CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE WIFE OF BATH RETOLD: FROM THE MEDIEVAL TO THE POSTMODERN

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The act of retelling simultaneously functions as invention, reception, transmission, and criticism. Of all the tales in the English canon, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* have had the longest and most prominent history of circulation. They have been subjected to various acts of retelling that reflect the historical moments of their composition and affect the ongoing reception of Chaucer’s work. Remarkably, it is not a single tale from the *Canterbury Tales* that has garnered the broadest range of retellings, but a pilgrim teller. The Wife of Bath and the fictional autobiography in her Prologue have been remade and retold in myriad ways, including fifteenth-century scribal additions to her tale, early modern ballads and plays, and twenty-first-century television shows and children’s books.

The Wife of Bath’s first words are “[e]xperience, though noon auctoritee” (line 1).1 Though the authority she has in mind is that of male biblical exegetes, and the experience she refers to is her own female experience in five marriages since she was twelve, the word “experience” seems to underpin not only her fictional autobiography but her reception since Chaucer’s death in 1400. No other Chaucerian figure has prompted more diverse and sundry retellings, and thus her experience reaches beyond Chaucer the author and his *Canterbury Tales*. From the scribal additions in several fifteenth-century manuscripts to the 2003 BBC modernization of the Wife, her experiences spill over the pages of the canonical work of literature.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “experience” variously, including “a tentative procedure; an operation performed in order to ascertain or illustrate some truth; an experiment.” Though now obsolete, this meaning was operative in the fourteenth century, and one of the quoted references in the *OED* in fact comes from Chaucer’s *House of
Fame. Moreover, in some manuscripts of the Tales, such as British Library Lansdowne 851, the word “experiment” replaces “experience.” In many ways, experimentation defines the multifarious retellings of the Wife. After Chaucer, she becomes an intertextual game piece, a figure that can be refigured and redeployed in different eras to match various societal ideas of gender, sexuality, and marriage. To use a concept from Hans Robert Jauss (1982), each new experiment/experience of the Wife reveals and shifts the reader’s “horizon of expectations” for the Wife of Bath (23).

In many ways, the experimentation/experience of the Wife in various retellings after Chaucer mirrors the structure of the work of the Canterbury Tales. The frame narrative of the Canterbury Tales is ostensibly about a pilgrimage, and though one may say that pilgrimages are just as much about process and journey as they are destination, one cannot help but notice that Chaucer’s pilgrims fail to reach their destination in the canonical frame narrative of the Tales. Besides the pilgrimage, one should recall that what really goes on in the frame of the Tales, and what serves as the occasion of the tales themselves, is not the pilgrimage but a game—specifically the storytelling game used to pass the time on the road to Canterbury.

The canonical parts of The Canterbury Tales have several game-like structures at work: in the Prologue, in order to pass the time along the way to their destination, the Host Harry Bailey proposes a game:

> And wel I woot, as ye goon by the weye,  
> Ye shapen yow to talen and to pleye,  
> For trewely, confort ne myrthe is noon  
> To ride by the weye doumb as stoon. (lines 773-6)

The pilgrims proceed to "requite" each other and respond to each other. This series of action and reaction, which frames the tales, recalls the adversarial structure and “moves” of a game. Players not only compete to tell "tales of best sentence and moost solaas," but they also play to repay attacks to their reputation. These game-like features recur in the ongoing reception of Canterbury Tales and, perhaps, most prominently and noticeably with the Wife of Bath. In one century she is belligerent against male-produced exegesis on marriage; in another she is lecherous and promiscuous but redeemable through Christ’s grace. More recently, she is victimized by social pressure to remain young and beautiful by any means possible. Each era since Chaucer’s death has seen a different instantiation of the Wife; each experiments with her to portray different historically traceable values. Why have there been so many different Wives since Chaucer? What makes her such an engaging figure that others have been
drawn to her and prompted to continue her story, remaking her through each rendering?

In this intertextual storytelling game, which has moved out of the world of the *Tales*, the Wife’s experiences are various and reveal readers, often male, experimenting with her as a figure. In the following, I explore several iterations of the Wife, from the scribal to the authorial, from the written to the visual, from the medieval to the postmodern. Using the criteria the Host sets up in the storytelling game in the *Tales*, how is the Wife remade to match the “sentence and solaas” (i.e., moral and entertainment value) of different eras?

Chaucer provides the *Wife of Bath* with the longest and most developed prologue, detailing her own readings of biblical views on sex and marriage, retelling some of her own experiences in her five marriages, and revealing a feminine view of marriage that threatens male sovereignty. Though Chaucer may be showing the danger of misinterpretation, the Wife’s readings are rather convincing, and Chaucer could be demonstrating the tenuous nature of glossing and exegesis. Justifying multiple marriages and defending sex for “ease” prompted the common reading of the Wife as a harlot.

