

ENGLISH LITERATURE'S FATHER OF AUTHORIAL ANDROGYNY: THE  
INNOVATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF CHAUCER AND THE WIFE OF BATH

BY

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## DEDICATION

*to my Dad*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

“GP” – “General Prologue”

“WBP” – “Wife of Bath’s Prologue”

“WBT” – “Wife of Bath’s Tale”

## ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to examine Geoffrey Chaucer as English literature's father of authorial androgyny, specifically through an analysis of his Wife of Bath character. Through a close reading of the "General Prologue" descriptions of the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath as well as an analysis of the "Wife of Bath's Prologue" and the "Wife of Bath's Tale," I will argue that the Wife of Bath is a psychologically androgynous character. Moreover, I will assert that Chaucer, through his creation and deployment of the Wife of Bath, exhibits authorial androgyny. To support these observations and claims, I consider historical context, psychological studies, feminist criticisms, and Chaucer's biography. The motif of psychological androgyny and the incipient concept of authorial androgyny are woven throughout this thesis.

Although canonical literature is often criticized for being out-of-touch and irrelevant to our modern times, it is possible to apply modern lenses to these older works of English literature. This approach results in a fresh perspective on both the work *and* the author. Male authors wrote important and inspiring female characters, and these creations allowed them to envision the world from an androgynous perspective. It is for this reason, perhaps, that many canonical works penned by men have transcended time.

## INTRODUCTION

### Methodology

For the past four years, my research has been largely focused on empowered female characters written by male authors. I feel these women elucidate aspects of their male authors that may not otherwise be apparent. Chaucer's Wife of Bath character proves particularly compelling in this regard. She appears to demonstrate a robust strength of character that is the product of a psychological androgyny she possesses. This psychological androgyny allows her to transcend the gender binary with respect to her point of view. Moreover, she serves as a paramount example of Chaucer's authorial androgyny and its inherent creative powers.

Psychological, feminist, and biographical theories were the lenses by which I interpreted the "Wife of Bath's Prologue" and "Wife of Bath's Tale." This blended approach provides a unique appreciation for the Wife and a renewed admiration for the innovative means by which Chaucer probes the breadth of the human experience. The Wife of Bath and her androgynous perspective validate Chaucer's remarkable vision of that experience.

### Purpose

The Wife of Bath is one of the most controversial, entertaining, and intriguing characters in the *Canterbury Tales*. My study of Western Literature in general and my research in particular has led me to an appreciation for female characters, penned by male authors, who inspire, influence, and buttress male characters. They have played a pivotal role in classical literature and much of Western Literature up to the present day. Consequential heroines reveal the capacity of male authors to perceive the world from a

partially feminine point of view and represent an acknowledgment of the critical role of feminine cogency. This acknowledgment dates back at least as far as Homer's Penelope who is both an inspiration for and loyal to Odysseus as he makes his epic journey home. In his exploration of the collective journey of humanity, Chaucer provides us with a powerful female character in the Wife of Bath who unveils a fascinating perspective on reality. Her viewpoint appears to be psychologically androgynous and serves as evidence of Chaucer's prescience as we read her Prologue and Tale in the modern age.

The *Canterbury Tales* is a depiction of the world of human experience and its ambiguity. It is not a simple world. The genius of Chaucer is his ability to distill the myriad of abstractions present in the medieval world with respect to theology, epistemology, authority and social conventions and concretize them in the context of his fictional characters. Characters, such as the Wife, have the capacity to create meaning that may run counter to conventional wisdom of that time. The Wife of Bath is more than a bold, defiant woman—she is a psychologically androgynous character who is capable of interpreting her world from a masculine and feminine perspective. Although a character of ages past, she remains relevant in our modern times.

#### Defining Androgyny in Terms of Literary Context

The amalgamation of masculine and feminine traits has fascinated mankind since ancient times. Examples of this concept are found in Greek mythology and are indicative of its significance with respect to our comprehension of the continuum of the human experience. One such example is that of Hermaphroditus, the child of the god Hermes and the goddess Aphrodite, who had the name and sexual characteristics of both parents. Ovid describes the physical attributes of Hermaphroditus in terms of a metamorphosis; a

transformation that occurred as he was unwillingly embraced by and coalesced with the infatuated nymph, Salmacis. As a result, the communal body appeared to be neither man nor woman but, rather, to be both man and woman (Mayerson 225-6, Ovid 4.373-533).

While Hermaphroditus represented a melding of male and female physical sexual characteristics, the prophet, Tiresias, had *experienced* life as a man and a woman. This experience afforded him both masculine and feminine insight—an androgynous perspective. When called upon to settle an argument between Zeus and Hera with regard to whether it was man or woman who enjoyed lovemaking the most, Tiresias gave an authoritative answer based upon his personal experience and insight, declaring woman garnered, by far, the greatest pleasure. The enraged Hera blinded him as a result, but Zeus bestowed upon him the gift of prophecy as compensation for his physical disability (Mayerson 335-6, Ovid 3.409-52). His sequential gender changes, or androgyny, provided Tiresias with an androgynous perspective and a gift of greater understanding.

These examples from the mythology of the ancient Greeks prompt a clarification of terminology. Hermaphroditism refers to a state in which an individual possesses both male and female sexual characteristics and organs (“hermaphroditism” *OED*), such as those displayed by Hermaphroditus (Ovid 4.317-88). In the case of Hermaphroditus, the condition was acquired as opposed to the congenital origin referred to in medical terminology. Androgyny is a somewhat more general term that refers to the combination of masculine and feminine traits in an individual (“androgynous” *OED*). Unlike hermaphroditism, which represents the biological combination of sexual organs, androgyny refers to a blend of masculine and feminine traits in various gradations.

Androgyny may be manifest in appearance or psychological makeup, but the sexual organs of the androgynous individual are clearly either male or female.

CHAPTER 1  
The Manifestation of Androgynous Qualities of the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath in the  
“General Prologue”

Physical Androgyny & The Pardoner

Androgyny is generally considered a manifestation of physical appearance. Chaucer’s Pardoner exhibits just such a physical androgyny and provides a delightful contrast to the psychological androgyny displayed by the Wife of Bath. These disparate types of androgyny displayed by these two characters allow Chaucer to explore this characteristic to great extent. The Pardoner is an emasculated male with regard to physical attributes, whereas the Wife possesses a mix of masculine and feminine personality traits that are the basis for the psychological androgyny she exhibits. This effaced masculinity with respect to the Pardoner and the psychologically masculinized Wife of Bath challenge our ability to define masculinity and femininity in these tales in terms of mutual exclusivity. While androgynous traits, whether physical or psychological, may cause discomfiture for some, the Pardoner and the Wife emerge as two of Chaucer’s most well-rounded, complete, dynamic, and controversial characters. Both characters transcend gender stereotypes and prompt critical thought about masculinity and femininity as a gender identity continuum, rather than exclusive opposites.

In the “General Prologue” of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer deploys his narrator, Geoffrey the Pilgrim, to offer initial descriptions and discerning impressions of the pilgrims he meets at the Tabard Inn prior to their pilgrimage. These portraits contribute to character development and create the possibility for inference of a deeper understanding of the nature of each of the pilgrims. Geoffrey the Pilgrim provides an

effeminate description of the Pardoner that prompts one to share Geoffrey's assumptions about him. He begins with the Pardoner's long, blonde hair that remains uncovered, despite the fact that he possesses a hood that he keeps in his pouch. The Pardoner opts for a "dischevelee" look (Chaucer, "GP" l. 675-83) that he believes to be more fashionable. He is fashion-conscious and is somewhat preoccupied with his appearance. This effeminate coiffure is further enhanced by the Pardoner's hairless face. Geoffrey the Pilgrim describes the Pardoner's face as so smooth it is as if he had just shaved. Geoffrey surmises, "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" (l. 689-91). This description is glossed as a metaphor that indicates Geoffrey may believe the Pardoner is a eunuch or gay (Beidler 16). At the very least, Geoffrey certainly speculates on his lack of manliness. It is the Pardoner's androgynous physical characteristics that prompt this speculation.

Such efforts to extrapolate the nature of an individual based upon physical characteristics was an emerging science during the medieval period. Known as physiognomy, it is the study of correspondence between psychological characteristics and physical features. Friedman, a philologist, explores physiognomy in Chaucer's works (Friedman 138). He explains that physiognomy is related to the four humors—blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm—as well as "those physical determinants of a person's intellectual, emotional, and moral character" (138). Androgynous physical features would prompt an inference of an androgynous nature according to the principles of physiognomy. On this premise, the Pardoner might be assumed to have androgynous tendencies in his psychological, intellectual, and emotional composition as well.

While Beidler argues that the question of the Pardoner's sexual orientation is the primary concern articulated by Geoffrey the Pilgrim in his physical description of him,

Green disagrees with this assumption and voices a notion that supports Friedman's ideas on physiognomy and its insistence upon an inextricable link between physical traits and intellectual, emotional, and moral characteristics. While Green stops short of calling the Pardoner an androgynous character, it would appear that Chaucer has indeed created an archetypal literary example of physical androgyny. Green argues that the Pardoner's androgynous appearance reveals his "preoccupation with women" and does not "indicate either homosexuality or a physical condition (whether that of a eunuch or a hermaphrodite)" (Green 307).

Medievalist Beryl Rowland claims Chaucer is purposefully vague in his presentation of "the Pardoner as a testicular pseudo-hermaphrodite of the feminine type" (Rowland 143). This label, which in terms of medical terminology is known as hypogonadism, is confusing and establishes the Pardoner as "an enigma" (142). In his book, *Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World*, Chaucerian scholar Donald Howard further expounds upon this enigmatic quality: "The Pardoner's androgynous quality can call to mind the medieval tradition of a male-female Christ" (489). It is difficult to label and categorize the Pardoner based on traditional binaries. This delineation of conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity in terms of mutual exclusivity challenges any predisposed notion that assumes the ability to categorize each and every person accordingly. Chaucer grapples with this question of identity and self-actualization. In the process, he questions traditional binaries. The Pardoner is a prime example of Chaucer's perspicacity with respect to human nature and its ambiguities.

### Psychological Androgyny & The Wife of Bath

Androgyny as a concept of blending masculine and feminine aspects of identity has been relevant to many authors throughout literary history. Both Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Virginia Woolf make pointed remarks about androgyny, which are applicable to Chaucer and his literary vision. In his book, *Table Talk*, Coleridge simply states, “The truth is, a great mind must be androgynous” (Coleridge 199). Coleridge lauds both Shakespeare and Chaucer as great authors. Although he seems to enjoy Chaucer more, Coleridge says Shakespeare is sympathetic towards his subjects because of the “effects by a strong act of imagination and mental metamorphosis” (310). He finds that Chaucer achieves the same level of sympathy with his subjects, albeit “without any effort, merely by the inborn kindly joyousness of his nature” (310). According to Coleridge, Shakespeare and Chaucer have a special nature that allows them to sympathize with both their masculine and feminine subjects in ways that transcend more typical artistic viewpoints. Both of these great authors exercise androgynous perspectives produced by different means. Shakespeare’s style is the product of an androgynous mind that renders remarkable results through an exaggerated artistic effort. Chaucer’s androgynous perspective is a more organic, effortless style. He is equally attune to both masculine and feminine characters with the end result that they are less artistically contrived.

