The Wife of Bath, Unbecoming:

Adaptation and Obscenity in Eighteenth-Century Chaucerian Retellings

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"And lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I."

— Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath (III 112)[1]

[1] All quotations from Chaucer are drawn from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edition (Oxford, 2008) and cited by fragment and line number.

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Note on citations

I have generally followed the citation conventions suggested in the *MLA Handbook*, 9th edition. When referencing individual tales and prologues from the *Canterbury Tales*, I instead follow *The Chaucer Review* in setting the titles of these texts in italics.

Citations from the *Canterbury Tales* are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, third edition, edited by Larry D. Benson (Oxford University Press, 2008), and are indicated by fragment and line number.

Quotations from the Bible are taken from *The Bible*, King James Version. Cambridge Edition, 1769. *King James Bible Online*, 2024. www.kingjamesbibleonline.org.

Quotations from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) are taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary* online edition (Oxford University Press, n.d.). www.oed.com.

Quotations from the *Dictionaries of the Scots Language* (*DSL*) are taken from the *Dictionaries of the Scots Language* online edition (Dictionaries of the Scots Language, n.d.). dsl.ac.uk/.

List of Abbreviations

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
DSL	*Dictionaries of the Scots Language*
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
RSC	Royal Shakespeare Company

Introduction

"Chaucer Tales were an unfinished business."

--Patience Agbabi, "Prologue (Grime Mix)"

"Too loud." "Too old." "Too sexy." "Too *much*."[2] The tendency to label feminine behavior as excessive remains an evergreen topic of debate, drawing impassioned responses from across the political and cultural spectrum.[3] Not a product of just our particular time and space, similar dismissals and discussions have also followed Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath across her literary afterlife. Writing about the Wife

[2] These oft-repeated complaints are so widely recognized that they appear as organizing strategies in recent feminist books. Anne Helen Petersen includes chapters entitled "Too Old" (Chapter Five), "Too Shrill" (Chapter Seven), and "Too Loud" (Chapter Nine); Rachel Vorona Cote includes chapters entitled "LOUD" (Chapter Ten) and "OLD" (Chapter Eleven).

[3] Popular culture from the last two years alone supplies numerous examples of the variety of responses feminine behavior elicits. The 2023 blockbuster *Barbie* movie includes a speech on the double standards women continue to face: "You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line. . . . And it turns out in fact that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault." These lines were quoted, remixed, and shared widely online in 2023. Elsewhere on the internet, the "tradwife" social media trend was claiming to represent a return to "classic" feminine values and norms as demonstrated via videos of women joyfully performing domestic activities and celebrating their place in the home. For an in-depth examination of the evolution of the "tradwife" movement, see Elmhirst.

of Bath in the Preface to *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700), John Dryden issues a clear refusal to include Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* "because 'tis too licentious" (Brewer 171). Dryden's *Fables*, widely recognized as a landmark text in the history of scholarly response to Chaucer's work, contains modernized English translations of selected works by Ovid, Homer, Boccaccio, and Chaucer, including versions of the *Knight's Tale*, the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, and the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. In addition, its Preface (cited above) provides an indispensable early commentary considering both Chaucer's canonicity and his obscenity.[4] Though Dryden might have judged the Wife (via her prologue) as "too licentious," this declaration did not prevent other writers and publishers in the eighteenth century from reinterpreting the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* despite its transgressive potential. Indeed, it is the Wife's perceived "too muchness" that many adapters seem to be both paradoxically drawn to and also intent on reforming.

This thesis frames the perceived excess of Chaucer's most well-known character, the Wife of Bath from the *Canterbury Tales*, within the discourse of obscenity in order to explore the complex interplay of taboos and gendered social expectations encountered by writers seeking to adapt her text. The Wife herself is a product of adaptation: Chaucer fashioned her character largely through interpretation of and borrowing from an assortment of primarily antifeminist texts.[5]

[4] See Trigg, especially Chapter Five; see also Marshall.

[5] For a comprehensive collection of these texts, see Hanna and Lawler, 351–404. For a more expansive collection that begins with antifeminist writings from Ovid and Juvenal and continues through medieval responses to antifeminism, see Blamires. A modern translation of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*

His repurposing of these texts led to the creation of a character profoundly changed from her origins. Marion Turner notes that the Wife is "not a virginal princess or queen, not a nun, witch, or sorceress, not a damsel in distress nor a functional servant character, not an allegory"; rather, she is "the first ordinary woman in English literature" (*Biography* 2). The possibility of reading the Wife of Bath as an "ordinary woman" emerges as a result of significant alterations Chaucer made in his reinterpretation of these antifeminist texts, particularly his reworking of "La Vieille" from Jean de Meun's portion of the *Roman de la Rose*.[6] "La Vieille," as an aged sex worker now acting as a bawd, portrays a more cynical and joyless character than Chaucer's frequently-married and respectably-employed Wife of Bath (Hanna and Lawler 353; Turner, *Biography* 70). The character Chaucer created through this reworking proved irresistible to later writers, attracting the attention of anonymous balladeers and eighteenth-century literary luminaries alike. Balladeers invented stories of the Wife of Bath's contentious arrival in Heaven in texts destined to be sung and read by two centuries of audiences (see Chapters One and Two). John Gay brought the Wife of Bath to the professional stage in a satirical comedy that never found success, despite an extensive revision after he had come to fame with *The Beggar's Opera* (Chapter Three). Alexander Pope also returned to Chaucer's work numerous times in his poetic career, responding to it in pastiche and through

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is situated "as a kind of interface between readings" in Blamire's text, further supporting its ambiguous nature as both a display of and response to antifeminist writing (198).

[6] Further exploration of Chaucer's own adaptational strategies, though of personal interest, does not fall within the scope of this thesis.

modernization (Chapter Four). As I will show, though Chaucer's reworking of earlier texts lent complexity to the Wife of Bath's character, his inclusion of potentially obscene material (understood as material portraying behavior judged to be in violation of social and sexual taboos) came to both define and complicate her for these later adapters as they reckoned with her capacity for excess.[7]

Thanks in part to the precedent set by Dryden in his Preface to *Fables,* Chaucer's intertwined reputations as a canonical author and as a master of obscene humor have fueled further scholarly discussion of the bawdier portions of the *Canterbury Tales* for quite some time.[8] They have also regularly featured in public debates about art and obscenity, particularly in the United States.[9] George Shuffelton has argued convincingly that obscenity should be recognized as "the defining feature of [Chaucer's] reputation in the United States," where the *Canterbury Tales* is frequently invoked as an example of a work that can be considered obscene but has "passed into the realm of the acceptable" (1, 10). In a nod to Chaucer's much-discussed reputation as the Father of English Poetry,

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[7] Arthur Lindley identifies the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, alongside other texts including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and plays by Shakespeare and Marlowe, as texts that "encode subversive possibilities within orthodox gestures" and "observe the pieties of their culture while subjecting it to pervasive and critical if ultimately ambivalent scrutiny [...] they devastate and leave intact" (11). This meeting point of the subversive and orthodox becomes a key attribute for adapters for whom it offers space for creative flexibility.

[8] See Marshall.

[9] For a broader look at Chaucer's reception in the United States across a wide variety of media and contexts, see Barrington, *American Chaucers*.

Geoffrey W. Gust further suggests that Chaucer "may well deserve the additional title of the 'Father of English Pornography'" due to his inclusion of numerous "sexually charged" passages in his work (3). Centuries prior to these critical conversations, however, discussion of Chaucerian obscenity roots itself in the closing section of the *Miller's Prologue* in the body of the *Canterbury Tales*, when the Chaucer pilgrim states his refusal to censor certain tales despite their "harlotrie," as doing so would contravene his intention to present *all* of the tales exchanged on the pilgrimage (I 3184).[10] He instead shifts responsibility to the reader, suggesting they might "[t]urne over the leef and chese another tale" should they have concerns about exposure to the upcoming subject matter (I 3177).

Discussions of Chaucerian obscenity invariably point to two primary textual examples: the *fabliaux* and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* of the *Canterbury Tales*, often mentioned in conjunction. Though both the Wife's prologue and the *fabliaux* can be read as transgressive, the obscenity in each functions differently: the *fabliaux* present stories that include obscene elements, while the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* presents her *character* as potentially obscene. The focal point of this thesis is this framing of the Wife's character as obscene and the responses that this framing later invites. More than any of her fellow pilgrims, the Wife of Bath has attracted scrutiny (largely in response to her prologue) over the centuries as she looms large both within and

[10] For more on this passage read in relation to Chaucer's poetic evolution, see Flannery, *Unveiling* at 153–55 as well as Flannery's book-length study of the reception of Chaucerian obscenity since 1400 (in progress), provisionally entitled *Censoring Chaucer: Canonicity, Obscenity, and the* Canterbury Tales, *1400–2020*.

beyond the *Canterbury Tales*. Furthermore, the afterlife of the Wife of Bath as a character has been more robustly developed than those of the other Canterbury pilgrims, beginning within the *Canterbury Tales*, where she is addressed by the Clerk (IV 1170) and later mentioned by name in the *Merchant's Tale* (IV 1685). In "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton," Chaucer invokes her character to a friend about to marry with the suggestion that "The Wyf of Bathe I pray yow that ye rede / Of this matere that we have on honde," signaling her ongoing hold on her author's imagination (lines 29–30).[11] Observations of this quality of the Wife led Carolyn Dinshaw to label her character as "apparently irrepressible": "she bursts out of even the confines of her 'fictive universe'" (*Sexual Poetics* 116). Similarly, Turner dubs the Wife "a bookrunner—a figure that escaped her own text" (*Biography* 26). These early demonstrations of the Wife as capable of moving beyond her original text set the precedent she was to follow for centuries to come.[12] The Wife's literary afterlife was further developed by fifteenth-century scribes and authors responding to her text through glosses and commentary. While references to the Wife within Chaucer's work accompany mentions of marriage and discussions of wifely behavior, these later glosses and commentaries were often more concerned with her potential for

[11] All quotations from Chaucer are drawn from *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson, third edition (Oxford University Press, 2008), and cited by fragment (when referencing the *Canterbury Tales*) and line number.

[12] For more on the earliest responses to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, see Cooper, "The Shape-shiftings of the Wife of Bath, 1395–1670." For an overview of variations found in early manuscripts of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, see Kennedy 207–10. For more on scribal response to the Wife, see Turner, *Biography* 146–53. See also Schibanoff and Windeatt.

obscenity as seen in her candid discussions of sexuality, her controversial interpretations of biblical passages, and her insubordinate nature.[13]

My purpose in considering early eighteenth-century adaptations of the Wife of Bath in relation to Chaucerian obscenity is twofold. First, this time period marked a dramatic shift in the reception of Chaucer's work that was fueled in part by the 1700 publication of John Dryden's *Fables*, which brought Chaucer to new readers and also demonstrated and justified new ways of reading Chaucer to writers.[14] In addition to labeling the Wife as "too licentious" in his Preface, Dryden also briefly weighs in on some of the complications of obscenity and adaptation, noting of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* that "where obscene Words were proper in [the characters'] Mouths, but very indecent to be heard . . . such Tales shall be left untold by me" (Brewer 167). With this declaration, Dryden acknowledged the obscenity contained within portions of Chaucer's work and stated his decision to refrain from modernizing these specific texts. In considering whom this licentious material might attract, Dryden earlier specifies that translating one of the *fabliaux* or the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* "would have procur'd me as many Friends and Readers, as there are

[13] Masha Raskolnikov describes the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* as containing "some of the strongest statements justifying female desire, female pleasure, and female autonomy in all of English literature," and these strong statements, accordingly, attracted many strong responses (415).

[14] For one example of an earlier commentary response to the Wife of Bath, see Brathwaite. For an overview of Chaucer's reception in the eighteenth century, see Graver 419–428. For a more in-depth exploration of John Dryden's approach to Chaucer, see Hopkins and Mason, *Chaucer in the Eighteenth Century*, particularly Chapter Two, "The Father of Poetry and the Father of Criticism: Chaucer Renewed?" (48–74).

Beaux and Ladies of Pleasure in the Town" (Brewer 167). Dryden emphasizes that, though these texts might attract readers, such readers would likely come from less well-respected populations (such as wits, coxcombs, and prostitutes) rather than those of a more learned bent.

Dryden's anxiety about the transgressive nature of portions of Chaucer's text speaks to the second aspect of this time period relevant to this thesis: a new and expanding reading community. As literacy rates in Britain increased and printing technology improved, these changes fed public concerns about new readers—including women and members of the lower classes—and the potential of texts to morally corrupt them.[15] In addition to new trends in the make-up of the reading public, Liz Bellamy points to an "increased awareness of, and anxiety about, erotic activity" in the early eighteenth century which coincided with "a simultaneous efflorescence of pornographic works and tracts expressing concern about their propagation" (5).[16] These anxieties about gender, sexuality, and the written word

[15] In accommodating a changing readership, Earl Miner speculates that Dryden's decision-making process in the composition of the *Fables* took into account "a larger component of women readers, for whom his respect seems to have been less than it was for men educated at the schools and universities" (59). For more on the growth of female literacy and corresponding developments in the book trade of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England, see Hull 1–8. For more on gendered social norms and conduct literature for women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Tague and Kenlon. For a discussion of stereotypes of women readers and feminine reading in this period, see Pearson. See also Fox-Genovese.

[16] For detailed analysis of the development of pornography in this period as it related to changes in education and literacy, see Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity,*

influenced numerous aspects of English society and were touched upon in a variety of literary forms.[17] Manushag N. Powell notes that periodicals of the day "integrated literary didacticism with the everyday operation of society" and often included discussion of "strong, often gendered, differences between the discourse and behavior appropriate to either domestic or nondomestic settings, and furthermore that pondering and demonstrating these differences is a huge concern of the period's literature" (256). Anthony Fletcher describes the period from 1500 to 1800 in England as "a historical period which seems to exhibit features of crisis in men's control over women" (xvi).[18] If clerics trading antifeminist writing in Chaucer's day taught that women seeking power or control in the household or their marriages were a threat and required a response, a very similar anxiety is

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1500–1800, especially 12–13. For more on the evolution of obscene, bawdy, and pornographic writing in England in the late 1600s, see Thompson, *Unfit for Modest Ears: A Study of Pornographic, Obscene and Bawdy Works Written or Published in England in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century.*

[17] Jacqueline Pearson argues that "[w]omen's reading, then, was troped as . . . disease, madness, deception, rebellion and transgression of the boundaries of acceptable femininity" and could be "viewed as problematic" because of its relations (and thus perceived threats) to masculine power and control (86).