Besides her glossing of biblical texts, which runs counter to male authorities, her own experience further challenges male dominance. In her early marriages, she uses her youthful appearance to build up her wealth and exercise power. Later, when she is older, she uses the money she gained in earlier marriages to exercise power over younger, handsome men, who rely on her for financial support. She burns her fifth husband’s *Book of Wicked Wives* and is beaten, becoming deaf in one ear. Both her burning of the book and deafness gesture toward her exegesis early in the Prologue, which tosses out conventional authoritative glosses of the Bible and turns a deaf ear to authoritative concepts of sex, gender, and marriage.

She then tells an Arthurian tale, which recounts the story of a young knight who rather abruptly rapes a woman in the woods. Arthur condemns the knight to death for this act, but the intervention of the women of Arthur’s court saves the knight. At their behest, instead, the knight is sent out to discover the answer to the question “what do women desire most?” If he does not find the answer, he will be executed. On his journey, he meets a loathly lady who agrees to give him the answer if he agrees to marry her. Faced with the choice of death or marriage to the old hag, he chooses marriage to save his life. On their wedding night, the loathly lady offers the young knight the choice either to have her fair and young but potentially unfaithful, or old and ugly and forever committed to him. The
knight, in his despair, allows her to choose. The ceding of governance ends up making her forever beautiful and forever faithful.

Because the Tales remained unfinished, and perhaps because of the confessional nature of her autobiographical Prologue, many readers joined in the storytelling act Chaucer initiated and experimented with the voice of the Wife. Early retellings of the Wife promote antifeminist readings and render her as nothing more than the comic figure of a recalcitrant wife and licentious female. However, recent iterations of the Wife are more sympathetic renderings, in which the Wife's own sovereignty is explored through the lens of contemporary concepts of gender, sex, and marriage.

**Scribal Wives**

Since the Canterbury Tales is a collection of stories, Chaucer utilizes a frame narrative to transition between tales. However, as has been demonstrated by many textual studies, the authorial tale order is unknown (Spencer et al. 2003, 106). Moreover, while some tales have clear transitions, most canonically do not. In a small handful of manuscripts, scribes have interjected their own transitions, reusing the structure of the authoritative links in order to form “spurious links.”

For the most part, these transitions demonstrate the desire of a few writerly readers to follow the rules of the game and match Chaucer's poetic patterns. They enact language appropriate for the context and narrative that links tales Chaucer left unconnected. In many of the spurious and canonical links, the Host is the central voice propelling the tales through imperative verbs such as “tell” and “speak.” The Host implores individual pilgrims to speak in a certain way or to tell a particular kind of tale. In these examples, the Host expresses his desire to control the game of “sentence” and “solaas.” The Host tells the Clerk twice to tell a merry tale. He also asks him to speak plainly according to the nature of his audience. At another moment, the Host tells the Pardoner to tell a moral tale. To Chaucer, the Host first suggests a moral tale (i.e., sentence) and then later, after he interrupts Chaucer’s Tale of Sir Thopas, he suggests a tale in prose, perhaps because no moral value could be found in the “drasty” rhymes of Thopas. In the spurious examples, similar suggestions of genre, form, and content by the Host imply that those who composed the spurious links recognized the Host's role as game master and referee of pleasure and moral value, as well as form and content. In the formula most often followed in the canonical links, the Host first explicated and evaluates, in his own words, the tale that has just been told or the character of the teller.
John Bowers (1992) groups the spurious links into two series. While the first series is unique to the text of British Library Lansdowne MS 851, the second is found in several manuscripts. From which, Bowers chooses BL Royal 18.C.II as his base text. In many of these cases, the spurious links are traces of experimentation. In the case of two spurious introductions to the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, one from each of the two series or groups of spurious links, the writerly readers are experimenting with gender ideologies. I take as my first case study these two very different versions of the Wife found in two fifteenth-century manuscripts of the *Tales*. Both precede the Wife’s *Prologue* and serve as transitions from the previous tale. However, the ways they introduce the Wife differ greatly, affecting and reflecting reception of her. The first paratextual addition seems to present the Wife as a submissive storyteller not capable of matching or fully “requiting” the male storytellers. The second example reinforces the Wife’s recalcitrance, describing her swearing and seizing control of the storytelling game.