Virginia Woolf expounds upon Coleridge’s idea that “a great mind must be androgynous” in her essay, *A Room of One’s Own*. She explains psychological androgyny by comparing it to a romantic relationship and the notion that opposites naturally attract. Woolf writes:

[I]t is natural for the sexes to cooperate. One has a profound, if irrational, instinct in favour of the theory that the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness... The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine... He [Coleridge] meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent, and undivided. (96-7)

Just as procreation requires both a man and a woman, Woolf suggests the same is true for the production of great art. A mind that is exclusively masculine or feminine may not be able to reach its full potential. Woolf insists that this amalgamation of masculine and feminine identities is “normal and comfortable.” Her explanation makes the concept of psychological androgyny more accessible and conveys the possibility that it is more prevalent than previously realized.

Psychological androgyny is a term embraced by second-wave feminist theorists and scholars who have used it to explain how men and women are equal despite biological differences. American psychologist, Sandra Bem, is one of the foremost scholars on psychological androgyny and the creator of a psychological inventory in order to study individual expression with masculine, feminine, and androgynous

personality traits. Her explanation of how these aspects of identity relate to one another can also elucidate the nature of some fictional characters in literary history, such as the Wife of Bath. Bem explains:

Both in psychology and in society at large, masculinity and femininity have long been conceptualized as bipolar ends of a single continuum; accordingly, a person has had to be either masculine or feminine, but not both. This sex-role dichotomy has served to obscure...[a] very plausible hypothes[is]...that many individuals might be “androgynous”; that is, they might be *both* masculine and feminine, *both* assertive and yielding, *both* instrumental and expressive. (Bem, “The Measurement of Psychological Androgyny” 155)

A person who manifests psychological androgyny displays a perception that is dependent upon both masculine and feminine personality traits. This type of androgyny is best understood when considered from a historical perspective. In her book, *The Lenses of Gender*, Sandra Bem provides historical, social, and cultural context for the concept of psychological androgyny. Bem claims, “Throughout the history of Western culture, three beliefs about women and men have prevailed: that they have fundamentally different psychological and sexual natures, that men are inherently the dominant or superior sex, and that both male-female difference and male dominance are natural” (Bem, *The Lenses of Gender* 1). Women have long been thought of as inferior. Bem’s ideas resonate in modern society but also provide some retrospective clarity to our understanding of Western society over centuries past.

Bem feels that the prevalence of a patriarchal dominance within society can be explained through the “concept of androcentrism, or male-centeredness,” which “goes

beyond telling *who* is in power to tell *how* their power is culturally and psychologically reproduced” (40-1). It is important to understand why men are considered as the privileged half of the male-female binary while women are thought of as the “other.” Although Bem formulated her theory in the late-20<sup>th</sup> century, male privilege has existed for hundreds of years in Western society as reflected in its theological, philosophical, and, more recently, psychoanalytical history. Bem begins her explanation with the history of the Judeo-Christian theology, which, over the course of centuries, revealed a shift from polytheism in ancient Semitic religion to monotheism. This change included an abandonment of the creation-goddess Asherah (43) and the subsequent replacement of her with Yahweh “as the one and only true god” (44) patterned on the male image. This theological change proved to be a seismic shift in the societal view of the gender binary and the proclivity to define women in terms of their relationship with men. The preferential treatment of men over women in the context of religion can be seen in the Bible, according to the works of both Eileen Power, a medieval scholar, and Bem. Both authors address Eve’s subordinate creation from the rib of a man as well as her role as the scapegoat for man’s fall. Religious teachings such as these establish a legacy of inferior status for women who are necessarily distanced from God. Both agree that this religious doctrine of Eve’s failure to resist temptation and her subsequent seduction of Adam to do the same introduces the label of woman as temptress (Power 16, Bem 47).

An androgynous perspective creates the possibility for women at least, to defy the constraints of this assumed natural inferiority. The male-female binary is based upon sexual and biological characteristics, while masculinity, femininity, and androgyny are based on gender identity, which operates on a continuum rather than as mutual

exclusivity. His Wife of Bath character evinces Chaucer's recognition of the reality of this continuum of gender identity, the valuable and important role women play in society, and the potential implications for a woman whose perspective is aligned in the median of the continuum. Chaucer envisioned the possibilities for women in medieval society, especially those capable of an androgynous point-of-view.

#### Historical Context: Medieval Women

The remarkable nature of Chaucer's Wife of Bath character is due in large part to the psychological androgyny she consistently displays. Placed in historical context, especially with regard to the traditional female experience in the Middle Ages, the Wife appears to be a literary archetype for the psychological androgyny Bem describes centuries later. As such, it is important to understand the Wife in terms of historical context. In her book, *Medieval Women*, Eileen Power explores the role of women in the Middle Ages. She examines the ways in which men of different social classes viewed women and how this impacted the way women were perceived during that time (Power 9-11). Although the view of women was unfavorable across much of the male population, the urban middle class, of which Chaucer and many of his fictional pilgrims were members, had "a better understanding of women's real position in medieval life than did the views of either the aristocracy or the Church" (10). According to Power these urban middle class men interacted with medieval women who played important roles in commercial activities of everyday life (10, 53). As a wife five times over and the bearer of unconventional ideas regarding both marriage and sexual relationships between men and women, Alisoun is a character who carves an aggressive position for herself in medieval society. Her androgynous personality traits enable Chaucer to provide her the

agency to assume such a position and even to challenge any potential male detractors. Alisoun is critical of clerks because she feels they have manipulated stories to deprecate women (Chaucer, “WBP” l. 692-6), and verbally subdues intrusive men, such as the Pardoner, who interrupts her as she begins her argument on marriage (l. 163-93). She serves as a means by which Chaucer questions prejudicial views of women and any notion that women must acquiesce in their social interactions with men. She does not allow the interruptions from either the Pardoner or the Friar to intimidate her or distract her.

In the medieval patriarchal society, women were not a prominent feature of public life. Medieval men moved in public spheres while women generally operated in private settings. The exception to this separation, however, is the unmarried woman or widow. Power calls this independent woman a “*femme sole*” who was “on a par with men” (Power 38). An important difference between a “*femme sole*” and a man with respect to social position was the potential impact of a marriage. Once an unmarried woman married or a widow remarried, her rights and her land were transferred to her husband. Furthermore, if a male child were born, then a woman’s “lands became his [the son’s] for life” (38). The only way for a married woman to reclaim her autonomy was through widowhood. Power explains the legal aspects of this return to “*femme sole*” status: “On his death, however, she became entitled to enjoy for life, under the name of dower, one-third of any land of which the husband was seized in fee during the marriage; and a husband could not alienate his own land, so as to bar her right of dower...and *this right she retained even if she married again*” (38, emphasis mine). Alisoun has returned to “*femme sole*” status repeatedly and has acquired wealth and land as a result. Yet, the key

to the Wife's ability to maintain her independence and her possessions is the fact that she is childless. In the Middle Ages, the woman with the greatest potential for independent means and personal freedom was a childless widow. One aspect of Chaucer's genius is his forethought to create a female character whose situation is commensurate with the time period. Alisoun cannot simply be dismissed as an unrealistic fictional character because her status is entirely plausible. In a sense, the Wife's androgyny extends to her social status because she has the ability to enjoy a sense of autonomy and social freedom comparable to that of men as well as experience the feminine role in the private sphere of marriage.

With regard to Alisoun's rhetorical question "Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?" (Chaucer, "WBP" l. 692), Power explains that medieval women were seldom writers, so the works about women were not written from a female viewpoint. The Wife bemoans the fact that all books are written by men: "Who peyntede the leon, tel me who? / By god, if wommen hadde writen stories / ... / They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse / Than all the mark of Adam may redresse" (l. 692-6). Women were often portrayed as vile and nefarious. Power discusses the long-standing, traditional thought that a woman was seen "as instrument of the Devil, a thing at once inferior and evil" (Power 14). The Church, a bastion of medieval male authority, was largely responsible for this view of women. Eve became the Christian symbol of feminine evil and weakness with regard to temptation; these characteristics were attributed to women generally. This view of women brought about "the concept of woman as supreme temptress...the greatest of all obstacles in the way of salvation...even matrimony could not wholly surmount it" (16).

In his powerful portrayal of his Wife of Bath character, Chaucer creates a sexually experienced female who has had multiple marriages, is outspoken with regard to her feminist opinions, and who does not consider her lifestyle an obstacle to personal fulfillment. Alisoun is practical, to some extent even utilitarian, with regard to marriage. She uses the institution of marriage to her advantage as she creates her own independence in a medieval world that privileges masculinity. In some respects, Chaucer offers her as a direct challenge to the medieval cultural norm. In order to deliver this challenge, he imbues the Wife with a crusty sense of humor and a blend of masculine and feminine personality traits. One of the defining manifestations of Alisoun's androgyny is the combination of her proclivity to use both textual evidence, which is traditionally masculine, as well as personal experiences as equivalent authoritative sources. Her use of personal experiences in such a manner is in contradistinction to the typical rational approach of males. She uses both masculine and feminine lenses, the product of her androgynous personality, to prosecute her arguments against male writers and texts.

The Wife's outlook on marriage exemplifies the androgynous aura that surrounds her. Medieval women often felt confined by the institution of marriage and the laws and religious constraints associated with it (Power 16-19). The Wife, however, manages to manipulate this institution in order to achieve dominance over her husbands. In her hands, the accepted roles of male dominance and female submission in the medieval marriage are mostly reversed. While all of her marriages demonstrate the Wife's capacity to outlive a husband and prosper through an inheritance, perhaps the best example of her ability to govern a husband can be seen in her fifth marriage to Jankyn. Rather than submit herself to listening to his stories from the "Book of Wikked Wives,"

the Wife tears “three leves” from the book (Chaucer, “WBP” l.790), hits Jankyn “on the cheke” (l. 808), and “made him brenne his book” (l. 816). She refuses to submit to his lessons and asserts her dominance through acerbic words and vigorous action. Her view of marriage as an institution that can serve as a means for a woman to achieve personal autonomy as well as her artful manipulation of her husbands create the possibility of female independence despite the societal prejudice that favored men and fostered negative views of women.

