy period of disempowerment, he is rescued by his *amie* Guinier, who undergoes a feminized version of the testing pattern. They are placed naked in adjacent tubs, his full of vinegar and hers full of milk. She pleads seductively with the serpent to leave her lover, and it is decapitated as it leaps to her breast. She emerges from this trial with a wound to her right breast, and this wound—or rather the magical gold nipple prosthesis which she is later given by her former assailant—becomes the sign of her successful candidacy, just as the traces of the assault on Caradoc's arm give him his new name, Caradoc Briesbras: his companion's first concern is to re-clothe him in vestments suitable to his rank. Desiré's lengthy period of subservience is ended by fatherhood, as is appropriate in a story which begins with his parents travelling to the shrine of St.

Forget the Grail

Giles to pray for his birth. Erec and Jaufre reactivate themselves, in response to cries for help. In *Le Chevalier à l'Épée*, Gawain is incited to carry on with the process which leads to his empowering neck-wound by his fear of scorn from his male companions. Lanzelet sleeps with the daughter first, at her urging; then he gets the knife-wound to the neck, from her father; then he kills the father. This confusion of the proper order of events requires that he go through the process again, with other women, before he can settle down as an established senior. Each narrative choice implies its own view of desirable social organization.

The moral progression from reactive vengeance to altruism in *Yvain*, *Jaufre* and *Erec* is basically an “add-on” to the pattern of transformation, deriving much of its persuasive energy for the original audience by being an accompaniment to increased military power and, of course, an improved economic position. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which spiritualizes the stages of the quest but not the goal, as soon as Gawain has been wounded in the neck he leaps up and confronts his opponent man to man, as if he were a typical re-empowered romance knight: his success is actually a failure, the kind of failure which for a penitentially-minded author is paradoxically a success, a success which Gawain himself soon transforms into a failure. Each of the elements in the pattern deserves to be the focus of a sub-group, with special studies of the “Loss and Regaining of Name,” the “Nick in the Neck,” the

Forget the Grail

“Crossing the Perilous Water,” and, for that matter, “Whose is that Blood on the Sheets?”

Structuralist studies of this sort frequently include a neutral, schematic summary of the underlying pattern they have discovered, and this often becomes the best-known part of the work, the only part ever quoted; this is unfortunate, since of course such a summary is the part of the work which owes most to the mind and society of the critic. In the case of this study, neo- or quasi-structuralist as it is, we are fortunate in having a medieval “summary” of the poems in a “text” of a different sort, the ritual through which young men became knights. The candidate for dubbing keeps a night-long vigil, comparable to the hero’s wakefulness in the *Lai de Doon* or *Jaufre*. He is given instruction in perfect knighthood by a surrogate for the mothers, the kings and the honest older knights and vavassors of the romances. He passes through water, taking a ritual bath comparable to the perilous rivers of the Arthurian wilderness or the vinegar and milk baths of Caradoc and Guinier. He puts aside his old clothing, and receives new garments and defensive and offensive weapons, meticulously allegorized by the spiritualizing revisionist commentators: romance authors usually focus more on problems with the identity of the giver. He is warned that if he fails in his calling, his spurs will be sheared off, like those of Yvain and Jaufre, and even, in some cases, that he will be mocked by the cooks as so many romance heroes are mocked by Kay. All of this, however, is just elaborate stage business to distract

Forget the Grail

attention from the truly efficacious part of the ritual, the one event which was never given a stable allegorical meaning, which was singled out in the *Ordene de Chevalerie* as properly performable only by a dominant on a subordinate: the colee, the blow to the shoulder with the hand or, more frequently, with the flat of the sword. As Sir Edmund Leach, the best structuralist anthropologist ever to be knighted, pointed out, “They tell you that she will touch your shoulder with the flat of the sword; they do not point out that the flat of the sword vis-à-vis the shoulder is the edge of the sword vis-à-vis the neck.” At the key moment in his transformation from subservient squire to empowered knight, the young man is told by an unequivocal gesture, “I could cut off your head... but I won’t.”

Representing the Gendered
Discourse of Power:
The Virgin Mary in *Christ I*

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The Old English *Christ I* or *Advent Lyrics*¹ have intrigued many scholars working from different critical perspectives. Studies range from the critical-historical attempts to determine sources, especially liturgical, interpretive commentary, and lectionary appropriations (Burlin; Cross 194–99; Joyce Hill 296–99; Thomas D. Hill 26–30; Rankin 317–37; Chance 13–30; Garde 122–30) and specific elements such as speech boundaries in Lyric VII (Anderson 611–18; Harlow 101–17), to studies of the “tonal development” in the Marian sequence (Moffat 134–41) to initial studies of the Virgin Mary in the context of representing women in Old English texts following the “images of women in literature” approach (Klinck 597–610). All contribute to our understanding of this unique Old English text. None, however, has been successful in accounting for the orchestration of gendered voices in the poem’s segments. In its form and treatment, the collection is an anomaly in Western European vernacular literature.

An approach concentrating on the representation of the Virgin Mary in *Christ I* raises some challenging questions about this text. Commenting on the position of women in Anglo-Saxon society as it is reflected in Old English texts, Anne L. Klinck notes that

The Gendered Discourse of Power

Simply because women are debarred from action, their position becomes psychologically more interesting, and they offer greater opportunities for the portrayal of thoughts and feelings, especially of an intimate kind. Women characters, confined to domestic roles, are the natural vehicle for the presentation of personal relationships, as opposed to the public relationships traditionally described by Old English poetry. (606)

Klinck's enlightening study asserts one very highly problematic aspect of the *Advent Lyrics*: psychological realism in the presentation of the Virgin. What seems apparent behind this informative study is an ahistoricism that ascribes the notion of a growing consciousness to the individual. If Old English literature as a whole reveals anything about individuals, then it valorizes the concept of an interconnected social network that defines them in relation to genealogy and—in the case of males—military status. In addition, this study—although not as heavily steeped in this ideology as earlier studies—interprets women as passive and men as active. Historical studies on Anglo-Saxon society and more theoretically-grounded feminist essays on the role of women in Old English texts since the publication of Klinck's article have shown the considerable economic and social power of women in the early Middle Ages.²

In the spirit of these more recent studies, this essay argues that the Virgin Mary of *Christ I* is by no means a passive character—“debarred from action” (Klinck

The Gendered Discourse of Power

606)—but is one who is simultaneously the creation of a discourse and the generative voice of a truth-shaping discourse. In essence, what would seem from several perspectives to be a marginalized text is actually an ideological pronouncement about the perception of late antique and early medieval spirituality crystallized in a late Old English text. And as such, the text requires a redrawing of the location of marginality in keeping with the subtle play of public and private spaces.

At the same time, the intention of this study is to show that the Virgin has a part in the poet's symbolic mode for interpreting gender and the construction of the body as a site of power—concepts absent from many OE poems, such as *Caedmon's Hymn*, *Beowulf*, *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Battle of Maldon*, *The Battle of Brunanburh*, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *Deor's Lament*. All are consciously male-authored texts whose preoccupations are those of an imagined heroic society. Even a text such as the *Wife's Lament*, while written from an apparent feminine vantage, has a family feud much like one in an heroic text at its center. Of the surviving literature of pre-Conquest England, the *Advent Lyrics* speak with a more consciously constructed voice of gendered relationships. Current methods of OE instruction have marginalized these voices and have thus “invented” and privileged an almost “heroic only” vision of the early Middle Ages. Our attempt here is to address this imbalance. Before we look at the structuralist power relationships in the poem and then analyze their particulars in the Marian lyrics,

The Gendered Discourse of Power

we need to establish our critical basis, since an appropriate one seems to be missing in scholarship.

I

In the last decade, Anglo-American literary criticism has witnessed the institutionalization of feminist and gender theory. The introductory essay to a collection entitled *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, edited by Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, traces this development up to the late '80s (1–26). Beginning as an approach broadly examining the “images of women” in literature, feminist criticism following Elaine Showalter’s 1981 article entitled “Criticism in the Wilderness,” has adopted complex theoretical bases (179–205).

Sometimes feminist criticism adopts portions of ideologies from methodologies that may be limiting, if not occasionally counterproductive to the announced agenda. Some feminist criticism adopts a Marxist or materialist base as a way of exploring the role of women not only in the literary text but also in assessing the text’s relation to a social, exterior world. The Marxist penchant to focus almost exclusively on power as repression or as the domination of one social, economic, and gender group over another, however, at best can only produce what we already know about medieval society in general—that it was decidedly patriarchal. Sigmund Freud provides another model, but again his focus on the male-centered world and for the feminine

The Gendered Discourse of Power

envy of that power distorts a view of human experience and tends to treat literary characters as real people. Such an approach has obvious problems when applied to medieval texts, few of which in the period before the rise of interest in Aristotelian causation dwell upon the psychological motivations of characters. In short, the typical character in Old English literature does not possess discernable depth or development that would tolerate an “etherizing upon the table.”

In the late 1980s and 1990s, feminists have turned to the writings of Michael Foucault to find a more congenial model. His *History of Sexuality* and *Power/Knowledge* are the most widely discussed in the attempt to negotiate a critical space between his ideological and scientific discourse and a general feminist criticism. In the introductory essay of a collection entitled *Foucault and Feminism: Reflection on Resistance*, Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby note several areas of similarity between Foucauldian and feminist theory:

Both identify the body as the site of power, that is, as the locus of domination through which docility is accomplished and subjectivity constituted. Both point to the local and intimate operation of power rather than focusing exclusively on the supreme power of the state. Both bring to the fore the crucial role of discourse in its capacity to produce and sustain hegemonic power and emphasize the challenges contained within marginalized and/or

The Gendered Discourse of Power

unrecognized discourses. And both criticize the ways in which Western humanism has privileged the experience of the Western masculine elite as it proclaims universals about truth, freedom, and human nature. (x)

Certainly, Foucault is not without his problems for a critic focusing of the role of women in a text and particularly with the concerns of discourse, given as Eloise A. Buker notes, that the feminine is almost excluded or that his work at least “fails to provide a view of women as participants in culture” (829). While this might be a problem, it is just as possible then to locate the feminine for him in a negotiated space—the Other—which Buker argues must be added into his overwhelmingly patriarchal view for a more complete reading (829). Such a position of negotiations accords well with what we know of the position of women in the Middle Ages.

Particularly interesting to a “feminist critique” of a text most likely written by a monk and intended to be read aloud during mealtime (Woolf 60–61) is this broad notion of power. In a 14 January 1976 lecture, later printed in a collection entitled *Power/Knowledge* and focusing on the historical and philosophical manifestation of power, Foucault contends that

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never

The Gendered Discourse of Power

localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting targets; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (98)

He also uses similar language in volume one of *The History of Sexuality* when he notes “power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (94). As noted above, Foucault’s redefining of power from obvious oppression to become an avenue of infinite possibilities is one of his most ingenious accomplishments.

In *The History of Sexuality* he explores the relationship between power, sexuality, and knowledge. Certainly his discussion raises some issues not immediately relevant to aspects of medieval power relationships, but there are several observations that are sufficiently transhistorical to aid an analysis of medieval notions of sexuality and power. As Ladelle McWhorter contends, Foucault was not a “liberationist” but was concerned with a culture’s management of the body (608). In fact, in the book, he charts social institutions “writing” the discourse of the body and sexuality from

The Gendered Discourse of Power

the medieval confessional through the eighteenth and nineteenth century to twentieth-century psychologists such as Freud. Discourses developed to inscribe and contain sexuality, and they became a form of maintenance. In an attempt to define modern society, Foucault writes:

We... are in a society of “sex,” or rather a society “with a sexuality”: the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used. Through the themes of health, progeny, race, the future of the species, the vitality of the social body, power spoke *of* sexuality and *to* sexuality; the later was not a mark or a symbol, it was an object and a target. (147)

For the Middle Ages, the body was a very obvious site of power, and the body of the Virgin Mary was no exception. Yet as readers might expect, the examination of the Virgin in keeping with the discourse of sexuality and power sublimated the erotic in favor of the doctrinal concretization of the word (Word).

Few medieval discourses show this aspect of power more readily than do those involving the Virgin Mary. While it is certainly true that medieval people understood the Virgin Mary as a highly exalted woman above all other women (lyric II) and above the entire human race (lyric IX), they would also have “mentally

The Gendered Discourse of Power

imagined” her bodily form as the result of the confluence of several textual traditions. Emerging in the Gospels and apocryphal writings and developing under the control of the Church Fathers, the Virgin became an important figure for veneration in both West and East (Warner 3–67). Celebrated in Roman feasts in Anglo-Saxon England as early as the seventh century, by the early ninth century—a date that Mary Clayton assigns to the writing of the *Advent Lyrics* (206)—the Virgin Mary was perceived as firmly inscribed in patriarchal discourse. Yet such a placement was not always marginalizing or constricting. Both Bede and Alcuin were important figures in the development of Marian thought and devotion, the first in commentary and the second in development of forms of liturgical services. Bede, as Hilda Graef notes, is devoted to the Virgin, but in discussions of the incarnation, stresses Christ’s fleshly inheritance as coming from Mary rather than his divinity (162–65). These early texts privilege the body as a material site. A representation of the Virgin at Breedon from the early ninth century with a raised hand of blessing and without the Christ child manifests “a very different conception of her role” (Clayton 152). All of these texts share in common the concept of the Virgin’s body as a constructed site of power. With the term “constructed,” the sense is not that Mary did not exist before the multilayered discourse we can call “Mary” was known, but that the texts focus on her body as a site both of and for the generation of power. *Christ I* shows how the conception of the Virgin

The Gendered Discourse of Power

was constructed in Anglo-Saxon cultural texts. Here the Virgin becomes what Foucault would call “the vehicle of power.”

II

The poet of *Christ I* imagines a complex relationship existing among his readers or hearers, himself, and the object of contemplation, between Mary and Joseph, and between typical persons, places and institutions, and their fulfillments in the antitype Mary. Douglas Moffat contends that the poet’s “goal was to move the readers emotionally by recreating the emotional response to the Advent season” (139). Many critics have observed the close structural parallels to Advent liturgy and lections (see the references to critical approaches on page 102). What becomes lost in scholarship’s attempt to historicize the text is an observation of the poet’s attention to a stylized representation of Mary’s body as the site of power. Her body is a textual construction developed from scripture and commentary, far removed from a contemplation of the human form seen in late medieval and Renaissance literature and art, but nonetheless imaginative within the domains of acceptable explanation.