In the Royal manuscript link, after the Host has just commented on January and May of the *Merchant’s Tale*, he asks the Wife to tell her tale: “‘Dame Wyf of Bathe,’ quod he, ‘I pray yow, / Telle us a tale now next after this’” (lines 20-21). She agrees and begins humbly:

“Sire Hoost,” quod she, “so God my soule blis,  
As I fully therto wil consente  
And also it is myn hole entente  
To done yow alle disporte, as that I can.  
But holde me excused—I am a woman;  
I can not reherse as these clerkes kune.” (lines 22-27)

What does it mean to have the strong-willed Wife begin her tale with a humility topos? Immediately after she asks to be excused because she is a woman in the spurious link, she undermines male authority in the famous and forceful canonical opening of her *Prologue* in which she states quite bluntly:

Experience, though noon auctoritee,  
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me  
To speke of wo that is in marriage [. . .]. (lines 1-3)

These lines stand in utter contrast to the end of the spurious link: “But holde me excused—I am a woman; / I can not reherse as these clerkes kune” (lines 26-27). Does she apologize in tongue-in-cheek irony before launching into her attack on male “auctoritee”? Is the humility of the
spurious link intended to offset the caustic disregard for authority in the canonical Prologue? Or, was this just a scribe interjecting what he felt a woman such as the Wife ought to say to her predominantly male audience without regard for what the Wife says in the lines immediately following? At least two possible explanations exist: either the scribe intended to adjust the voice of the Wife via this link, or he merely made a mistake by introducing her in such a way that contrasts with the canonical Prologue. Regardless of this interactor’s intentions for the literary meaning and gender rhetoric of the tale, it is clear that the Wife takes on new meaning as either initially humble or displaying a wry sense of humor not matched by any of her remarks in the canonical text.

Remarkably, in the Lansdowne text, the transition to the Wife plays out differently. In that link, the Wife follows the Squire rather than the Merchant. More importantly, the Host’s voice is absent from the following link, but his linking function is nevertheless played out in the voices of others, especially in the voice of the Wife. The Squire, at the end of his incomplete tale, decides that he will tell no more because he has talked too long and would like someone else to have a turn. He asks the Host to find another teller:

Bot I wil here nowe maake a knotte
To the time it come next to my lotte.
For here be felawes behinde, an hepe treulye,
That wolden talke ful besilye
And have her sporte as wele as I.
And the daie passeth fast, certanly.
Therfore, Hoste, taketh nowe goode heede
Who schall next tell, and late him speede. (lines 11-18)

In the manuscript, there is a rubricated “explicit,” suggesting the end of the Squire and an “incipit,” suggesting the beginning of the Wife of Bath. However, it is not the Host who replies but the Wife herself who takes up the charge:

Than schortly ansewarde the Wife of Bathe
And swore a wonder grete hathe,
“Be Goddes bones, I wil tel next!
I will nouht glose, bot saye the text.” (19-22)

She decides who will speak next in the manner of the Host. She is even swearing in the manner of the Host as he does in the canonical Man of Law’s Epilogue when he says “Sir parishe prest, quod he, for goddes bones, / Telle us a tale, as was thi forward yore” (lines 1166-7) at which
the Parson takes offense. The Host uses the same curse in the *Monk’s Prologue* after the *Tale of Melibee*:

By goddes bones! whan I bete my knaves,
   She bryngeth me forth the grete clobbed staves,
And crieth,—slee the dogges everichoon,
   And brek hem, bothe bak and every boon! (lines 1897-9)

Besides swearing like the Host, she is even specifying how she will tell her tale, which is typically reserved for the Host. The Wife has not followed the rules of the game. Yet this attitude seems truer to form for the Wife than her passive and humble voice in the Royal manuscript link series, providing we do not read the humility topos ironically. Even Chaucer’s canonical Wife breaks the rules of the frame narrative. She has an exceptionally long *Prologue*, longer than some of the other pilgrim’s tales. She constantly undermines male authority either through her rhetoric or through tossing her latest husband’s *Book of Wicked Wives* into a fire. By breaking the rules of decorum, the Wife seems in line with Chaucer’s pattern for her. Ironically, perhaps, the humble Wife, who adheres to the rules of decorum and of her sex, violates the very patterns and rules Chaucer establishes for the Wife in the canonical text. In the Lansdowne Squire/Wife link, behind the Wife’s breaking of the rules, is a writerly reader who follows the rule and pattern Chaucer establishes in the canonical text for the Wife.

While some links simply recycle the Host’s narrative function and language in order to form new links where no canonical links exist, the Lansdowne link reveals an observant reader forming a new and meaningful change in the voice of the Wife from the Host’s narrative function and lexicon. On another level, the Wife, in this moment of taking control of the Host’s function as game master and referee, parallels those writerly readers who have taken control of Chaucer’s opening. Like the Wife, they have seized upon their turn.