On first impression, the copious verses on courtly love by French troubadours of the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century would appear to contradict the subordinate role and negative view of women in the Middle Ages as described by Power. Courtly love existed in literature between a knight and a lady, whom he worshipped. She served as his motivation and inspiration, and, in return, he was completely devoted to her (Power 20-24). In some instances, such as that of Tristan and Isolde, this love provided an outlet from a loveless marriage. Power explains this type of love as “feudalised” because “the lady stood in a position of superiority...the lover served his lady as humbly as the vassal served his lord” (24). The women who were the objects of courtly love had their own form of agency in that they motivated and inspired their lovers to attempt remarkable feats of strength and promoted their lover’s character development. Their agency, however, is inextricably linked to, and appears to be a product of, courtly love. Courtly love, including the agency it extends to its female objects, is a concept created by men for the direct benefit and empowerment of their own sex. Power exclaims, “How often in real life must the lady of chivalry have been not romantically unhappy, but simply bored!” (36). Real life chivalry and courtly love were likely not as romantic as our modern society and its resultant

literary interpretations have presented them. As explained by Power, women were not in a position of power in society, even though the concept of courtly love may make it seem so. Although courtly love does not focus on the power dynamics of a couple, the power and agency on the female side is possible only because the male wills it so. The female counterpart in a courtly love relationship is not truly empowered and self-actualized by it. Her exalted status is created for her by heroic men who have, in essence, created a conduit to promote their own heroism.

The Wife of Bath stands in stark contradistinction to this ideal of courtly love and what appears to be a false sense of female agency as evidenced by her multiple marital relationships, self-assurance, and bold, aggressive view of marriage as a channel for feminine sovereignty both socially and financially. The Wife derives a true sense of agency through her manipulation of the institution of marriage as compared to the circumstances of courtly love. Specifically, courtly love did not occur between married couples. Chaucer portrays Alisoun as a strong female who dominates by unconventional means. Unlike the women involved in courtly love relationships, her position and her agency are not the products of willing male deference.

Power explains that as the subject matter of courtly love fades from literature, “the chorus of anti-feminist literature sounds more strongly than ever,” particularly in the genre of fabliaux (28), which are bawdy, humorous, antifeminist tales. She provides some general examples of the types of women featured in fabliaux: “[t]he old are all evil-minded hags, the wives all betray their husbands, the girls are either minxes or fools” (28). Chaucer refutes this stereotypical over-simplification of women in his characterization of the Wife. Furthermore, the Wife’s tale continues in this same vein.

Jill Mann explains that Chaucer created an issue of “polarisation [sic] of male treachery and female suffering” in his work, the *Legend of Good Women*, which he, in turn, solves in the *Canterbury Tales*, specifically through the “Wife of Bath’s Prologue” (Mann 39). The *Legend of Good Women* is meant to portray virtuous women in a good light, but the work further divides men and women. She says, “Chaucer solves this problem by setting both antifeminism and ‘wommanly pitee’ within dynamic structures that enable him to go beyond the old stereotyped polarities” (39).

Historical context with regard to the political and social organization of medieval society provides prospective for Chaucer’s remarkable ability to undermine the stereotypical male-female binary through the Wife’s character. The combination of male and female characteristics in her psychological composition may be the essence of her status as a progressive character. Chaucer’s works appear to stand in contradistinction to some of the teachings of the Church, the copious works of the troubadours, and antifeminist fabliaux with regard to women and their potential place in society.

#### Material Characteristics as a Manifestation of Psychological Androgyny in

#### Alisoun

Chaucer’s engagement with antifeminism begins with the description of the Wife in the “General Prologue,” which heralds the emergence of a dominant female character who is the product of Chaucer’s androgynous perspective. His androgynous perspective provides the impetus for his expression of an alternative view of women in society as realized in the Wife of Bath; she is intriguing, entertaining, and controversial. Furthermore, the disclosure of the Wife of Bath’s character is particularly compelling because she is one of only three women and the only secular one in this group. As with

the Pardoner, Geoffrey the Pilgrim provides a physical description of Alisoun that prefigures the image of her as revealed through her own prologue and tale. Chaucer's ingenious creation of a character, Geoffrey the Pilgrim, who performs this initial, instinctive, and natural assessment of the other characters based upon physical appearance is partly responsible for his effortless sympathy towards his characters to which Coleridge referred. Geoffrey the Pilgrim's description of the Wife describes novel features and unusual dress, all of which provide clues to her unique nature.

Geoffrey provides a sparse physical description of Alisoun's facial features. We know that she is "somdel deef" (Chaucer, "GP" l. 446) and "Boold was her face, and fair, and reed of hewe" (l. 458). She is courageous, somewhat prepossessing, and, if the color of her cheeks is any indication, filled with a zest for life. One of the telling physical attributes Geoffrey mentions is that Alisoun is "gat-tothed" (l. 468). In a case study on the Wife of Bath, Peter Beidler offers insight into this "goat-toothed" physical attribute and says, "[a]ccording to some physiognomists...having gaps between the teeth could indicate pride and heightened sexuality" (Beidler 43). This descriptive phrase hints of a sexually aggressive nature that is somewhat atypical for women. Even her attire evinces self-confidence and egoism and her sense of relevance among these pilgrims: "Her coverchiefs ful fine weren of ground— / I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound— / That on a Sunday weren upon her heed. / Her hosen weren of fin scarlet red, / Ful streite yteyd, and shoes ful moiste and newe" (Chaucer, "GP" l. 453-7). Alisoun is richly dressed. Finely spun fabric was expensive, and she wears ten pounds on her head, likely to advertise her skill as a spinster. These particular aspects of Alisoun's appearance and

dress are distinctly feminine but provide a sense that she is indeed a character of consequence.

Geoffrey also draws our attention, in subtle fashion, to features that he describes with a mix of masculine and feminine imagery, which introduces the notion that her character may, in some ways, combine the two genders. Geoffrey says the Wife is “Ywimpled well, and on her heed an hat / As brood as is a bokeler or a targe, / A foot-mantel about her hipes large, / And on her feet a pair of spores sharpe” (l. 470-3).

Alisoun has her head and neck covered by a wimple, or a linen cloth, her hat is as broad as a shield, and she wears an apron and spurs (Beidler 43). Her attire is appropriate for her status as a wealthy cloth-maker and as a figure that demands attention. Moreover, the metaphor of a hat of shield-like proportions and the spurs she sports create a somewhat masculine impression. A shield is part of a knight’s equipment for battle, and this metaphor indicates her affinity for a level of protection and status associated with masculine warfare. Its size emphasizes her position as a successful businesswoman and woman of the world. Furthermore, her spurs impart an image of zealousness and dominance. Spurs are used to hurry a horse along and are indicative of control. Geoffrey’s description suggests Alisoun possesses qualities that transcend those typical for women.

Alisoun’s rich and somewhat ostentatious attire is indicative of her apparent entrepreneurial success as a cloth-maker. Geoffrey says, “Of clooth-making she hadde swich an haunt, / She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt” (Chaucer, “GP” l. 447-8). Beidler explains that these two towns in Belgium were famous for the cloth they made, and Chaucer asserts Alisoun’s skills exceed them. Her business success is particularly

responsible for her sense of independence, her freedom to travel, and her capacity to interact socially in ways not necessarily available to medieval women. This freedom and independent means she enjoys bolster her agency and highlight her self-sufficiency that is derived from her psychological androgyny. Her business savvy and acumen in conjunction with her travel experience are indicative of traditionally masculine traits and activity and emphasizes that her character is a non-traditional medieval woman.

When contrasted with his description of the Prioress, Geoffrey the Pilgrim's vignette of the Wife almost bristles with masculine imagery. The Prioress has impeccable table manners (Chaucer, "GP" l. 127-36), is "ful plesaunt" (l. 138), and is charitable towards animals and emotionally attached to them (l. 143-50). She is soft and mild-mannered. Her physical appearance is dainty with a "nose tretys" (l. 152), a small red mouth (l. 153), and a fair forehead (l. 154). She wears her cloak with graceful charm (l. 157) and accents her habiliments with tasteful articles of jewelry including a bracelet and brooch (l. 158-60). The depiction is unambiguously feminine.

Geoffrey informs us that Alisoun has been on many pilgrimages—three to Jerusalem and one each to Rome, Boloigne, Galice at Seint-Jame, and Coloigne (l. 463-6). Pilgrimages served as a means of comparatively safe travel, and Alisoun takes advantage of such opportunities. She does not appear to feel the least bit intimidated to travel unaccompanied as she does to Canterbury. Pilgrimages were opportunities for this frequently widowed woman to travel and embrace her freedom. Many medieval women died at a young age, often from childbirth, and did not outlive one husband. Alisoun manages to outlive five husbands, remain childless, conduct a successful business, and enjoy a sense of freedom that was unusual for women in the Middle Ages. She offers a

fascinating androgynous viewpoint and has much to communicate to other pilgrims about world travel (l. 467) and the adventures of love (l. 475-6). More importantly, her assertive character, the product of those androgynous traits she possesses, allows her to assume a central position in this pilgrimage that avails her an audience.

Although the description of Alison in the “General Prologue” is brief, it is rich with inference. This early portrait highlights her ability to manipulate others as she demonstrates a literal manipulation of textiles to make cloth but is also capable of a figurative manipulation of her world. She spurs her horse and, metaphorically, willfully spurred her past husbands. Her capability gives her both the confidence to travel and the agency to speak her mind freely. These aspects of her personality are expounded in her own Prologue, the longest in the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer himself yields to her and allows her free reign.

#### Authorial Androgyny

When Chaucer grants agency to his female character, the Wife of Bath, he becomes more transparent as an author. Coleridge remarks, “How well we seem to know Chaucer!” (310). This transparency is indicative of the degree to which Chaucer is immersed in his art. The Wife’s psychological androgyny reflects Chaucer’s innovative form of authorial androgyny. This authorial androgyny is transferable to a fictional character because Chaucer wills it so.

The most lucid example of Chaucer’s authorial androgyny can be gleaned from the “Wife of Bath’s Prologue.” The Wife’s autobiographical prologue is indicative of Chaucer’s understanding of the intimate inner thoughts of women. As Howard says, “It is hard to imagine how Chaucer could have succeeded in portraying...the Wife of Bath if he

did not have, androgyny aside, the ability to be a companion and a friend with women” (Howard 97). Chaucer could envision life from the feminine perspective. His capacity for this alternative viewpoint is revealed powerfully through the psychological androgyny of the Wife.

CHAPTER 2  
The “Wife of Bath’s Prologue”: The Wife’s Psychological Androgyny Revealed

The Wife as a Literary Manifestation of Psychological Androgyny

Chaucer expresses his authorial androgyny best through his Wife of Bath character. Her sustained and detailed autobiography is one of the most recognizable pieces of literature that signifies Chaucer’s careful attentiveness to her character development and possibly his special connectedness to her. Chaucer’s intellectual androgynous characteristics are displayed through his creation of Alisoun who manifests a psychological androgyny that contributes to her uniqueness. Gustave Flaubert said of his character, Madame Bovary, “c’est moi,” which indicated that this female character was partly an extension of the author’s own personality. Perhaps Chaucer had a similar relationship with his outspoken, psychologically androgynous character.