[18] Suzanne W. Hull summarizes key takeaways from a survey of English books for women in this period with the following observation: "Male authors gave women directions on how to dress (with decorum befitting their rank), how to talk (as little as possible), how to behave toward their husbands (with subservience, obedience), how to walk (with eyes down), what to read (works by and about good and godly persons, not romances), and how to pray (frequently)" (135). These masculine directions suggest the anticipation of feminine excess reminiscent of more modern complaints of women as "too loud," "too bold," and "too much."

reflected in numerous eighteenth-century conduct books that focused on the character and the social role of women, which included titles such as *The Whole Duty of Women* (1695), *The Character of a Good Woman, both in a Single and Married State* (1697), and *The Young Ladies Companion or, Beauty's Looking-Glass* (1740).[19] This preoccupation with and subsequent enforcement of gendered social expectations not only animated the conversations of the day, but also infiltrated a variety of texts across the literary sphere, including Chaucerian adaptations. This may go some way towards explaining why, if obscenity is understood as a defining quality of the character of the Wife, it then also accompanies her throughout her eighteenth-century "bookrunning" to varying degrees.

But why, given this context, is the Wife considered a touchstone of obscenity at all? One of the frequently cited difficulties of studying obscenity is the slipperiness of the term itself, demonstrated by the fact that recent texts examining obscenity in the Middle Ages all include substantial discussion intended to clarify the definition of obscenity with which each scholar works. Nicole Nolan Sidhu, for example, distinguishes between scatological obscenity and sexual obscenity and focuses her study on obscene comedy, which she identifies as works whose plots generally "[invert] social hierarchies and [invite their] audience to laugh at the

[19] Though a fuller exploration of this material lies beyond the scope of this thesis, the guidelines and anecdotes they offer of ideal feminine behavior is indicative of the social expectations facing women in the eighteenth century. For more on the contents and impact of conduct books directed at women in this era, see Armstrong 96–141. For a fuller history of conduct literature intended for a female audience, see Kenlon.

transgression of the decent, the good, and the seemly" (*Indecent* 2). Jan Ziolkowski notes the usefulness of the view that obscenity functions "as the counter-code to whatever orthodoxy prevails" ("Introduction" 4). Carissa M. Harris neatly enumerates the conflicting qualities of obscenity across time periods, writing that it "defies assumptions and sensibilities; it horrifies, scandalizes, entices, offends; and it incites laughter" (*Pedagogies* 2). These three definitions share an understanding of obscenity as capable of both upsetting and entertaining in its intentional violation of cultural taboos and expectations.

Notions of obscenity change with time, place, and situation, though certain trends and preoccupations are more persistent than others. One noteworthy quality of the obscene is that, by designating "sanctioned and unsanctioned realms of human experience," it delineates a border between the acceptable and the transgressive (Caputi 5). Literal and metaphorical visibility, as this thesis will explore, is also a key component of obscenity.[20] Though the etymology of the word

[20] In a chapter on popular books from the mid-sixteenth through the seventeenth centuries addressing "[t]he woman problem," Hull enumerates multiple views on feminine behavior and masculine expectations, with particular interest paid to women's appearance and comportment. Hull addresses the social implications of feminine visibility succinctly, "If they brought any attention to themselves they were accused of being whores by the most strict" (124). In other words, social behavior violating these masculine-penned standards could directly lead to accusations of sexual misconduct. On a related note, in his 2009 retelling of the *Canterbury Tales*, Peter Ackroyd suggests a direct connection between visibility and sexual misconduct when his Wife of Bath celebrates her husband's departure for London because his absence enables her to pursue other lovers. Ackroyd's

obscene itself remains subject to debate, Robert Graves argued in "Poetry and Obscenity" for etymological consideration of the word *scænus/skene* as relating to the theatrical world and what could and could not be shown on stage.[21] Melissa Mohr also considers the possibility of the modern "obscene" as relating to *scaena*, stating that "obscenity would be what cannot be said *except on stage*, where, in ancient Greece and Rome, comic ribaldry was licensed" (18, my emphasis). Though the *OED* considers the *scænus/skene* etymology "doubtful," the concept that some things are only permissible onstage (thus in a controlled environment and presented with an intended effect) but should otherwise be kept out of view is a useful one when considering obscene behavior and social expectations.[22] Such behaviors and expectations are at the core of this thesis, and regardless of etymological accuracy, the concept of the obscene as that which must be kept "off-scene" remains fundamental to my analysis.[23]

Traditionally, scholarship on obscenity has demonstrated that the response to potentially obscene material can be understood as a key indicator of the presence of obscenity; in other words something that is judged obscene *becomes* obscene. John Joseph Honigmann's "Cultural Theory of Obscenity," for instance, argues that

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Wife states that "I had the chance of eyeing up some hunk. And *I would be pretty visible, too*. How did I know where luck might lead me?" (159, emphasis mine).

[21] This usage is discussed in Hughes 332; Minnis, *Fallible Authors* 294; Mohr 18; and Sidhu 15.

[22] *OED*, *s.v.* "obscene" (*adj.*).

[23] The idea of the obscene on/off-stage returns in particular in my discussion of John Gay's reinterpretations of the Wife of Bath, which take the form of two stage plays (see Chapter Three).

obscenity consists of "the expression, representation or display . . . in certain contexts or situations, of something that is culturally regarded as shocking or repugnant" (717, qtd Sidhu, *Indecent* 15). This focus on the power of response means that each time, place, and culture must negotiate its own complex understanding of obscenity and that the notions of obscenity which emerge from this process are subjective though they often share broad categories. Among these broad categories, scholarship has generally focused on the sexual and the scatological as the chief constituents of obscenity. By reflecting on the judgements and interventions made in response to an allegedly obscene character – the Wife of Bath – we can trace developments to both her character and social notions of obscenity over time.

As a character with an extensive literary afterlife, not just in the eighteenth century but continuing through the present day, the Wife of Bath serves as a particularly useful subject to study the interplay of adaptation and obscenity.[24] Adaptation scholar Linda Hutcheon writes that "adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a *double process* of interpreting and then creating something new" (20, emphasis mine). When faced with a moment of potential obscenity in a text to be adapted, each adapter must first interpret these

[24] Contemporary adaptation of Chaucer's Wife of Bath is not limited solely to creative or literary professionals. As of early 2024, the fanworks archiving website *Archive of Our Own* (archiveofourown.org) contained over a dozen entries tagged "Wife of Bath," including titles like "The Seconde Tale of the Wyf of Bath," "Four weddings and a funeral," and "Mordre, She Wroot." For more on fanfiction and the Wife of Bath, see Wilson. For more on non-specialists interacting with and reinterpreting medieval texts, see Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*.

charged passages and then decide what path they will follow in their treatment: to retain, to obscure, to omit, to expand? [25] These decisions require an adapter to approach the text in different ways and can be further influenced by an adapter's intended audience and their understanding of what is required for adaptation into a new medium. Additionally, in the case of perceived obscenity, their adaptational decision-making must also take into consideration what was permissible when a text was created and what is permissible in the adapter's own era. Numerous adaptation scholars argue that reinterpretations of older texts are often concerned with responding to or reflecting on cultural anxieties which connect the source text with the present day (Kaplan 133; Griggs 9). Observing how the potential obscenity of the Wife of Bath is treated in adaptations makes visible aspects of each writer's particular understanding of the character of the Wife as reflected in the choices made while reinterpreting her.[26] As this thesis will show, the decisions made by

[25] For more on approaches to adapting obscene texts for a child audience, see Fleming. Based on her work analysing adapters' responses to potentially offensive passages encountered when adapting Shakespeare and Chaucer for a child audience, Fleming categorizes several commonly employed adaptational strategies, including omission, suppression, and alteration. While "omission" is fairly clear-cut, Fleming differentiates suppression and alteration, arguing that suppression "opacifies the events of the source-text, thereby acknowledging their authority or even their 'truth'" while alteration "rewrites the source-text, retaining certain elements . . . but modifying them." Though Fleming categorizes these responses with a particular eye to adaptations created for a child audience, they are also relevant to discussions of adaptations more generally.

[26] While this thesis focuses on adaptations that postdate Chaucer's own text, it is possible to read misogynistic interpretations of the Wife within the *Canterbury Tales* itself, especially as expressed by

these early eighteenth-century adapters, taken together, point to their preoccupations with ideal feminine behavior and suggest that the treatment of the Wife of Bath in these texts is symptomatic of troubling misogynistic tendencies in this era.[27] It is worth noting that the Wife of Bath herself identifies a similar tendency in her own time when she rhetorically asks, "Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?" (III 692) and goes on to declare that, were the roles reversed, female authors "wolde han written of men moore wikkednesse" in their versions of stories (III 695). In the 1970s, Adrienne Rich called for a similar response, labelling this act of feminist rewriting "re-vision" and defining it as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction . . . more

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the Wife's fellow pilgrims. Glenn Burger reads two possible responses to the Wife's autobiographical recitation from her masculine fellow pilgrims, each of which brings a different difficulty with it: either she is viewed as "living proof that 'woman' can never rise above the natural limitations of her sex and can only embody a monstrous femininity" or as "not properly husbanded by a dominant masculinity . . . therefore demand[ing] the refutation provided by their delineations of proper, 'real' femininity in the so-called Marriage Group" (*Queer* 83). Like the male pilgrims listening to her, male adapters reinterpreting her text also understand the Wife sometimes as an example of the inherently limited feminine, sometimes as a woman who has *become* unruly through insufficient masculine guidance, and sometimes as a combination of the two.

[27] I find Kate Manne's conceptualization of misogyny as "the 'law enforcement' branch of patriarchy—a system that functions to police and enforce gendered norms and expectations, and involves girls and women facing disproportionately or distinctively hostile treatment because of their gender" to be particularly helpful here as it shifts focus from misogyny understood as a felt hatred of women to misogyny viewed as a system of control. Manne further argues that misogyny often arises (or resurfaces) *after* an alleged transgression by a woman has been observed (7).

than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (18).[28] With Rich's idea of feminist "re-vision" in mind, at various points this thesis briefly examines twenty-first-century adaptations of the Wife of Bath with an eye to their reinterpretations of the same thematic elements treated in the eighteenth century, namely, her voice, age, and sexuality. Whereas these more recent feminist rewrites may be read as acts of survival, the adaptations of the eighteenth century read more as tools of misogynistic oppression.

Though the adaptations examined in this thesis apply different approaches to reworking Chaucer's text, it is the character of the Wife of Bath that remains the shared focus of each.[29] Hutcheon writes briefly about adaptations which focus on

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[28] One recent and particularly riveting example of a "re-visioning" of a premodern text that both celebrates and critiques its source text is Maria Dahvana Headley's novel *The Mere Wife* (2018). Headley takes *Beowulf* as her starting point, relocating the story to the contemporary United Sates and refocusing it on the women in the source text. Headley uses the *Beowulf* story to explore contemporary issues of gender, class, race, and culture in the United States. Elsewhere, scholar-creators such as Dr. Laura Varnam are also bringing their artistic practice into conversation with their scholarly expertise through creative-critical adaptation and response, writing new creative works while also documenting the process and the research behind them.

[29] An aside from Simon Dickie suggests the possibility that the Wife's origins in Bath might have further resonances for an eighteenth-century audience. Writing about the proliferation of jokes hinging on infirmity and disability in popular jestbooks of the period, Dickie summarizes descriptions of Bath from the eighteenth century as:

> a venue that brought together fashionable people in search of amusement and invalids on the very point of death. The crowds of lunatics, consumptives, barren wives, and paralytics in wheelchairs turned the streets into a national freak show. It is no accident that the

the transfer of a character from a source text to a new creation and suggests that "[p]sychological development (and thus receiver empathy) is part of the narrative and dramatic arc when characters are the focus of adaptations" (11). Developing reader empathy, however, does not seem to be a driving preoccupation of eighteenth-century adaptations such as the broadside ballad *The Wanton Wife of Bath*. Rather, some adaptations seem to see in the Wife of Bath a convenient caricature of the unruly woman that can be isolated and further developed to reinforce misogynist stereotypes.[30] If one pictures the Wife of Bath's 600-year literary afterlife as an hourglass shape, the eighteenth century can be seen as the narrowest point in the hourglass, situated midway between the complexity of Chaucer's original character and the more recent wave of twentieth- and twenty-first-century adaptations, which often seek to return the Wife of Bath to a version closer to her early Chaucerian form, yet profoundly changed along the way. As this thesis will show, when seventeenth- and eighteenth-century adapters retell her text, the presentation of Chaucer's Wife often narrowed to focus primarily on her

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> deformed dinner parties of [Joseph] Addison and other wits were set in Bath, where a quorum could so easily be assembled. (78)

[30] Numerous works of antifeminist complaint were circulating in this era. As one example written earlier but reprinted through the early eighteenth century, Joseph Swetnam's *The Arraignment of Lewde, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (1615) declared its audience to be neither "the best nor . . . the worst, but to the common sort of women" and represents an antifeminist satirical text with enormous reach (Hull 111, Heertum). The notion of feminine excess and socially unacceptable is made clear in Swetnam's title as its attacks on women align with modern accusations: too sexy, too lazy, too difficult.

negative qualities and included attempts to correct or reform her character, a trend that continued to varying degrees across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[31]

As I will reveal over the course of this thesis, in their reinterpretations of Chaucer's Wife of Bath, eighteenth-century adaptations frequently shift their focus from the Wife's sexual behavior (her traditional "obscene" quality) to other aspects of her character: her vocality and her age. These qualities are clear sources of anxiety for these early adapters and provoke responses not dissimilar to eighteenth-century responses to sexual obscenity. This thesis argues that while adapters' treatment of the Wife's lasciviousness indicates an understanding of her character as sexually obscene, their responses to the Wife's volubility and status as an older woman suggest that her character's excessive voice and her visible feminine aging are elements of what I theorize as *social obscenity*. This term puts forth the idea that feminine behavior (even of a nonsexual or nonscatological nature) that is deemed to be overly visible or excessive is viewed and treated as a violation of gendered social taboos.[32] Moreover, as feminine age increases, the tolerance for acceptable feminine visibility and behavior decreases in direct proportion, resulting in older women

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[31] For more on the literary and filmic afterlives of the Wife of Bath in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Turner, *Biography*. For Chaucer in nineteenth-century popular culture, see Von Nolcken.