To those who might dismiss the Wife’s multiple voices as the work of some intrusive and unwitting scribes, I contend that literary meanings do not always spring intentionally from the minds of the authors who create them. Rather, meanings and interpretations are ultimately matters of reception. In this case, one cannot help but notice how the writerly scribes’ rather scant textual additions in the paratext reframe everything that the Wife says in her lengthy *Prologue*. They are acts of reception and prompt new receptions of the Wife and the *Tales*. They are the first signs of experimentation with the Wife after Chaucer.
Modern/Early Modern Wives

William Blake (1809) says of the Wife of Bath:

The characters of the Women Chaucer has divided into two classes, the Lady Prioress and the Wife of Bath. Are not these leaders of the ages of men? The lady prioress, in some ages, predominates; and in some the wife of Bath, in whose character Chaucer has been equally minute and exact; because she is also a scourge and a blight. I shall say no more of her, nor expose what Chaucer has left hidden; let the younger reader study what he has said of her: it is useful as a scarecrow. These are of such characters born too many for the peace of the world. (24)

Blake, though prosaic, seems to reiterate an antifeminist reading of the Wife that was quite common, figuring her as both a “scourge and a blight.” She upsets the order and peace of the world, destroying any sense of common profit. Blake describes her as a scarecrow, forewarning young male readers of wives like this. Writing in the early nineteenth century, Blake reveals a perception of the Wife that runs through several early modern retellings of her.

Before the Wife made it to the screen in the 2003 BBC retelling, she made it to the stage in John Gay’s *The Wife of Bath: A Comedy* around 1713. Besides being far younger and far less contemptuous than Chaucer’s Wife, what is perhaps most remarkable about this Wife is that she is put into a dramatic situation with her author Chaucer. In the play, she is a figure set out to influence and persuade Myrtilla, the object of Chaucer’s affections, not to cede power to a man. The Wife, named only Alison in the speech assignments, laments that English women are not educated like Italian women, though the education she has in mind seems far more, appropriately, based on experience and cunning. Thus, she persuades Myrtilla not to be too quick to marry without considering the situation carefully and seeing what her dreams tell her about her marriage plans. Rather than referring to biblical authority, this Wife relies much more on proverbial folk wisdom, a choice that makes the Wife far less threatening to male authority. Chaucer learns of Alison’s advice and decides to influence Myrtilla’s dreams through deception. Alison discovers his intent and says of the potential marriage: “What marry her to a Poet! The gingle of Love in a Copy of Verses will never answer a Wife’s Expectation. Besides, Poverty is the meer Bane of Love” (11). Such a line reflects the post-Chaucerian reception of the Wife and the *Tales*. Gay has recognized the Wife’s counsel for young women to marry for money, as she had done, and Alison recycles that advice to Myrtilla and in her resistance to
Chaucer. More importantly, it is this resistance to Chaucer that is most telling. He has created the Wife in the canonical *Canterbury Tales*, but, having set her into motion in the public sphere, he no longer can control the future experiments with her. As in his poem to his scribe Adam and the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer recognized the potential for what might become of his works. To Adam, he says:

Adam scrivener, if ever thee befall  
*Boece* or *Troilus* for to write new,  
Under thy longe locks thow maist have the scall,  
But [unless] after my makinge thou write mor trew,  
So oft a day I mot [must] thy werke renewe  
It to correct, and eke to rubbe and scrape,  
And all is thorowe thy negligence and rape. (650)

Chaucer is concerned with what might happen through scribal transmission, as he should be if the links described above are any indication. He understands that there is only so much he can do, and his books and his characters will eventually be in play for interpretation and retelling. At the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer says:

Go, litel book, go litel myn tragedie,  
Ther god thy maker yet, er that he dye,  
So sende might to make in som comedie  
But litel book, no making thou n'envye,  
But subgit be to alle poesy;  
And kis the steppes, wher-as thou seest pace  
Virgile, Ovyde, Omer, Lucan, and Stace.  
And for ther is so greet diversitee  
In English and in wryting of our tonge,  
So preye I god that noon miswryte thee,  
Ne thee mismetre for defaute of tonge.  
And red wher-so thou be, or elles songe,  
That thou be understonde I god beseche! (Book 5, lines 1786-98)

Chaucer is concerned with how his works will be interpreted and remade. Gay’s 1713 version of the Wife, openly resisting Chaucer, puts the potential for remaking—through retelling—into a dramatic situation, placing the Wife outside the influence of her original author. Once a character created by Chaucer, this 1713 Wife is now his dramatized antagonist. Just as the Wife resists Chaucer in the play, interpretations of the Wife remain in conflict with Chaucer’s intentions, which may never be known but will continue to prompt these paratextual and intertextual acts.
of interpretation, retelling, and remaking. Is she a model for feminine sovereignty in marriage or a scarecrow for the dangers of cunning and deceptive women?

All signs are that the play was quite popular with records of many performances at the Drury Lane Theatre of London in the early eighteenth century (Winton 1993, 30-33). By 1730 Gay would revise the Wife of Bath, removing Chaucer completely and replacing him with Sir Harry Gauntlet. After revising the play according to the criticism of friends and financiers, Gay makes the Wife far more socially acceptable, or as Calhoun Winton says: “the second wife is prettified, cleaned-up; made right for polite society” (147). Already younger and less belligerent than Chaucer’s in the first version, such revisions of this Wife further contain and suppress her unruliness and completely take poor Chaucer out of the picture.