Lyrics II, IV, VII, IX, and XII provide clear evidence of this verbal and ideological posturing. These “Marian” lyrics, as Moffat notes, show “an uncluttered, unambiguous crescendo to joy” compared to darker, brooding “Christ” lyrics (139). Clearly the poet is

The Gendered Discourse of Power

orthodox in his treatment, but such treatment suggests that he is adopting a discursive strategy more directly related to the homology of grammar in the early Middle Ages as a quest for ontology and as an expression of kinship (Bloch 78–80). Throughout the lyrics the poet, similar to a grammarian of the early Middle Ages and a chronicler of history who defines individual family lines according to patronymics or matronymics, creates a verbal space for understanding the ontology of Incarnation and the Marian role within that simultaneous material and symbolic order. That the Virgin has a voice in the lyrics is indicative of the poet's desire to have her articulate the discourse of power which operates through her. That she seems on the surface in her speeches to articulate the language of patriarchy is in no way limiting. Actually, she is the only person—of biological necessity a female—who can articulate that power. In a real sense, she empowers their language as she is its “consenting target” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 98). These words have their fullest meaning then as an example of feminine discourse. To illustrate this point further, we need to examine these lyrics.

III

Lyric II, based on the *O clavis David* antiphon, articulates Foucault's observation that power “functions in the form of a chain” (*Power/Knowledge* 98). Although the source does not include an implicit reference to the Virgin (Clayton 185), it is here

The Gendered Discourse of Power

developed to show the choice of Mary as a mystery that completes the circuit of the “witgena wōψsong” (46a) (prophet’s songs). In this lyric, Mary is the vehicle of power which circulates throughout “grundisceat” (42b) (the earth) and thus connects her with nature—a traditional association of male-centered discourse used in the description of the feminine. The poet emphasizes the naturalness of this version of power in creating potential for bringing salvation through the natural metaphor “wisna” (43a) (shoot) which receives artistic expression in the high Middle Ages in the Jesse Tree. Jackson J. Campbell notes that from the sixteenth line of the lyric, the connection with the antiphon is less obvious (15). He does, however, note a thematic unity based on the concept of light throughout the lyric (15). The shift away from the antiphon, however, in terms of the feminist discourse is intriguing. To this point, the lyric echoes through the OT exilic prophets an image which we traditionally associate with heroic poetry: the separation from homeland. At this point in the lyric, Mary represents the filling-in of the theological and verbal gap as the one who simultaneously bears the Word and also interprets the mystery in an experiential way. Unlike lyrics IV and VII, lyric II imagines Mary functioning in a chain of discourse whose end is the power of knowledge to be actualized in the Incarnation.

Lyric IV, based on the *O virgo virginium* antiphon, continues the theme of mystery, but here the dialogue presents one of the poem’s two direct, verbal articulations of the Virgin’s discourse of power.

The Gendered Discourse of Power

Anderson terms this presentation “magisterial authority” as she acts as the *eiron* reprobating the *alazon* (232). Scholarship traditionally sees the Virgin’s response to the mystery of birth as a mild reproof (Anderson 232–34; Campbell 18–19). The emphasis here is solidly on the Virgin and on her physical body as the site of power and on her knowledge as the controlling force of power in the formation of a cult around her.

In response to the speaker of the dialogue assessing the mystery, Mary says:

Fricgab þurh frywet	hu ic fæmnan had,
mund minne geheold,	ond eac modor gewearþ
mære meotudes suna.	Forþ an þæt monnum nis
cup geryne,	ac Crist onwrah
in Dauides	dyrre mægan
þæt is Euan scyld	eal forpynded,
wærgþ a aworpen,	ond gewuldrad is
se heanra had.	

(92–99a)

[You ask for curiosity how I my virgin state,
my purity I kept and also became the great mother
of the Son of God. Therefore that to humanity is not
a known mystery, but Christ revealed
in David’s beloved maiden
that Eve’s guilt is all nullified,
condemnation is cast off and glorified
is the more humble sex.]

The Gendered Discourse of Power

Her response, in distinction to that of her questioners, who are identified as “sunu solimæ somod his dohtor” (4.21) (sons of Jerusalem and her daughters), moves away from a contemplation of the body as the site of power to the nature of revelation in the power/knowledge synthesis. The center of power is shifted, if not subverted through the manifestation of that power. While Robert Burlin is correct in asserting that “the woman’s role and the unnatural occasion are overshadowed by the anagogical significance” (95), a feminist critique, while not dismissing the import of his suggestion, instead shows how the poet allows Mary to move beyond the biological to shape a discourse of truth. For it is in the discourse of truth that power operates.

Of the Marian lyrics in *Christ I*, lyric VII is the most unusual, and its form has prompted the greatest amount of critical commentary. There are several points we need to observe here. First, the question of speech boundaries is by no means a matter of scholarly consensus. The number of speech divisions ranges from three (Cosijn 109) to five or more (Anderson 230–40, 611–18; Burlin 611–18). The divisions must concern us here because it is through these speeches that the Virgin establishes her position relative to the discourse of power. Critics, however, do agree that the opening lines (164–67a) and the closing lines (197–213) are Mary’s. Joseph is likely speaking in lines 167b–76a and 181b–95a (Garde 122–30). Second, we must also consider the relative position of Mary and Joseph with

The Gendered Discourse of Power

respect to power, for here the concept is highly problematic and seems to fulfill Foucault's notion that power is "never in anybody's hands" (*Power/Knowledge* 98). Klinck, however, contends that Joseph occupies the central position in this lyric while Mary is the "dominant character" (601). Her observation must be seen in light of the comment that all women in OE literature are "subject to male authority" (Klinck 605). In his edition of the *Advent Lyrics*, Jackson J. Campbell notes that in Mary's concluding speech in which she explains the mystery that

it is best not to apply dramatic criteria of judgment to Mary's last speech, lest she appear prudish and pretentious as a woman. As a spokesman for religious instruction, she fulfills her function in the poem admirably, for the dignity of the teacher is more to the purpose than the appealing ingenuousness of the young girl. (24–25)

Both critics seem to miss the importance of Mary's position in the dialogue—the first under psychological probing and the second under the inability to read her statement within a larger frame of authority which would account for the tone of her speech.

Mary is the bearer of "wuldres þrym" (83b) (heaven's power)—through her, power functions. She is the center of attention. That there are what C.G. Harlow calls a "quotation within [a] quotation" (101) as a structural principle within the dialogue and that Mary

The Gendered Discourse of Power

reshapes the discourse surrounding the image of the temple to herself as the embodied discourse are significant in establishing Mary's dominance in several areas: gender relationships, understanding, and linguistic sophistication.

The quasi-dramatic situation which the poet imagines in this lyric is not a “realistic” (Klinck 602–04) or “naturalistic” (Campbell 24) one; instead, it is one that allows him through verbal echoes and gender roles to meditate on the symbolic and literal channels of power that allowed Joseph to contemplate removing Mary from the Temple to her becoming God’s refigured temple. Anderson is correct in asserting Mary as “self-deprecator and magisterial authority” (237). But we need to extend his point. Mary’s understanding of her position and of Joseph’s are based on gender roles: “Saga ecne þonc/ mærum meotodes sunu þæt ic his modor gewearþ,/ fæmne forþ seþeah, ond þu fæder cweden/ woruldcund bi wene” (209b–12a) (Give eternal thanks to the great Son of God that I have become his mother, however henceforth a virgin, and you called his father by the reckoning of the world). These are roles that she articulates and empowers through her words; and they are ultimately the roles that support the dominant ideology which prescribes them. Only she can resolve the mistaken notions. As Jane Chance notes, Mary teaches Joseph the importance of spiritual over literal reading of her words (24–26)—all of which accords with an early medieval notion of signs and their meanings that privileges spiritual readings over the

The Gendered Discourse of Power

literal sense. We may extend this notion then to suggest that a feminine, authoritative discourse is inscribed within the larger domains of patriarchal discourse. Joseph exists outside the circuits of power; he is brought into the network as a necessary vehicle on both social and linguistic levels. His resistance merely channels the orchestration of power.

With lyric IX, based on the *O mundi Domina* antiphon, we note a shift in the tone as Burlin observes to one of finality (144–47). Here Mary is not the human Mary on lyric VII, but the Queen of Heaven and mediator. Here power represented as biological is now transferred to the spiritual realm in this celebratory lyric. The poet reimagines the events of the incarnation, using as his source the misidentified prophet Ezekiel, who plays on the image of the temple gate (Burlin, 147). The poet does, however, change the polarity of the incarnation slightly by viewing it as an act of sacrifice:

Forþon þu þæt ana	ealra monna
geþohtest þrymlice,	þristhycgende,
þæt þy þinne mægþad	meotide brohtes,
sealdes butan synnum.	Nam swylc ne cwom
ænig oþer	ofer ealle men,
bryd beag hroden,	þe þa beorhtan lac
to heofonhame	hlutre mode
siþhan sende.	

(287–94a)

The Gendered Discourse of Power

[Therefore you that alone of all humanity
thought gloriously, strong in mind,
that you your virginity brought to God,
gave it without sin. None like you has come
any other over all humanity,
jewel-adorned woman, who the bright gift
to the heavenly home with clear mind.]

The poet engages the converse positions of powerlessness and powerfulness. At the very moment that it seems that Mary has been made a subject of power, albeit a “consenting target,” the incarnation subverts the power so that she is finally the producer of power inscribed within the patriarchal words of the prophet. Lyric II sees Mary as the fulfillment of the prophet’s speech, but here the imagery—building on an exegetical model as Chance observes (26–30)—combines elements seen in some of the earlier lyrics to sublimate the biological imagery on birthing to that of an ornate temple door, a highly symbolic and controlled metaphor of authority, through which Christ passed. The experiential manifestation of Mary as “consenting target” then transforms her into Queen of Heaven. With its emphasis upon authoritative frames for understanding the incarnation and the implicit concerns for ontology, the lyric describes the power relationships, placing Mary at numerous points within the circuits.

Lyric XII, based on *O admirabile commercium* antiphon, closes the collection of poems and should be

The Gendered Discourse of Power

taken as a recontextualizing of the Virgin within the syntactical scope of salvation history as a “symphonic coda” (Burlin 171). If we see the lyrics as meditative moments highlighting various elements mandated and echoed in liturgical offices during the Advent season, then sometimes what may appear as an idea brought forward for consideration must be reinserted into a signifying space. That is precisely what lyric XII does. Marian devotion must be seen as a part of a whole. The poet ultimately rejects the construction of an homology to the Breedon representation of the Virgin. Merging the virginal birth as a generative point for Christ’s coming into the world through Mary’s “flæsc unwemme” (3) (undefiled flesh) with the sanctified Christ in heaven with imagery that is suggestive of Christ’s sitting the majesty achieves this reordering of the circuits of power. Clearly, Mary’s position is subordinated here—all in accordance with orthodox theology. She is an element within the highly complex notion of salvific power—one of its most human and experiential “consenting targets.”

Christ I’s representation of the Virgin Mary as a discourse of power at the same time as functioning within a discourse of power is complex. Critics of the poem have not seen the Virgin in this light. From studies in the material culture and religious institutions of the Anglo-Saxon period, we note Mary’s coming to assert herself in recognizably central positions. While on the surface a feminist approach to the poem may seem suspect to some readers, such an analysis using a

The Gendered Discourse of Power

Foucaultian understanding of power can help us to reexamine the unique role of the Virgin Mary within a system. That patriarchy is present in the symbolic rhythms of the poem is clear, but rather than being a trapped spokesperson for the system, she becomes the true voice of the system. She is the one for whom the system was created and the one who through her own experiences lends to that system a clear and strong feminine voice. Clearly, *Christ I* with its complex associations with liturgical texts, its impressive treatment of gender identification, and its centrality to Anglo-Saxon culture and ritual deserves greater attention—especially given that the poem is a supreme example of the process of negotiation of the authoritative Latin ecclesiastical and liturgical materials with the vernacular Old English which contains embedded traces of a martial and tribal/familial ideologies. The lyrics voice the seldom-voiced but ever-present issues found in the margins of other OE texts.

Notes

¹All quotations from *Christ I* are from the edition by Robert B. Burlin, *Yale Studies in English* 168 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1968).

²Among the most recent are *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988) and *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico

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Childe Hood:
The Infantilization of Medieval Legend

Julie Nelson Couch

In Parentheses: Papers in Medieval Studies 1999

n *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*, Stephen Knight offers a prime pattern for teaching Robin Hood. Knight lays out a detailed history and scrutinizes the generic, ideological and political dimensions of Robin Hood representations. I would like to share yet another pattern for bringing Robin Hood to the literature classroom. What I will attempt briefly here is to situate the Robin Hood legend within a particular historical construction of the medieval past, drawing on recent work in reception theory.¹ I will attend to what I regard as infantilization of the medieval past by eighteenth and nineteenth century literary scholars—their representation of medieval people and medieval literature as childish and/or childlike. I see a crucial relationship between such infantilization and the prominence of medieval legend in modern children's literature. This relationship, I suggest, explains a striking generic collision between historical fiction and the *boys' book* in Howard Pyle's *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*.

Infantilization itself arose from a collision of sorts—a historical collision at the intersection of nationalism, the theory of evolution, and the common perception of old tales as the reading of childhood. Thomas Percy was one of the first eighteenth century antiquarians to 'apologize' for taking old 'childish'

Childe Hood

poems seriously; he justified their usefulness by placing them within an evolutionary paradigm of progress. By arranging a collection of poems in chronological order, Percy intended to illustrate “the gradual improvements of the English language and poetry from the earliest ages down to the present” (I. 3). Use of an evolutionary model necessarily demotes earlier peoples—Percy calls them “gross and ignorant minds,”—or at best, in the nationalistic mode, renders them less highly developed versions of present learned, literary selves: the “old, simple bards,” though they lived in “rude, ignorant times” and used a “barbaric, unpolished language,” nevertheless composed truly English poems (as opposed to French derivatives) that “display great descriptive and inventive powers” (III. 340, 352, 354, 358, 363).