[32] Tracing the development of the concept of "taste" as relating to both appetite and aesthetic judgement, Denise Gigante notes that "[n]ot only is taste bound up with the unruly flesh; traditionally, it is associated with *too* intense bodily pleasure and the consequent dangers of excess" (3). Excess and unruliness, according to this understanding, might both be read as suggesting a lack of aesthetic or moral "good taste" in the eighteenth century.

being more quickly seen as excessive or inappropriately visible and, as a result, being dismissed, ridiculed, or otherwise socially isolated.[33] This is consistent with the findings of feminist writer Rachel Vorona Cote, who observes that "[t]he public devises unspoken rules of deportment born from anxieties over what we can bear to see expressed—and accordingly, whom we are willing to allow the privilege of expression" (3). As the following chapters explore, the Wife's voice and her age – along with her sexuality – are routinely denigrated and exaggerated to the point that we are essentially invited to *view them* as obscene. If obscenity entails a demarcation of borders, social obscenity as theorized through the case of the Wife of Bath designates the boundary between the feminine behavioral ideal and the perception of "too muchness" that can precipitate a slide into spectacle and disgust.[34]

While a considerable amount of scholarship has been produced on Chaucerian adaptation, on the character of Wife of Bath and her afterlife, and on various understandings of obscenity across time, the intersection of these three

[33] In a searing essay on gender and aging, "The Double Standard of Aging," Susan Sontag identifies an "aversion men feel . . . most frankly, with least inhibition, toward the type of woman who is most taboo 'aesthetically,' a woman who has become—with the natural changes brought about by aging—obscene" (36). Perplexingly, these references to the obscenity of aging were removed from the essay as reprinted in 1997 (see Pearsall) but were included in Sontag's essay collection *On Women* (2023).

[34] In her work on gender, unruliness, and laughter, Kathleen Rowe argues that "women who make spectacles of themselves" can be seen "as vulnerable to ridicule and trivialization—but also as vaguely demonic and threatening" (3). Again, visibility and excess lead to negative judgements of feminine behavior and can thus provoke a misogynistic response.

topics has not been considered at length. Two edited collections of essays, *Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages* (1998), edited by Jan Ziolkowski, and *Medieval Obscenities* (2006), edited by Nicola McDonald, bring together a wide array of scholars reflecting on how obscenity was understood and employed in the Middle Ages across diverse formats including text, performance, and legal codes. Following on these edited collections, two recent monographs develop a more in-depth analysis of medieval obscenity and its social and cultural significance. Sidhu's *Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature* (2016) considers the cultural and political constructions and uses of obscene comedy in late medieval England, which Sidhu argues could both uphold and challenge elements of the hierarchy during a period of social upheaval. In her 2018 monograph *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain,* Carissa M. Harris considers the pedagogical uses of obscenity across a wide variety of medieval texts and further explores gendered differences in its employment. Though each of these texts makes some mention of the Wife of Bath, she is not of central interest to any of their arguments.[35] Two recent books by

[35] Ziolkowski's edited collection includes a passing reference to the *Wife of Bath's Tale* in the context of a discussion on the Middle English lyric "I have a gentil cok," but contains no essay with a specific focus on the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* (123–124). McDonald's edited collection includes an essay by Alastair Minnis that considers the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* alongside the *Roman de la Rose*, which introduced themes and ideas further developed in his 2008 *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath* (156–178). Sidhu mentions the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* on several occasions but notes that though the Wife might appear to be "the most obvious candidate" for her chapter's consideration of obscenity in Chaucer's work, the *fabliaux* and their ordering better support her argument (78). Harris,

Betsy Bowden and Marion Turner have considered the Wife of Bath and her literary afterlife in greater depth. Bowden's *The Wife of Bath in Afterlife: Ballads to Blake* (2017) introduces and analyzes a number of eighteenth-century responses to the Wife of Bath as reinterpreted in ballads, plays, modernizations, illustrations, and early Chaucer scholarship, with a particular interest in how audio and visual elements were treated within these texts. In *The Wife of Bath: A Biography* (2023), Turner takes a longer view of the Wife of Bath's afterlife and reads these responses, ranging from early scribal interventions to twenty-first-century rewritings, alongside historical texts offering a picture of everyday life as experienced by medieval women. While each book contains mentions of the Wife of Bath's potential for obscenity, neither takes this lens as a central concern.[36] This thesis therefore fills a crucial scholarly gap in the literature. As the early eighteenth century represents a pivotal time in Chaucer's reception, reading the obscene figure of the Wife of Bath as she is

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like Sidhu, makes repeated mention of both prologue and tale but focuses more heavily on the "[c]ommunal obscene storytelling" of the *fabliaux* in Chaucer's work (30).

[36] Turner primarily addresses responses to the Wife's unruly voice in the ballad and other early adaptations with less attention given to her potentially troubling sexuality during this period, though she notes that Dryden found the Wife's "discussion of the body and sex . . . particularly problematic" (164). The first half of Turner's *The Wife of Bath: A Biography* compares the Wife's character as constructed in the *Canterbury Tales* with historical records of feminine life, including work, marriage, and travel, that support her reading of the Wife as "the first ordinary woman in English literature" (2). Bowden notes some instances in her corpus of omission or alteration relating to the Wife's sexual candor but does not focus on them. The index to *The Wife of Bath in Afterlife* contains no references to censorship, obscenity, or sexuality.

reinterpreted in these early adaptations sheds new light on gendered expectations and stereotypes attached to female speech, feminine desire and sexuality, and feminine aging that persist today.

Drawing together the work of theorists in cultural studies, medieval literature, and adaptation studies, this thesis examines how the decision-making processes behind the adaptation of an allegedly obscene text can expose cultural preoccupations that require we broaden our understanding of what constitutes obscenity. Using Hutcheon's definition of the "double process" of adaptation as a theoretical framework for reflecting on these eighteenth-century responses to the character of the Wife of Bath enables us to consider both how each adapter understood the Wife *and* what their reinterpretations then suggest about gendered social expectations of this time. This consideration is particularly important in relation to obscenity. Sidhu argues that a key difference between medieval understandings of the obscene and those of the present day is the medieval inclusion of certain nonsexual and nonscatological behaviors under the umbrella of the obscene. Sidhu notes that "the strictly hierarchical culture of the Middle Ages also invests *disobedience and resistance to the established order* with a level of obscenity equal to the display of lower body functions, body parts, or sexual acts" (25, italics mine). Using this observation and its subsequent broadening of the definition of the obscene as a starting point, this thesis argues that the eighteenth-century preoccupation with gender norms and social behavior is indicative of a similar cultural response to feminine unruliness as that observed by Sidhu. Further, I argue that adaptations of the Wife of Bath in the early eighteenth century suggest a world

in which not just feminine unruliness is understood as socially taboo, but also other deviations from the feminine ideals of silence, chastity, obedience, and youth.[37]

In applying the name of social obscenity to this concept, this thesis takes inspiration from Miranda Fricker's work on hermeneutical injustice, defined as "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" (155). Fricker argues that hermeneutical injustice results from social conditions which prevent certain marginalized members from having the tools or vocabulary to make sense of their own experiences and consequently being actively harmed by this lack (Fricker offers the coining of the term "sexual harassment" as an example).[38] Feminist scholar Mary Caputi asks us to consider:

> Who controls the reality principle, the boundaries separating civilization from the abject realm devoid of taboo? Who decides

[37] One oft-reprinted book describes the ideal woman's vocal behavior as "not always talking and prating as the Generality of Women are; no, her Mouth is not always open, but for the most part shut, and when she sees Occasion to open it, it is with Wisdom: Her words are but few, and always agreeable to Truth" and further insists that *good* wives speak only in kindness (*Look e're you Leap* 106–107). For an in-depth exploration of early conduct literature espousing these virtues to female readers, see Hull, especially "The Practical Guidebooks" 31–70. While Hull's study focuses on the years 1475–1640, a number of these conduct texts remained in print throughout the early eighteenth century. For more on specific examples of eighteenth-century conduct books for women, see Armstrong 96–141 and Tague, especially 18–24.

[38] It is notable that both of Fricker's chief examples—sexual harassment and postpartum depression—are most often related to the experiences of women.

> how and when we transgress this principle, thereby revealing its provisional nature and mocking its putative hold on civilization? Such questions of course allude to *the highly political nature of the obscenity debates*, for negotiating the divide between civilization and the contrapuntal *is always, on some level, about power, authority, and the ability to name*. (81, emphasis mine)

This thesis argues that the idea that nonsexual aspects of a woman's existence might *also* be treated as offensive, repugnant, or horrifying can be understood from these eighteenth-century adaptations. This type of misogynistic thinking remains an ongoing and harmful concern for many women today, and people suffering from its effects would benefit from a clearer and more actionable description of the root problem.

This dissertation does not offer a comprehensive treatment of adaptations of the Wife of Bath; rather, it treats a number of prominent adaptations of this character during the early eighteenth century with a specific view towards their engagement with obscenity and its social forms.[39] Though it briefly references other

[39] I group all texts within my corpus under the umbrella of "adaptations" and further classify them as continuations, insertions, or modernizations according to how they respond to their Chaucerian source text. Of the adaptations discussed in this dissertation, I classify the ballads in my first two chapters as continuations, as they build on the story of Chaucer's character of the Wife. John Gay's plays in the third chapter function as insertions, wherein a new story is invented by a later author and worked into a perceived gap in Chaucer's text. Alexander Pope's text is classified as a modernization due to its methodology of adapting Chaucer's language while generally retaining his

related eighteenth-century texts, this thesis confines itself to early eighteenth-century adaptations that acknowledge their Chaucerian origins and focus on the Wife of Bath as a character knowable through her prologue rather than on her tale. In proclaiming their Chaucerian origins, these works place themselves within a longer literary tradition, while their existence further shapes the development of Chaucer's reputation, particularly among readers whose only exposure to Chaucer presumably would have come from such rewritings. The texts do notably differ in terms of form. The main body of texts that this thesis considers includes two ballads (one printed in broadside form and one printed as a chapbook), a play in both its original form and as it was rewritten over a decade later, and a poetic modernization. These texts were all either printed during the eighteenth century or, in the case of the ballads, were composed earlier but retained their popularity as they were referenced and reprinted during the eighteenth century. Consequently, the thesis does not cover in any detail more diffuse representations of the Wife, or those that focus entirely on her tale, such as Dryden's modernization, but instead focuses on reinterpretations informed by the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* due to its potential for judgement of the Wife's character as obscene.

By focusing primarily on a single adaptation in each chapter, this thesis considers how the treatment of the Wife's voice, age, and sexuality in these texts speaks to our understanding of the Wife as an allegedly obscene character. Chapters proceed in roughly chronological order by each adaptation's year of creation,

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narrative and chronology. For more on the relationship between modernizing and translation, see Chapter Four.

though the texts in Chapters Three and Four display considerable overlap and have instead been ordered according to adaptational methodology and escalating thematic approaches observed in each text. Chapter One, "Too Loud: *The Wanton Wife of Bath* and the Socially Obscene Voice," examines an early adaptation which highlights the argumentative voice of Chaucer's Wife of Bath as her key transgressive feature. Taking the form of a broadside ballad, *The Wanton Wife of Bath* detaches the Wife from her Chaucerian context and imagines a story occurring after her death in which her vocality becomes her most noteworthy characteristic. This chapter provides a brief overview of ballad culture in the eighteenth century, including early episodes of suppression of this text, as it relates to performance, popularity and circulation of the ballad. Beginning to theorize these strategies of suppression and perception of excess as elements of social obscenity that *precede* the eighteenth century builds a foundation for understanding the remainder of the eighteenth-century adaptations this thesis examines—just as the ballad itself lays the conceptual groundwork for later adaptational treatments of the Wife of Bath.

In Chapter Two, "Too Old: *The Wife of Beith* and the Obscenity of Aging," I introduce a second ballad that retains the vocal unruliness that defined the Wife in the first chapter and points to her aging as a further troubling characteristic. This second ballad, *The Wife of Beith*, adapts and enlarges upon the earlier *Wanton Wife of Bath* ballad, in part through the addition of two Scots concepts: the verbally aggressive act of *flyting* and the term *carling*, a derogatory word generally applied to an aging woman. This chapter argues that these concepts broaden our understanding of the socially obscene feminine through analysis of their

presentation within the ballad which culminates in an eventual transformation of the Wife, bringing her into alignment with the feminine ideal.

While the ballads of the first two chapters both offer continuations of the Wife of Bath's story after detaching her from her *Canterbury Tales* context, the primary text of Chapter Three, "Too Sexy (Again): John Gay's *The Wife of Bath* (1713 and 1730)," represents a shift in format and adaptational approach. Gay's plays transport the Wife of Bath from the ballad-singing of the London streets to the professional stage, where she is portrayed alongside a few fellow pilgrims in a satirical comedy that highlights her unruly voice and advanced age while *also* retaining and exaggerating her lascivious nature. These aspects of the Wife are often remarked upon and occasionally denigrated within the plays, ultimately resulting in her romantic isolation at the close of the later version of Gay's play. I argue that by including qualities that mark the Wife of Bath as socially obscene alongside her sexual transgression, Gay suggests that both forms of transgression may be essential to the character of the Wife even as his decision to punish her reminds audiences of the social unacceptability of her behavior.