In addition to the plays, ballads about the Wife circulated in several forms in both England and Scotland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, printed as broadsides and codices. These ballads are, one could say, sequels to the Wife of Bath’s Prologue, narrating the events that happened immediately after her death as she reaches the gates of heaven and hell. Ballads, as a popular form that often circulated orally as well as textually, tend to have various forms, and the Wanton Wife of Bath is no exception. Though other versions likely circulated, I focus on two that made it into print. A shorter version, dated as early as 1600, is a ballad of thirty-five, four-line stanzas that begins with the death of the Wife and an announcement that her life was led sinfully:

In Bath a wanton wife did dwelle,  
As Chaucer he doth write,  
Who did in pleasure spend her dayes,  
And many a fond delight.  
Upon a time sore sicke she was,  
And at the length did dye;  
And then her soul at Heaven's gate  
Did knocke most mightilye. (Anonymous 1723, 173)

The ballad then narrates her confrontational efforts, refuting one biblical figure after another as she argues her way into heaven. First, Adam meets her at the door and tries to send her away. But she will not leave, pointing out how Adam was a sinner himself. Then she is met by an impressive array of “who’s who” from the Bible and refutes each of them, including Jacob, Judith, David, Solomon, Jonas, Thomas, Mary Magdalene, Paul, and Peter. Male and female alike, each one tells her that she cannot enter
heaven. To each one she points to sins they committed in their lives. Only to Christ does the Wife show deference. To her, Christ shows mercy after she confesses her sinful ways:

“Most lewdly did I live;
But yet the loving father did
His prodigal son forgive.”
“So I forgive thy soul,” he sayd,
“Through thy repenting crye;
Come enter then into my joy,
I will not thee denye.” (178)

The Wife, whom Blake called a scarecrow and a blight several decades after this, is redeemed by God’s grace and her argumentative skills. She is wanton, as the title suggests, but not outside the purview of God’s grace. This Wife meets a happy end after Chaucer.

Nevertheless, this Wife was unacceptable to early modern audiences; according to the Stationer’s Registers Arbr’s Transcript dated to June 25, 1600, “Yt is ordered touching a Disorderly ballad of the wife of Bathe, printed by Edward aldee and William white and Edward white: That all the same ballates shalbe brought in and burnt [...]” (quoted in Spurgeon 1925, 54). The Wife’s unruliness is disorderly, and thus unpalatable, according to the censors and must be suppressed. In spite of the Stationers’ efforts, the ballad remained in circulation. Like the revisions to Gay’s play and the scribal additions in some fifteenth-century manuscripts, the Wife needed to be contained, burned, and/or suppressed. What is most remarkable is that the acts of retelling and burning mirror each other. While one effort attempts to reform the Wife, the other seeks to simply silence her—an effort that clearly failed based on the survival of many broadsides of the ballad.

Expanded and revised versions of the ballad, published in England and Scotland, include the Old Wife of Beith, the seemingly contradictory The New Wife of Bath, and just The Wife of Bath. In these versions, she meets various biblical figures at the gates of heaven, including Eve and Noah. However, the tale begins in hell with Judas as the wife’s guide:

In Beath once dwelt a worthy wife,
Of whom brave Chaucer mention makes
She liv’d a licentious life.
And namely in veneral acts;
But death did come for all her cracks
When years were spent, & days were driven
Then suddenly she sickness takes,
Deceast forthwith, and went to heaven.
But as she went upon the way,
There followed her a certain guide [. . .]. (3)§

He offers to take her through hell, likely with no intent of taking her to heaven’s gates. Judas asks, “I pray you then tell me your name” (5). The Wife responds, “The wife of Bath since that you speer [. . .].” At this Judas quickly changes his mind:

I will not have you here good dame,
For you were mistress of the flyting;
If once within these gates ye come,
I will be troubled with your biting.
Cummer, gae back and [leave] me be,
Here are too many of this rout,
For women lewd like unto thee,
I cannot turn my feet about. (5)

Judas realizes who she is shortly into the journey and says he cannot continue to lead her because her reputation has preceded her. There are already too many of her kind in hell. Once the Wife reaches heaven’s gate, the story continues much in the same manner as the shorter ballad. But there is something to be said for Judas, who is condemned to endure hell (and placed rather deeply in it according to Dante’s cosmography), not want to endure the Wife. The actions of Judas imply a scathing critique—suffering this notorious Wife is worse than the worst punishments of hell. Thus he leaves her to go to the gates of heaven on her own.