Percy’s condescending glance toward early literature paralleled a scholarly conception of the past as the nation’s childhood, an idea enabled by the logical extension of evolutionary thinking to history and also by the deep-seated feeling among learned men that the old tales were essentially children’s stories. Samuel Johnson explicitly linked childhood with the medieval past when he asserted that romances and legends are “children’s literature” because they come from a time when “learning was in its infancy” and people were “on the footing of children.” As Walter Scott put it, the tales of old show us “the National muse in her cradle” (in Johnston 33, 96).

This scientific, psychological, and nationalistic picture of a nation developing from a primitive

Childe Hood

childhood to an enlightened adulthood dignified antiquarian interest in ballads long considered cheap entertainment for children and the lower classes. Chapbooks, in which rewritings of early romances and ballads enjoyed prolonged popularity, were, as George Crabbe versifies, “the Peasant’s joys, when placed at ease,/ Half his delighted offspring mount his knees” (in Johnston 28).² According to Joseph Addison in No. 417 of *The Spectator*, the old medieval “Legends and Fables, [and] antiquated Romances” were the “Tradition of Nurses and Old Women,” the stories of childhood.

The ‘gentrifying’ of the material by such collectors as Percy and Joseph Ritson did not take the ballads out of the nursery; rather, it entrenched them anew in juvenility as writers utilized Percy’s and Ritson’s printed collections of medieval tales and the evolutionary concept of English history to write historical fiction.

American historical fiction in the late nineteenth century reveals how the notion of an infantile Middle Ages permeated fictional conceptions. Mark Twain’s 1889 novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, is a prime example of fictionalized evolutionary history that infantilizes the past. When Hank Morgan, a head superintendent in an arms factory, finds himself in a sixth century Malorian Camelot, he sees himself as a “man among children, a master intelligence among intellectual moles” who has been given the great opportunity to “sail in and grow up with the country” (54, 50). To Hank, King Arthur and his retinue are like babes in a nursery, “childlike and innocent,” ignorant

Childe Hood

and gullible (18). After a lifetime of contrasting their superstitions and simplicity to his nineteenth century scientific and mechanical knowledge, Hank finally brings the pinnacle of his civilization to the past—high-tech weaponry—and subsequently brings about mass destruction. The infantilization of the past then metamorphoses into a romanticization of the past, a self-reflexive move that regularly attended infantilization. By the end of the book, we find Hank back in his own century yearning for the purity and innocence of the medieval world—a world now figured in the image of a mother and child (his medieval family) and placed against an empty “civilized” nineteenth century.

Infantilized, romanticized history not only affected historical fiction; it also mutated into a primitivist view of childhood in a new genre brought forth by the burgeoning market of children’s literature. Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s 1869 *Story of a Bad Boy* was recognized by contemporaries as introducing a new generic paradigm: a *boys’ book*, in which a boys’ world is constructed “that is antagonistic to the world of adults” because boys are like ‘natural savages’—wild and uncivilized—who resist the constraining civilization of adulthood, its work and responsibility. Henry Cabot Lodge compared boys to primitives who lived during the “boyhood of the race.” Like *A Connecticut Yankee*, the boys’ book romanticizes an imagined ‘childhood’ and effects an “elegiac tone,” mourning the inevitable loss of boyhood “innocence,” a concept that subsumes the great

Childe Hood

freedom of a boy's life and the particular camaraderie of the boy-world, a group organized around its own rites and rituals distinct from those of adult authority (Crowley 385–87).

A boys' world invades Sherwood Forest in Howard Pyle's 1883 elegant and popular rendition of the Robin Hood legend for children, *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*. Knight notes that Pyle's *Robin Hood* followed upon a long succession of Robin Hood books written specifically for the children's market. He suggests that Pyle's book solidified Robin Hood as part of the heritage movement in English education, a movement that supplied a masculine, pastoral English past as the student's romanticized dose of history (201–7).

Although Pyle's medieval world is definitely a masculine one, its masculinity is that of schoolboys. Fusing the infantilization of the medieval past with the romanticization of childhood, Pyle enacts a 'primitive' boys' world in which Robin Hood and his men *become boys* whose freedom and merry savagery is antagonistic to an 'adult' world of work and organized violence. Here the medieval past becomes a nostalgic Peter-Pan fantasy world.³

Pyle's medieval escapism presents a psychological paradigm of romantic, free, fun-loving childhood that persistently opposes a somber, confining, and violent adulthood—a lush picture of innocent, boyish outlaws prevailing easily against the rage and cowardice of their cardboard cut-out adversaries. While the sheriff fumes,

Childe Hood

whines, and wheedles to ensnare Robin Hood, the “outlaws” laughingly use pranks and disguises to outwit him.⁴

Tricks are natural to this medieval past because it is a past that is *played*. In the preface, Pyle explicitly sets up history as a performance, as pageantry, a domain where historical characters may frolic like children; he announces that the reader will find “good, sober folks ofreal history so brisk and caper in gay colors and motley, that you would not know them but for the names tagged to them” (vii). His characters from history will enter in disguise, ready to play history as a child’s game for a child’s pleasure. The framed illustrations supplement this presentation of the legend: the decorative border around each picture gives the sensation that one is peering into another world that is set upon a stage. The same sets—Nottingham towers or Sherwood oaks—often fill out the backdrop.

Pyle welcomes the young reader to share in these merry delights and is quick to show serious “adult” readers the door:

You who so plod amid serious things that you feel it shame to give yourself up even for a few short moments to mirth and joyousness in the land of Fancy; you who think that life hath nought to do with innocent laughter that can harm no one; these pages are not for you. Clap to the leaves and go no farther than this... (vii)



Robin Hood meeteth the tall
Stranger on the Bridge

Childe Hood

Adult readers are summarily dismissed from this boys' world in which adult characters, typecast as humorless bullies, make easy targets for the boys' tricks. However, in the prologue and epilogue, adults take on a more ominous role as villains who spur Robin's flight into the merry forest of childhood and then force his sad return to adulthood and civilization. In the prologue, Robin appears as a youth tripping merrily to Nottingham for an archery contest who is pulled up short by foresters who mock him severely for his youth. Using the issue of age as the medium for their maliciousness, they call him "little lad" and belittle his bow and arrows. The mocking continues in this vein: "Why, boy, thy mother's milk is yet scarce dry upon thy lips, and yet thou pratest of standing up with good stout men at Nottingham butts" (2).⁵ Pyle represents an enmity not so much between oppressors and oppressed (the leitmotif of many Robin Hood texts) as between troublemaking adults (given to violence and greed), and merry-minded youth (given to sportsmanship and camaraderie). These adults force Robin to murder one of them and thus drive him into outlawry. The murder goes against the grain of his youthful goodness, making him sick at heart (4); as an outlaw, Robin diligently avoids use of deadly force, preferring pranks and equitable theft.

The conscious rejection of violence and rage, figured as adult traits, in favor of schoolboy sportsmanship appears explicitly in Robin's recruitment of Little John, an incident that rounds out the prologue. As in the seventeenth century ballad, Robin Hood and Little John



Childe Hood

meet on a bridge and challenge each other to a bout of quarterstaff. Laughing at his own ducking at Little John's hands, Robin proceeds to check John's rage with joviality at every step, re-training him to be a "merry man." When Will Scarlet jokes that this fellow called John Little should be renamed Little John, John becomes angry and threatens Will, but is told by Robin to "bottle thine anger" (9). By the time they have dragged Little John through a mock christening complete with pouring ale over his head, John has learned to be merry; "at first he was of a mind to be angry, but found he could not because the others were so merry; so he, too, laughed with the rest" (10). Here the metaphorical return to childhood has been made explicit; Little John is the "fair infant," the "bonny babe," whom the "merry boys" christen and clothe anew (9–10).⁶ In similar fashion, a number of other adults who have been working for the authorities or who have simply been carrying out their trade desert their livelihoods at the drop of a hat to join Robin. Upon his invitation to join, the tanner makes clear the contrast between merry outlawry and adult work: "Hey for a merry life! And hey for the life I love! Away with tanbark and filthy vats and foul cowhides!" (87). No sense of obligation to family or community appears to mar the easy and valued regression into the forest and childhood.

The description of the merry, boyish life in the woods runs like a refrain from the beginning to the end of the book. As the narrator and Robin tell us over and over:

Childe Hood

Right merrily they dwelt within the depths of Sherwood Forest, suffering neither care nor want, but passing the time in merry games of archery or bouts of cudgel play, living upon the King's venison, washed down with draughts of ale of October brewing" (1).

The realities of real work and real oppression are pushed into an idyllic background of this toy landscape for boys, a landscape characterized by the centrality of a school boy morality and masculinity. Women are rarely seen in the novel, and if seen not heard. Maid Marian appears as a mere thought of "bright eyes" in Robin's mind before he is outlawed and is then never heard of again (2). Other women are simply part of the scenery. "The voice of the busy housewife," for example, fills the air along with the "drowsy drone" of the bee and "the crow of a distant cock" (89). The wedding of Allan a Dale and Ellen becomes a boys' game of outwitting the bishop; Ellen only looks forlorn and happy by turns and never speaks (143–54). In general, feminine qualities are curtly checked and contrasted against the "manliness" of the boys. Robin is at first quite offended by the "dainty" walk and gestures of his nephew Will Gamwell (89–90).

As in the boys' book, idyllic youth in *Robin Hood* is gendered masculine. Homosocial camaraderie dominates, obscuring or even opposing conventional "adult" heterosexual relationships.⁷ Women, as part of

Childe Hood

the adult world, are mere buxom lasses in the background; in the foreground the boys fight, love, kiss, and embrace one another in joyful, tearful reunions and partings. The dying Robin Hood lies in Little John's "loving arms" and his men send up "a great loud sound of wailing" (295). Using the homosocial potency of the boys' book, Pyle renders the medieval past and its child reader not only childlike but also misogynistic.

Adult enemies become a real threat again as the narrative approaches its conclusion, expelling Robin from the forest of innocence. The process begins when Robin is driven to commit a second murder by the hardened Guy of Gisborne. The epitome of violent authority—a hired murderer—Guy, wearing dead animals and a "thin cruel mouth," contrasts with the peaceful, mirthful Robin.⁸ When Little John believes that Guy has killed Robin, he cries out at the disparity:

"who is there that hath not heard of thee and cursed thee for thy vile deeds of blood and rapine? Is it by such a hand as thine that the gentlest heart that ever beat is stilled in death?" (267)

Robin must kill the murderous outlaw or be killed, and so the obligations of adulthood commence, marked first by violence and then by the constricting machinations of authorities. In the next episode, King Richard, who can be as good a sport as Robin in the rough give-and-take of the forest games, pardons Robin on the condition that he go into the service of the king. When this seemingly

Childe Hood

innocuous agreement is made, Allan a Dale sings a song of death that foreshadows the end of Robin and his merry life in the forest (283–84). Robin then follows the king into years of war—the violent trope of adulthood (287).

The epilogue marks Robin’s definitive exit from merry childhood. In fact, the narrator offers a soft warning to his reader about the end of “merry doings”:

“I will not bid you follow me further... for that which comes hereafter speaks of the breaking up of things, and shows how joys and pleasures that are dead and gone can never be set upon their feet to walk again.” (289)

The epilogue then continues with the sense of loss that is characteristic of the boys’ book. In a prolonged scene of nostalgia, Robin returns from the wars after King Richard’s death and rides over his old stomping grounds, now quiet. He experiences a “great longing” for the old times that is met with the “wild cry of yearning, of joy, and yet of grief” of Little John and his other men who come running at the sound of his old horn (290–91). They mean to return to their old way of life but the attempt is short-lived; King John and the sheriff send troops of men to take them, and a changed Robin cannot simply hide until the danger is over:

Now had Robin Hood been as peaceful as of old,
everything might have ended in smoke, as other

Childe Hood

such ventures had always done before; but he had fought for years under King Richard, and was changed from what he used to be. It galled his pride to thus flee away before those sent against him

and so Robin meets his enemies in a “bloody fight” (292). Though Robin and his men win the day, the change to violent adulthood has gone through to completion, and Robin dies soon after.

Pyle cements the link between the medieval past and childhood and in doing so, situates history and legend within the nineteenth century romanticization of childhood. Pyle’s Robin Hood helped establish the scholarly paradigm of progress in the popular imagination. That nationalistic, progressive view shaped the teaching of history in the nineteenth century and continues to shape history represented today by educators, writers, and film makers. In teaching the later manifestations of the Robin Hood legend, we can show students how the construction of readers and the construction of concepts in other venues of culture, such as the concept of evolution or the romanticized view of childhood, intersect to affect receptions of history and literature. For many students today, Robin Hood is still a child’s fanciful story and the Middle Ages are simply a time of thrilling boyhood adventures.

Notes

1. Reception theory allows one to recognize the interpretative filters that have been placed over our reception of the past by earlier constructors of history. It also recognizes changing audience expectations that make certain generic collisions possible, collisions which result in new conceptions of history in new generic forms. See Frantzen 22, 56, 59.
2. Crabbe did not separate his own childhood delight in reading the old legends from the peasant's children's delight; in another poem, he fondly remembers the days when he "Winged round the globe with Rowland or Sir Guy" (in Johnston 28).
3. Before Pyle's novel, English writers had linked the innocent, pastoral Robin Hood of the heritage movement to the idea of childhood. For example, to Leigh Hunt's 1820 *Ballads of Robin Hood* was appended the subtitle *For Children* in the second edition of 1855 (See Knight 159, 164–67). One can see that a self-reflexive motion underlies the notion that the yearning for a simple, non-urban past belongs to the idealized time of innocent, 'pre-civilized' childhood.
4. The sheriff is the prime example of the adult bully. Whether he is sending his gang to beat up one of Robin's outnumbered men, running away from Robin and his men, or gnawing his "nether lip" while Little John counts out his purse—"every clink of the bright money was a drop of blood from his veins"—the sheriff serves

Childe Hood

as the butt of all jokes, Pyle's moral exemplar of cowardice, "greed and guile" (36, 43, 55–56). King Henry is also portrayed as a poor sport; his wrath toward Robin for beating his foremost archers in a contest drives him to break his promise to the queen to pardon Robin Hood, instead chasing Robin all over the country. In contrast, when Robin wins he shares his grand prize with the king's archers and compliments their skill (229–34).