While the “General Prologue” description of Alisoun is proffered through the lens of Geoffrey the Pilgrim, the “Wife of Bath’s Prologue” is related from her own perspective. She capitalizes on her opportunity to lecture her fellow pilgrims on the value of life experience as a legitimate means to authoritative knowledge. The autobiographical portion of her Prologue provides experiential evidence of the psychological androgyny that suffuses her point of view. Her psychological androgyny appears to be an extension of Chaucer’s. In his book, Howard discusses Chaucer’s androgynous personality, particularly in relation to his wife, Philippa. Howard asserts that Chaucer “lived in a man’s world, achieved eminence as a public figure and a writer in a man’s world, yet he had no difficulty at all seeing the world through women’s eyes” (Howard 97). Medieval women, according to Howard, “were mere necessities; they were the subjects of song and story, the objects of desire or emotional dependency,

indispensable in family and dynastic alliances, but never companions or friends, certainly not equals” (97). Yet, it was Chaucer’s ability to understand and appreciate women as more than necessities that enabled him to empower this female character with a psychological androgyny as a means of mounting an effectual challenge to the pervasive male-centric point of view in medieval society. It is not a question of whether or not Chaucer agreed with Alisoun’s viewpoint. It is unlikely that he did. Her value as a literary character is her capacity to enhance Chaucer’s conveyance of the full breadth of the human experience. Howard attributes Chaucer’s astounding creation of the character, Alisoun, to his androgynous mind, which enabled him “to be a companion and a friend with women” (97). Chaucer probably would not have been able to write such a character without his own interaction with and appreciation for a variety of feminine perspectives. It is precisely this personal, lived experience that Chaucer emphasizes in the “Wife of Bath’s Prologue.” This plucky character who might be considered a literary prototype of psychological androgyny, serves as Chaucer’s expedient to address women’s issues and explore the perspective of lived experience as a primary means by which the world may be known and understood.

The Wife opens her Prologue with a proclamation of her credentials: she was first married when she was twelve years old (Chaucer, “WBP” l. 4), and she has been married five times (l. 6). Just as she manipulates cloth and men to her advantage, she manipulates texts in her Prologue to bolster her viewpoints on marriage and virginity. In particular, the Wife discusses the Bible and St. Jerome’s work, *Adversus Jovinianum*. Beidler describes St. Jerome’s work, a criticism of Jovinian’s liberal views, as a “long epistle against Jovinian, which provides much of the antifeminist material” in Alisoun’s

Prologue (Beidler 44). In *Chaucer Sources and Backgrounds*, editor Robert P. Miller compiles the sources Chaucer used in his works, and he includes the “Marriage and Virginitie” section from *The Epistle against Jovinian*. In an introduction to this section, Miller explains that St. Jerome’s work “enjoyed an exceptional popularity as an authority in the antimatrimonial [sic] and antifeminist library of the Middle Ages” (Miller 415). The Wife is so angered by the antifeminist rhetoric of St. Jerome’s *Adversus Jovinianum* that she engages in a physical altercation with her fifth husband, Jankyn, who holds such antifeminist works in high regard (Chaucer, “WBP” l. 664-75).

As a woman who displays psychological androgyny, Alisoun places a premium upon her independence. It seems her recent marriage to Jankyn, who clearly holds antifeminist views, further inspires her diatribe against male chauvinism and society’s general belief that “auctoritee” must come from formal education. It is an extended diatribe that runs practically the length of her prologue. The Wife says, “But me was toold certeyn, not longe agoon is, / That sith that Crist ne wente nevere but ones / To wedding in the Cane of Galilee, / That by the same ensample taughte he me / That I ne sholde wedded be but ones” (l. 9-13). Jankyn feels it is his responsibility to educate his wife even though she is older and, no doubt, more experienced in life than he. Hallissy discusses why this responsibility would have been legitimate in the Middle Ages. She explains that Christian orthodoxy said an individual could not engage directly with scripture but, rather, the message must be “filtered down” from “great theologians” to “learned clerics; and only then received by their humble flocks.” Everyone was subject to this mode of learning, but, “[f]or women, another layer was added: the husband” (Hallissy 172). The Wife insists that her experience makes her every bit as

knowledgeable about life and marriage, in particular, as her husband, Jankyn, who relies upon books as his source of truth. She considers her experience to be the equivalent of male formal education when it comes to authority. She adheres to the androgynous position that authority is shared and does not belong exclusively to one gender.

The Wife views St. Jerome's argument as mere specious reasoning as reflected by his interpretation of verses 1-10 of the second chapter of John: "For by going once to a marriage, He taught that men should marry only once" (Miller 431). It is St. Jerome's interpretation of the Bible that the Wife argues against in her Prologue, not the Biblical text itself. Laskaya asserts, "The Wife knows the representations of women popular in Church writings are inadequate and biased...[F]or example, she objects to clerics who privilege virginity to such a degree that they sometimes condemn marriage, and she takes them on using their own weapon, the Bible, against them" (Laskaya 178-9). In two particularly compelling examples, Alisoun uses references to four different Biblical passages to refute St. Jerome's positions on marriage and virginity (Chaucer, "WBP" l. 24-34, 62-72). St. Jerome manipulates the Bible and offers interpretations that benefit his argument. The Wife disagrees with his positions and offers her own interpretations. It is as if she asserts that if a man can manipulate Biblical texts, so can a woman. In fact, her pugnacious literary criticism is yet another example of a masculine trait displayed by this plucky woman. Despite the claim some critics have made that this Prologue emphasizes Chaucer's own antifeminism, it appears to be anything but that. As the Wife of Bath roundly castigates St. Jerome's work, it would appear that Chaucer uses humor both constructively and instructively to discredit the antifeminist argument.

In Chaucer's lifetime, the issue of education and knowledge was a gendered one because some men had access to formal schooling while women generally did not. As the Comptroller of Customs under King Edward III, Chaucer met and interacted with a multitude and variety of people. This combination of awareness of societal issues as well as his general knowledge of the populace contributed to Chaucer's androgynous perspective of life and its consequent reflection in his writing. Chaucer processes the discrepancy between the genders and their respective means of education through his creation of Alisoun. The Wife voices her opinion on the value of experiential learning when she says, "Diverse scoles maken parfit clerkes / And diverse practik in many sondry werkes / Maketh the werkman parfyt sikerly. / Of fyve husbondes scoleiyng am I" (l. 41-4). Alisoun feels secure and confident about her knowledge regarding marriage because her lived experience has made her wise. One way women gained knowledge was from older, wiser members of their sex. For example, when Alisoun explains how she captivated Jankyn by pretending to dream of her death at his hand, the Wife says, "My dame taughte me that soutiltee" (l. 576). Priscilla Martin explains, "Alison is conscious of the manipulative strategies she has been taught by female tradition, a sub-culture with its own murky education in survival techniques" (Martin 100). Similar to the way in which Alisoun must learn the nuances of womanhood through communication with other women, which has made her wise and an authority on relationships, Chaucer too, according to Howard, learned about women and the issues they face in this way (Howard 97). Howard discusses the platonic-turned-romantic relationship between Chaucer and Philippa as a main source of his inspiration but also mentions that Chaucer had a "way with the ladies," even citing Queen Anne as one who would "banter and

discourse with Master Geoffrey” (98). An intimate yet non-sexual relationship with a woman ran counter to the traditional view of women as “mere necessities” (97). This countercultural view allowed Chaucer to develop relationships with, learn from, and appreciate female acquaintances and friends.

Companionable yet non-sexual relationships such as this enabled Chaucer to develop a heightened awareness of the feminine perspective and more personal female issues such as desire, dreams, and dependency. The Wife’s androgynous personality is a manifestation of Chaucer’s appreciation of a combined masculine and feminine viewpoint. His male privilege allows him to voice bold opinions on several controversial topics through the truculent wife. Her unabashed self-assertiveness might be considered an unrealistic trait in a medieval woman were it not for her androgynous personality, which makes the Wife a non-traditional medieval woman and somewhat unique. In the final two lines of his portrait of Alisoun in the “General Prologue,” Geoffrey the Pilgrim astutely recognizes her experience, knowledge, and confidence: “Of remedies of love she knew per chance, / For she koude of that art the olde daunce” (Chaucer, “GP” l. 475-6). This summation of her capability and her relation to traditional female knowledge establishes the Wife as a disciple of la Vielle from de Meun’s *Romance of the Rose* (Desmond 124). This connection to an influential and provocative female character provides a compelling literary parallel to the Wife’s fictional deference to the edifying instruction of other women (Chaucer, “WBP” l. 530-9). She aggressively challenges the conventional authority of the Church, an extension of masculinist perspective, and the power it wields over women on certain matters such as marriage, virginity, and sexual relationships.

This challenge to authority may be understood in one sense through Boethius' 6<sup>th</sup>-century, allegorical work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Written while he was imprisoned, this work features his imaginary conversation with Dame Philosophy, figured as a woman, who helps rehabilitate him. The two of them cover a variety of topics in an effort to help him recognize the purpose behind the untoward events that have occurred in his life. Their philosophical discourse includes a discussion of power and its role among humans. Dame Philosophy states, "You creatures of earth, don't you stop to consider the people over whom you think you exercise authority? You would laugh if you saw a community of mice and one mouse arrogating to himself power and jurisdiction over the others" (Boethius 38). This ridiculous image highlights the lack of real consequence to be found in such human contrivances, especially when considered in light of more ultimate concerns, such as divine purpose. Medieval men and women would have been taught that, from a Christian perspective, the highest power and authority rest in God and based their beliefs upon the Great Chain of Being. At a macrocosmic level, this schema places God and then angels at the highest positions followed by people, animals, plants, and inanimate objects, in that order. On a mesocosmic, or earthly, level the three estates include clergy, ruling class, and peasants. The Church places the husband above the wife. It is this mesocosmic level, the human level, that the Wife challenges. The Wife exercises skepticism with regard to the authority of some leaders of the Church, members of the clergy, and especially with the authority of husbands. She is actively skeptical because she questions the limitations they place upon women. Her psychological androgyny provides her with a posture of male assertiveness that empowers her to challenge these types of male dominance.