In the end the Wife is redeemed, but only after this version figures her as harder to endure than the punishments of hell. This is the Wife Blake imagines in his criticism and likely the anti-feminist idea of the Wife that remained in play for centuries. These early modern retellings of the Wife add new dimensions to a Wife whose identity is grounded in “experience.” Moreover, she is the subject of an experiment in these ballads. What happens to the most sinful? Hell doesn’t want her. How far does Christ’s grace extend? Does it even reach the wanton Wife of Bath?

**Postmodern Wives**

Scholarship on the Wife within the past few decades has been plentiful, and most of it feminist, informing the 2003 BBC miniseries by Sally Wainwright and the 2007 adaptation and illustration of *The Wife of Bath* by Marcia Williams. While the scribal versions extend or suppress her
voice, and the early modern versions make her a lecherous sinner only redeemable by the limitless grace of Christ, these postmodern versions of the Wife engage more contemporary ideas of female empowerment and the societal constructs of beauty.

The BBC modernization of the Wife of Bath fuses the Tale with the Prologue, situating both in contemporary England. This new Wife, played by Julie Walters, is a sort of Elizabeth-Taylor figure. Walters’ character Beth is an aging actress, who stars in and produces a popular soap opera. It is her character Roz in the soap opera that echoes the loathly lady of the canonical tale. The episode begins in the now popular “mockumentary” style with Beth, a pun on Bath, speaking directly to the camera. The stylistic choice gestures towards the fictional autobiography Chaucer uses and towards the confessional nature of the canonical Prologue. Inverting the conventional descriptive techniques of the Middle Ages dominated by male authors and used to describe beautiful female figures, the camera begins close on Beth’s feet and then pans up to her head, moving past each part of her body quickly. Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s early thirteenth-century poetry manual Poetria Nova instructs its readers in how a beautiful woman ought to be described:

Let Nature's compass draw the outline of the head; let the color of gold gleam in the hair; let lilies grow on the lofty forehead. Let the eyebrows equal black whortleberries in appearance; let a milky way intersect the twin eyebrows; let restraint rule the shape of the nose, lest it fall short of, or exceed, the proper bounds. Let the sentinels of the forehead gleam from both sides, twin little eyes with emerald lights, like a constellation. Let the face be like the dawn, neither rosy nor white, but of both and neither color at the same time. Let the diminutive mouth shine forth like a half circle; let the swelling lips be moderately full, and red, fired with a mild flame. Let order join together the snow white, even teeth. Let the savory odor of the mouth be like frankincense; let Nature, more powerful than art, polish the chin smoother than marble. Let the milky supporting column of the head, of exquisite color, raise the mirror of the face on high; from the crystalline throat let there proceed a certain splendor which can strike the eyes of the beholder and steal the heart. By a certain law let the shoulders be similar, neither sloping nor rising but resting in a straight line. Let the upper arms, as long as they are slender, be enchanting. Let the fingers be soft and slim in substance, smooth and milkywhite in appearance, long and straight in shape: in them let the beauty of the hand shine forth. Let the snowy bosom present both breasts like virginal gems set side by side. Let the waist be slim, a mere handful. I will not mention the parts beneath: here the imagination speaks better than the tongue. But let the leg show itself graceful; let the remarkably dainty foot wanton with its own daintiness. (45-46)
Because of the close-up shot, she is still fragmented, but to a very different effect. In Wainwright’s version, the camera moves quickly not resting for any length on the body, which is fully clothed and resisting of the sexualized gaze of conventional descriptive techniques. As the camera moves, she begins with the same word as Chaucer’s Wife, “experience.” She tells the camera that she left school at sixteen because she couldn’t go to school married. Soon after, in response to an apparent off-camera question, she says, “I’ve been married [. . .].” She hesitates and then responds, “more times than you’ve had hot dinners.” She is colloquial and crass, but this intimate view of the Wife offers a very different character than the “scarecrow” Blake describes in the early nineteenth century.