Chapter Four, "Too Much: Alexander Pope's 'The Wife of Bath Her Prologue' and Transforming Obscenity" turns to an adaptation which responds to all three key aspects treated in earlier chapters—voice, age, and sex—by "modernizing" Chaucer's work. However, I argue that reading this text through the lens of social obscenity exposes it as the adaptation demonstrating the *highest* degree of authorial intervention in reinterpreting the Wife (while claiming a close kinship to Chaucer's work), with significant cultural ramifications. Pope's "The Wife of Bath Her

Prologue" differs in major ways from the more diffuse adaptations covered previously. First, it claims to be merely a modernization of Chaucer's text, inviting readers to believe that they are in some way consuming the work of Chaucer himself. Second, Pope's own reputation as a canonical writer eventually fueled his version's popularity, despite the fact that Pope was very young when he composed it as part of his self-led poetic education. If Pope's youthful decision to modernize Chaucer's text was meant as a challenge to Dryden's earlier refusal to include the "too licentious" *Wife of Bath's Prologue* in *Fables Ancient and Modern*, the end result of Pope's attempt proves Dryden's point even as he seeks to defy it: the retention of this "licentiousness" is critical to portraying the character of the Wife.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I reflect on my own experiences contending with obscenity and gendered social expectations as a middle-aged woman adapting the Wife of Bath as a character in my ongoing graphic memoir, *Repainting the Lion*. As I have found in the process of creating adaptations of my own (often of a humorous nature), the inclusion of the Wife's socially and sexually obscene qualities might be key to adapting her character, but it does not follow that this is necessarily an easy or straightforward task. Informed by Hutcheon's consideration of adaptation as both "process and product," I find that the act of adaptation as a form of practice-based research is particularly illuminating insofar as it enables one to discover the different challenges and opportunities provided by a particular text (9).[40] In their study of the employment of humor by women and other marginalized

[40] For two recent works on practice-based and creative-critical research, particularly as applied to medieval studies, see Lees and Overing; Brookman and Robinson.

comedians, Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett argue that "moral judgements are themselves part of the power apparatus. This apparatus constructs reason as codes, standards, and habits that render some of us or some of our experiences abnormal, disgusting, or even obscene" (37). In my attempts to adapt the Wife of Bath, I found myself having to come to terms with my own internalized "moral judgements" that certain aspects of femininity were "disgusting, or even obscene" as I regularly caught myself refraining from addressing certain aspects of the Wife.

Acknowledging the difficulty of walking this tightrope, this thesis closes with two additional eighteenth-century case studies demonstrating very different approaches to the Wife: one in which her vocality, age, and sexuality continue to vividly define her character (adapted by London bookseller Andrew Jackson) and a second in which the Wife of Bath, unnamed and unacknowledged, is possibly reinterpreted in the mild-mannered and sexless Arietta (introduced in an early issue of the popular periodical *The Spectator*). Taken together and considered in conjunction with my own experience as an adapter, these responses to the Wife of Bath as an obscene character require us to approach her as a palimpsest created through layers of reinterpretations which further invite the possibility of (and the need for) an expanded and reconsidered definition of obscenity itself. Beyond eighteenth-century studies, adaptation studies, or even Chaucer studies, this expanded understanding invites us to think about obscenity as a "double process" in which we play an active role in interpretation and can further instigate change through our reinterpretations.

Chapter One

Too Loud: *The Wanton Wife of Bath* and the Socially Obscene Voice

Patience Agbabi closes the acknowledgements of her *Canterbury Tales* adaptation, *Telling Tales* (2015), with a final word of thanks to Chaucer "for creating a literary work that defies time and space" (124). The same might be said of the Wife of Bath, who "defies time and space" in her long and varied literary afterlife. From her initial breaking of the boundaries of her prologue and tale and subsequent movement into works like "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton," the Wife's character, "apparently irrepressible," continued to move beyond Chaucer's work and into later adaptations such as the ballad which forms the core of this chapter: *The Wanton Wife of Bath* (Dinshaw, *Poetics* 116). It is the Wife's memorable voice, in particular, which has made this afterlife possible, and it is her vocality which can be both clearly recognized and utterly changed through the double process of adaptation. As this chapter will show, that voice is also heard and echoed through the concept of social obscenity, as specific interlocutors within the ballad frame the Wife's voice as "scold[ing]" (line 74), "shrill" (line 42), and ultimately too loud.[41]

[41] Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from *The Wanton Wife of Bath* are taken from the variant reprinted in Bowden's *Afterlife*, Appendix A1, pp. 307-11, and cited by line number.

As its title suggests, Chaucer's talkative medieval pilgrim is cast as the main character of *The Wanton Wife of Bath*, a broadside ballad first recorded in the seventeenth century and popular throughout the eighteenth. Chaucer himself is mentioned only briefly in the opening four lines:

> In Bath a wanton Wife did dwell,
> As Chaucer he doth write;
> Who did in pleasure spend her days;
> In many a fond Delight[.] (lines 1–4)

Having mentioned Chaucer and credited him with the Wife's creation, the ballad then dispenses with him; the Wanton Wife instead takes center stage.[42] In this respect, the ballad's approach resembles that of adapters and modernizers throughout the centuries who have jumped at the chance to isolate the Wife of Bath from her Chaucerian context, an act that allows greater flexibility in the reinterpretation of her character. As I will show in this chapter, this ballad removes the Wife of Bath from the context of the *Canterbury Tales* in a manner which puts a particular (and particularly negative) emphasis on one of her defining qualities: her

[42] Kathleen Forni observes that often in texts alluding to Chaucer, he "functions as an iconic literary figurehead whose cultural status lends canonical imprimatur to the popular text" (4). By claiming the Wanton Wife is Chaucer's creation, the ballad brings a degree of literary authority to a medium more often associated with popular (and ultimately ephemeral) culture. The technique was often employed in antifeminist satirical writing of the period. Stephen Browne suggests that eighteenth-century writers' use of appropriations and allusions from older sources was indicative of "a deeply entrenched tendency to harness a shared history against the incursions of women's speech" (25).

powerful voice.[43] As other scholarship has noted, the Wife of Bath's voice has attracted a significant antifeminist response for centuries, beginning within the *Canterbury Tales* itself, when the Wife finishes her prologue and the Friar immediately comments that "This is a long preamble of a tale!" (III 831).[44] These responses support the argument that the feminine voice can be—and often is—interpreted as a marker of social obscenity. The anonymous adapter's choice of the ballad form further enhances this demarcation as voice and vocality are closely linked to the form's dissemination and transmission.

This chapter considers how the broadside ballad form of *The Wanton Wife of Bath* enables the Wife's voice to reach a new and wider audience even as the ballad's continuation of Chaucer's story makes clear the need to ultimately silence the Wife's verbal unruliness. Betsy Bowden notes that eighteenth-century ballads

[43] The notion of a woman's voice as troubling, corrupting, or in need of being controlled is not only a European or English concern of a past time: it remains a reality in many women's lives today. Metra Mehran argues that a new law passed by Taliban leaders in August 2024 that forbids women from being heard by men outside their own families in public needs to be understood as a tool of "gender apartheid." Mehran and others have issued a call for this type of repression to be codified at an international level as a crime against humanity. That these laws seeking to control women's voices are invoked in relation to the Taliban's rulings on "vice and virtue" clearly aligns feminine voices with "vice." Mehran clarifies that these new laws designate women's voices as "awrah — a term referring to the intimate parts of the body that must be concealed to avoid tempting and morally corrupting others."

[44] Margaret Hallissy argues that "[o]n the subject of women's speech, Chaucer deviates sharply from received opinion" and is sensitive to the difficulties women face when trying to communicate with men (73). Few early adapters read Chaucer's construction of the Wife in this manner.

such as *The Wanton Wife of Bath* "walk the fine line said to separate high art from popular art, official culture from unofficial culture, administered education from shared folklore, . . . and—through the long eighteenth century—epic-composing Ancients from street-singing Moderns" (*Afterlife* 2). This ballad also, it would seem, walks a "fine line" between experience (such as that of a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century audience hearing or reading the ballad) and the authority of the original text as Chaucer "doth write." Over the course of the ballad, attacks against the Wanton Wife's voice by other characters begin by focusing on its aural excess. These attacks then escalate to suggestions that her acoustic excess is symptomatic of a lack of mental fitness as the Wife's interlocutors dismiss her attempts to gain salvation. Through a close reading of the ballad, I show how this adaptation of the Wife of Bath frames her unruly voice as socially obscene.[45] I argue that the numerous complaints against the Wife of Bath fixating on her vocality emphasize the ways in which she is "too loud" and thus must be silenced. I close by returning to Patience Agbabi's text as an interpretation of the Wife's voice that, like *The Wanton Wife*, highlights its performative qualities, but to a very different effect. Agbabi's reinterpretation of the Wife demonstrates that charges of social obscenity (as read in

[45] As noted in the Introduction, Carissa M. Harris highlights the conflicting qualities of obscenity, writing that it "defies assumptions and sensibilities; it horrifies, scandalizes, entices, offends; and it incites laughter" (Harris *Pedagogies* 2). The voice of the Wanton Wife is portrayed as offensive and upsetting within the body of the ballad, but in a manner more likely to entertain and incite laughter amongst readers and listeners.

the attacks of the Wanton Wife's biblical interlocutors) need not be the default response to a forceful female voice.

"I am the Wife of *Bath*, she said": From Pilgrimage to Ballad[46]

Among early adaptations of the Wife of Bath's story, the broadside ballad *The Wanton Wife of Bath* (c. 1600) has been singled out as particularly sensitive to the nuances of Chaucer's character. Helen Cooper describes the ballad as "the most attentive and responsive reading of Chaucer," a text that displays "a much greater commitment to exploring what Chaucer actually makes of the Wife" ("Shape-shiftings" 80–82). The story told in the *Wanton Wife of Bath* ballad opens several years after the pilgrimage of the *Canterbury Tales* and functions as a continuation of the Wife of Bath's biographical story as begun in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* rather than as a retelling of it. After a period of unspecified sickness, the Wanton Wife dies and finds herself at the gates of Heaven, upon which she "did knock most mightily" (line 8).[47] Her loud knocking is soon answered by Adam, who opens the gate, asks her identity, and then denies her entry, declaring that she is a sinner and

[46] *The Wanton Wife of Bath*, line 11.

[47] For greater clarity, *The Wanton Wife of Bath* and *The Wife of Beith* refer to two different ballad adaptations. Mentions of the "Wanton Wife" refer to the title character of the first ballad while references of the "Worthy Wife" refer to the title character of *The Wife of Beith*, the later Scottish ballad variant that is the focus of the next chapter. I refer to their Chaucerian source character as either the Wife of Bath or as Chaucer's Wife. For more on variations in descriptors of the Wife in the opening lines of the Scottish ballad, see Bowden, *Afterlife* 6.

"here no Place shall have" (line 14). This interaction sets up a repeating pattern of the Wanton Wife arguing for her salvation with well-known biblical figures, including several patriarchs as well as two women of biblical fame, Mary Magdalen and Judith.[48] Over the course of the ballad, in which the Wanton Wife does eventually manage to talk her way into Heaven after successfully arguing her case with Christ, she is depicted as a drastically simplified version of Chaucer's Wife of Bath on whom she is based and of whom little more than her voice remains. As I explore in this chapter, that voice is then presented as the marker of the Wife's socially obscene behavior.

Given the Wife of Bath's distinctive capacity for making noise, it seems somehow particularly fitting that when she was brought back to life in *The Wanton Wife*, it was in a text that took the form of a ballad, designed for loud, oral delivery. In the early modern period through the start of the long eighteenth century, ballads "saturated daily urban life for the middling to low" (Fumerton 97).[49] They covered a variety of subjects from current events to repetitions of older stories, and they served both to inform and to entertain.[50] This ballad marks a significant moment in

[48] A number of the figures encountered in the ballad are also mentioned by Chaucer's Wife of Bath in her prologue, including Solomon, invoked as a "wise king" with multiple wives (III 35); Saint Paul, mentioned for his stance on virginity (with which the Wife of Bath disagrees (III 79–82)); and Christ himself, whose name first appears when Chaucer's Wife notes the invocation by others of his attendance at a single wedding as an argument against multiple marriages (III 10).

[49] For more on the notion of the "long eighteenth century" see Lipking.

[50] For more on ballads and their historical and cultural contexts, see Atkinson. See also Fumerton and Guerrini with McAbee.

the Wife of Bath's career as a bookrunner, "a figure that escaped her own text," as it sees her moving into a new text that *adds* details to her biographical story rather than merely alluding to or commenting on it (Turner, *Biography* 26). The *Wanton Wife of Bath* was both popular and controversial across the more than two centuries of its existence, and it was likely encountered by a much wider and more varied audience than Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* would have been in this era.[51]

While the ballad was known to a wide audience for over two hundred years, it is the early controversy it sparked that has attracted the most academic interest. Cooper notes of the ballad that "[i]ts first seventy years of existence are on record only in terms of a series of attempts to suppress it;" one charge declared that "'the histories of the Bible are scurrilously abused'" in *The Wanton Wife*, a charge used as justification for the censoring of the ballad ("Shape-shiftings" 180). Likewise, Marion Turner assesses that the "censors of the ballad in 1600 and 1632" found the

[51] Like the "bookrunning" of Chaucer's Wife of Bath, the *Wanton Wife of Bath* ballad also found its way into other texts. In addition to broadside printings and its inclusion in ballad anthologies, a portion of it was also included in Thomas Jevon's 1686 play *The Devil of a Wife: or, A Comical Transformation*, a misogynistic play exploring the dynamics of two relationships: that of a violent husband and his kind wife and of a kind knight with a cruel wife. The first two stanzas of *The Wanton Wife of Bath* also appear in Charles Coffey's 1731 ballad opera *The Devil to Pay* which was itself an adaptation of Jevon's text. As Bowden puts it, "For several centuries, for better or for worse, an English speaker most likely first heard the name Chaucer in line two of a ballad," *The Wanton Wife of Bath* (1). Alongside the ballad, most eighteenth-century readers would have been familiar with Chaucer through the modernizations of John Dryden and Alexander Pope (Spurgeon, xliii). Pope's modernization is the central focus of Chapter Four.

figure of the Wanton Wife "too rebellious," which not only suggests that the contents of the ballad were considered problematic but also that this variation of the Wife herself was largely responsible for the censorship to which the text would later be subjected (*Biography* 163).