5. Like the foresters, the sheriff tries to take advantage of Robin's youth when Robin is in the disguise of a butcher-cum-spendthrift prodigal, but Robin exposes his deviousness: "thou, with thy gray hairs and one foot in the grave, wouldest trade upon the folly of a wild youth" (52).

6. The mock christening of Little John, the "pretty sweet babe" does occur in the ballad, but Pyle has added the frequent exchanges of John's angry fits and their corrective: Robin's side-splitting laughter (see Dobson 166–70).

7. The one adult heterosexual relationship that is dramatized in the novel is that of the king and queen, a relationship which proves almost fatal to Robin Hood.

8. Guy has heard that Robin "hath never let blood in his life, saving when he first came to the forest" (257–59).

Childe Hood

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Semiotic Perception and
the Problem of Chaucerian "Prejudice"

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A Brief Summers' Storm and The Problem of Prejudice

Like some deep-seated flaw in the marble of a wondrous statue, Chaucer's seemingly prejudicial attitudes have at turns puzzled, vexed, and even embarrassed twentieth century readers, especially those for whom the source of the poet's greatness is arguably his understanding of the universal human condition in his fellow pilgrims both medieval and modern.¹ Indeed, such pettiness in the midst of greatness seems to fly in the face not only of the claims we make for Chaucer but for those concerning the civilizing effects of literature or even of a liberal education. To be sure, the regularity of the appearance of this issue might well be taken as evidence of the fact that the stakes in this debate—whether tenets about the civilizing effects of literature or the conception of a revered poet—are high. Our constant return and the peculiarities (including the apologist, sometimes defensive tone of many studies)² demonstrates that many Chaucerians, at least on a gut level, feel that something important is being challenged, that more than just the text is being interrogated when we take up the issue.

For the most part, there have been two responses to the possibility of Chaucer's "prejudicial" attitudes.³ The first is an essentially "historical" interpretation by which one views Chaucer as a product of his times and, hence,

Chaucerian "Prejudice"

subject to their cultural vices as well as virtues.⁴ In this regard, one might well consider the epistolary exchange that was waged some years ago over Melvin Storm's 1982 *PMLA* essay on the Pardoner, an essay that Claude Summers, a non-medievalist, found to be in violation of that journal's "editorial policy, which 'urges its contributors to be sensitive to the social implications of language and to seek wording free of discriminatory overtones'" (254). Storm's final response to this charge is the very embodiment of the historical approach: "Summers' quarrel, it would seem, is not with me, nor with the Editorial Board, but with the fourteenth century" (255). And, indeed, Summers does, in fact, unhesitatingly indict the whole period for its active intolerance of Jews, women, and homosexuals. One advantage of the historical approach is that it allows us to congratulate ourselves on how far we have come since the fourteenth century. A serious disadvantage is that it is distressingly similar to the Wife's ascribing her own shortcomings to the constellations under which she was born. Fairly or unfairly we expect more from Chaucer, that he should transcend the cultural constellations under which he was born. Another problem is recovering the history upon which the historical approach is based. Emmy Stark Zitter notes that "Most of Chaucer's audience undoubtedly had never had any contact with Jews, who had been expelled from England in the year 1290" (278). Paul A. Olson implies that Jews, presumably were known since they enjoyed roughly equal protection under the law (141).

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

The second response to this most sensitive of matters Chaucerian is to see Chaucer as transcending, or at the least scrutinizing, the cultural limits of his age—as using Prioress’ anti-Semitism or the Merchant’s misogyny as self-revealing shortcomings whose exposure inevitably entails a self-deflation that reveals the poet’s condemnation of such attitudes.⁵ Although appealing from a humanistic point of view, this response is suspiciously convenient, an essentially Romantic, as opposed to medieval, one—relying as it does on a rather untypical defiance of the norm by a poet who in many ways is the embodiment of his age, by expecting the subtext of all creative acts to be *non serviam* rather than *caritas*. We see traces of such an approach in Summers’ reluctance to ascribe to Chaucer what he finds to be “noxious sentiments” while unhesitatingly condemning the entire period out of hand in regard to its intolerance. The list here is a long and impressive one. Muriel Bowden, in her highly influential handbook, deliberately contrasts anti-Semitism to the Prioress’ supposed piety in order to condemn the former and undercut the latter (99–100). Sr. Mary Hostia likewise finds the contradiction between piety and the tale indicative of Hypocrisy. Richard J. Schoeck presents the tale condemning the cruelty of the Prioress, finding deliberate irony and a “satire” of anti-Semitism. Talbot Donaldson (*Prioress*) finds the Prioress to be a person of her age, but insists that Chaucer was not, finding it inconsonant with the still influential construction of “Chaucer the Poet” which Donaldson found at the heart

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

of the canon. The natural heirs to such “modern” ironic” and/or “satiric” readers of the tale are those whose critical methodologies are founded on “subversion,” ideological “resistance,” and “interrogation.”

The question, then, of the exact nature of Madame Eglentyne’s attitudes towards the Jews is, as her name implies, a thorny one in which far abler critics than ourselves have had recourse to the better part of valor. Larry Benson, who in his notes to the *Prioreess’ Tale* seems firmly in the “historical camp” on the issue of Madame Eglentyne’s anti-Semitism, concludes by observing “On the whole Chaucer’s characteristic ambiguity defies final definition of either his own attitude or his intent regarding the Prioreess” (914). On the other hand, as the *Parliament of Fowles* demonstrates, such an open question is always an opportunity for the “parfit raison of a gose,” so what we would like to do in this essay is to reopen this debate, however briefly, bringing to bear some recent as well as medieval literary and semiotic theory. What we would also like to do is to have our cake and eat it too (or in the case of the Summoner, to have it and wear it). Cloaking ourselves in the historicity of the first response, we will argue that Chaucer is traditional, that he is very much a person of his times, but that the tradition he follows is semiotic rather than a social in nature, and that a medieval, as opposed to a modern, semiosis might well mean that his use of persons in what to us seems a prejudicial fashion may well not be prejudice at all, at least in the modern sense in which the

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

term is buffeted about in the Summers Storm over the *Pardoners Tale*.

The Promise of Postmodernism

If as we have noted, the natural heirs to the popular “satiric” readings of the Prioress’ anti-Semitism are readings which rely on contemporary “critical theory,” the question properly posed is whether post-modernism offers anything more than new terminology in exposing the Prioress’ un-Christian attitudes in the midst of (and relation to) her Christian piety. Indeed, given the Francophile basis of a good deal of Postmodernism, such approaches might well offer new insights into the question of Chaucer’s relationship with the Prioress’ anti-Semitism since, as Michael Weingrad notes in another context, “Every major contemporary French theorist has made some study of or pronouncement upon the Jews and their place in the West” (79). To be sure, Louise Fradenburg has shown value of deconstructive approaches to question of the Prioress, although her focus is more on critical responses to the Prioress’ anti-Semitism than the anti-Semitism, itself.

Yet despite the possibilities, medievalists have not by and large brought to bear semiotic elements of contemporary critical theory (or for that matter key sociological studies of the nature and, most importantly semiotics, of prejudice)⁶ on the troubling questions raised by the Prioress and her Tale. In this, they have repeated the habits of their structuralist predecessors.

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

For example, Emmy Stark Zitter, like many others, finds Chaucer using Jews in “conventional” fashion of the times (278, 279). Focusing solely on the content of the convention rather than how it works, Zitter presents its conventional signification without examining the underlying semiotic conventions of that signification. Indeed, reflecting the semiotic bases of much contemporary theory, Paul Olson, citing Kenneth Pike, argues,

When historical-sociological analysis is done meaningfully, the *Canterbury Tales* first receive what linguist Kenneth Pike calls an *emic* description, one that examines Chaucer’s language from within the linguistic and semantic system available to the poet’s court.... When we have achieved [an]... understanding [of Chaucer’s way of life, language, and system of usage], we have done the critics first job. We may then, if we wish, despise his vision and dislike his artifice. We ought not to flinch. Better to reject the poet than to make him the Narcissus image of our own historical or semiological fantasies. (16–18)⁷

The Mirror that Holds the Image: The Nature (and Structure) of Prejudice

What has also not come under scrutiny are “Narcissistic” projections/assumptions that the prejudice in the Middle Ages is the same as prejudice in our own

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

times.⁸ Ignoring a good deal of sociological research to the contrary, Chaucer criticism has by and large been rested on the premise that if you have seen one bigot you've seen them all. This, of course, is uncomfortably close to what many along with Summers would condemn as the “noxious” sentiment that—if you've seen one woman, Jew, Muslim or gay—you've seen them all. In short, that prejudice is immutable and that its modern mechanisms and practice are identical to its mechanisms and practices in the Middle Ages. Perhaps it's an understandable despair about the human condition combined with a dose of current events that leads us, in regard to prejudice, to a totalizing, essentialist tendency, even amongst those whose critical practice has been to reveal hidden assumptions and challenge just such formulations. Old historicism or New, Structuralist or Postmodernist, it would be hard to find a medievalist who would make the same claim for the unbroken continuity of, say, boasting (the *beot*) from the time of Beowulf to the present.

For the most part, the question of prejudice, both medieval and modern, has logically been treated primarily as a sociological issue, the major forces behind the phenomenon being historical, economic, political, and/or sexual rather than linguistic. (Parenthetically, we might note that the *PMLA* guidelines cited by Summers speak of “social implications of language.” Indeed, Summers’ concern is with the first word in the phrase. The fact that the medium is language is a matter of accident rather than

Chaucerian "Prejudice"

of substance in Summers' objection.) In fact, with a few notable exceptions, even many linguists and semioticians have paid remarkably little attention to this area, including literary theorists many of whom have produced remarkable if impenetrably written analyses of the nature of metaphor. Discussions of the linguistic aspects of prejudice, the first heyday of which seems to have been in the period following World War II, appear mostly in regard to socio-linguistics rather than semiotics, *per se*.

By way of example, one might consider Haig A. Bosmajian's *The Language of Oppression* which provides an important study of the role of language in prejudice. Writing of "linguistic superiority" and the power of language, Bosmajian argues that "...if we can minimize the language of oppression we can reduce the degradation and subjection as human beings. If the nature of our language is oppressive and deceptive then our character and conduct will be different from that which would ensue from humane and honest use of language" (363). Whatever Bosmajian means here by "the nature of language," he certainly does not explore the semiosis involved in that language. Indeed, Bosmajian begins his study with a Positivist survey of the power of language, beginning with the initial linguistic act in the Biblical creation story to Adam's dominion through the naming of beasts through Nazi linguistic practices in the Holocaust. Certainly proof of Bosmajian's phenomenalizing of language is to be seen in the fact that his ultimate focus is on legal measures to

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

control and contain speech which has been deemed dangerous and is therefore seen as a substantive threat.

As with Bosmajian, even today, such discussions tend to the problem of offensive language as a “social problem” rather than as a semiotic act. To wit, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) who certainly are not strangers to matters of linguistics, speak in a 1970 resolution of the “relation of language to public policy” and the need to define and isolate the language of distortion and oppression” (Bosmajian 139–40). Contrary to such a purely sociological approach, Prejudice, as it will be defined in this presentation, will be seen as an exercise in semiotics, as a matter of classification and definition, as the use of definable groups—such as women, homosexuals, Jews—as signs and in particular as metaphors, in both cases as pejorative ones.⁹

Word Fetishism and the Primitive Other (Which, by the Way, is Not Ourselves, Sort of)

Post-Saussurian semiotics has, to be sure, made much of the arbitrary and hence symbolic nature of language. Likewise much contemporary theory finds itself rooted in the recognition of the difference between signifier and signified. Part of the reason that the “cult of difference” originally had such a hard time gaining a toe-hold in medieval studies was its often self-congratulatory tone, partially in evidence in Pike, as though such observations had just freed us from a long

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

“droghte of March” in regard to our belief in the fixedness of language. In Olson’s recapitulation of Pike, one might note the assumption of the absolute alterity of the medieval. More importantly, although Pike attempts to mask the fact through the use of “fantasies,” his underlying assumption is that the “real” is ourselves; the Narcissistic, and hence unreal, *image* is Chaucer. In the grand historical narrative implied the assumption is our own evolution, the expectation (and hence discovery) of the presence in Chaucer of prejudicial attitudes along with the assumption of our universal superiority. “We,” not some of us, will do the rejecting. In the grand narrative implied, the Middle Ages are an indistinguishable part of the pre-Postmodern. At worst, because they are the remotest part, they are the essence of the Positivist, logocentric past from which current critical praxis divorces itself. What is suppressed here is the possibility that the eschewing of modern positivist, pre-Saussarian semiotics might *return* us to a pre-modern semiotics that shares much with postmodern and that the pre-modern is, in fact, the medieval.

No doubt part of the resistance to such a recognition is the universal ascription of “word fetishism”—a positivist conception of the relationship between signifier and signified—as belonging to the “primitive.” Often, moreover, the “primitive” is identified with the temporally remote, since in the grand narrative that underlies much of our study of signification time is equated with “progress” away from a “primitive” state. S. I. Hayakawa, by ascribing the word fetishism

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

associated with bigotry to “infantilism,” implies all these elements—primitivism (lack of development measured against our own adult progress) and historical remoteness (youth as opposed to our maturity) (207).

Such mythic certainty of the otherness of such linguistic practice can lead Egyptologist Hilary Wilson, without even a trace of irony or sense of contradiction, to follow her observation that until “the modern resurrection of his name,” Tutankhamen was a “non-person” with no real existence with a statement that “[s]ome primitive societies still maintain” fetishistic attitudes toward language and names (14–15). Similarly, Harvard scholar Margaret Schlauch can note,

From time immemorial men have thought there is some mysterious essential connection between a thing and the spoken name for it. You could use the name of your enemy, not only to designate him either passionately or dispassionately, but also to exercise a baleful influence. (13).

Yet as with Wilson, such primitivism is not necessarily confined to the remote past. Gordon Allport in a discussion of verbal realism notes that

The City Council of Cambridge, Massachusetts, unanimously passed a resolution (December, 1939) making it illegal “to possess, harbor, sequester, introduce or transport, within the city limits, any book, map, magazine, newspaper, pamphlet,

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

handbill or circular containing the words Lenin or Leningrad (182).