This Wife is married to a dentist, who soon reveals he has had an affair and a baby with another woman, apparently, not because she is younger and more beautiful; to Beth’s dismay, she is neither. What is different is that the dentist is not secondary and submissive with this new woman. Nevertheless, just as in Chaucer’s tale, this husband dies quite abruptly. But, while Chaucer’s Wife seems to feign sadness at her fourth husband’s death, Beth seems genuinely upset. She soon takes up with Jerome, a young actor from her soap opera, who can have any girl he wants, as we see early on in the episode. He desires to be with Beth not because of her wealth but because he is attracted to her apparent success, confidence, and celebrity power. The name Jerome is Wainwright’s gesture towards Chaucer’s own source for the Wife’s Prologue, St. Jerome’s Against Jovinianus, but this Jerome is like the voice in Against Jovinianus in name only.11 He is young and immature but enamored with Beth. In the soap opera, Jerome’s character Gary has raped a girl, and we see the writers of the show debate what the proper response should be, just as Arthur and the women of the court debate what should be done about the rapist knight in the Wife of Bath’s Tale. The modernized tale removes the magic, and Beth decides, after some argument with her writers, that her character Roz should have sex with the rapist. The writers are not troubled with the idea that Roz would sleep with a rapist but that a fifty-two-year-old woman would sleep with a twenty-two-year-old man. Beth argues that no one seems to mind when the gender roles are inverted and an older man sleeps with a much younger woman. At the behest of Beth, rape is put aside to address the issue of age disparities in relationships, something Chaucer himself takes up in the Miller’s Tale and Merchant’s Tale, but never from the perspective of an older woman with a younger man. The loathly lady, we must remember, has the power to be young and beautiful, something the cuckolded men in those other tales do not have. This power is something Beth and her character Roz lack as well, save the promises of
plastic surgery. The justice in Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* is troubling. A rape has gone without punishment. In fact, the rape has led to a fortuitous conclusion for the rapist with his new magical wife. Similarly, this soap-opera rapist is not punished and instead gets to have sex with Beth’s character Roz; this is where the tale and the *Prologue* meet. The wife/loathly lady and the fifth husband/knight blur, and the stories are intertwined. During the filming of the sex scene, Jerome and Beth decide *not* to fake it, and thus blooms their relationship much like Alisoun and Jankyn in the Wife’s *Prologue*. Yet Beth’s anxiety over her age and appearance drives her to have radical plastic surgery, at which point the empathy the audience might have felt for her shifts to pity. She appears disfigured by the surgery, leaving the much younger Jerome rather uncomfortable with the appearance of his older lover. In this way, Wainwright, in her experiment, shows what happens when we take magic out of the equation. The Arthurian romance’s “happily ever after” dissolves.

Like the BBC version of the Wife, Marcia Williams’s 2007 children’s graphic novel suppresses the rape saying, “[H]e came upon a fair maiden whom he treated with great cruelty” (24). It is a children’s book after all, and so perhaps it is not surprising that rape becomes “great cruelty” without much explanation. However, it is remarkable how little these two recent versions say about this issue. Rather than emphasizing the violence of the rape, both Williams and Wainwright, female writers, retell the wife to focus our attention elsewhere.

Other than glossing over the rape, Williams adapts and paraphrases the story quite faithfully, maintaining most of the plot elements from Chaucer’s tale. However, she does another kind of glossing, the one done in the margins to elucidate the meaning of the text. In medieval manuscripts and early printed books, it is quite common to come across glosses in the margins that either comment on the text, provide scriptural references, or gesture (sometimes with pointing hands) to important, sententious lines. Williams, in her graphic novel, creates her own *glossa ordinaria*, which frames the text visually and also stands as a paratextual gateway to the meaning of the text. Outside of the frames of the graphic novel’s text, Williams depicts decorative, floral boxes surrounding the text. Such framing evokes common illumination techniques usually reserved for the first pages or sections of medieval works, yet Williams’ illumination is clearly modern. Along with the floral and leafy patterns, she includes small fairies, evoking the fairy-world setting for the tale. In addition, there are stars and hearts, making this potentially disturbing tale more about the love story than the crime that has precipitated this love. In
what appears to be imitative of small banners, another common marginal form in medieval manuscripts, Williams includes a running commentary that is anything but medieval and stands as a gateway to the meaning of the primary story. These paratextual devices celebrate the loathly lady figure as “cunning,” “clever,” and “a winner” (27). To end the tale, Williams’ last four banners say: “She’s cunning.” “She’s got him . . . [.]” “[. . .] and his obedience.” “She is a winner” (28). Such glossing remakes the loathly lady not as a magical figure, but as the Wife herself. Just as Wainwright blurs the line between loathly lady and wife, so too does Williams, celebrating her (or them) not as wanton, lecherous, old, or witch-like, but as clever and cunning. These women are empowered, not deceptive. This is a semantic difference, but one indicative of shifting receptions of the Wife. Both postmodern versions reclaim the meaning of the Wife by retelling and reframing her story in new contexts, replacing the wanton Wife of the previous centuries with an empowered woman, struggling against patriarchal societal constructs.