The Wanton Wife of Bath began to circulate in London around the early seventeenth century. The earliest mention of the ballad occurs in the context of a fine levied against two printers and a seller in punishment for the printing of "a Disorderly ballad of *the wife of Bathe*" in 1600 (Bowden, *Afterlife* 5; Turner, *Biography* 155). Cooper views the later imprisonment of a printer of the ballad in 1632 as proof of the Wife's "continuing potential for subversion" as the ballad finds her "outraging Reformation religious orthodoxy as [she] once outraged Catholicism" ("Shape-shiftings" 170). Though no copy is known to survive of that 1600 printing, documentation exists of fifty-four separate printings of the ballad and its variants, with reprintings of the later variants continuing through the late nineteenth century (Bowden, *Afterlife* 19). Of these printings, Bowden notes that half preserve the earlier, shorter broadsheet version, which serves as the focal point of this chapter, and half preserve the significantly longer Scottish variant, which will be the subject of the next chapter (*Afterlife* 2). This ballad enjoyed a prolonged popularity estimated to span the period from 1600 past the 1820s, surviving in a number of print editions and variations and referenced in other works such as Richard Steele and Joseph Addison's *The Spectator* (Bowden, *Afterlife* 5–7).[52]

[52] For further discussion on *The Spectator* and the Wife of Bath, see Conclusion of this thesis.

Despite surviving in at least twenty-seven examples, the *Wanton Wife of Bath* ballad appears to have largely escaped scholarly attention prior to recent publications by Cooper, Bowden, and Turner.[53] Bowden dedicates the first chapter of *The Wife of Bath in Afterlife: Ballad to Blake* (2017) to the ballad and its variants, paying particular attention to comparisons between different versions, to the woodcut images used to illustrate the different variants, and to audio-visual elements of the ballads in performance. Turner discusses the ballad and its variants in a chapter entitled "Silencing Alison," which highlights the ballad as a controversial text whose publication, on more than one occasion, resulted in fines and the threat of imprisonment for printers as well as destruction of copies of the text (*Biography* 154–55). In addition to writing on the ballad, Turner also made the text and its variants a key part of the 2023–2024 "Chaucer Here and Now" exhibition she curated at the Weston Library, where the inclusion of at least fourteen different printings attests to the texts' popularity.[54] Building on their work on the acoustic and vocal qualities of the ballad alongside the controversy it caused, this thesis addresses controversy surrounding the Wife's voice found within the

[53] In 1929, Ernest Kuhl wrote a brief analysis of the possible political and religious implications of *The Wanton Wife of Bath* which argues the ballad's early suppression as "disorderly" resulted from its political undertones. David Hopkins and Tom Mason also discuss the ballad in their chapter "Some Eighteenth-Century Wives of Bath," 214–51.

[54] Variants in the exhibition emphasized the different forms the ballad Wife took through the display of at least fifteen copies of the text. The exhibition included copies of the broadside ballad *The Wanton Wife of Bath*, of *The Wife of Beith* Scottish chapbook variant, and of versions included in ballad collections and anthologies.

ballad itself, arguing that the denigration of the feminine voice in the text speaks to a larger cultural preoccupation with women's vocality as transgressing societal norms and expectations.

The Wife's voice becomes the focal point of the ballad through multiple adaptational decisions, including the removal of most of the biographical details provided by Chaucer's *General Prologue* and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* that flesh out her character.[55] The opening lines of the *Wanton Wife* set up a key tactic reflected in several adaptational approaches to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*: detachment of the Wife from her *Canterbury Tales* context and minimization or removal of Chaucer as her author. Considering the varied audiences broadside ballads reached, it is likely that audiences contained members with disparate levels of knowledge of Chaucer and his work.[56] The ballad's opening lines give readers or listeners a setting, a one-word-encapsulation of what the balladeer is presenting as the Wife's key characteristic (wantonness, which encompassed a wide range of behavior from disobedience through promiscuity), and declare her to be Chaucer's creation. She is

[55] Adin Lears describes Chaucer's Wife as "loud in multiple senses of the word" (163). This "multivalent loudness" includes her vocal presentation as well as her "eye-catching-red clothing," and her "tendencies toward self-display" among other qualities (163). *The Wanton Wife of Bath*, in contrast, is concerned only with her acoustically excessive voice.

[56] Linda Hutcheon identifies two different types of adaptation audiences based on their awareness of the adaptation's source material: "knowing" readers and "unknowing" readers. Hutcheon argues that in order for an adaptation to be considered successful *as* an adaptation, it must be coherent for both audiences (120–21). Audiences hearing the ballad must be able to understand the story being told regardless of their familiarity with Chaucer's work.

not situated within the *Canterbury Tales* and her status as a pilgrim goes unmentioned. After this line, no further mention of Chaucer is given in the ballad.[57] Were one going by only these opening lines, the Wife appears to stand alone as an ill-behaved character created in literary isolation by a long-dead author. Detachment from her original literary surroundings is not the only form of loss/deprivation imposed on the Wife. The Wanton Wife of the ballad is also stripped of her body, her occupations, her husbands, her wealth, her life, and her hat. Only her outsized voice remains, and it is on this that she relies to argue for her salvation. In highlighting the volume and the disturbing nature of her cries outside the gate, the ballad writer directs attention to the social obscenity of her unruly voice, with its power to cause Adam to flee, Judith to blush, and even Christ to concede.

Though the ballad might simplify the Wife's character in order to emphasize her disruptive voice as its focal point, hers is also not the only voice heard in the text. The ballad employs an unnamed narrator and transforms Chaucer's Wife from the speaker of her prologue to one speaker of many quoted across the ballad's lines.

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[57] One 1723 ballad anthology in which it was reprinted, *A Collection of Old Ballads: Corrected from the Best and most Ancient Copies Extant, with Introductions Historical, Critical, or Humourous,* offers an additional reference to the source material as Chaucerian, stating, "I need not acquaint my Readers that the following story is borrow'd from old Chaucer" (Bowden, *Afterlife* 307). Hopkins and Mason note that, despite this reference to Chaucer as source, the anthology editor "relies on a critical endorsement rather than venerable antiquity to justify the poem's appearance in his volume" when the editor continues by noting that the "'Ballad has always been esteem'd, and even Mr. Addison has commended it, whose Judgement in Poetry, I believe never was disputed.'" (215).

Chaucer's Wife's autobiographical monologue thus becomes, in the ballad, a series of dialogues that culminate with the Wanton Wife's salvation and subsequent silence. Rather than the speaker, she becomes spoken-of. She may have the most lines, but the *final* word, that which decides her fate, is given to someone else. Sarah F. Williams explains that one role ballads performed was to use "the heightened language of poetry to disseminate stereotypes of female excess and acoustic disorder," both of which apply to the Wanton Wife.[58] Though the ballad form itself is well-suited to portraying the aural excess of the Wanton Wife (and likely made for lively public performances of this voice), its brevity and the resultant simplification of Chaucer's Wife of Bath to a single negative quality results in a very specific interpretation of "what Chaucer actually makes of the Wife" (Cooper, "Shape-shiftings" 82).

"So vile a Scold as this": Amplification of Vocal Unruliness[59]

The interlocutors in the *Wanton Wife of Bath*, building on vocal qualities and behaviors present in Chaucer's Wife of Bath, frame the Wanton Wife's voice as socially obscene by fixating on its excessive volume and aural unpleasantness through repeated complaints even as they ignore her other potential transgressions.

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[58] In examining the treatment of women in seventeenth-century broadside ballads, around the period from which *The Wanton Wife of Bath* originated, Williams dedicates an entire chapter to "Acoustic Disorder and Verbal Excess in Ballad Texts," suggesting that the Wanton Wife is but one in a long line of loud ladies found in this medium (89–109) .

[59] *The Wanton Wife of Bath*, line 74.

Chaucer's Wife of Bath has long been recognized as distinctive in large part due to her voice: the tone of it, its liveliness, and its usage in relating her own personal experience within the larger thematic framework of the "wo that is in mariage" (III 3). In Chaucer's text, the Wife opens by introducing the virginity debate with which she situates her own life experience as in opposition, marshaling biblical justification along the way as she argues her case and defends her choices. She then delivers a performance of how she used her voice in her relationships to assert and retain control over her husbands, embodying exactly the kind of negative portrayal of a wife which Jerome and other antifeminist writers familiar to a medieval audience wrote. Finally, she switches to a more emotional and vulnerable register as she narrates the coexisting threads of desire and violence running through her fifth marriage to the Oxford clerk, Jankyn. Only after this does Chaucer's Wife of Bath use her voice for the task originally requested of it: the telling of a tale.

Complaints about the Wife's loquaciousness are first found within the body of the *Canterbury Tales*, which leads the Host to intervene and insist that the rest of the pilgrims "Lat the womman telle hire tale" (III 851). Chaucer's Wife, perhaps sarcastically, responds that she is ready to tell her tale, assuming "I have licence of this worthy Frere" (III 855). Scholarly discussions often read Chaucer's Wife and her voice in relation to expectations of women as represented in medieval literature, much of it antifeminist in nature. Patterson notes that "[a]ntifeminist literature presents woman as an inveterate and interminable talker," adding that "for the male audience feminine speaking is never wholly divested of the titillating ambivalences of eroticism" thus breaking down female speech into two distinct problems: the

quantity of women's speech ("interminable") and its potential impact on an audience (660–62). Jill Mann reads Chaucer's Wife's "tirade" as speech that "functions simultaneously as a demonstration of female bullying and as a witness to masculine oppression," and further argues that the ways in which the Wife of Bath uses her speech are key to the reader's sense of her as "a living individual" (64).[60] These arguments agree on one thing: the Wife of Bath's voice, as both a source of power and a vehicle for provocation, provides a useful representation of two contrasting functions of female speech that also provoke opposing reactions, exhilarating some, and upsetting others.[61] The Wanton Wife's voice displays a complicated loudness as it is both implicated in calls for her damnation and later credited with her eventual salvation—it is disruptive and disturbing in one context and repentant in another.

The controversies surrounding *The Wanton Wife* are also rooted in Chaucer's construction of the Wife of Bath as a character. In addition to her capacity to make noise, Chaucer's Wife courts controversy with the uses to which she puts her voice, namely her spousal manipulation and her frank discussion of sexual matters as well as her often irreverent employment of biblical references and personages (her

[60] For more on readers' conflating of Chaucer's Wife with a historical person and on male authorship of feminine voices, see Hansen.

[61] For more on women's speech and potential obscenity, see Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 294–311. For further discussion on speech and power, see in particular the Afterword to Carruthers, "Painting," 39–53. For consideration of the Wife of Bath's use of gossip and small talk, see Phillips, 106. For the role confession plays in the structure of the Wife's *Prologue*, see Root, 260–62.

glossings).[62] Chaucer's Wife admits to using her voice to deceive her husbands as a way of retaining control in her marriages. She verbally acts out the ways in which she (falsely) puts antifeminist commonplaces into the mouths of her husbands in order to attack them. The Wife of Bath embodies Jerome's worst fears: "[s]he floods his house with her constant nagging and daily chatter" (Blamires 67), which she demonstrates by performing these interactions for her fellow pilgrims, noting that her husbands "were ful glad whan I spak to hem fayre. / For God it woot, I chidde hem spitously" (III 223–24). The Wife both embodies the antifeminist texts she has previously railed against and, early on, demonstrates the damage they do to wives. Her vocal unruliness is symptomatic of her refusal to abide by patriarchal conventions.[63] Mann insists that Chaucer's "dramatization of the fact that the more vigorously the Wife asserts herself in opposition to traditional antifeminism, the more she conforms to its stereotyped image of her" serves to point to the complicated balance required of women in the face of antifeminist sentiment and argues that the use of antifeminist commonplaces in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* "in no way implies Chaucer's endorsement" of these beliefs (66).[64] Though Chaucer might not have endorsed an antifeminist understanding of the Wife's vocality, this

[62] For more on Chaucer's construction of the Wife considered in relation to glossing as a gendered act, see Dinshaw, Chapter Four, pp. 113–31.

[63] Margaret Rogerson argues that Chaucer treats the character of the Wife of Bath "as a carnival figure who *validates* the unruly 'woman on top' through comedy rather than as an example that proves that women need to be repressed" (17, emphasis mine).

[64] Not all feminist scholars read Chaucer's construction of the Wife of Bath as complicating or resisting antifeminist stereotypes; for one example early, see Diamond.

interpretation is not evident in these early adaptations, *The Wanton Wife of Bath* included. By building on a misogynistic interpretation of the Wife's voice, framed as the chief source of complaint against her character, the Wanton Wife's biblical interlocutors resemble the antifeminist texts from which Chaucer's Wife was created and portray the Wife as a "stereotyped image" of excessive feminine vocality.

Whereas her voice is one of several important characteristics in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, it becomes the Wife's defining characteristic in *The Wanton Wife of Bath*. Complaints about the various ways in which the Wanton Wife makes noise form a constant refrain across the course of the ballad.[65] Though the initial attack leveled at the Wanton Wife by Adam focuses on her sinfulness, subsequent attacks quickly shift to complaints about the noise she is making and the ways in which it disturbs the denizens of Heaven, with six of her interlocutors complaining about her noise and only four singling out her sinfulness. Regardless of their accusations against her, one after another of these interlocutors is disturbed, shamed, or silenced by the Wanton Wife's response. The range of insults aimed at the Wanton Wife in the ballad reads as a continuation of longstanding antifeminist traditions that sought to control women and moderate their behavior. The Wanton Wife's noisy unruliness is referred to repeatedly in the ballad: she is accused of calling out "with such shrill sounding notes" (line 42), decried for "mak[ing] all this strife" (line 50), and scolded for "wear[ying] Christ with cries" (line 108). Even the unnamed narrator of the ballad describes the Wanton Wife as knocking "with might

[65] David Hopkins and Tom Mason describe the "tongue" of the Wanton Wife as "all-conquering," a quality that they note she shares with other women in Chaucer's writing (215).

and main" (line 33). Later, Jonas states that he has never heard "so vile a Scold as this" (line 74) and Thomas remarks on the constant movement of the feminine tongue, "[o]f Aspen-Leaves [their tongues] are made" (lines 78).[66] These moments in the text repeatedly draw attention to the disturbing qualities of the Wanton Wife's knocking and her unruly voice, making this aspect her most memorable quality after the omission of Chaucer's Wife of Bath's other potentially obscene qualities.