Apparently such primitivism was not as temporally (or even geographically) remote as Schlauch would imply. In fact, one might credit as unlikely a group as an American association of egg producers with recognizing the yoke of our own cultural tendency to close the gap between metaphors and their analogical associations. In the 1970s the association expressed the producers' grave concern with a series of advertisements showing a fried egg with the caption, “This is your brain on drugs.” Understanding the semiotic praxis of the egg-buying public, the egg producers feared an indelible connection between drugs and eggs might adversely affect sales of their product.

Back to the Future: Modern vs. Ancient (The Latter of Which is Not Ourselves, Sort of)

All this evidence to the contrary, as we see in Pike, there is often a “evolutionary” bias that assumes that the farther we go back in time the less enlightened are authors in regard to our lack of recognition of the prospects of semantic fluidity, with the Middle Ages by implication being reduced to the part of postilion, an age irretrievably lost in its own superstitious regard for the power of names. In short, as the term “Postmodernism” implies, the emphasis is always on the break from the recent past. There is never much of a sense that, because

Chaucerian "Prejudice"

the modern broke with the medieval, the postmodern, far from being a break from all that has come before, is really a return to the pre-modern. Clearly the study of medieval semiotic theory reveals something quite the contrary. While finding that in many cases medieval symbols are “anything but arbitrary and subjective” (227), Gerhart Ladner, his comparison of medieval and modern symbols, also goes on to note that “science, philosophy, and art become more deeply involved than ever in symbolism but in new ways, in many instances stressing the arbitrariness and subjectivity of signs and symbols rather than their correspondence with an objective reality” (228). In the search for the what Pike calls “the linguistic and semantic system available to the poet’s court,” the “Narcissus image of our own historical or semiological fantasies” may be the totalizing universal ascription of a pre-Saussurean verbal realism to the Middle Ages and the assumption that the medieval period is simply “Modern” (as opposed to the Postmodern) in its semiotics, only more so because of its temporal remoteness.

To appreciate the break between medieval and early modern semiology, it is helpful to consider that most curious of early Renaissance exercises, the “Defense of Poetry.” Such “defenses,” of course, raise a number of questions, beginning with “Why *now* must poetry be defended?” Certainly poetry is not a medium new to the Renaissance, so “How have attitudes changed regarding its nature and status?” In part, the change which demands such a defense is the evolution of a modern

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

(non-medieval) sense of the nature of signification. The issues are brought remarkably into focus in a essay by Alan Fisher entitled “Three Meditations on the Destruction of Vergil’s Statue: The Early Humanist Theory of Poetry.” Fisher’s starting point is a symbolic beginning of the Renaissance, the moment in 1397 when Carlo Malatesta, Commander of the Florentine League, entered Mantua “and shortly afterward ordered the destruction of a statue of Vergil which had stood there ‘for centuries’ upon the poet’s tomb” (607). Noting that Malatesta, “no mere military vandal,” was himself “trained in the *bonae litterae*,” Fisher explores both the reasons for Malatesta’s suspicion of Vergil and in particular “three [separate, contemporary] cries of outrage... in private letters” that take up a defense of poetry (608). Interestingly enough, Malatesta’s rationale was that “statues were for saints, not for poets or pagans. Poets did not deserve them because poets were nothing more than mimes” (609). The issue, then, is clearly a matter of signification. Mimes merely imitate. There is no Real (Positivist) connection between the mime or his representation and what the representation signifies. Malatesta, as a Renaissance Humanist is simply reviving the Platonic argument against the poets as “liars” and is insisting on a Platonic Positivist connection between signifier and signified with its corollary that poetry consists of lies for the very reason that it fails to demand and produce such connections. One of Malatesta’s critics, the Chancellor of Florence, Coluccio Salutati, counters with the argument that “poets do not

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

‘imitate’ at all. Their discourse is self-originating, not derivative, as men are *directly* the image of God....” (emphasis ours, 610). Note that Salutati, like Malatesta’s other critics, has no quarrel with Malatesta’s Positivism. For Salutati, poetry becomes what linguists might call “performatory language.” Salatutti’s complaint is not that Malatesta is wrong in defining and condemning mimes for lack of connection between signifier and signified. His complaint is that Malesta is wrong in not recognizing the Positivist nature of poetry. As in Sidney’s “defense,” Poetry matters because it is “Real.” It’s the new “modern” demand for such realism (and the concomitant suspicion that such realism might not exist in poetry) that generates the defenses.

Such “modern” ideas are exactly the *ancien régime* cast off by Saussurian-based postmodern linguistics. If the postmodern is a rejection of a formalist/positivist fixity of meaning, a few minutes spent with Augustine will of course dispel the notion that postmodern semiotics are also an escape from all that is medieval. At the same time, a few moments spent pondering some of the issues in twentieth century medieval criticism will demonstrate the strength of *our* modern (as opposed to postmodern) identification of the signifier with the signified, an association which perhaps even explains a bit of the *elan* with which theorists announce the revolutionary nature of their own discoveries concerning the indeterminacy of text, the rejection of positivist ascription of signified to signifier.

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

Something We can Finally All be Postiv(ist) About: Chaucer Criticism

Of course an advertisement for a movie that reads “Harrison Ford IS Indiana Jones” is fodder for introductory Linguistics courses throughout the country because it illustrates a positivist view of language, ridiculed in its informal name of “the Ding Dong” theory of signification, so evident in Bosmajian.¹⁰ Likewise, the strength of the Positivist theory as an unstated premise in the history of Chaucer criticism is evident in the fact that not until some five hundred years after the death of Chaucer was one of our best critics finally able to pry loose “Chaucer the Poet” from “Chaucer the Pilgrim.” Viewed in one context such a separation of signifier (Chaucer the Pilgrim) and signified (Chaucer the Writer) is itself a radical act of deconstruction unraveling as it does the tautology that “Chaucer is Chaucer,” vindicating what might be Malatesta’s assertion that “Chaucer is *miming* Chaucer.” Similarly, our libraries are still filled with articles, excellent ones at that, that argue that Alice of Bath is Alice Perrers or the Man of Law is Thomas Pynchbeck.¹¹ Indeed, what could possibly be a more positivist argument than the one that “Courtly Love” didn’t exist in the Middle Ages’ because the term did not exist until the Nineteenth Century.¹² And of course a large part of our criticism of the Canterbury pilgrims consists of moralizing concerning their hypocrisy, the condemnation of characters because the difference

Chaucerian "Prejudice"

between what they are supposed to signify (priest, prioress, wife, for example) and what they are. In such matters, old habits die hard. The new historicism is in many ways saying "Chaucer IS the Middle Ages." For us the space between what is and what is represented by such categories is unrelentingly negative. Perhaps we have too quickly and unquestioningly seized upon the seemingly positivist Chaucerian dictum that the "word must be cosyn to the dede" without realizing that cousins may not be as identical as Palamon and Arcite and that "to cozen" is "to betray or cheat." Chaucer, to be sure, has his own way of raising such issues, sometimes by providing a defense before the charge is leveled, as he does in raising the question of "sodeyn love" in the case of Criseyde in Book II of *Troilus*. The symbolic equivalent of this is the Nun's Priest's preemptive "My tale is of a cok" as well as the claim that "Thise been the cokkes wordes and nat myne." It seems that whenever we are in danger of forgetting the gap between symbol and what is signified, when we come to think of Chaunticleer as a person rather than as a bird symbolizing a person, the proud rooster stops and pecks at a kernel of corn or scartches the dirt with his claws (Perhaps the equivalent of Criseyde's "What, may I nat [peck] here?"). If we don't take up these kernels ourselves, there is always Dame Pertelote to remind us of the confusion by asking "Have ye no mannes herte, and han a berd?" And, of course, the answer is "No, I'm a symbol for a man, not an actual man." And lest we go too far in the other direction, eliminating the gap

Chaucerian "Prejudice"

between signifier and signified by doing away with the latter, the Nun's Priest concludes with an admonition to those of us who think the tale merely about "a fox, or of a cok and hen." No matter which direction one approaches the tale, difference must be maintained. Still despite, these warnings not to confuse fools and fowls, the Realist strain in Chaucer criticism may well justify the egg producers' concern over contemporary semiosis.

Among those studying Chaucer, then, there is strong positivist bent in spite of Augustine and perhaps in spite of Chaucer whose *Wife of Bath's Tale*, if we read it correctly, comes to a screeching halt when it becomes evident that the signifier is not the signified, when readers along with Dame Alice realize that Dame Alice is not the hag. The hag might represent qualities that the Wife sees in herself, but the fiction comes crashing down when the hag magically transforms herself offering both beauty and fidelity, qualities that the Wife cannot possess, underscoring the difference between herself as signified and the signifier with which she has chosen to represent herself in her tale. As we shall see, it is this very act of overlooking the gulf between signifier and signified that is at the root of prejudice. And, in parallel fashion, it is the strong predilection for closing that gap in criticism that has led many critics to see Chaucer's use of groups as prejudicial, despite the fact that he is, as we read the Wife's tale, warning us against such a confusion.

Chaucerian "Prejudice"

The Prejudicial Sign of the Times: Performative Signifiers as Signifieds

Scapegoating, an important element of prejudicial attitudes, is clearly a fetishistic attempt to locate, to localize, abstract concepts otherwise beyond the perceiver's control or knowledge, a definition that is remarkably close to that of metaphor where the remote is made known or felt more strongly through the linking of the known to objects, persons, things less foreign. The difference is that scapegoating inevitably has as its purpose the control of its subject. In regard to pejorative signs. The more one increases the distance between signifier and signified, especially the consciousness of the act as trope and hence the distance between knower and known, the more the result is metaphoric. Decrease that distance and the result is scapegoating.

It takes only a brief encounter with contemporary prejudicial material to see that groups victimized by prejudice are seen as the embodiments, the physical *loci*, of negative qualities they are alleged to possess. In our society, prejudice is an operation where the identification between signifier and signified collapses. If all x's *symbolize* bad quality y, we might well still come in contact with x without suffering the ill effects of exposure to that quality. We may play with the sign for fire without being burned. And perhaps we are even likely to do so because we know that it is *only* a sign and that signs by definition are something other than what

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

they represent. Or the Wife may manipulate the sign she chooses for herself without, sad to say, benefiting from the manipulation. But if we change our proposition and make *x embody* bad quality *y*, if we close ranks between signifier and signified, then our relationship with all *x*’s become quite different. We cease our commerce with *x*’s for fear of the negative effects of exposure to bad quality *y*. In a rather effective turn of phrase, Rupert Brown describes prejudicial stereotypes as “hypotheses in search of confirmatory information” (117). In short, a stereotype is a signifier trying to establish a connection to signified. When the connection is made and the identification complete, the result is prejudice. For his part, Hayakawa defines prejudice as an “habitual confusion of symbols and things symbolized” (28). In his classic study of human prejudice, Gordon Allport offers the following observation at the close of a chapter entitled “The Language of Prejudice”:

...to liberate a person from ethnic or political prejudice it is necessary at the same time to liberate him from *word fetishism*. This fact is well known to students of general semantics who tell us that prejudice is due in large part to *verbal realism* and to *symbol phobia*. Therefore any program of reduction of prejudice must include a large measure of semantic therapy. (Italics ours; 103)

In leading up to this conclusion, Gordon Allport notes that Margaret Mead “has suggested that labels of

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

primary potency [those labels most likely to be prejudicial] lose some of their potency when used as adjectives” (176). Clearly nouns present the illusion of Reality of substance in regard to categories. Adjectives used this way are in fact called “substantives.” Adjectives, on the other hand, when used as adjectives underscore their own arbitrariness. An adjective is but one of many qualities arbitrarily selected to describe a single thing. Adjectives by their implicit arbitrariness emphasize the gap between signifier and signified; nouns by their nature obscure it.

In this regard, one might consider a peculiar, although not unique, aspect of the vocabulary of anti-Semitism. All of us are aware of offensive, derogatory “names” for various ethnic groups. We are all familiar with terms for Blacks, Hispanics, Women, Gays, and Whites, for example. While the term “kike” certainly has some but evidently decreasing currency, in many circles the term “Jew” alone functions like derogatory ethnic slur. Hitler, it may be recalled, required all Jews simply to wear the inscription, “Jude.” The word by itself was sufficient to stigmatize. In fact, “He’s a Jew” may be a positive statement of fact, or a neutral, or a negative one, demonstrating the “element of un-definedness” that we will later see described by John of Salisbury in his writings about the meaning of words. While there are of course exceptions, we stand in little doubt as to the emotional “value” of, say, “Black,” “Nigger,” “Chinese,” “Chink.” etc. when used by members outside the category being named. “Jew,”

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

however, demonstrates—to use another medievalism—competing *in bono* and *in malo* meanings. One senses this in the vocabulary of gentles who, in referring to Jews, prefer the adjective “Jewish” to the noun “Jew,” confirming Mead’s observation about the power of nouns as opposed to adjectives. Similarly, there is frequently among older Southerners a genteel inclination towards the term “Hebrew” as a term of good will which severs all connection with the bipolar “Jew.”¹³

The Wandering Sign: Nominalists and Realists, Medieval and Modern

At this point, we might consider the work one of the central voices in the development of French and subsequently “English” literary theory. Jean-François Lyotard, in *Heidegger and “the jews”* (*Heidegger et “les juifs”*), explains the unconventional form of his work’s title:

I write “the jews” this way neither out of prudence nor lack of something better. I use the lower case to indicate that I am not thinking of a nation. I make it plural to signify that it is neither a figure nor a political (Zionism), religious (Judaism), or philosophical (Jewish philosophy) subject that I put forward under this name. I use quotation marks to avoid confusing these “jews” with real Jews. What is most real about the Jews is that Europe, in any

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

case, does not know what to do with them. “The jews” are the object of a dismissal with which Jews, in particular, are afflicted in reality. (3)¹⁴

Medievalists should find this familiar rather than alien, for it is the Nominalist discourse of one half of the great philosophical debate of the Middle Ages, the debate over the Reality of “names.”