While Chaucer’s Wife struggles against male-controlled ideas of sex and marriage in authoritative interpretations of biblical and patristic texts, Wainwright’s Beth struggles against male-defined beauty and her own aging and public relevance. While she remains in a position of power in the BBC episode because she owns the production company, she has a sense that with the decay of her physical appearance will come the decay of both her power and the desirability that made her capable of enchanting the much younger Jerome. The last scene of the episode mirrors the first, and it marks an affective shift. While the audience might have initially empathized with Beth’s struggle for empowerment, her desperation on display shifts empathy to pity. Beth is again in front of the camera in the documentary style from the start of the episode, talking about her recent plastic surgery and the new possibilities it will provide her as a desirable, public figure. She thinks she has found the fountain of youth, but she looks deformed and grotesque. By ending this way, Wainwright points back to Chaucer’s Wife, and her ongoing struggle to remain “on top” in marriage with youth and beauty in her early marriages and power and experience in the later ones. This Wife, however, has tried to have it all, and plastic surgery has made her appear entirely unnatural. She perceives plastic surgery as her ticket to both beauty and experience, but she has exposed herself as fragile, breakable, and vulnerable. She thought of plastic surgery as something akin to the magic the loathly lady uses in the tale to transform herself for her new husband, but this plastic magic has failed to deliver as she imagined.
Making Sense of the Pieces

The collection of the various iterations of the Wife at different historical moments lends itself to several metaphors. At once it is a puzzle of intricate pieces. Chaucer’s Wife is at the center, and these various retellings interlock with it, further bringing about and also changing the bigger picture of the Wife of Bath, each new narrative experimenting with the Wife in one way or another. This collection of stories is also like an onion. While peeling away each layer, readers should find Chaucer at the center, but he is not there. Chaucer is not the prime mover of the Wife, but only the first to give her a name and a place. Behind Chaucer’s Wife, there is Jerome’s Against Jovinianus and Noah’s recalcitrant wife from medieval cycle plays. For the medieval writer, originality wasn’t important. Intertextuality was not embedded behind a façade of newness, but the sources and authority behind medieval works were prominently on display by the writer. Chaucer was more of an inheritor of stories, an experimenter of tales, than he was author of them.

Moreover, each subsequent retelling of the Wife, each new experiment with her, is inevitably couched in the ethics of gender during a specific historical era. Because the ethics of female social roles has shifted so dramatically, the Wife emerges again and again, each time a little different and with a different ethical dimension. In Chaucer’s time, as the Wife directly addresses, the question was whether a woman should marry or remain virgin as a nun. By the time of Blake, monastic communities had been expelled from England, and the cloister was no longer an option. Rather, the ethical concern was over female sexuality and proper marriage. Over the past one hundred years, feminism has radically reshaped the ethics of gender. In such a historical milieu, the Wife continues to emerge with each new version recalling her past and experimenting with her anew.

Notes

* Some parts of this section are excerpted from Andrew Higl, 38-46.
1 All canonical material quoted from Chaucer comes from The Riverside Chaucer (1987).
2 See John Bowers, 42. For more on these manuscripts, see the British Museum Department of Manuscripts and British Library’s (1974) A Catalogue of the Lansdowne Manuscripts in the British Museum: With Indexes of Persons, Places, and Matters, 226, 303, [150].
3 The reference refers to the Riverside pagination.
4 See Caroline Spurgeon (1925, vol. 54). Little has been written specifically about *The Wanton Wife of Bath*, with the exception of Ernest Kuhl (1929). It seems, also, that Joseph Addison (1711) admired the poem since he cites it in *Spectator* 247.


6 This scene echoes the biblical story of the Samaritan woman, whom Christ defends and saves in spite of her sinfulness. On the connection between the Wife and the Samaritan woman, see Robert Longsworth (2000).

7 Though the reference from 1600 clearly suggests the ballad was in circulation at least this early, the first extant version of the ballad is datable circa 1665, according to the British Library. There is no evidence to suggest what differences there might be between the version condemned to flames in 1600 and the one surviving from 1665.

8 The source cited here is the 1790 version of *The New Wife of Bath, much better reformed, enlarged, and corrected than it was formerly in the old uncorrected copy*.

9 For a thorough and well-researched overview of the criticism on the *Wife of Bath*, see Peter G. Beidler and Elizabeth M. Biebel (1998). Since 1995, which covers the extent of the book, there have been a number of other critical articles, chapters, and books written about Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath* and her *Prologue* and tale.


11 In *Against Jovinianus*, Jerome uses Theophrastes (fictional or now lost) to lament women’s attempts to justify second marriages and also point out that a wise man does not marry. This passage below seems to be directly informing Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath*:

   What am I to do when the women of our time press me with apostolic authority, and before the first husband is buried, repeat from morning to night the precepts which allow a second marriage? Seeing they despise the fidelity which Christian purity dictates, let them at least learn chastity from the heathen. A book On Marriage, worth its weight in gold, passes under the name of Theophrastus. In it the author asks whether a wise man marries. And after laying down the conditions—that the wife must be fair, of good character, and honest parentage, the husband in good health and of ample means, and after saying that under these circumstances a wise man sometimes enters the state of matrimony, he immediately proceeds thus: But all these conditions are seldom satisfied in marriage. A wise man therefore must not take a wife, 383.
Works Cited


Anonymous. 1790. *The New Wife of Bath, much better reformed, enlarged, and corrected than it was formerly in the old uncorrected copy*. London, UK.