Williams describes the ties between female transgression and verbal excess, adding that many broadside ballads of this period "depicted aural excess as a symptom of disorder, discord, and even a pact with the devil" (89–91). According to this understanding, the accusations of being too loud that are repeatedly thrown at the Wanton Wife take on a heavier meaning, marking her as not merely annoying but also potentially threatening in her disruptiveness. This loudness goes against the prevailing expectations for silence and modesty that typify feminine virtue as extolled in conduct books and periodicals of the time which "sought to reassert what they saw as women's proper role, a 'prudent modest retired life' of domestic love and responsibility" passed quietly outside of the public eye (Tague 1–2).[67] The

[66] The *OED* traces the connection of aspen leaves and women's loquaciousness back to 1532. *OED s.v.* "aspen" (*adj.*), sense 3. The notion of quaking aspen leaves also appears in Chaucer's work—but in relation to feminine sexual anticipation rather than vocality: "[r]ight as an aspes leef [Criseyde] gan to quake, / Whan she hym felte hire in his armes folde" (*Troilus and Criseyde*, III 1200–01).

[67] One sample text popular in this period divided its advice into sections which offered female readers guidance on avoiding "obstacles to vertue" as well as instructions to "practice humility and modesty" and in the "regulation of daily actions," including leisure activities, dress, and meal times (Darrell).

Wanton Wife's voice becomes even more transgressive when considered within a Christian religious context. As just one biblical example, I Corinthians 14.34 (KJV) commands feminine silence in religious settings: "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law."[68] Heaven, as the holiest of places, by this logic would also be unlikely to welcome women's speaking, preferring their silence and obedience according to this verse.

Uncontained speech could be viewed as connecting to or indicating the presence of other forms of feminine unruliness. The word "wanton," in the time of the ballad, acted as a sort of catch-all reference to generally incorrect behavior with a few positive usages also applicable in specific scenarios. Defined variously by the *OED*, "wanton" can be read as "undisciplined, ungoverned; unmanageable, rebellious," as "childishly cruel and unruly" when referring to boys, sometimes as "having no regard to decorum" in the mid-seventeenth century, and finally of a woman as "sexually unrestrained; not chaste; (often with a more strongly derogatory sense) promiscuous and unprincipled in sexual matters."[69] It can be a compliment when applied to young animals or artistic creations, signifying liveliness, or it can indicate excess when applied to fortunes and appetites. The Wife of the ballad encompasses a number of these possible definitions from her unmanageable complaining to her vigorous debating, from her disregard for expected social behavior to her life lived

[68] Alcuin Blamires records an assortment of other scriptural passages that influenced antifeminist writers, including verses from Genesis, 2 Kings, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and others (31–37).

[69] *OED*, *s.v.* "wanton" (*adj.* and *n.*).

in pursuit of "Fond delight" (line 4). Wantonness can apply to how she lived her life, how she uses her voice, and how she interacts with others: to behaviors spanning both the sexually and the socially obscene.

The shrill unruliness of the Wanton Wife's voice is not only a problem in its own right – it is also symptomatic of a more significant issue: her refusal to respect order as imposed by the patriarchal hierarchy and its assumed voice of reason.[70] Adin Lears identifies a "dichotomy of noise" in Chaucer's text that differentiates noise between masculine and feminine; between reason and babble; and between valuable and waste (175). The ballad responds to this dichotomy in part by the Wanton Wife's attempts to equalize (and take control of) it. The decision to excise Chaucer's Wife's sexual openness from the Wanton Wife while also presenting her as both knowledgeable of and fixated on the sexual transgressions written of in the Bible represents a shift in her potential for obscenity. This shift becomes most apparent in the Wanton Wife's extended interaction with Solomon, her longest sustained interaction (other than her closing conversation with Christ) of the text. Just as in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, Solomon is called upon to serve as biblical precedent on multiple marriages, but from a different angle.[71] The Wanton Wife

[70] For more on shifting gender and social norms in this period, see Fletcher and Rogers.

[71] Solomon's legacy in the Middle Ages encompassed an array of different understandings, including Solomon as "fallible actor" and Solomon as "flawless *auctor*" (Bose 188). Mishtooni Bose analyzes several medieval responses to Solomon, including the Latin *Dialogus Salomonis et Marcolfi*, which places Solomon in dialogue with "the churl Marcolf," who frequently outwits Solomon as their conversation continues (193). The ballad interactions between the Wanton Wife and Solomon appear somewhat similar to this tradition.

argues that, despite all his relationships (marital and extramarital) and despite the negative impact the Bible ascribes these relationships to have had on his faith, none of these factors prevented his admission to Heaven. Following a particularly scathing attack on David that highlights his own sexual misbehavior (culminating in a murder),

> You were more kind, good Sir, she said,
>
> Unto Uriah's Wife.
>
> And when thou caused'st thy Servant
>
> In Battle to be slain[.] (lines 51–54)

and leaves the famed biblical king speechless, his son and successor Solomon speaks up in his place. Solomon opens with a dismissive declaration of the Wanton Wife, "The Woman's mad, said *Solomon*, / That thus doth taunt a King," (lines 57–58) to which the Wife has an immediate response:

> Not half so mad as you, she said,
>
> I know in many a thing.
>
> Thou haddest seven Hundred Wives,
>
> For whom thou did'st provide,
>
> Yet for all this, three hundred Whores,
>
> Thou did'st maintain beside.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Had'st thou not been besides thy Wits,
>
> Thou would'st not have ventur'd;

And therefore I do marvel much,

How thou this Place hast enter'd. (lines 59–72)

Solomon's brief dismissal serves as a reminder of the entrenched hierarchy the Wanton Wife finds herself pitted against as he brushes off her criticism by reminding listeners of David's, and his own, high standing.[72] The Wanton Wife immediately turns his words back on him, questioning his own mental capacities not once but twice: "not half so mad as you" (line 59) and again "[h]ad'st thou not been besides thy Wits" (line 69) across the fourteen lines of her attack. She denounces him for his many marriages and extramarital relationships and accuses him of following the counsel of his women which led him eventually to idolatry. During this accusation, the Wanton Wife seems to emphasize the immoderation of Solomon's sexual habits, "Thou had'st seven Hundred Wives . . . yet for all this, three hundred Whores" (lines 61–64).[73] The disapproval that can be read in the "yet" of these lines stands in contrast to the wistful Wife of the *Canterbury Tales* and her wish to be "refreshed half so ofte" as Solomon (III 38). Whereas Chaucer's Wife seemed to see something admirable or enviable in Solomon's status as an oft-

[72] Browne traces a long history of the notion of feminine speech as "chatter" from antiquity through the present day, writing that "women's speech has long been stamped as excessive, empty, contentious, pretentious, and disruptive" (25).

[73] Of the ballads, Adam Rounce notes that the "success of the poem is based on its unveiling of hypocrisy, especially in matters of sex" (87). The Wanton Wife's prolonged interaction with Solomon is the most extensive example of this in the ballad.

married man, the Wanton Wife sees it instead as both cause and proof of his mental and spiritual unfitness.

The Wanton Wife's attack on Solomon finds her speaking out against the sexually obscene behavior that Chaucer's Wife defends and of which she might have been accused by readers of the *Canterbury Tales*. In her prologue, Chaucer's Wife cites Solomon as biblical precedent for multiple marriages. Solomon, who is mentioned in the *Canterbury Tales* over fifty times, is introduced by the Wife of Bath as "the wyse king" known for his "wyves mo than oon" (III 35–36), reflecting both the biblical depictions of Solomon as gifted by God with "wisdom and understanding exceeding much" (1 Kings 4.29) and also his reputation as the possessor of "seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines" (1 Kings 11.3). When Chaucer's Wife expresses her own desire to be "refreshed half so ofte" as Solomon, she shifts the focus to his sexual and marital life, leaving his wisdom and accomplishments largely ignored (III 38). Solomon appears again toward the end of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* when she mentions his inclusion in Jankyn's "book of wikked wyves," "and eek the Parables of Salomon," where his words appear alongside a number of well-known antifeminist texts (III 679). If Chaucer's Wife of Bath reflects primarily on Solomon's marital legacy while only briefly making passing reference to his antifeminist proverbs, the Wanton Wife take a quite different approach. In response to Solomon's brief attack, the Wanton Wife retaliates, declaring Solomon mentally and morally unfit for his place in history and in Heaven, largely due to his seven hundred wives "and three hundred Whores" (line 63). The Wanton Wife's charged language and judgmental tone regarding

Solomon and his legacy stand in stark contrast to Chaucer's Wife of Bath referencing Solomon as she argues in defense of her own sexual conduct in prologue.

Though Solomon's declaration of the Wanton Wife's potential madness is a direct response to her verbal "taunt[ing]" of David, the Wanton Wife connects Solomon's sexual excess with mental incapacitation in her argument for her entry into Heaven. The Wanton Wife insists she is "not half so mad as you" (line 59) before immediately launching her attack on Solomon's immense number of sexual and marital partners. She ties Solomon's romantic relationships with his later descent into idolatry, tracing a clear path from sexual impropriety to spiritual degeneration. In putting these arguments into the mouth of the Wanton Wife, the anonymous author of the ballad also (possibly inadvertently) points to some of the ways in which sexual obscenity and social obscenity exist in tandem. The Wanton Wife's arguments that sexual excess can lead to mental incapacitation and spiritual degradation are exactly the sorts of arguments that the Wife of Bath appears to be anticipating in the defensive tone Chaucer crafts for her in the opening lines of her *Prologue*.

After several other interactions and just before Christ's appearance, the Wanton Wife finds herself in conversation with Peter, who addresses her as "Fond Fool" and requests she "knock[s] not so fast" as both her knocking and her vocal complains are wearying to Christ (lines 107–08). When he appears at the gate, however, Christ does not attack her voice or her noise as so many of her interlocutors before him had, but instead draws her attention to her more serious

transgressions: her sinful life, her use of profane language, and her refusal to follow the laws and commandments of the Church. While it might have been her capacity to make noise that was disruptive to her other interlocutors, Christ is able to see beyond her verbal excess to the more troubling aspects of her behavior. Yvonne Griggs categorizes adaptations according to how they relate to their source material as following the "classic treatment" that prizes fidelity to the original, "re-visioning," which retains the text's "thematic and ideological preoccupations" and the "radical rethink," which applies to adaptations that make a "definitive move away from [the] source" (11). In taking up after the *Canterbury Tales* story leaves off and highlighting the Wife of Bath's concern for her soul, this ballad is closer to a "radical rethink" than to the "classic treatment." This approach allows an adapter to start from a source text and move beyond it, using the material provided by the original author to push further on certain themes and ideas that may have been present in the source text but less developed. The balladeer adapter of the *Wanton Wife of Bath* started from Chaucer's Wife's perceived garrulousness combined with her capacity for glossing and pushed these understandings further by placing the Wife in a situation in which these qualities are both the source of her salvation and also incompatible with social norms and thus in need of correction. In order to bring these qualities into compliance, the Wife must be rendered silent. Ultimately, in reinterpreting the Wife of Bath, the Wanton Wife of the ballad appears less Chaucerian as her most recognizable qualities are removed: by omission in the case of her overt sexuality, and by correction of her unruly voice in her final interaction with Christ, which is further considered in the following section.

"For Mercy did she crave": Repentance and Admission[74]

As noted earlier, attacks aimed at the Wanton Wife in the ballad generally follow two approaches, each of which indicates a different problem with the Wife: either her unruly voice and capacity for making noise or her sinful nature. Though the majority of the Wife's interlocutors are biblical patriarchs, two women also converse with the Wanton Wife, each taking a different approach to her demands. Judith speaks first and is also first to reproach the Wanton Wife for her loudness. The Wanton Wife treats Judith differently from the patriarchs with whom she has argued when she verbally attacks Judith for an action (the killing of Holofernes) largely considered an admirable act, her "good deed" in the words of Christine de Pizan (Blamires 289).[75] Though Judith appears to not recognize the Wife when she asks "Who calleth there . . . With such shrill sounding Notes," the Wanton Wife immediately identifies Judith, labeling her a "fine Minks" whose hearing deficiency the Wife speculates may be caused by her propensity for "cutting Throats" (lines 41–44).[76] This interaction causes the narrator to exclaim, "Good Lord, how *Judith* blush'd for shame" before she disappears from the text, replaced by David's arrival.

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[74] *The Wanton Wife of Bath*, line 117.

[75] Blamires notes that the story of Judith's killing of Holofernes and subsequent liberation of Bethulia "fascinated the Middle Ages" (231 n. 28).

[76] *OED*, *s.v.* "shrill" (*adj.*). "Shrill" at this time was associated with any high-pitched or piercing noise, according to the *OED,* though it has taken on a more gendered meaning in recent years. In her book *Too Fat, Too Slutty, Too Loud: The Rise and Reign of the Unruly Woman (*2017), Anne Helen Petersen explores the use of the word "shrill" as a gendered insult in her case study of Hillary Clinton, noting

Several verses later, her second female interlocutor, Mary Magdalen, attempts to dissuade the Wanton Wife from her petitioning by shifting focus away from her unruly voice and back to her sinful life. The biblical Mary Magdalen remains a complex figure whose name could be invoked to signify sanctity or excessive sin, depending on the context.[77] Mary Magdalen was traditionally known for her preaching and conversions, as she and her sister "received the gift of different tongues along with the Apostles, and were sent out to teach and preach publicly just as the menfolk were" (Minnis *Fallible* 194), and for being the first person to meet Christ after the resurrection (Minnis *Fallible* 203).[78] Both of these characteristics of Mary Magdalen were called upon in support of antifeminist debates against women's voices as well as in their refutations, making her an interesting conversational partner for the Wanton Wife (Minnis *Fallible* 200–06, 228–30).[79] Bowden reads the ballad's Mary Magdalen in line with views that centered her supposed sexual immorality, pointing out that the Wanton Wife's attacks often focus on the sexual improprieties of those with whom she is in conversation: "[f]or

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that "'[s]hrillness' is just a word to describe what happens when a woman, with her higher-toned voice, attempts to speak loudly. A pejorative, in other words, developed specifically to shame half the population when they attempt to command attention in the same manner as men" (137). Clinton herself once responded to an attack on her way of speaking by stating "[s]ometimes when a woman speaks out, some people think it's shouting" (Petersen 153).

[77]For more on the evolution of Mary Magdalen's portrayal from her initial biblical mention through the modern day, see Almond.

[78] For more on medieval understandings of Mary Magdalen, see Jansen.

[79] See also Blamires Chapter Two and Chapter Eight.

sexual excesses, . . . the Wife scolds David for six lines, her initial challenger Adam for eight, and Mary Magdalen for ten" (*Afterlife* 4).

The Wanton Wife's exchange with Mary Magdalen displays a change in both tone and tactics on the part of the Wife.