Interestingly enough, Michael Weingrad cites this very same passage in a revealing critique of Lyotard:

Here is a curious mixture of abstraction and specificity. Lyotard explains that we should not confuse “the jews” described in his book with real Jews. “The jews” are not to be taken as a political, religious, or philosophical entity. However, he also tells us that it is precisely real Jews who suffer the misfortunes of “the jews.” What precisely is the difference? (83)

Here we see the other half of the debate, the voice of the “Realist” attempting to take “Nominalist” Lyotard to task. Significantly, Weingrad’s indictment of Lyotard and French theorists is that in their writings the Jew as symbol is *divorced* from the Jew in history—that there is a lack of identification between the sign “Jews” and what it represents. Hence Weingrad can claim, “[Lyotard’s] ultimate advocacy of “the jews” as postmodern good-guys is hardly flattering since it (1) displays little concern for knowledge of the intricacies

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

of Jewish thought and history...(3) has little use for Jews who do not fall within this model” (82). Weingrad thus finds in French “Theory” “disturbing characteristics” since “...theory tends towards a surprising level of abstraction and reduction. Its treatments of Jewish history are marked by an extreme ahistoricism, with the details and specifics of Jewish life thought, and culture glossed over and ignored in favor of reductive schema” (79). “Abstraction”—removal from the particular—is “reduction” because it is secondary, a movement away from the “thing” (*res*) and “Reality.” A Platonist would see the opposing movement from universal to particular as a loss.

Lyotard argues that there is no connection between signifier and signified; Weingrad that there is. Lyotard, in fact, does not say that the “real” Jews suffer the misfortunes of “the jews.” What he is implying is that the real Jews suffer precisely because decoders of signs do not recognize the difference, because they achieve the very closure that Weingrad demands between “the jews” and the Jews. In fact what is notable here is Weingrad’s tone. Implicit in Weingrad’s argument is that Lyotard among other theorists is abetting anti-Semitism if not being anti-Semitic. And that is the whole point. When the space between signifier (“the jews”) and signified (the Jews) is closed, the result is what we term “prejudice.” When that gap is maintained, it is not. This is exactly the point made by Haig Bosmajian in his study of the Nazi metaphorization of both Bolsheviks and Jews: “The Bolsheviks were not like a dragon, they *were*

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

a dragon; the Jews were not like a demon or a bacillus, they *were* a demon and bacillus” (25–26).

Weasel Words: Muslims, Jews and Unattached Signs

With these points in mind, let us for a brief moment consider medieval attitudes and practices toward practitioners of Islam in regard to their possible status as metaphors or scapegoats. To be sure, everywhere one looks the “followers of Mahoun” are portrayed as symbols of evil, and yet there is a great deal of commerce between Christians and Moslems during the Middle Ages. Much of that commerce is cross-cultural, and much of it strictly speaking not essential. This fact should alert us that it may have been possible for the medieval Christians to see Moslems as signifiers, as individuals that were different distinct from the negative qualities signified, a difference that allowed commerce of the sort just noted. Part of that ability might rest in the often discussed medieval practice of seeing in signs conflicting meanings. The same may be true of Jews, who appear ubiquitously as symbols of evil but who, as Olson notes, still receive equal protection under the law. If a single object might at turns and at times signify meanings *in malo* or *in bono*, then the meanings were signified by the object but not embodied there. At worst, in the case of *in malo* significations, they were there *in potentia* as opposed to actuality. Margaret Nims, in an excellent, although often overlooked, essay on the theoretical bases of medieval metaphor makes this very

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

observation citing Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s use of the term *convertibilitas* to describe the “metaphorical potential of words” (217). Nims goes on to cite John of Salisbury’s claim that

A word standing alone has an element of un-definedness analogous to that of prime matter. It is to be sure, a unit of meaning, but much of its meaning is held in suspension, in potency, until its position in discourse stabilizes its grammatical form and elicits the relevant areas of its meaning. (216)

This aspect of medieval linguistic theory emphasizes the very aspect of selectivity and hence arbitrariness that Margaret Mead suggests be highlighted through the use of adjectives rather than nouns in order to minimize prejudicial use of signs. Its recognition would allow use of groups as signs without prejudice. As such it represents a semiotic practice far different from our own “modern” one.

We might add that the idea of semantic polyvalence of meanings *in bono* or *in malo* residing in a single sign (something like the green of the Green Knight) seems particularly difficult for our students. “Well which is it?” they ask expecting sameness, fixity explicitly refuted in Augustine’s assertion in *De doctrina* that

Since things are similar to other things in a great many ways, we must not think it to be prescribed

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

that what a thing signifies by simultaneity in one place must always be signified by that thing. (8–9)¹⁵

Again, we have here a principle that strikes at the heart of the modern use of closed signifiers as signifieds. A fully developed and practiced semiotic theory inculcating this as well as several other of principles such as those described by Nims (or postmodernists such as Lyotard) would allow the use of groups as signs without fostering Summers’ “noxious” tendency to judge individuals as the embodiment or event connected to the qualities that their class might be seen, in context, to embody.

Several other well-known examples from the medieval symbolic lexicon shed some light here. The weasel, thought to conceive through the ear, was taken to be an emblem—that is, sign—of the Virgin.¹⁶ Now if a weasel got into one’s garden, one did not stay one’s hand because killing the weasel was doing violence to the Virgin. The weasel in real life signified a quality of the Virgin but did not embody Her. Moreover, we might make parallel observations concerning the fart which has been taken by some critics as an emblem for divine grace. If we grant that the fart might in some context be an apt sign for the Holy Ghost or divine grace,¹⁷ we still do not posit that medievals sought out moments of flatulence for religious delectation. Similarly, it may follow that Jews as well as others may well have been used in pejorative ways and yet not ostracized or stigmatized on a day-to-day basis. Indeed,

Chaucerian "Prejudice"

the medieval penchant for using scatological objects as emblems for divine concepts is a most difficult practice for modern readers, something that we believe provides evidence for the difference between our semiotics and theirs.

Armed with principles we usually associate with medieval sign theory, it may have been possible for medievals to deal with any other part of a constantly signifying creation that itself is often referred to as a “liber” as an individual, distinct part of reality separate from what its species or category might elsewhere connote. This ability, of course, flies directly in the face of prejudice which is to prejudge, to treat the individual not as individual but as part of a class, whether good or evil. The word fetishism of which Allport writes makes such prejudice possible because it treats the individual and the class or species as identical.

Another literary crux demonstrates the ability to treat an object that is a member of a signifying class as an individual object devoid of its generic signification. In the works of the *Gawain*-Poet, the most complex and fully articulated sign is, of course, the pearl.¹⁸ As such, pearls have of course received a great deal of critical attention. Yet in the midst of this poem filled with multivalent pearls, the dreamer finds himself in a middle ground where the stream has pearls for gravel (ll. 79–84). What is significant here is that these pearls are simply pearls, they are the objects themselves, devoid of any particular meaning. Readers in producing increasingly ingenious symbolic systems and

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

progressions for the sake of interpreting those pearls simply ignore these exasperating pearls that are only pearls. But we often do so uneasily, guiltily, in spite of Augustine, in our belief that what is true for pearls as a class must be true for each individual pearl. Readers of James Joyce know that part of Joyce’s uniqueness as a writer is his ability to give himself wholeheartedly and simultaneously to literal description (objects used solely for their own sakes) and symbolism (objects used solely for the sake of the “other” they suggest). This is what we believe happens with the gravel in *Pearl*. The ability to switch in midstream separates Joyce from his contemporaries, but it also separates medieval from the modern in use of signifiers.

Levels of Abstraction and a Tiny Retraction (*The Authors’, not Chaucer’s*)

Ultimately, what is at debate here is level of abstraction. Indeed, S. I. Hayakawa in an oft cited discussion describes prejudice as “a confusion of levels of abstraction” (203–05). As Hayakawa is clear, such confusions are socially constructed, declaring that, in regard to such “confusion,” “society, itself is often to blame” (28). What, then, of a different—that is, “medieval”—society—one whose language constructs officially discourage rather than encourage such “confusion”? Would it be “blameless” of the charge of modern prejudice? So much of medieval literature is about this very question of levels of abstraction and

Chaucerian "Prejudice"

hence the explicitly self-conscious use of metaphor. Poor Geoffrey of the *Book of the Duchess* must puzzle out the different levels of abstraction between a chess game, the loss of the Black Knight's lady, and the losses to which all humans, including himself, are liable. More specifically, we must ask, what is the nature of the "noxious and antiquated attitudes [Storm] attributes to Chaucer" and to the Middle Ages as a whole? What exactly is our objection to Chaucer's use of the Pardoner, or rather his homosexuality? Of course, the objection raised was to discuss the Pardoner's homosexuality in negative terms was to make a corresponding judgment of all gays. Assuming that Chaucer uses homosexuality as a signifier for love of similitude, one's own image, we must ask whether the homosexuality is

- a) the reflection of the Pardoner's individual narcissism (love of sameness)
- b) the reflection of the same quality in all homosexuals
- c) a reflection of the narcissism liable to found in all human beings.

In the same fashion, are the Wife's proclivities indicative of the virtues of Dame Alice? Women? Humans? Our modern discomfort lies in our belief that the answer in both cases is the middle option that the level of abstraction stops short of all humanity. Indeed, just such a question was raised by George Gopen in regard to Dame Alice at the Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo. Gopen went on to describe the Wife "as a

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

voice, a codifiable point of view, not a woman *per se*.” Her nature was described as an “aspect of her human nature, not her identity as a woman” so that in regard to many of her points, “Gender is not an issue.”

Paul A. Olson’s assessment of the Prioress’ spiritual “incompleteness” ... “comes to focus in her representation of the triumph over tyranny” (139). He notes

In late fourteenth-century terms, the Prioress’ main failure in the temporal sphere is not anti-Semitism; it is injustice. Injustice and violation of due process were not popular in the same England, and Jews in medieval England had status before the law comparable to that of other citizens. John C. Hirsh has incorrectly argued that the Prioress possesses a proper ‘medieval’ sense of law since the provost in her tale puts to death only those Jews ‘that of mordre wiste’ (B2, 1820; cf. B2, 1757). But Eglantine tries to establish the complicity of all the Jews in the tale by having the widow-mother ask every Jew about her child’s whereabouts (B2, 1791). (141–42).

The fundamental legal mistake is the semiotic operation that underlies prejudicial use of symbols, the closure of the gap between the individual and the set to which the individual belongs, between the individual signifier and the signified. The root of the Prioress’ prejudice is the root of her legal fallacy, her inability to read the

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

individual and the general. She is, then, another in the long line of Chaucer’s “misreaders” and false glossers.

Let us return, again, to Summers’ objection to Storms’ assessment of the Pardoner. To begin with, the essential argument is over the issue of distinction, of difference. Professor Summers complains, “Storm never distinguishes between his views and what he thinks are Chaucer’s.” Storm the critic who represents, that is *re-presents*, Chaucer to his readers is not fully set apart from Storm the person, holder of values. For his own part, Storm counters that the difference is obvious in “historical criticism” and that its underscoring is a cumbersome insult to a sophisticated readership. In short, Storm assumes the gap—the distinction between Storm and what he sees in Chaucer, between Chaucer and what he or his persona represents in the Prioress—is inherent in the literary act itself. Here, then, is the real issue: the distinction between signifier (in this case the one doing the signifying, Storm himself) and the subject of his discourse. The issues in the debate over the alleged prejudicial aspects of Storm’s essay becomes remarkably congruent with the issue of “Chaucer the Pilgrim” and “Chaucer the Poet.” Likewise it reflects the complaint of Weingrad against Lyotard. If the gap between Storm and his discourse is present, then Summers’ objections are without foundation. If Chaucer were aware of gap between reality and the fictions or tropes used to portray reality, then he might likewise be excused.

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

Are Chaucer in the *Prioress’ Tale* or, for that matter, Shakespeare in *Merchant of Venice* anti-Semitic because they locate bad qualities in Jewish figures? Are they guilty of treating those figures unfairly? Is treating them unfairly mistreating “real” Jews? In the purely theoretical (and totalized) world of this essay, the answer is “yes” only if we believe in the positivist connection between signifier and signified. If the Prioress’ Jews or Shakespeare’s Shylock are theoretically real, in the sense that voodoo dolls are, then one can do harm to those embodied by the sign. Given a different “Nominalist” semiotics, Chaucer’s practice would not conform to *modern* prejudicial practice. Shakespeare’s, following the new Renaissance defense of poetry and especially without the buffer of an intervening narrator, would be more difficult to assess, and we leave it to the keepers of the Renaissance to (con)tend the monument to the Vergil of that Age.

Of course neither the Medieval or Renaissance worlds nor ours is a purely theoretical, and the harm and hurt of words are often real, or at least really felt. So it may be well for us to remember that while D. W. Robertson, Jr., in *A Preface to Chaucer*, ably demonstrated the theoretical ironic thrust of Andreas’ *De Amore*, it was beyond Robertson’s, or anyone’s, ability to prove that Andreas’ audience recognized such irony and avoided whatever “effects” might accrue in a more literal reading. So it is with Chaucer. Chaucer, the linguistic theorist, might well have recognized the arbitrary, multivalent, and hence non-prejudicial nature

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

of his signs, but we cannot totalize his Age, nor even his audience, to assume they recognized the same, no matter what the authorized, patristic writings might contain, “whoso that kan may rede hem as they write.” So if Chaucer, whatever his semiotic theory, might be taken to endorse—or this argument used to condone—what we ourselves find “noxious,” we think it best to “arrete it to the defaute of [oure] unkynnyng, and nat to [oure] wyl.” Will, whether good or bad, exists from moment to moment, and the same caveat might be applied to our vision of Chaucer, himself—dear as that image is. While the solidifying term “Chaucer” might, itself, be an apt name for a statue, fixed and permanent as statues are, it is certainly inadequate, at worst deceptive, as a way of signifying a human being subject to “decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse,” for there’s no reason to believe that Chaucer could be fixed “in a formulated phrase,” whether it be “prejudiced” or “prejudice free”—a fact that allows us to hold prejudicial attitudes and at the same time say that “Some of my best friends are...” and thereby congratulate those friends for not being like the signifier, which to us in the non-theoretical world is real.... Sort of.