Alisoun makes a persuasive argument for experiential authority and offers a fresh perspective on social conventions. Her androgynous ego prompts her to declare herself a man's authoritative equal on the basis of her experiential learning (Chaucer, "WBP" l. 174). Hallissy explains the idea that women were defined in literature by an allegedly elite group of men who composed texts based largely on older works. The Wife, however, according to Hallissy, "creates her own text, glosses it herself, and preaches it to a congregation of attentive listeners" (Hallissy 172). Chaucer grants a level of agency to the Wife, which allows her, as a literary figure, to utilize this public platform, albeit a fictional one, and voice the realities and concerns of women, who were largely voiceless in medieval patriarchal society. Alisoun categorically refuses to let the patriarchal society in which she lives dictate her life, her experiences, and her sources of authority. In fact, she becomes her own source of authority, particularly on the topics of marriage and virginity, with which she has ample experience. "Auctoritee" is a masculine trait consisting primarily of written authority produced by men during the Middle Ages. Chaucer, however, grants "auctoritee" to the Wife; she uses her opponents' written words to argue her own views. Alisoun is capable of exercising such authority because she is confident that her life experiences grant her such latitude. While her experiences are of a female and are interpreted from her feminine point of view, her insistence that she must be recognized as an authority is a reflection of an assertiveness more commonly expected from males.

The Wife's views on marriage and virginity are progressive and position her as a modern woman, an incipient feminist, and a staunch individualist. Her perspective and forthright opinion are a direct result of the influence she feels from both Venus and Mars.

Alisoun tells the pilgrims, “I hadde the prente of Seinte Venus seel” (Chaucer, “WBP” l. 604), and “I Martes mark upon my face, / And also in another privee place” (l. 619-20). Beidler explains that the “seel” and “privee place” are apparently birthmarks that are “in some concealed place on her body” (Beidler 65). The Wife bears the mark of Venus, the goddess of love, and Mars, the god of war; both serve as stamps of her androgynous personality. In her resource, *Chaucer Name Dictionary*, Jacqueline de Weever provides background information on names that appear throughout Chaucer’s works. Venus is married to Vulcan but had many lovers, including Mars and Mercury, whom the Wife mentions in her prologue. De Weever explains that Venus represents a “voluptuous life” and “dominates Dame Alys.” Alisoun is clearly a lover, but she also has a pugnacious edge about her, which is symbolized by the mark of Mars she bears. With regard to Mars’ influence, de Weever states, “her [the Wife’s] heart is Martian, and Mars gave her her sturdiness” (de Weever, “Venus” and “Mars”). Her link to the feminine Venus and masculine Mars is indicative of the duality within her nature and the combination of these male and female elements in her character are further evidence of her psychological androgyny.

The Wife also makes reference to another lover of Venus—Mercury. Mercury has a variety of roles in mythology. De Weever says, “He was Jupiter’s winged messenger, the god of cunning, wit, and eloquence, and became the guide of souls.” Mercury is known for his deception and magic; his caduceus has magical properties and “represents the power of language” (de Weever, “Mercurie”). Alisoun makes reference to Mercury after her diatribe against men who misrepresent women in their writing:

The children of Mercurie and Venus  
Been in hir wirking ful contrarius.

Mercuire loveth wisdom and science,  
 And Venus loveth riot and dispence,  
 And for hir diverse disposicioun  
 Ech falleth in otheres exaltacioun.  
 And thus, God woot, Mercurie is desolat  
 In Pisces wher Venus is exaltat,  
 And Venus falleth there Mercurie is reysed.  
 Therefore no womman of no clerk is preysed.” (Chaucer, “WBP” l. 697-706)

Beidler provides historical context for these lines and explains that “learned men, or clerks” were associated with Mercury whereas secular women were connected to Venus (Beidler 68). The Wife proudly and eagerly displays her dual nature that reflects influences from both Venus and Mars but finds she has little in common with those men who are associated with Mercury. In Roman mythology, however, the offspring of the relationship between Venus and Mercury is Hermaphroditus, a minor deity of unions, androgyny, and marriage (Roman 220). It seems possible that Alisoun herself is a child of Venus and Mercury based on her androgynous psychological composition. The Wife criticizes the mutual exclusivity that exists between the children of Venus (women) and the children of Mercury (men). Her androgynous character traits lend her the capacity to identify with Hermaphroditus who was begotten by both Venus and Mercury. Hermaphroditus was not born a hermaphrodite; he acquired his blend of physical and sexual characteristics when he was merged with the nymph Salamacis in the bathing waters. The Wife acquires her psychological androgyny through a series of rich life experiences and may be considered, to some extent, a mortal representative of unions, marriage, and an androgynous mindset.

The Wife’s Prologue reveals some of the potential complexities associated with the discovery and expression of identity. This process of becoming is a direct extension

of life experience. Her experiences have provided her a means of self-edification and a stimulus for the development of a novel androgynous perspective that transcends her femininity. She embraces her identity and presses her claim that she is an authority on marriage and quite capable of mounting stiff opposition to antifeminist sentiments. In their anthology, Gilbert and Gubar comment on an excerpt from *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir in which they claim that “before the so-called second wave of feminism...[her work] exerted immediate influence and continues to shape feminist elaborations upon her famous sentence that ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ ” (Gilbert and Gubar 299). De Beauvoir advocates for a greater appreciation of female issues and encourages women to welcome the process of becoming a woman. Gender identity is more than mere biology; it is also influenced by society, culture, and life experiences and one’s perception of those experiences. Chaucer, writing centuries before the feminist movement, was apparently a proponent of the art of becoming because he conceives of the Wife as a dynamic, progressive character whose psychological androgyny evolves out of her perception of her life experiences. While a superficial analysis of her character may find her shrewish or bearing a resemblance to an antifeminist stereotype, a closer reading would argue that Chaucer presents her as a far more unique creation, one who demonstrates an ability to learn from her experiences and manipulate her world to her advantage. Admittedly, medieval women were often stereotyped as loud gossipers, promiscuous with a proclivity for moral corruption. Works such as Jankyn’s “Book of Wikked Wives” were common, and “stories abounded in which the wicked wiles of women were held up as warning for the unwary” (Miller 399). Women were feared because they were unpredictable and represented powerful

temptations from a theological standpoint. The Wife does not align with the antifeminist stereotype because her intent and motivation are not malicious or spiteful but merely self-serving.

The Wife does desire many things, such as financial security and a sense of independence for which she engages in a series of marriages. Moreover, she desires a loving relationship as exemplified by her Tale's happily-ever-after ending and her romantic feelings for Jankyn. Alisoun would like to have it all and grasps to fulfill her desires by means of a psychologically androgynous approach to life that combines powerfully masculine and feminine elements. As a result, Chaucer gives us a most unusual woman who is fulfilled in nontraditional ways.

She has had five husbands—"three of hem were goode and two were badde" (Chaucer, "WBP" l. 196)—but welcomes "the sixte, whan that evere he shall!" (l. 45). Despite the negative experiences in two marriages, Alisoun has become a perpetual wife who climbs the rungs of matrimony as she discovers the good life for herself. Indeed, she becomes the merry widow. She recognizes that she cannot remain chaste. This realization causes her to actualize her womanhood as a wife, a wife of repetitious matrimonial relationships, rather than act upon her desires and suffer eternal damnation. " 'Bet is to be wedded than to brynne,' " she quotes (l. 52). The Wife has recently acted in a manner consistent with the concept of becoming with respect to her relationship with her fifth husband, Jankyn. She proclaims, "I loved him best for that he / Was of his love daungerous to me" (l. 513-14). She must reconcile these contradictory feelings and resolve the crisis that evolves out of this romantic love for Jankyn. Yet, her love is so great that she marries him even though she realizes she must relinquish all her land and

wealth to him (l. 630-1). But, she feels frustrated by his readings from his “Book of Wikked Wives,” and, despite her love for him, she strikes him a blow, which prompts him to strike her back. Both are sorry for their behavior, but Jankyn especially so. He pledges never to strike her again and even gives her back her land, grants her full governance of the house, and burns his offensive, antifeminist book (l. 805-16).

Alisouns’ love quells her anger towards him for his preoccupation with his “Book of Wikked Wives” (l. 811-28). The Wife treats him with nothing but kindness and honor from that day until his death; a remarkable transformation for this marital warrior (l. 822-25). She accepts her dual nature, derived from both Venus and Mars (l. 609-12) and uses both elements to her advantage to become a better wife to Jankyn.

The portrayal of this dynamic female character who appears to be motivated by a psychologically androgynous state of mind seems to indicate that Chaucer was quite progressive in his conceptualization of the possibilities for women. Still, it is difficult to say with any certainty if Chaucer could be considered a feminist. Although the Wife was not intentionally written as an obviously feminist character, she appears to resemble the inchoate images of such. Nevertheless, she does have her detractors in the field of literary criticism. Elaine Tuttle Hansen argues that the Wife is not a genuine female character because she is the creation of a male author. Hansen calls Alisoun “a feminine monstrosity who is the product of the masculine imagination” (Hansen 35).

Alternatively, one might argue that a fully developed, bold, energetic woman who displays androgynous character traits is anything but a “monstrosity.” Throughout literary history, male authors, such as Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Fielding, and Dickens, have written powerful female figures who are realistic and inspiring. In the case

of Chaucer's Alisoun specifically, the author took full advantage of the privilege he had to address an audience, and, amongst all the male-centric prologues, he included the Wife's autobiography. In doing so, he created a woman whose psychological androgyny made her a challenge to the male pilgrims. The "Wife of Bath's Prologue" could be seen as a reminder to both Chaucer himself and his audience that feminine sexual and romantic desire as well as the quest for personal independence were real and important, and fulfillment of such within the constraining conventions of medieval society might well call for a character who has become a different type of woman. Chaucer's interests lie not in some type of incipient feminist movement but, rather, in the possibility that a woman may desire more, and grasp more, than permitted by a highly structured, patriarchal society.

Hansen cites multiple articles, which focus largely on the categorization of Alisoun as either feminist or victim (42). In fact, Hansen herself argues, "the Wife turns out to be a reflection of 'categorizing principles' rather than a speaking subject. Wearing and reproducing the mark, the brand, the inscription, of the gender system as we know it, she, like any female, becomes the mark at which hostile forces aim" (52). Contrariwise, she may be a woman who exhibits a powerful psychological androgyny and transcends categorization, branding, and the traditional gender binary against whom hostile forces dare not take aim. Moreover, it is the genius of Chaucer that engenders a character such as the Wife who, completed by her androgynous traits, transcends time. Her timelessness is evidenced by her relevance even in modern times. She eludes the categorization that societies tend to impose.