> When *Mary Magd'len* heard her then,
> She came unto the Gate,
> Quoth she, good Woman, you must think
> Upon your former State.
>
> No Sinner enters in this Place,
> Quoth *Mary Magdalen* then.
> 'Twere ill for you, fair Mistress mild
> She answer'd her again:
>
> You for your Honesty, quoth she,
> Should once be ston'd to Death,
> Had not our Saviour Christ come by,
> And written on the Earth.
>
> It was not your Occupation,
> You are become divine,
> I hope my Soul in Christ's Passion
> Shall be as safe as thine. (lines 81–96)

Mary Magdalen in this passage reasserts the impossibility of the Wanton Wife's admittance to Heaven and insists that she reflect further on her "former state" (line 84). This interaction reflects a much gentler tone than that seen in earlier interaction, with Mary Magdalen refraining from attacking the Wanton Wife's noisiness and focusing instead on the Wife's behavior in life as being what prevents her entry. The Wanton Wife responds in equally gentle tones, addressing Mary Magdalen as both "fair" and "mild" in contrast with the insults she aimed at some patriarchs, and replacing her former attacks with an acknowledgement that the two share similar pasts and also the experience of being judged and condemned by others. Rather than focusing on the sins of Mary Magdalen's past in a verbal attack, the Wanton Wife instead focuses on her attainment of salvation, which the Wanton Wife presents as a precedent for the treatment she hopes her petition will receive from Christ.

The Wanton Wife cites Mary Magdalen's honesty as being the quality that nearly brought about her death by stoning. This sense of honesty or frankness as being a dangerous quality could be read as one that ties the three women—the Wanton Wife, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and Mary Magdalen—together. While Chaucer's Wife is very frank about numerous aspects of her life, this honesty is responded to in the ballad by, variously, omission (of her sexuality and her marriages) or continuation and reform (of her qualities of vocal unruliness). If Mary Magdalen and, following her example, the Wanton Wife are saved by Christ, perhaps the Wife of Bath is "saved" by the anonymous balladeer via her refraction into a new text. Anthony Fletcher notes that "ballad mongers wrote for the market,

reflecting current and perennial issues about love and marriage, religion and morality, work and leisure" and further notes that the stories "told in popular ballads and narratives" often shared similar "themes of female sexual will and domination" (xx, 6). Through the ballad's omission of the Wife of Bath's sexually obscene behavior and its focus on addressing and subduing her unruly voice as a tool of domination, the ballad, just as Mary Magdalen suggests, reflects upon the "former state" of Wives both Wanton and Chaucerian.

Though her unruly voice may be the target of complaint for several of her biblical interlocutors, ultimately it is exactly this voice which aids her eventual attainment of salvation. In her final interaction with Christ, the Wanton Wife does as Mary Magdalen suggests and finally repents of her earlier sins even as she cites biblical precedent for her forgiveness, reminding Christ of both the thief on the cross and of the prodigal son. By this point in the ballad, the Wanton Wife's vocal tone has undergone a significant shift, from the socially obscene voice which hurled heated accusations at the patriarchs to a contrite voice acknowledging her transgressions and pleading for mercy. The ballad closes with the following lines, which signal an important turn in the presentation of the Wanton Wife as related to her Chaucerian source:

> So I forgive thy Soul, he said,
>
> Through thy repenting Cry,
>
> Come you therefore into my Joy,
>
> I will not thee deny. (lines 137–40)

The Wanton Wife's primary characteristic (and her sole remaining Chaucerian quality) has been her garrulousness for most of the ballad. In the closing of the ballad, however, this final quality is also addressed and corrected as Christ cites her voice, particularly after its tone has shifted from argumentative to confessional, as being the source of her salvation. Merrill Black, an author who has also practiced creative response as an approach to Chaucer's Wife of Bath, notes that "vectors of courage and foolhardiness intersect in her telling—she is both comic and poignant, but she will not be silenced," highlighting a very distinct voice as one of the "essential, identifiable, and transferrable" qualities necessary to adapting Chaucer's Wife (86; McFarlane qtd. Griggs 3). While the Wanton Wife could also be read as both courageous and foolhardy, comic and poignant, by being refused the opportunity to respond in the final interaction of the ballad, she *is* effectively silenced despite Black's prediction. With these closing lines, the last quality of Chaucer's Wife of Bath still present in the Wanton Wife appears to be extinguished.

The Wanton Wife's interaction with Christ pushes back against earlier attacks on her voice, reminding the audience of the ballad that her sinful nature was the true impediment to her entry into Heaven. Despite this interaction, though, it is the Wanton Wife's unruly voice that proves more resonant in the ballad's afterlife. In the 13 December 1711 issue of the *Spectator*, Joseph Addison refers to the "excellent old ballad of The Wanton Wife of Bath" as containing "the following remarkable lines: 'I think, quoth Thomas, women's tongues / Of aspen leaves are made'" (Bond, 2: 458).[80] The focus of this issue of *The Spectator* is a denigration of women's

[80] I return to *The Spectator* in the conclusion of this thesis.

speech and its contents ("there are many among them who can Talk whole Hours together upon Nothing"), a theme which the periodical would return to more than once (Bond, 2: 458).[81] The essay opens by dividing women into groups according to how they inappropriately and immoderately exercise their voices; it includes a digression pondering the dissection of a woman's tongue in search of anatomical differences which might result in women's misuse of their vocal capabilities. Following these complaints about feminine vocality, the author closes the piece with a confession of sorts, declaring:

> I am so wonderfully charmed with the Musick of this little Instrument, that I would by no Means discourage it. All that I aim at by this Dissertation is, to cure it of several disagreeable Notes, and in particular of those little Jarrings and Dissonances which arise from Anger, Censoriousness, Gossiping and Coquetry. In short, I would always have it tuned by Good-Nature, Truth, Discretion and Sincerity. (Bond, 2: 461)

[81] Browne suggests that the satiric representations of feminine speech so prevalent in the eighteenth century "help to establish patterns of reception" and "habits of perceiving women's speech as naturally aberrant" (20). Elsewhere Browne points to a tendency in these texts to portray women's speech "as a perversion of social order" (23). Attacks on women's speech as somehow unnatural or perverse appear with great frequency in writings about women in this period, which suggests that the views expressed in *The Spectator* were among the more conservative responses to the feminine voice despite their apparent misogyny.

Women's speech, like that of the Wanton Wife, that displays anger or offers criticism is painful to the ear, and, according to the essay's author, this type of unruly expression should be cured (suppressed). Though the speaker claims to enjoy conversation with women, these final sentences make abundantly clear exactly what type of voice is acceptable and what sort of voice should be kept off-scene.

Conclusion

Anne Helen Petersen suggests that "[u]nruliness has always been about making people uncomfortable, about making people talk, about challenging the status quo" (xvii). The presence of feminine unruliness, particularly vocal excess, often elicits a response, whether this unruliness is displayed by a living woman or assigned to a fictional character.[82] This was true for Chaucer's Wife of Bath and for the Wanton

[82] In the age of social media and widespread internet access, the responses elicited by the feminine voice (whose presence alone is enough for it to be viewed as excessive in some online spaces) are frequently threatening and explicit. Sarah Banet-Weiser identifies the trend behind these responses as "popular misogyny" and indicates that this kind of online harassment can respond to activities as minor as "tweeting a feminist sentiment," "post[ing] a selfie on Instagram," or "wr[iting] a long-form essay about, well, online harassment, in a blog," all activities generally seeking to communicate something about the feminine experience (83). The online harassment responding to these activities includes the release of personal identifying information ("doxxing") as well as threats of bodily harm and death. For an extensive review of the literature on gendered differences in amounts of speech as perceived and as actually spoken, see Deborah James and Janice Drakich. Though most studies surveyed indicate men often speak more, James and Drakich remind us that social structure and

Wife of the ballad; it is true for Patience Agbabi's Mrs Alice Ebi Bafa and it remains true when intentionally employed by women pushing back against gendered standards of behavior today. Cooper writes of the Wife of Bath's character in the *Canterbury Tales* that "above all, she is concerned to justify her own way of life," a quality that shines through in the vocal unruliness of her prologue, particularly through her creative citation of biblical personages and other authorities (*Oxford Guide* 148–49). Though this concern may be a hallmark of Chaucer's Wife, the Wanton Wife of the ballad instead shifts her focus to a more urgent desire for forgiveness and redemption as she is forced to acknowledge the grave consequences of a life she (eventually) admits was "spent . . . in vain" (line 122). Though her socially obscene behavior might serve to secure an audience with Christ, ultimately it is only through the renunciation of such behavior that she can be redeemed: this salvation is contingent upon a cessation of her "too muchness." Thus, the vocality by which the ballad defines the Wife is exactly that of which she must be "cured."

Like *The Wanton Wife of Bath,* Agbabi's recreation of the Wife hinges on both voice and performance. Other qualities shared by these two distinctive texts include their abilities to bridge the high and low, the educated and the vernacular, as well as a capacity to make the medieval Wife feel modern and recognizable to a new audience. Agbabi, a poet known for her performances, is skilled at capturing and showcasing unique voices and her adaptation of the Wife of Bath vibrantly re-

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context in which speech happens are also key factors and must be taken into consideration. See also Cutler and Scott. For recent instances of feminine vocality and misogynistic backlash, see Tolentino.

visions Chaucer's character.[83] Her poem "What Do Women Like Bes'?" adapts both the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* and also incorporates details of Chaucer's Wife's description from the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* all together in just over 160 lines.[84] Written in the voice of a London-based cloth dealer from Nigeria, Mrs Alice Ebi Bafa, Agbabi's retelling combines spoken dialect and a modernized setting, including mentions of *Playboy* magazine and Guinness beer, alongside references to "King Solomon / with wife and concubine" (32). The voice of Agbabi's Wife of Bafa is further developed through dramatic pauses, indicated by ellipses or line breaks, used as punchlines for jokes, as sexual innuendo, and as a segue from the tale she tells back to her present interaction with a potential buyer. These pauses give her speech the sense, reminiscent of Chaucer's construction of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, of a well-honed and oft-practiced performance. Like the ballad (and potentially the Chaucerian source text), the voice of Agbabi's Wife of Bath is written to be read aloud.

Ultimately what unites these two poetic reimaginings, seventeenth-century ballad and twenty-first retelling, is their shared nature as pieces suited to public

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[83] Sara Ahmed argues that "[a] willful character in fiction can acquire a life out of fiction. And in becoming feminists, we might create imaginary characters for ourselves with reference to those whose familiarity we inherit from our immersion in fictional worlds" (249). This sense of familiarity was a key attraction for Agbabi, who has pointed to her "lifelong ambition" to reinterpret the "timeless" and "complex" character of Chaucer's Wife of Bath (Turner, *Biography* 230).

[84] While Agbabi's poem "What Do Women Like Bes'?" in its latest form situates the Wife within her larger *Canterbury Tales* context by including it in *Telling Tales*, an earlier version, published in *Transformatrix* (2000), exists as a stand-alone poem entitled "The Wife of Bafa."

performance as well as private reading and their shared understanding of the character of the Wife as known and knowable through her distinctive voice. Kathleen Rowe argues that the "connection between spectacle making and power" has been understood and performed since the earliest days of the theatre (11). Reading these two adaptations together, though both voices exude power, the response to the spectacle presented by the Wife sets them apart. The ballad portrays the Wife's argumentative voice as a nuisance (effective though it may be) that is incompatible with her eventual salvation: only when she shifts tone from accusing to repenting does her voice become acceptable. Agbabi's Wife of Bafa's voice reads, both on the page and in performance, as the ordinary voice of an outgoing woman rather than as a socially obscene disturbance requiring intervention or as a deviation from the ideal.

While *The Wanton Wife of Bath* portrays one early recreation of the Wife's voice, it does not tell us anything about how women listening to or reading the ballad might have viewed it: as ordinary or as transgressive. Fletcher notes that in the eighteenth century, didactic literature, ballads and plays were generally written by men and "tell us how men wanted women to see the gender order, their place in it and themselves. They tell us what women heard, saw, read or were taught. But they tell us nothing about what they thought" (Fletcher xxi). Though we remain unable to access what women in this period might have thought of the Wanton Wife of the ballad, the current wave of feminist adaptations of Chaucer's text provides a productive way to think about how women *might* have responded had they been given the opportunity. Rowe argues that unruly women and feminine laughter are

able to "challenge the social and symbolic systems that would keep women in their place" (3). With this understanding in mind, Agbabi's text reminds us to consider other possible perspectives of Chaucer's Wife and to think about the ways in which female ballad performers might have portrayed the Wanton Wife. Body language, facial expression, and vocal performance could all be harnessed to portray the Wife as powerful and sincere rather than merely a stereotype of a nagging wife or a socially obscene outcast who must be corrected. Thinking about the Wife's ballad interlocutors' framing of her voice as socially obscene provides a vital starting point for understanding the other eighteenth-century adaptations examined in this thesis. Reading these earlier texts alongside both the Chaucerian original and the most recent adaptations reminds us that there are other interpretations possible—that interpreting the voice as socially obscene may be one response, but it is not the only one.

Chapter Two

Too Old: *The Wife of Beith* and the Obscenity of Feminine Aging

Just as depictions of the Wife's unruly voice have varied in later adaptations even as it remains an essential quality of her character, so have interpretations and representations of her age. In her 2019 book *Alisoun Sings*, for example, Caroline Bergvall's Wife of Bath declares "Sayso meselfe maturity has me ageing like bran & rich fields of hemp into a whole exciting array of multifunctional attributes & shapely designables" (74).[85] Bergvall's Wife describes the effects of aging with phrases reminiscent of advertising copy touting a new-and-improved product, and further presents this aspect as something that has only enhanced her potential. Bergvall builds on details from Chaucer's descriptions of the Wife in order to explore aspects of her character, including her age, relevant to a twenty-first century audience. Chaucer's Wife of Bath makes multiple references to her age in her prologue: she recalls being a twelve-year-old bride (III 4), revels in having been a forty-year-old woman marrying a man half her age (III 600–01), and reminisces about the amorous joys of her youth and the impact of time's passage on her appearance (III 470–75). Despite these allusions, however, the age of the Wife at the time of the pilgrimage remains unknown, a lacuna that has seen the Wife interpreted as middle-aged by some and as a decrepit old woman by others. In the

[85] For an interview with Bergvall discussing contemporary poetry working with medieval texts, see Von Contzen and Wolf.

long afterlife of the Wife of Bath, optimistic treatments such as Bergvall's are strikingly rare. Indeed, as the eighteenth-century example in this chapter illustrates, it is far more common to exaggerate and denigrate the Wife's age, in ways that—I will argue—mirror renderings of her voice as socially obscene.