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

Notes

1. For historical overviews of critical reaction to the question of Chaucerian prejudice, see the *Variorum* edition of the *Prioress’ Tale*, pp. 43–50 as well as Benson, pp. 913–14.
2. For example, the *Variorum* edition of the *Prioress’ Tale* begins with an epigram about anti-Semitism taken from Lincoln Cathedral. Emmy Zitter’s intelligent reading ends with a personal judgment as she needs to go on record, calling the Prioress’ attitudes “frightening and repugnant” (282).
3. Emmy Stark Zitter divides responses into “historical” and “ironic” (3).
4. On medieval anti-Semitism, see *The Variorum*, pp. 27–32. In regard to Chaucer’s reflecting the anti-Semitism of his times, see Robert Worth Frank (1981): 259. Derek S. Brewer cautions that modern negative responses would not match those of Chaucer’s contemporaries (151).
5. On the tale as “satire” see the *Variorum*, pp. 31–32. Zitter argues that the tale’s “success” casts doubt on an ironic reading. Muriel Bowden, in her highly influential handbook, deliberately contrasts anti-Semitism to her supposed piety in order to condemn the former and undercut the latter (99–100). Sr. Mary Hostia likewise finds the contradiction between piety and the tale indicative of Hypocrisy. Richard J. Schoeck finds the tale condemning the cruelty of the prioress, finding deliberate irony and a “satire” of anti-Semitism.

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

Donaldson (“Prioress”) finds the Prioress to be a person of her age, but insists that Chaucer was not, finding it inconsonant with the still influential Chaucer which Donaldson found at the heart of the Canon. Arguably deconstruction seems to be more effective than recourse to “irony” in exposing the Prioress’ un-Christian attitudes in the midst of (and relation to) her Christian piety.

6. Weingrad argues that French Theorists, themselves, while almost unanimously taking up the question of anti-Semitism have failed to “apply” the principles of theory, finding as he does, considerable “essentialism” in their studies of the subject.

7. Also cited in Fradenburg, p. 72.

8. Ian Robinson finds the Prioress’ “hatred of the Jews unlike and less dangerous than modern anti-Semitism” (151). R. M. Lumiansky warns that “anti-Semitism was a somewhat different thing in the fourteenth century from what it is today” (43) Neither Robinson nor Lumiansky considers whether the symbolic or semiotic aspects of anti-Semitism have changed from the fourteenth century.

9. For helpful definitions of “Prejudice,” see Allport, pp. 6–10 and Brown, pp. 3–9. On the role of classification/categorization in Prejudice, see Brown, pp. 39–80, as well as Allport, pp. 166–68, esp. 42–44, and Hayakawa, pp. 214–19.

10. The name comes from the notion that the *one correct, true name* for a given thing “rings a bell” and hence seems correct in the mind of the person who hears

Chaucerian “Prejudice”

it. Thus when I consider something that I sit on, the term “chair” rings a bell in mind, while “fire” does not.

11. In the same fashion, only very late in the readings of *Pearl* were critics able to accept the possibility that the poem is not an elegy—that the Pearl-maiden might be a purely fictitious symbol, that the genesis of the poem might not be the death of a “real” child named Margaret.

12. See Moore. Donaldson (“Myth”) takes up the problem of nomenclature as well (154–55).

13. This latter term has the additional semiotic force of removing the reference from the New Testament, in which “Jews” are stigmatized with the Crucifixion and relocating the term in the “Old” Testament before the rejection of the “Christ.”

14. On the “problem” of defining “Jews,” see Allport, pp. 116–23. See also Hayakawa, pp. 203–05.

15. For a discussion of medieval sign theory, especially medieval attitudes toward the polysemous nature of signs, see “Introduction,” Ross G. Arthur, especially pp. 10–11. On the medieval notion of the arbitrariness of signs, see Wasserman, especially pp. 199–200 as well as pp. 215, note 2 and 216–17, note 7 for brief bibliographies on medieval semiotics.

16. See Debra Hassig pp. 29–32. We’d like to thank Laura C. Minnick along with other Chaucernetters for jogging our collective memories about this medieval zoological “fact.”

17. See Benson, p. 879, note on line 2255 for a brief bibliography of the fart in the cartwheel as a “parody

Chaucerian "Prejudice"

[of] iconographic representations of the descent of the Holy Spirit to the twelve Apostles."

18. See Scholfield.

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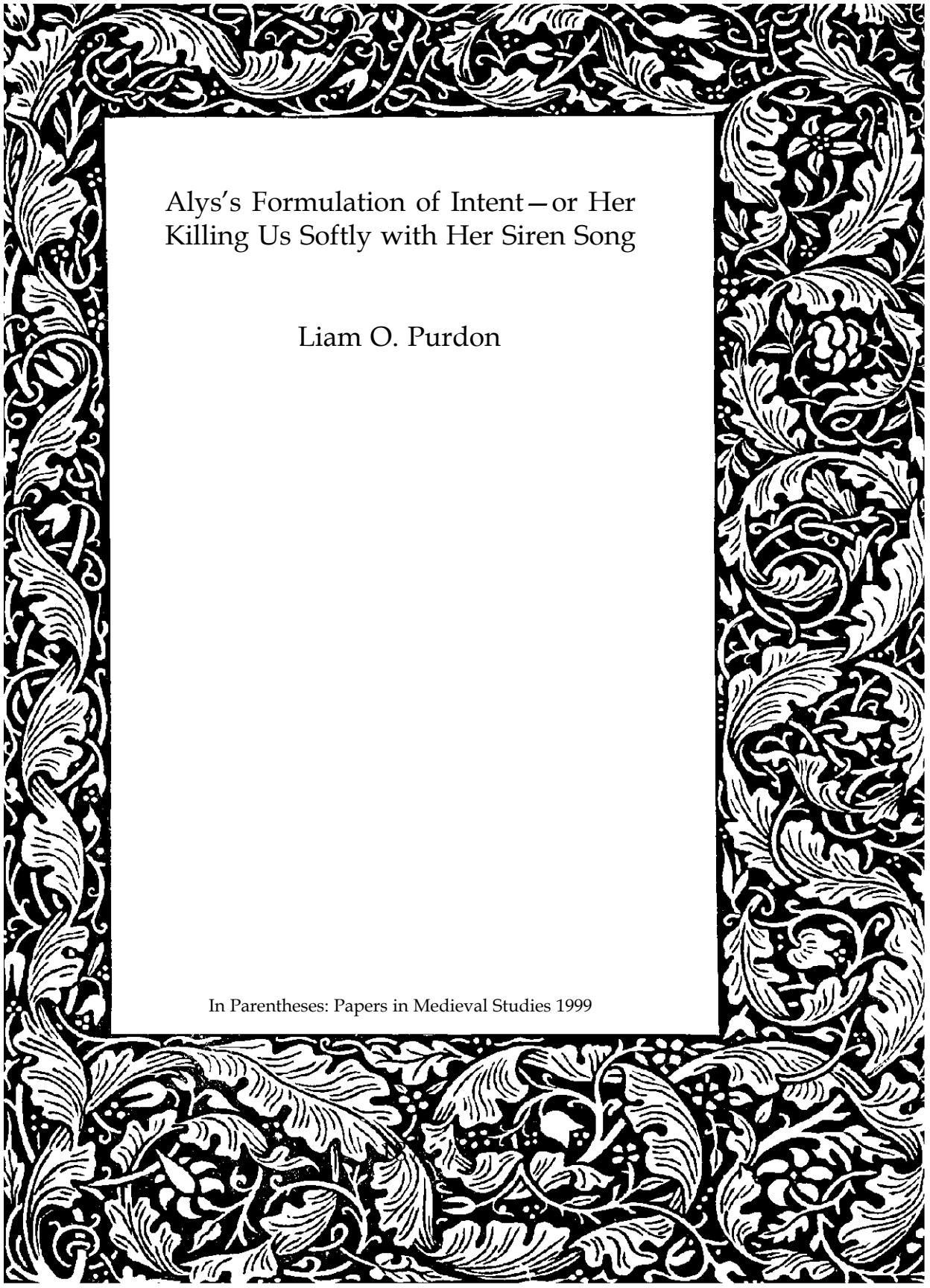
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Alys's Formulation of Intent—or Her Killing Us Softly with Her Siren Song

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Ever since the publication of Vernon Hall, Jr.'s *Baker Street Journal* article treating the possibility of foul play in the abrupt and untimely death of Alys of Bath's fourth husband,¹ the questions of Alys's guilt or innocence, and of the degree to which she might have been involved in her late husband's demise, have intrigued Chaucer students and scholars alike. Foremost in the recent scholarly search for justice in this matter has been Beryl Rowland, who, in following Hall's lead in two of her subsequent articles, introduced two legal issues at the heart of the inquiry—namely, the issue of Alys's allegedly being, by her own compulsive admission, accessory before the fact in the death of her “revelour” husband, and the issue of her allegedly being accessory after the fact in her collusive relationship with Jankyn, to which she appears to confess, again by means of a compulsive self-revelation, after being “knocked down” by Jankyn in one of his fits of rage.² Following Rowland's line of reasoning has been Dolores Palomo, whose 1975 *Chaucer Review* article further supports the contention that Alys inculpates herself in the murder by her own digressive tactics, and introduces, in a careful analysis of Chaucerian implication, the contention that Alys also exculpates herself deftly by indirectly accusing Jankyn of the crime through her gossips (from whom she hides nothing), and by journeying with the other

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

pilgrims to Canterbury, an act which, according to canonical law, she must perform in order to make restitution for her having been found to be in the state of adultery, the result of the legal dissolution of her fifth marriage.³

Other scholars have taken the investigation in other directions. Both Mary Hamel and Douglas Wurtele assume that Alys's fourth husband died of natural causes. Hamel, however, suggests that Jankyn suspects Alys of having murdered his predecessor; and Wurtele assumes that Jankyn and Alys proposed murdering the “revelour” and are therefore morally, although not legally, guilty of his death.⁴ Susan Crane, on the other hand, admonishes us to remember that the Wife of Bath is a fictional character, and that “to invent more of her life than Chaucer has already given us is to take ourselves for poets.”⁵

Without inventing anything (while heeding the spirit of Susan Crane's admonishment), this paper proposes to address once again the relationship between Alys and her fourth and fifth husbands, this time by examining the medieval legal implications of the alleged conspiracy between Alys and Jankyn. To do this, it will be necessary to consider, in light of each other, the two principal moments in Alys's *Prologue* that have raised the most critical eyebrows and questions. The first of these involves Alys's Lenten dallying-field encounter with Jankyn, which consists of the if-I-were-a-widow come-on and the blood-and-money dream. The second

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

of these, of course, is the knock-down drag-out fight between Alys and Jankyn.

The dallying-field episode has been considered the point in the *Prologue* when Alys admits to being an accessory before the fact in the “revelour” husband’s alleged murder. This episode has also been identified as the moment in the *Prologue* when, by means of “aiding and abetting,” Alys finds herself morally—if not legally—implicated in the alleged scheme.⁶ Lee Patterson has argued that this encounter occurs in the “darkest” part of the *Prologue*, in which the suffering of the unloved spouse is the subject,⁷ so whether we agree or disagree with those who would indict Alys, we should carefully reexamine this episode because, if motive for what she has allegedly done actually exists, such a moment of vulnerability will probably reveal it.

There is little doubt that Alys’s admitted unhappiness in her fourth marriage is one reason for her journey with Jankyn into the dallying fields. Nor can this unhappiness as motive be ignored when she recounts that “I spak to hym and seyde hym how that he, / If I were wydwe, sholde wedde me” (567–568).⁸ But is this utterance as significant as some have made it out to be? In the eyes of medieval law, as the rest of this essay will attempt to demonstrate, it is, and even more so than perhaps has previously been suggested.

To begin, whether or not a crime of homicide with prepensive malice has occurred, this dallying-field statement can be construed as a formulation of intent—that is, the design, resolve, or determination

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

with which one acts. What is more, the conditional element included in the statement instills in the mind of Jankyn an idea. As a result, Alys sets the stage and so establishes a conspiracy.⁹ If a homicide has happened as a consequence of this conspiracy, as some have speculated, then such a conspiracy would have serious legal implications, even for the medieval legalist. If, on the other hand, no homicide has occurred, or if insufficient evidence exists to determine that a homicide has occurred, then the moral implications of what Alys has done here are still serious since she has at least inspired so as to incite. This judgment might be disregarded but for the fact that Alys herself subsequently further sets the stage by inducing in Jankyn, by means of the authority of dream prophecy,¹⁰ the belief that he would profit from his intimate relationship with her, a belief she offers in the blood-and-money dream she recounts:

I bar hym on honde he hadde enchanted me,—
My dame taugte me that soutiltee
And eek I seyde I mette of hym al nyght,
He wolde han slayn me as I lay upright,
And al my bed was ful of verray blood;
But yet I hope that he shal do me good,
For blood bitokeneth gold, as me was taught

(575–584).

Combined with her first statement, this utterance, which Alys herself subsequently characterizes as a lie,

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

establishes *mens rea*, the guilty mind of one who has criminal intent.¹¹ It is no doubt for this reason that Chaucer has Alys momentarily forget what she is saying, interrupt herself, and then immediately resume her marital history beginning with the day of her “revelour” husband’s funeral. The narrative sequence expressed by a guilty mind, including a rupture in the narrative, the unexplained death of an unloved spouse, and brazen “daliaunce,” raises suspicion as the critical efforts of Rowland and others have demonstrated.

Be that as it may, it is not Alys’s alleged action but rather her state of mind, intricately revealed in a matter of moments in this episode, that invites further consideration of other examples of criminal intent in the *Prologue*. The consistency of state of mind is an important consideration to be determined in the case of Alys since such consistency would provide us with greater insight into her motivation for doing what she says she used to do, and into what others have alleged she has done. It would be well at this juncture, however, to recall how Chaucer’s world viewed criminal intent and liability, especially where foul play was involved. The most comprehensive and accessible treatment of this aspect of the law available to readers of the court and to Chaucer would have been Henry de Bracton’s thirteenth-century *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae*.¹²

In turning to this work, we should heed Frederic William Maitland’s warning concerning Bracton—namely, that the legalist is an untrustworthy guide to

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

legal notions of his English contemporaries when he goes beyond what is actually done in courts of law.¹³ Anthony Michael Platt and Bernard L. Diamond, however, assure us that, whatever Bracton's sources may be, one of the major contributions made by him in his treatment of law is his emphasis on subjective intent as being a necessary criterion of criminal behavior.¹⁴ While Bracton's direct dependence on Bernard of Pavia and indirect dependence on Gratian are well documented,¹⁵ what he has to say about criminal intent does conform to actual practice as thirteenth and fourteenth century coroner's rolls, year books, and select case rolls attest.¹⁶ Accordingly, insight into how Bracton views criminal intent can be gained through consideration of his definition of homicide.