### The Empowerment Derived from Psychological Androgyny

The Wife's androgynous personality grants her a freedom of speech that typical medieval women would have envied. This liberty can be seen throughout her Prologue as she makes bold statements that contradict those of male writers, particularly those of the clergymen. One such example occurs when the Wife argues against St. Jerome's assertion that women should only marry once but that multiple marriages are preferable to extramarital affairs. St. Jerome interprets the passage in 1 Corinthians 7:9, 28 to mean that any marriage after the first is inferior, undesirable, and spiritually problematic. He says, "it is more tolerable for a woman to prostitute herself to one man than to many" (Miller 425). The pragmatic Alisoun debunks St. Jerome's argument by citing Biblical men who had multiple marriages including Solomon, Lameth, Abraham, and Jacob. She emphatically challenges the double standard St. Jerome upholds. To conclude her argument, she says, "Wher can ye seye, in any manere age, / That heighe God defended mariage / By expres word? I pray you, telleth me" (Chaucer, "WBP" l. 59-61). The Wife challenges the position taken by prominent male religious leaders. She insists that there is no clear commandment from God in the Bible that identifies marriage and even multiple marriages, on the part of a woman, as a sin. Her argument is androgynous in its nature because she uses a text written by males as well as her own feminine experiential learning to formulate her refutation.

Alisoun's psychological androgyny makes possible a vigorous and bold diatribe against many of the accepted religious authorities of the Middle Ages. It grants her a fearlessness that enables her to go on pilgrimages and affords her the opportunity and the courage to persist in a candid discussion with her numerous male companions regarding

marriage, virginity, and sexual desire. She does not hesitate to take certain liberties with the wording and meaning of Biblical text. She stresses nuanced meanings of words as a basis for her textual interpretations. Alisoun does so in an outspoken manner that is reminiscent of the style of argument used by male authorities, such as St. Jerome, with whom she takes issue. For example, she deliberates on the difference between Biblical commandment and suggestion in her discussion of virginity: “Or where comanded he virginitee?” (l. 62). Not only is a commandment on virginity non-existent in the Bible, but Alisoun also notes that St. Paul had no precise rule with regard to virginity (l. 65). The Wife uses a rhetorical question to make her compelling point: “For hadde God comanded maidenhede, / Thanne hadde he dampned wedding with the dede. / And, certain, if there were no seed ysowe, / Virginitee thanne werof sholde it growe?” (l. 69-72). She makes obvious the fact that it is necessary for women to marry and have sex in order to produce offspring who may choose to be virgins. Sex and the possibility of abstinence are interdependent. The Wife goes on to tell the pilgrims, “The dart is set up for virginitee. / Cacche whoso may. Who renneth best lat see” (l. 75-6). Here Alisoun asserts that women have a choice; for some the right choice is virginity, but, for others, such as herself, it is marriage, which necessitates a sexual relationship.

Moreover, the Wife contends that multiple marriages are not an offense. She feels compelled to respond to St. Jerome’s argument that people should marry only once because Christ attended only one wedding (Chaucer, “WBP” l. 9-13, Miller 430-1). The Biblical story relates the miracle Jesus performed when he turned water into wine at a wedding at Cana in Galilee. St. Jerome’s interpretation of the text claims that because this is the only time Jesus attended a wedding, by inference, no one should have more

than one wedding. This rationalization is flawed because it is not founded on scholarship or experience; it is merely opinion and manipulation of a Biblical text. Alisoun's argument is similar yet more cogent than that of St. Jerome as she uses Biblical references or the absence thereof to support her own view in the manner of male scholars. In addition, she incorporates her personal life experiences, which gives her assertions weight. Her argument is born out of her psychological androgyny because it is based upon both life experience and authoritative interpretation of Biblical text; she even manipulates the text to her advantage after the manner of St. Jerome.

The Wife exhibits a combination of masculine authority, polemic, and Biblical exegesis. Alisoun deploys these masculine elements in the course of her argument and blends them with her personal experience as a woman. The result is an androgynous interpretation of reality that is captivating, powerful, and timeless. As such, the Wife of Bath highlights Chaucer's genius and suggests that Alisoun's character is reflective of his own. Several scholars have considered the similarities between Alisoun and Chaucer. Hansen's position is supportive of Chaucer's "feminist leanings on the basis of a closely related issue: the similarities between the position of women and the apparent position of the poet" (Hansen 37). She finds that both medieval poets and women are "marginalized and subordinated figures" who appear to exhibit a sense of social insecurity and question "the ideology that tries but fails to define them" (37-8). Laskaya argues that Chaucer and Alisoun fuse into a single, androgynous character, which is the "product of both 'experience' and 'auctoritie' [sic]" (Laskaya 187). Chaucer is closely associated with Alisoun precisely because she is psychologically androgynous; in this way, they both transcend the gender binary. Laskaya explains, "Unlike his male pilgrim narrators,

Chaucer embraces and enjoys the multiplicities of character, whether male or female. What attracts him to Dame Alysoun is the complexity of the human, not the simplicity of artificial social or cultural definitions” (187). By creating Alisoun’s psychological androgyny, Chaucer explores a non-traditional viewpoint, which critiques the masculine-feminine binary. He concerns himself with the expression of both the meaningful physical and intellectual interactions and relationships between the sexes in a candid manner. Alisoun’s androgynous perspective allows her to exhibit confidence as she broaches topics that are taboo in mixed company. In this group of pilgrims, the Wife displays confidence in her “auctoritee,” which stems from her androgynous mind and life experience.

Chaucer’s androgynous mind allowed him to empathize with feminine desires and the frequent social marginalization of women often generated by their authoritative, close-minded male counterparts. Mann explains that he “could not plumb the unrecorded secrets of woman’s existence, but he *could* anatomize the literary stereotypes which set the terms in which male-female relationships were played out, and he could question the male writer’s role as the ‘auctoritee’ that supports them” (Mann 67). The Wife’s psychologically androgynous characterization allows Chaucer to offer criticism of his own sex for their literary representations of women and the perpetuation of negative, unfair stereotypes. Moreover, he grants agency to a strong female character whose androgynous mind and controversial rhetoric captivate her fellow pilgrims. Empowered as she is by her psychological androgyny, Alisoun can neither be silenced nor ignored.

## CHAPTER 3

The “Wife of Bath’s Tale”: The Creative Power of Psychological Androgyny

The Wife’s Tale is an extension of the idea she expresses in her Prologue and serves as a further manifestation of her psychological androgyny. The Wife proves a capable storyteller whose method reflects her androgynous point of view. It is by means of her psychological androgyny that the Wife creates financial security and a sense of personal freedom, as seen in her Prologue. The setting, characters, and genre of her Tale provide the Wife with another platform to present her views on marriage, the precarious position women often experience in medieval society, and the sovereignty women seek in their spousal relationships in order to rectify this precariousness.

Two scholars, Helen Cooper and Mary Carruthers, offer diametrically opposed views of the Wife and her Tale. Cooper has a somewhat unflattering view of the Wife and her discursive manner of speech whereas Carruthers offers a generally more positive and optimistic interpretation of her. A comparison of their arguments provides further clarity with regard to the Wife’s character and the rich complexity of her personality.

Cooper, the author of the *Oxford Guide to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, focuses on the various literary aspects of the “Wife of Bath’s Tale,” such as setting, genre, and style. The Wife sets the tale “in th’olde dayes of the King Arthur” (Chaucer, “WBT” l. 857), which prompts Cooper to classify the tale as a romance (Cooper 156). The importance of this setting would appear to be its provision of an environment conducive to the suspension of our disbelief with respect to magic and miraculous transformation. Cooper places less emphasis upon the setting than she does upon the genre. She asserts, “by giving her a romance, Chaucer adds another side to her [the Wife’s] character: she is an incurable romantic...The tale may overtly be about women’s

love of sovereignty, but it ends with marital—and especially sexual—bliss” (156). This interpretation romanticizes the Wife’s Tale and oversimplifies her point of view. The autobiographical portion of her Prologue stresses the importance of financial security and independence that can be achieved through serial marriages by a childless widow and consequently deemphasizes the role of romance. Furthermore, the Tale’s ending is as much indicative of a moral lesson learned and a resolution of marital tension as it is of marital bliss.

The Wife’s Psychologically Androgynous Poetic License: The Role of “Digressions”

As opposed to Cooper’s interpretation of the Wife as an “incurable romantic,” it would appear the Wife is just as much an incurable pragmatist whose psychological androgyny serves to facilitate personal security. The setting appears to be more pivotal to understanding the Wife and the meaning of her Tale. Set in the time of Arthurian legend, which was, and still is, a time that usually conjures images of courtly love, the Wife chooses to explore a more problematic aspect of sexuality and romance. In the process, she includes within her Tale three divarications that Cooper refers to as “digressions.” She labels them as such because they are seemingly unrelated to the plot of Alisoun’s Tale. Furthermore, Cooper feels the “digressions” and the entire Tale are merely “narrative exemplum to illustrate the argument developed discursively in her Prologue” (157). There are three such “digressions”: the satire of friars that compares them with the demonic incubi, the retelling of Ovid’s story of Midas, and the hag’s lecture to the knight on “gentillesse.” Cooper offers her interpretations of the three “digressions”:

The purpose of the first digression is primarily a cue for the following tale,

The Friar’s...The second digression, the story of Midas, is digression for its own

sake, a match for the ramblings of the Wife's Prologue, as her own voice takes over from the impersonal voice of the storyteller. Both her voice and the story recall the anti-feminist propaganda of the Prologue...The third passage, the *gentillesse* speech, is not strictly a digression since it is given as part of the main narrative, as the hag's attempt to win over her bridegroom. Its presence does some startling things to the final meaning of the story, and its sheer length shifts the balance of the tale markedly from story for its own sake towards story for the sake of a moral. (161)

Although Cooper's interpretations may be valid, an alternative view would suggest that each of the Wife's divarications reveals a psychological androgyny that expressly informs her Tale. The first "digression" seems anything but a setup for the Friar's Tale, which immediately follows Alisoun's. Cooper's interpretation glosses over the Wife's point and oversimplifies her opening remarks. As the Wife compares the old, magical, faraway land of the Arthurian kingdom to her own present day, the connection she acknowledges between incubi and friars reveals the ever-present danger for females. Alisoun is telling her Tale for a largely male audience, so it is important that the men understand the perceived dangers women experience in order to better appreciate and understand her Tale. Whether the imposing, authoritative theological control and sexual aggressions of the friars of her own time, or the sexual assaults of the incubi of ages past, Alisoun highlights the pervasive lack of security women experience.