In discussing the crime of corporal homicide, Bracton introduces the issue of state of mind no less than four times, without even considering intent as a feature of homicide committed by word. In the first example of corporal homicide done by deed, for instance, Bracton indicates homicide done in the administration of justice raises the issue of criminal intent if the homicide is “done out of malice or from pleasure in the shedding of human blood....”¹⁷ Malice or evil purpose is again considered by Bracton when homicide of necessity is done. In this case Bracton says that when the homicide is unavoidable and is carried out without premeditated hatred, and with a sorrow of heart, there is no liability.¹⁸ The fourth form of corporal homicide in this part of the *De Legibus* Bracton labels “of intention”;

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

what distinguishes this is the variety of states of mind acknowledged. Bracton says one commits a corporal homicide of intention if one acts in “anger of hatred or for the sake of gain, deliberately and in premeditated assault.”¹⁹ Finally, Bracton reintroduces the issue of intent when considering the punishment for criminal intent of those whose cases might be classified as exceptional. Being part of a group whose acts end in homicide, for example, does not free one from liability: “Several,” Bracton says, “may be guilty of homicide just as one may be, as where several have quarrelled among themselves in some dispute and one of them is slain; and [if] it does not appear by whom nor by whose blow it was done, all may be called homicides, those who struck, those who with evil intent held while he was struck, and those who came with the intention of slaying though they struck no blow.” Being at one or more removes from the actual deed of killing is also no defense according to Bracton. Those who order a killing and those who neither slay nor have any intention of slaying but attend a slaying to offer counsel and aid to slayers are liable. What is more, even one who might rescue the slain from death but fails to do so is not free from guilt.²⁰

The determination in actual medieval legal practice of some distinctions made here may have been impossible or may even have been ignored; the importance which is given to criminal intent in this and other parts of the *De Legibus*, however, cannot be disputed. That this feature of law received substantial

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

philosophical and practical consideration by readers of the Plantagenet court of the fourteenth century is a fact of legal history. Whether Chaucer, one of those readers of court, read Bracton may be difficult to determine, though his knowledge of Bracton's conception of the "king's pleasure" suggests he did.²¹ However, the interest in intent and other legal subtleties Chaucer demonstrates, for example, in the *Reeve's Tale* or in the *Tale of Melibee* indicates he possessed much more than just a passing familiarity with the law. How he uses the definition of criminal intent he establishes in the dallying-field episode as the informing structural principle of the entire *Prologue* convincingly demonstrates this.

Alys's *Prologue* follows a pattern of successive moralizations of the letter *tribulatio*, at the beginning of which Alys, as *entremetteuse*, prepares the way to herself.²² In the first of these moralizations (what Lee Patterson identifies as the refashioned *sermon joyeux*), Alys therefore engages us in an argument in favor of the inevitable fleshly temptations and delights brought on by marriage. Her purpose, which is to convince us of the joys of this particular kind of tribulation, is so persuasively presented that it is easy to overlook her use and abuse of authority, the exegetical method by which she moves us to accept her point of view as well as her self-assertive carnality.²³ It may not be that she entirely or convincingly inveigles us since her contravention of authority admits of numerous—and in some cases startling—ambivalences,²⁴ but if we do not object to the

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

no-win situation that she defines marriage to be when identifying the husband's role as 'debtor and slave,' then our acquiescence predisposes us to her experience-based idea of the dynamic of a not-so harmonious conjugal relationship. In other words, if we do not respond the way the Pardoner does (though not for the same reason) by quickly starting up and rejecting the deceptiveness of the "joly body" of the immediate text, then we find ourselves legally estopped²⁵—that is, in the curious position of involuntarily conspiring with Alys and experiencing a state of incitement somewhat like that experienced by Jankyn in the dallying fields. The objects of his and our experience are different, and yet the same: he hopes to gain wealth and physical or sexual gratification through marriage while we give the nod to the degradation of human dignity within the sacrament of matrimony. Jankyn of course cannot walk away since he is part of the fiction and since, according to Alys, he has already participated in her collusive strategy as a pledge or witness. Likewise, we cannot walk away from our Chaucer book, even if we would like to throw it down or tear out a leaf, because we know by this point we have no choice but to keep reading even though reading will imperil us as it has so done already.

If Alys's method in the dallying-field episode involves establishing a conspiracy by formulating intent, instilling an idea, setting the stage, and reaffirming that process, then her method in the second part of the *Prologue* is nothing new since it conforms to that design by transforming the conspiracy established between Alys

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

and the reader in the *sermon joyeux* into a discursive/discursive collusion or bearing “on honde.” The reader who has voluntarily or involuntarily accepted Alys’s come-on in the first part of the *Prologue* by not stopping the process of reading or throwing down the book, now in the second part has no choice but to allow him- or herself to be borne “on honde that the cow is wood.” In other words, we must believe in the value of falsehood and of bearing false witness, even if we do not agree. Reason, of course, should compel even the least attentive reader to question the apparent limitations of Alys’s morality in light of what she is saying. But no sooner is the advice for “wyse wyves” offered than the focus of the discourse is dramatically altered, maneuvering us into the position of discursive debtor and slave by preempting not only the language of accusation but also any and all manner of response. The means by which this change is effected is Alys’s use of the dramatic monologue, in which we are compelled to participate silently. This discursive/discursive manipulation of the reader has been accurately described as the experience of the nightmare of the antifeminist imagination.²⁶ But it has an even darker side to it. We find ourselves, especially those among us who are not antifeminist in our outlook, unable not to collude or to co-play with Alys. We discover, in other words, that we are trapped or estopped, the way a conspirator is trapped in whose mind an idea of gain or mischief has been placed. Though we have done nothing, we are accused of not providing for our spouse, of

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

philandering, of conspiring, and of being a lecher, a chider, a jealous, a drunk, a preacher, an antifeminist, a misogynist, a misanthrope, a shrew, a liar, an old fool, and a spy, and we have no choice but to accept what is said. The rub of course is that if we realize this is happening to us as we continue to read, then the pain resulting from the hallucinatory one-sided exchange between Alys and us becomes even greater, not only because we begin to feel the full psychological effect of accusation without a chance at rebuttal, but also (and worse still) because we are forced to experience the degradation of human dignity in the discursive/discursive actualization of the debtor/slave condition to which, through our initial and continued reading, we have already tacitly consented.

It would seem from what Alys says in the dramatic monologue, in the shift back into a conventional narrative, and in the final hallucinatory address that ends the *Prologue*'s second part, that it has been her intention, all along, to provide us with enough clues to realize we have become at least her discursive debtor and slave—that is, we have allowed ourselves, like a conspirator, to be bereft of our freedom, at first perhaps involuntarily, but then voluntarily by the very act of reading itself. Such a realization, for one thing, creates a tension, the full ironic effect of which is perhaps not apparent until Alys rubs our imaginary cheek in the closing lines of the second part and counsels us to be patient and meek. We have not only been played with, which is partly our own doing, but we have also

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

been played upon, something over which we have not had control. To make matters worse, however, as soon as the second part ends we cannot but think the worst is over, and nothing could be farther from the truth. We are readied for the last part of the *Prologue* where form and content ostensibly open up, but what has actually been done is that we have been set up for yet another fall, this one the most perilous of all.

This undermining of our ethical confidence is effected by Alys's illusion of options. We can of course continue reading the *Prologue* as cozened or "Jankyned" readers and sympathize with Alys's victimization. In this particular case, we must favor the moment of ideogrammed book destruction and accept, without any hesitation or resistance, our own contravention of moral authority as well as the consequent irrevocable fall from, or "killing" of, our own innocence. But if we have been at all sensitive to the troubling condition of ineffectuality we are forced to experience through the discursive collusion resulting from Alys's hallucinatory dramatic monologue, then we find ourselves further ensnared, as many critics have been, as we attempt to remove ourselves from the discursive conspiracy and try logically to prove her guilt in an alleged murder, for which there is insufficient factual evidence, and for which there is excessive circumstantial evidence, compliments of Alys's digressive method. In other words, by trying to right the situation through establishing guilt when the facts cannot actually support such a conclusion, we contravene legal authority and

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

precedent. In other words, we put our innocence in jeopardy again, this time by “killing” or giving up reason or logic. It is here, then, that the second important *Prologue* episode, the knock-down drag-out fight between Jankyn and Alys, takes on a special meaning for us as an emblem of our own predicament. Alys’s characterization of the event as a murder—“‘O! hastow slain me false theef?’ . . . / ‘And for my land thus hastow mordred me?’”(800–801)—cannot but challenge our understanding of the degree to which she comprehends legal subtlety and the degree to which Jankyn, at least, understands its applicability. A homicide *se defendendo* might be what Jankyn would be charged with were Alys actually killed by the blow of his fist. But because there is no evidence to support self-defense, because the circumstantial evidence of Jankyn and Alys’s love-dangerous marriage is known to all of Alys’s gossips, and because Jankyn’s antifeminist reading material might suggest a state of mind predisposed to antifeminist violence, the fact that the act of striking Alys is without prepensive malice may actually be irrelevant. What is more, we realize at this moment that Jankyn’s plight is like our own: we discover ourselves “cornered” in a condition worse than Alys’s much scorned mouse, which only “hath but hole for to sterte to, / And if that faille, thanne is al ydo” (573–574). And we can do only as Jankyn does. As readers or participants in the discourse, we try to make peace with Alys, but we also know our efforts to

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

preserve our “estaat” are futile. Welcome the sixth: we’re history, too.

Well, not quite. Another option is permitted us. We can laugh at the entire discursive manipulation as does the Friar. It’s really the only way to deal with a no-win situation like this discursive estoppel. But we must do this judiciously. For if we laugh and then offer a judgment of the *Prologue*, as does the Friar when he characterizes the *Prologue* as a “long preamble of a tale,” then we may find ourselves caught again collusively in or as part of Alys’s state of mind, especially at the moment when she notices the legs and clean and fair feet of Jankyn preambling or walking before her at the funeral of her fourth husband.

This final jeopardy, another buffet upon our imagined cheek, predisposes us to accept the variety of legal fictions within the subsequent fictional tale, not the least remarkable of which is the accusation and prosecution of rape without so much as a shred of evidence offered in the prayer for relief. More important, however, it enables us (if we have not done so already) to sympathize with Alys’s sense of profound disappointment. Our suffering in the *Prologue* is comparable to the suffering of the unloved spouse when we discover we can neither accuse, cajole, nor sympathize, but must remain cut off, isolated, powerless to change our lot, and always be bereft of voice. Alys’s *Prologue* is therefore a kind of Siren song for us, a song that softly and alluringly enables us to kill ourselves as we allow it to be sung to us. To survive and appreciate

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

it, we have to respond to it as both an Odysseus and a Jason. We have to secure ourselves to the resolve that we will not be taken in by it, seductive though it may be, and at the same time we have to meet it with an Orphic consciousness, which keeps reminding us of the purpose of our reading adventure.

Notes

1. Vernon Hall, Jr., “Sherlock Holmes and the Wife of Bath,” *Baker Street Journal* 3 (1948), 84–93.
2. Beryl Rowland, “Chaucer’s Dame Aly: Critics in Blunderland,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 73 (1972), 381–385, and “On the Timely Death of the Wife of Bath’s Fourth Husband,” *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 209/124 (1973), 273–282.
3. Dolores Palomo, “The Fate of the Wife of Bath’s ‘Bad Husbands,’” *Chaucer Review* 9 (1975), 303–319.
4. Mary Hamel, “The Wife of Bath and a Contemporary Murder,” *Chaucer Review* 14 (1979), 132–139, and D. J. Wurtele, “Chaucer’s Wife of Bath and the Problem of the Fifth Husband,” *Chaucer Review* 23 (1988), 117–128.
5. Susan Crane, “Alison of Bath Accused of Murder: Case Dismissed,” *English Language Notes* 25 (1988), 12.
6. Rowland, “On the Timely Death,” p. 281.
7. Lee Patterson, “‘For the Wyves Love of Bath’: Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the *Roman*

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

de la Rose and the *Canterbury Tales*,” *Speculum* 58 (1983), 679–680.

8. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed., ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 81, lines 567–568. Hereafter all reference to this edition of the tale will appear in text.

9. Palomo, p. 309.

10. On the authority of such prophecy, see C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: CUP, 1964), pp. 63–65.

11. Roger Smith, *Trial By Medicine: Insanity and Responsibility in Victorian Trials* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1981), p. 72, points out that *mens rea* was a concept that was accepted from as early as the Middle Ages.

12. *Bracton on the Laws and Customs of England*, 4 vols., ed. George E. Woodbine and trans. Samuel E. Thorne (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968).

13. *The Collected Papers of Frederic William Maitland*, 3 vols., ed. H. A. L. Fisher (Tokyo: Logos, 1975), I:314.

14. Anthony Michael Platt and Bernard L. Diamond, “The Origins and Development of the ‘Wild Beast’ Concept of Mental Illness and Its Relation to Theories of Criminal Responsibility,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 1 (1965), 357; also see Fisher, I:308–309.

15. *Select Passages from Bracton and Azo*, ed. F. W. Maitland (London: B. Quaritch, 1895), p. 225; Fisher, I:314.

Formulation of Intent—or Siren Song

16. See, for example, Fisher, I:309. There, Fisher discusses the statute of 1389, Acts of Richard II.
17. Woodbine, II:340.
18. II: 340–341.
19. II:342.
20. II:342.
21. On this legal fiction, see Fisher I:317. Any act of violence against another was construed as the breaking of the “King’s Peace.”
22. Patterson, p. 664.
23. D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: PUP, 1962), p. 321.
24. Patterson, p. 683.
25. McFarlane, Gavin, *The Layman’s Dictionary of English Law* (London: Waterloo, 1984), p. 99. This is the rule of evidence “that a person cannot deny the existence of a particular state of affairs which he has himself brought about, and on the basis of which another person has acted.”
26. Patterson, p. 678.

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Notes on Contributors

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Notes on Contributors

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Notes on Contributors

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Notes on Contributors

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