In Middle English romance literature, incubi are complex figures who are largely interpreted as mystical amalgamations of good and evil. For example, "the story of Merlin's conception through the mysterious agency of the incubus was evidently both

intriguing and troubling to later tellers” (Saunders 221). The concept of incubi impregnating innocent, usually sleeping, women was challenging for some authors who wanted to advocate for a woman’s innocence (221). The Church utilized the figure of the incubus as an “extreme test of the holy woman’s chastity” (222), and “the incubus is presented according to clerical tradition as an actual threat, a manifestation of the devil whose subtlety can betray the souls of humankind” (227). This perception of incubi makes the Wife’s first “digression” an important commentary on the Church as an institution rather than a mere gesture to the next tale, the Friar’s. The Wife relates the friars to incubi because they create their share of misery for women *and* men through their opinionated teachings derived out of organized religion. She says, “Wommen may go now sauflly up and down. / In every bussh or under every tree / There is noon oother incubus but he, / And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour” (Chaucer, “WBT” l. 878-81). Beidler offers insight into Alisoun’s reference noting, “[a]n incubus was a demon who made love to women while they were sleeping. The union could result in a pregnancy... Alisoun’s point is that the only ‘incubi’ these days are friars, who, having driven off the real ones, give women dishonor rather than offspring or adventure” (Beidler 74). Therefore, incubi are rapists who, potentially, despoil women for marriage. One particular issue the Wife has with friars is their self-proclaimed superiority with regard to Biblical interpretations. Metaphorically, the friars contribute to the inhibition of the layperson’s quest for independence and spoil any sense of freedom from authoritative control. When she links the incubus to the friar, the Wife creates a metaphor that is the product of her androgynous viewpoint. While women could readily comprehend the fear associated with the threat of a physical assault from an incubus, men could appreciate the

ever-present threat of the spiritual intrusiveness of friars. The Wife's point is well taken from both male and female perspectives. There is a sense of vulnerability in life that crosses gender boundaries.

Although some scholars would argue that the Wife is too extreme with her Biblical exegesis, it should be noted that the Church was garnering attention for its corruption during Chaucer's lifetime. Rhodes provides historical context for the negative connotations regarding the Church throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. He acknowledges that characters such as the Friar and Pardoner are deployed by Chaucer to provide commentary on religious life, but Rhodes is cautious in his discussion because the characters are just that—fictional characterizations. Nevertheless, he says, “[t]he abuses and venality they [the Friar and Pardoner] embody were real and they make for lively reading...[w]hat the corruption of the Church and some of its clergy did do was create an appetite for reform” (Rhodes 86). Friars as representatives of the institutionalized aspects of the Church and its propensity for corruption and possibly antifeminist views were viewed negatively by Chaucer. The Wife reinforces this point with confidence as she opens her Tale. Her psychological androgyny influences her to challenge the generally accepted practice that friars and clerics, such as Jankyn, could provide proper interpretation of the Bible for women who have no choice but to acquiesce no matter how antifeminist those teachings may prove.

The Wife's second “digression” occurs when she retells Ovid's story of Midas. Cooper argues that this is a “digression” because it is merely a rehashing of the antifeminist diatribe from the Wife's Prologue. In *Metamorphoses*, Midas has asses ears, and the only person who knows is his barber, a male. The barber, unable to keep this

information to himself, whispers the secret into a hole in the ground. But, when the wind blows the reeds above this hole, Midas' secret is known (Ovid 6.119-270). Chaucer's Wife, however, purposefully changes this narrative and substitutes Midas' wife for the barber: "That save his wif there wiste of it namo. / He loved her moost and trusted her also. / He preyde her that to no creature / She sholde tellen of his disfigure. / She swoor him nay" (Chaucer, "WBT" l. 957-61). In Alisoun's version of this story, Midas' wife bears his secret and discloses it into the water. The Wife concludes, "Heere may ye see, thogh we a time abide, / Yet out it moot. We kan no conseil hide" (l.979-80). Desmond connects this alteration to one of Chaucer's source texts, the *Romance of the Rose*. Genius, one of the allegorical characters, says of women telling secrets, "To her thinking she would be dead if the secret did not jump out of her mouth, even if she is in danger or reproached. And if the one who told her is such a person that, after she knows, dares strike her or beat her just once, not three or four times, then no sooner than he touches her will she reproach him with his secret, and she will do so right out in the open" (de Lorris and de Meun l. 16366-72). In order to explain the connection she makes, Desmond writes:

Though he intends to illustrate the physical incapability of women to keep secrets, Genius inadvertently observes that a husband cannot beat a wife who knows his secret. In the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the description of a wife who cannot keep a secret echoes Genius' assertions...Chaucer's text does not include the notion that a woman who knows her husband's secrets has thereby acquired an immunity from his violence. Indeed, Chaucer's narrator, the Wife of Bath, specifically grounds the premise that wives cannot keep secrets in the authority of

Ovid, whom she cites even though she misrepresents the exemplum...But it is the *Roman de la Rose*, not Ovid, that elucidates the libidinal economy suggested by the exemplum: the exuberant verbal eroticism of a wife should not be met with violence. (Desmond 143)

Chaucer's Wife exercises poetic license when she exchanges Midas' wife for his barber in Ovid's story. This exchange is yet another example of her psychological androgyny. Alisoun demonstrates an unbiased androgynous acknowledgement of the weakness women have where gossip is concerned. Her androgynous viewpoint allows her to offer this critique of women even as she affirms the loyalty Midas' wife demonstrates toward him when she whispers his secret only to the water. She also, as Desmond says, creates the possibility for an androgynous harmony within a male-female relationship; the woman may protect herself from a man, if she knows his secrets.

The Wife's retelling of Ovid's story is not mere palaver, as Cooper claims. Much like her argument against St. Jerome in her Prologue, this retelling shows Alisoun's knowledge of her sources. Furthermore, as a mirror to Chaucer in the role of storyteller, the Wife's knowledge of authors and her consequent manipulation of their texts is a mark of esteem. Due to an interest in antifeminist texts and a juxtaposition of Alisoun's Prologue with this retelling, the audience may detect the irony the Wife deploys in the Tale. As the teller, the Wife manipulates Ovid's text in order to engage fully the attention of her predominately male audience. A few lines after she concludes her version of Midas' story, she reveals the knight's newly acquired understanding of what women want most; an insight he has gained from a lowly woman, a hag, no less. The psychologically androgynous Wife seems to understand not only what women want but

also what men want and what they need. The male audience members may want to hear a woman admit that women are weak and are gossips by their very nature but need to hear that women, even lower-class women, such as the hag, can be remarkably insightful and provide instruction for men.

The final "digression" the Wife relates in her tale is the hag's lecture on the meaning of "gentilesse" to her husband, the formerly wayward knight. Similar to the ways in which the Wife demonstrates a precise understanding of language in her Prologue, she carefully conveys the definition of "gentilesse" and her preference for the meaning that relies on superiority of character over birth. The *Middle English Dictionary* defines the term in two ways. One definition is nobility of birth or rank and another is nobility of character. Cooper is critical of the hag who bolsters her own argument against her husband by using a precise definition. She feels that even as the hag teaches her husband about the true meaning of "gentilesse," she is more concerned about asserting her own claim (162). Mary Carruthers, however, argues in favor of the hag's lesson as one that is effective and valid. She writes, "[t]he old hag and rapist-knight understand 'gentilesse' in different ways. She sees it only as an inner, moral quality, and he defines it solely in terms of birth and class...The knight believes that gentlemen can do whatever they want to anybody—except marry penniless old hags—without losing their 'gentilesse' " (Carruthers 217). She supports this claim about the knight's version of "gentilesse" through his explanation of how partner selection works for gentlefolk: "one can marry up or across but never down, certainly not without a great deal of money to offset the match" (217). Carruthers says the knight's argument "is not the way genteel people ought to argue...and the old hag will have none of such reasoning" (217). The

hag's lesson on the more substantive meaning of "gentillesse" is not a digression but, rather, a pointed reminder that outward appearances and social class are not the most important aspects of character just as gender should not necessarily relegate one to a subordinate position in a relationship. Although Cooper labels the Wife's three deviations from her plot line as "digressions," Carruthers is astute in her recognition of the Wife's Tale, including these three divarications, as an extension of her Prologue. The Wife's divarications facilitate the elucidation of her character as initially revealed in her Prologue and are suggestive of her values. Moreover, the Wife's articulation of the hag's concept of "gentillesse" provides further evidence of her psychological androgyny. "Gentillesse" transcends wealth, social class, and gender.

Carruthers' explanation of the Tale as a short version of a deportment book offers a means of further understanding the Wife's psychological androgyny. Medieval deportment books were meant to provide instruction for women as they learned to be good wives, which included a particular attitude as well as a willingness and capability to perform duties in the household (211). Carruthers departs from other scholars in her argument that the Prologue and Tale are connected in this way:

The Wife's tale should be understood in the context of her prologue rather than as a wishful alternative to it, for the story's utopian simplicity of thought is severely qualified by the teller...though the Wife has been capable of sentimentality, she knows too much now to indulge herself in it seriously again, even in a tale...It is her contribution to the exemplary stories of the deportment books, for it is surely their ethos that the Wife has especially in mind. The tale teaches "proper" marriage relationships. Only, of course, it is an exemplum that turns the ideas of

the male dehortment-book writers upsidedown.” (216-7)

Unlike Cooper, who claims the Tale is little more than a moral on “gentillesse” (Cooper 161), Carruthers asserts that the Tale is meant to instruct men on how to be good husbands. The Tale represents a genre familiar to the mostly male audience—the dehortment book. Her focus on the knight who needs to be reformed as well as educated with regard to women, allows the Wife to make an example out of a man who needs to be more aware of what women want. Her method stands in contradistinction to the traditional dehortment book lesson, which is provided for women with instruction on how to be good wives. The Wife’s psychologically androgynous perspective enables her to upend the traditional purpose of the dehortment book because she is able to envision the world from a masculine and feminine perspective. The knight’s search for enlightenment with regard to the female perception of fulfillment is a non-traditional quest in Arthurian terms. The Wife’s articulation of such a quest is evidence of her special ability to interpret reality from the standpoint of this dual perspective.

Chaucer’s choice to deploy this upside-down version of the dehortment book genre, a genre typically reserved for the express purpose of the instruction of women by male authors, is further indication of his androgynous viewpoint. His own dual perspective as a male author disposes him to utilize an outspoken female character as an instructress for men. Carruthers explains the dehortment book features the Wife incorporates in her Tale:

Her [the Wife’s] tale is strongly akin to the dehortment-book stories in both method and substance; it is askew only in gender. It shares with them the voice of the all-wise older counselor, the aristocratic milieu, the concern with virtue (that

of the younger person being counseled especially), the emphasis on gentility, the showpiece exemplum against gossip, and the digressive, informal manner of storytelling.” (217)

Chaucer utilizes the Wife to create an elevated art form within her Tale that highlights his skill as a storyteller. This elevated art form is achieved because of the difference between her Tale and the traditional genre of dehortment books. Carruthers explains, “The chief difference between them, besides the obvious one of sex roles, lies in intention. The dehortment-book writers do not often seem aware of the problems of truth that are inherent in the exemplary genre, the painting of lions and hunters, but Alisoun clearly is. The result is a significant difference in tone. The one is solemn and hortatory, the other not so. The Wife of Bath’s tale is funny. That is a crucial point to remember” (217). The difference in tone is important because it makes the tale entertaining rather than punitive or condescending. Its ability to deliver entertainment makes the Tale more palatable for a male audience, which is more apt to be receptive to the Wife’s advice. The humorous twist that Chaucer places on a typically masculine genre is further evidence that he is able to transcend gender expectations and create a unique art form that capitalizes on the Wife’s psychological androgyny. Her combined perspective, a product of Chaucer’s own dual perspective, allows her to reach the full gender spectrum, offer advice to men, and explore the realities with which women were forced to cope in the Middle Ages.

Chief among these is the role of marriage as it pertains to the everyday reality for a medieval woman. The evolution of Alisoun’s understanding of marriage contributes to the development of her psychological androgyny. Although her first marriage may be

attributed solely to financial gain on the part of her parents, her last marriage to Jankyn is based more on pleasure than necessity. Carruthers attributes Alisoun's first marriage to "either notable greed or straitened financial circumstance" on the part of her parents (214). She makes this assumption due to the Wife's young age at the time of her first marriage. Carruthers says the first three marriages are no better than "melancholy misalliance," but Alisoun learns a valuable lesson, namely that "marriage is contracted for money, and the acquisition of money is equivalent to the attainment of honor, respect, and independence" (214). The fourth husband seems no better than the first three, in fact, he is worse. But, Chaucer makes it clear that by the time Alisoun marries Jankyn she has achieved a level of personal freedom that allows her to move beyond marriage for the sake of necessity and entertain the idea of love.

It is the wealth she has amassed from her first four marriages that affords her the opportunity to marry for love. She is rewarded for her multiple marriages. Carruthers explains, "As Alisoun knows from experience, the true fruits of marriage are described neither in Jerome nor in the dehortment books but are set in the marriage bed. Its important spoils for her are neither children nor sensual gratification but independence" (214). Marriage is a contractual agreement that is, at best, mutually beneficial for both husband and wife. Clearly, Alisoun has been quite fulfilled by her marriages from a pecuniary standpoint because she is afforded her current lifestyle and, more importantly, her freedom as a widow. She is not dependent on a man precisely because she has achieved independence similar to that of a man. Part of the Wife's dynamic evolution is her ability to marry for love rather than economic gain. Carruthers says, "Chaucer's brilliant stroke is to give her a streak of romance that blossoms in direct proportion to her

accumulated wealth” (215). Her achievement of financial security and personal independence enable the Wife to lead more with her heart than her head.

The Inherent Power of Psychological Androgyny as Exhibited by the Hag and the Knight

Chaucer’s hag is similar to characters in other texts, such as the poem by the Scottish prophet Thomas of Erceldoune and “The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle,” as well as the folk traditions of Loathly Ladies in medieval English literature. These women have been embraced by recent feminist critics; they feel “these Loathly Lady stories might offer a message of empowerment” (Caldwell 236). Caldwell explains that an androgynous nature is the source of the hopeful message these female characters offer:

[T]he old hag in Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath’s Tale,” Thomas of Erceldoune’s lady, and Dame Ragnelle initially enjoy their roles as masters in their marital, linguistic, and political spheres, assuming “masculine” powers to make demands of powerless men who are gendered “feminine.” But when they become beautiful, the women revert to their conventional roles. Generally, it is only when she is loathsome and “ungendered” (i.e., freed from her female role), that the Loathly Lady is beyond male control and is sought after, not as a sexual object but as the source of special powers. (236)

Like the Wife, the hag displays a type of psychological androgyny that is made manifest through her assumption of “‘masculine’ powers.” Her psychological androgyny is all the more apparent because she is physically “ungendered” by her loathsomeness. These characteristics accentuate her voice, which is “universal, rational, and authoritative” (Saunders 309). It is in this way that the manifestation of her psychological androgyny

differs from that of the Wife. In the absence of any semblance of physical attractiveness, the hag can be that which she must be in order to gain dominion over her knight—she is a sage who is an authority on women and the dynamics of the male-female relationship. Saunders describes her as “a didactic figure of rational and moral authority in the mould of Boethius’s Lady Philosophy...The hag’s carefully constructed discourse on gentillesse illustrates her capacity for reason, and therefore refutes in its very form the antifeminist texts instanced by the Wife in her prologue” (305). Like the Wife, the hag has the capability to operate beyond male control. The source of this capability, her loathsomeness, is the difference. The source of their power in their interactions with men also differs. The Wife relies on her experience while the hag has magic.

The Wife and the hag do not live in the world of courtly romance and do not dispatch men on daring quests that showcase feats of strength. Theirs is a practical world in which the complexities of male-female relationships often revolve around the dynamics of those relationships. A sense of independence allows them to choose love and romance and permits them the power to choose. This empowerment is derived from sovereignty. Both are confident that sovereignty must be a woman’s greatest desire. In keeping with the androgynous perspective they exhibit, both women also recognize what men want—wives who are alluring and faithful. This merged perspective permits them to exercise their transformative powers. Jankyn, the Wife’s fifth husband, finally yields to her and burns his “Book of Wikked Wives,” while the hag’s knight submits to her higher level of understanding of “gentillesse” and human nature.

In fact, the hag transforms the errant knight’s perspective on women. His transformation is indicative of his own acquisition of an androgynous perspective and an

ability to comprehend a woman's point of view. Yet, he is only able to achieve this androgynous perspective because the hag guides him to it. The knight's transformation is a process of salvation. His physical salvation occurs when he accepts the hag's explanation of what women desire most and informs Queen Guinevere and the court that it is sovereignty that women most desire. His spiritual salvation occurs with the transformation of his point of view. Upon hearing the hag's explanation of true "gentillesse," he comprehends her point of view, expresses his appreciation for the value of faithfulness as a superior quality to that of beauty, and loves her as a wife despite her loathsomeness. Significantly, the hag delivers her discourse on "gentillesse" and asks the knight to choose which type of wife he would prefer—one that is beautiful or one that is faithful—*before* she magically transforms herself. Carruthers explains that "[a]ge and looks are the last items on the hag's agenda...for in the light of true virtue only an idiot (or an imperfect being) would care about such attributes. But the old hag is kind in the end" (Carruthers 217). The knight is an imperfect being, a condition common to all of humanity, as his need for redemption is a universal need. The hag permits the knight the opportunity to amend his point of view and mend his imperfections.

The knight's transformational change of viewpoint appears to be a psychologically androgynous one as he chooses to abide by "the voice of woman" as presented by the loathsome hag. His alteration in his frame of reference appears to be sincere because the hag's external appearance could not possibly have any coercive effect. The hag's speech on the virtuous definition of "gentillesse" inspires him to emulate her behavior and adopt her point of view. The knight is humble in his response to the hag's alternatives and places himself in her "wise governaunce" (Chaucer, "WBT")

l. 1231). Enlightened by this new perspective that allows him to see the world from the hag's point of view, a loathsome lady's point of view, he chooses wisely. Having chosen in favor of a faithful wife as opposed to beautiful, he is rewarded with a wife who is *both* beautiful and faithful. The hag is not only kind, she too is enlightened by her own androgynous point of view that allows her to appreciate and become the woman a man desires most. But, the hag only undergoes her physical transformation into a beautiful woman once she is confident her knight has made a spiritual, or at least psychological, transformation of his own. Some scholars, such as Hansen, feel the hag's magical transformation is a reward for the knight's crime, but this analysis ignores the arc of the Wife's Tale and the powerful metamorphosis of his character wrought by the hag's cogent argument. The knight, with the help of the hag, experiences a transformation of perspective from misogynistic to androgynous. The knight's journey is remarkable. Saunders says, "Chaucer's open-ended perspective, the complex layering of meaning and nuance in his writing of rape, and his awareness of issues profoundly relevant to female experience, place him as startlingly 'modern' within the world of fourteenth century" (Saunders 310). Chaucer's authorial androgyny as reflected in the Wife's Prologue and Tale is one of the reasons he has remained relevant throughout the ages.

## CONCLUSION

Psychological androgyny is a modern concept that seems to promote a more realistic understanding of gender viewpoint as a continuum rather than a binary. Chaucer's powerful poetic examination of a wide breadth of the human experience in his *Canterbury Tales* includes numerous extraordinary characters, but none more so than his Wife of Bath. The Wife is distinguished from the other pilgrims by her decorative attire, outspokenness, her proclivity to challenge established authority, and her storytelling. Moreover, she appears to exhibit psychological traits that are consistent with an empowering androgynous point of view. Her psychological androgyny may well be interpreted as a reflection of Chaucer's authorial androgyny. Clearly, she is a product of Chaucer's brilliant androgynous mind. Howard asserts that Chaucer's attentiveness to women was somewhat unique for a man and an artist in medieval times:

*Chaucer liked women.* He had what was for his day an unusual kind of interest in women, and he had unusual insight into a woman's mind. The evidence in support of such an assertion is overwhelming: he was the first male writer since the ancient world who was successfully to see inside the mind of a woman, successfully to portray a woman's thoughts and feelings. He may have been the first *writer* since the ancient world to see inside the mind of the sex opposite his or her own, though Marie de France and Heloise could be reckoned exceptions...Chaucer had no such models to follow, and there was...little to lead him into this accomplishment but his own interest and ability...he had the interest, and the *motive*, to portray women, and he would not have had it without some predisposition to do so. (96-7)

Chaucer is widely known by the epithet “the father of English poetry.” He is also a masterful storyteller and an innovative artist who was perhaps centuries ahead of his time. Although England during the Middle Ages was patriarchal, largely misogynistic and antifeminist, and oblivious to the unfair treatment of women, there were men, such as Chaucer, who sympathized with women and fostered a unique understanding of and appreciation for them. In Chaucer’s case, his appreciation of women and his capacity to relate a story from a feminine perspective are indicative of his androgynous mind.

This is not to say that Chaucer is a feminist. The old world order would hardly permit such a leap in the fourteenth century. Chaucer is, after all, a medieval author first and foremost. But, while he may not have championed equal rights for women, he certainly comprehended feminine viewpoints in a way not many male authors did. In order to understand Chaucer’s own viewpoint it is sufficient and accurate to say that he was *not* an antifeminist. He writes strong and often inspirational female characters, including the Wife of Bath, and is critical of antifeminist texts, physical dominance, and institutions that demean women. Chaucer saw women as important and valuable within society—they managed homes, businesses, and particularly, in the case of the Wife, men.

The *Canterbury Tales* conveys much of the reality of the human experience in 14<sup>th</sup>-century England. It is a rich experience that involves serious endeavor, difficult challenges, the full breadth of emotions, and most importantly, atonement for sin. Chaucer distills this world in his masterful poetry and depicts a reality that remains almost palpable centuries later. In the process, he reveals his visionary capacity to portray both male and female viewpoints. His artistry is enhanced by his authorial androgyny that allows him to initiate a change in the way males and females write about

one another, challenge the accepted male-female gender binary, and forge an incipient appreciation for the gender psychological spectrum.

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