Whereas my first chapter considered the figure of the Wanton Wife[86] as a simplified and abbreviated reinterpretation of Chaucer's Wife of Bath that made her unruly voice its focal point, this chapter explores expansion and amplification of the Wife's character primarily through the introduction of two Scots concepts: the act of *flyting* and the character of the *carling*, a derogatory word for an old woman.[87] I take as my primary case study the Scottish ballad variant known as *The Wife of Beith*, which retains several elements from the earlier *Wanton Wife* ballad on which it is based. Like *The Wanton Wife of Bath* broadside ballad, *The Wife of Beith* functions as a continuation of Chaucer's Wife's biographical story. As I will show, in addition to

[86] As noted in the previous chapter, I use "Wanton Wife" to refer to the title character of *The Wanton Wife of Bath* broadside ballad and "Worthy Wife" to refer to the title character of *The Wife of Beith*, working from Bowden's observation that of the twenty surviving exemplars of the Scottish variant, two describe the Wife as "wicked," three retain "wanton," and the remaining fifteen all refer to her as "worthy" (*Afterlife* 6). The character of the Worthy Wife as written in *The Wife of Beith* chapbook ballad is the principal concern of this chapter. While this Scottish variant was printed under different titles, I refer to it as *The Wife of Beith* for clarity.

[87] *DSL*, *s.v.* "carline" (*n.*); *OED*, *s.v.* "carling" (*n.*). The word "carling" and its variants appear in some of the examples of flyting quoted by Harris in *Obscene Pedagogies*, including one woman referring to another mockingly as a carling (71), a mention in a poem by Dunbar of the "cryis of carlingis" (72) and another of "decrepit karlingis" (79).

preserving elements of the Wanton Wife such as her unruly voice, *The Wife of Beith* further develops the character through the addition of a new pilgrimage, expanded interactions, and an emphasis on feminine aging.[88] It is this last quality in particular that builds on the idea of the socially obscene feminine in this chapter as the Wife's age prompts further criticism and dismissal of her complaints from her interlocutors and results in an eventual transformation when she finally achieves her long-sought salvation. While the Wanton Wife of the broadside ballad was eventually invited into Heaven, the aging Worthy Wife of *The Wife of Beith* does not enter Heaven until she has been returned to a more socially acceptable state of youthful beauty.[89]

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[88] All quotes are taken from the variant of *The Wife of Beith* included by Bowden as a representative text in Appendix A2 and are cited by line number (*Afterlife* 313–28).

[89] *A Dictionary of the English Language*, *s.v.* "worthy" (*adj*.). The descriptor "worthy" was a more multivalent word during this period, as can be seen in Samuel Johnson's 1755 dictionary, where it is defined variously as "[d]eserving; such as merits: with or before the thing deserved.," and "[v]aluable; noble; illustrious; having excellence or dignity," and "[h]aving worth; having virtue." Johnson further notes that it could also mean "[n]ot good. A term of ironical celebration," with this definition supported by a quote from Dryden's 1697 translation of the *Aeneid*, "My worthy wife our arms mislaid, /And from beneath my head my sword convey'd." This second, contradictory definition is only the first of several, with Johnson continuing to define *worthy* as "[s]uitable for any quality good or bad; equal in value; equal in dignity," and then "[s]uitable to any thing bad" and culminating with "[d]eserving of ill." The flexibility of "worthy" from valuable and virtuous to being applicable to "any thing bad" and finally as being rightly punished or made to suffer is well-suited to the Wife.

"When years were spent and days out-driven": The Wife of Bath and Feminine Aging

The topics of feminine age and aging are broached more than once in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, including one mention that suggests the Wife of Bath is, herself, middle-aged.[90] Chaucer's decision to make the Wife of Bath a middle-aged woman was as intentional as his decision to make her a skilled businesswoman, a serial pilgrim, and a snappy dresser. Sue Niebrzydowski describes middle age as "a liminal moment in a woman's life cycle, in which she is neither young nor old, neither as fertile as in her youth not yet necessarily sterile, her beauty neither fully in focus not totally invisible to the men who surround her" (2). Chaucer's text itself leaves her precise age at the time of the pilgrimage unclear, specifying only that she is at least forty years old and still in robust health, "boold … and fair" of face (III 601, I 458). When this age-related lacuna has attracted attention from scholars and adapters (which has not often been the case), it has met with different responses and assumptions which often reflect personal interpretations and biases. But the issue of

[90] Sue Niebrzydowski notes that middle age in the Middle Ages "could begin at thirty-five or forty and last until fifty or sixty" (7). Writing of the eighteenth century, Pat Rogers states that life span figures of this period were skewed due to high mortality rates among children and childbearing women, but that "people of either sex who survived unscathed into their thirties had a reasonable chance of living into their fifties or sixties" with wealthier people living even longer, suggesting a similar range for "middle age" (42). Rogers further notes that then, as now, women often lived longer than men (48).

the Wife's age (and in particular adapters' attitudes towards it) deserves closer consideration than it has thus far received.

Though the topic of feminine aging is often touched on in scholarly discussions of the Wife of Bath, it is rarely explored in any depth. Scholars may mention the Wife's age, but then they move on. Interestingly, some scholars seem unable to resist the impulse to present Chaucer's Wife as aged despite a notable lack of textual evidence to support such a reading. Writing in 1983, Lee Patterson, himself then in his early forties and arguably middle-aged, refers to the Wife of Bath (and her precursor *La Vieille*) as a "garrulous old wom[a]n" and her supposedly advanced age plays an important role in his argument (663). Stephen Rigby, briefly discussing the Wife's age and status as a remarried woman, considers her in light of Christine de Pizan's assessment that "nothing is more ridiculous than old people who lack good judgment or who are foolish," and argues that Christine would not have been likely to approve of Chaucer's Wife's behavior at her age (though he simply refers to the Wife of Bath as "older," citing her reference to her "coltes tooth" as evidence) (148–49). Mary Carruthers notes a tendency in scholarly literature to heap denigration on Chaucer's Wife due to her age (and even to make her older) when she observes that "the fiftyish Wife is hardly a candidate for a tombstone" and adds that "[t]o see the Wife as the ugly old crone of her tale…is to sentimentalise her well beyond the bounds of the text" (39).[91]

[91] The 1979 publication of Carruthers' article sparked the publication of a trio of letters in response, including two critical responses from Robert M. Jordan and James I. Wimsatt and a reply from Mary Carruthers. Carruthers sums up their arguments as "one accus[ing] me of having the morals of a

Possible connections between the Wife of Bath's verbal transgressiveness and her age have also received little critical attention. Alistair Minnis, expanding on the work of Jan M. Ziolkowski, provides the most in-depth consideration I have yet found of the work being done by these two character traits in tandem. Minnis builds upon Ziolkowski's view that, "[i]f in the Middle Ages any collection of individuals was implicated strongly in obscene language and was perceived to be habitual offenders, that group was old women" ("Old Women" 73). Minnis considers both the figure of the *vetula* as embodied by *La Vieille* and also Christine de Pizan's reaction to the *Roman de la Rose* in his exploration of whether the language used by Chaucer's Wife can truly be considered obscene. Though he notes that, "if we are looking for blatantly offensive language . . . there is little if anything to be found," after giving further consideration to the context in which the Wife speaks her prologue, he writes that "in the final analysis much of her discourse may be deemed 'obscene' because of the nature of many of the things described therein, including the private parts of men and women and her own sexual feelings and exploits" (Minnis, "From *Coilles*" 171, 177). He goes on to explain what this stereotype meant for Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife of Bath, focusing in particular on her similarities to (and, more importantly, differences from) *La Vieille* of the *Roman de la Rose*. Minnis closes his essay by noting Chaucer's decision in creating the Wife of Bath to "make a figure who combined negative qualities of both *vieille* and *veuve* into the voice of reason, as she tells her tale of a loathly damsel" ("From *Coilles"* 178). The

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feminist and the other of holding opinions hopelessly carnal" as what led her to publish a reply (952).

licentious older woman figure, in other words, is complicated in Chaucer's text, as the potentially obscene speech in the Wife's prologue sits alongside the ethical teachings of her tale. Chaucer's middle-aged Wife of Bath exhibits unruly verbal behavior one moment and offers deeply moral teaching in the next.

In her article on the treatment of old women in French *fabliaux*, Nicole Nolan Sidhu closes by noting:

> [i]n the old woman fabliaux, the fableor convinces us that the old woman and her obscenities can enter the public, literary sphere, if they enter under the careful supervision of a male literary professional who allows them free rein when they can be marshaled to morally appropriate ends, but who can simultaneously redirect the social trajectory of the old woman's obscenity when she threatens to overstep her bounds. ("Go-betweens" 57)

These older women, then, are allowed their unruliness and obscenity as long as they are contained by a male presence poised to take action should they suddenly transgress the "wrong" boundaries. This understanding bears a startling similarity to the approach of the eighteenth-century male adapters working with the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. The same does not hold true, however, for Chaucer's construction of the Wife. While her tale can be understood as working in support of a "morally appropriate end," her prologue instead calls into question the designation of what *is* morally appropriate, particularly for women in her cultural context. Chaucer's Wife of Bath both attacks and personifies antifeminist texts in a way that proves more

discomforting the closer it is examined. The Worthy Wife, though, displays no such complexity in *The Wife of Beith* ballad adaptation.

"I know you are the Wife of Beith": An Expanded Ballad[92]

The ballad now known as *The Wife of Beith* appeared around 1700, inspired by both *The Wanton Wife of Bath* ballad discussed in the previous chapter and by John Bunyan's wildly popular 1678 book *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Bowden *Afterlife* 5–6). According to Betsy Bowden, the penny chapbook version of *The Wife of Beith* stayed in print into the nineteenth century, with the majority of the surviving copies of this variant apparently printed in Scotland (*Afterlife* 6–7). Expanding the 140 lines of *The Wanton Wife of Bath* to several hundred, this later Scottish variant takes the Wife into new territory, literally and figuratively.

The Wife of Beith makes a number of changes to its primary source, the single-page *Wanton Wife of Bath* broadside ballad, as it expands the text by several hundred lines (Bowden *Afterlife* 5). The Scottish variant introduces a new pilgrimage for the Wife, a guide to accompany her, several new interlocutors, a more heated closing debate with Christ, and a final moment of transformation. Several of these expansions are summarized in the title page of one variant, which describes the *Wife of Beith* as containing "the difficulties, torments, trials, and sufferings [the Wife] encountered in her journey" before adding "[a]lso the swearing, fighting, blessing, cursing, flyting, etc. etc. etc. she got and gave before she was admitted." This

[92] *The Wife of Beith* line 13.

succinct introduction neatly highlights both sides of her character in the ballad: striving Christian seeking salvation and aggressively unruly over-talker (Bowden, *Afterlife* 6). Like the main character of its source text, the Worthy Wife in *The Wife of Beith* is met without the Chaucerian trappings of her original context: her fellow pilgrims, her husbands, her career, or her tale. Additionally, the Worthy Wife is also geographically detached, moved from the city of Bath in England to the town of Beith in Scotland, located around eighteen miles from Glasgow.[93] This change in location roots the Wife of Bath not only in a new cultural and religious context but in a new linguistic context as well, marked by the inclusion of a several words from the Scots language, including *spier* (to question; to inquire), *flyting* (quarreling or using abusive language), *cummer* (godmother, gossip, scandalmonger), *lown* (unchaste or immoral woman) and *carling* (old woman).[94] Significantly, the majority of the newly added or otherwise expanded upon details, interactions, and Scots vocabulary all highlight the Wife's socially obscene unruly voice and her argumentative nature.[95]

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[93] Currently recognized for its furniture industry, in the eighteenth century, the town of Beith was best known for its textile industry as well as its location along a route popular with smugglers ("Beith").

[94] *DSL*, *s.v.* "spier" (*v.*); *DSL*, *s.v.* "flyting" (*vbl. n.*); *DSL*, *s.v.* "cummer" (*n.*); *DSL*, *s.v.* "lown" (*n.*); *DSL*, *s.v.* "carling" (*n.*). While each of these terms has multiple possible definitions, for this initial brief mention, I have provided the definitions most relevant to their context in *The Wife of Beith*.

[95] This treatment places *The Wife of Beith* within a larger tradition of antifeminist response to the women in Chaucer's writing. Earlier Scottish texts inaugurated this tradition of misogynistic reinterpretation of Chaucer's best-known female characters, shown by Caroline Ives and David

The changes made to the earlier ballad also extend to the treatment of the Wife's inappropriate behavior relating to her sexuality. *The Wife of Beith* expands on its source in a manner that both heightens the social obscenity of the Worthy Wife's voice and amplifies her sexual transgression, which is implicated in her death. Whereas in *The Wanton Wife of Bath*, the Wife lingered in sickness and eventually died ("Upon a time sore sick she was, / And at the length did dye" (lines l5–16)), things proceed quite differently in *The Wife of Beith*: "suddenly she sickness takes, / Deceast forthwith, and went to heaven" (lines 7–8). The *Wife of Beith* suggests this sudden sickness may have been the inevitable result of the Worthy Wife's behavior in her youth: readers are told she "lived a licentious life, / And namely in venereal acts" (lines 3–4). The description of her acts as "venereal" highlights her sinful sexuality and serves as a potential reminder for readers of the dangers of sexually transmitted illness.[96] Later mentions of the Worthy Wife's illness and "bloody issue" (line 610) serve as additional reminders of the perils of a "licentious life" (line 3).[97] These details stress both the Worthy Wife's age and her lasciviousness as her

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Parkinson, who argue that "[w]here Chaucer's versions of Criseyde and the Wife of Bath have otherwise been read as subtle and open for lively debate, the Scottish versions are often—well into the sixteenth century—reductive, stereotypical, and misogynistic" (189).

[96] *OED*, *s.v.* "venereal" (*adj.*). The *OED* records this usage as far back as the seventeenth century.

[97] The phrase "bloody issue" might refer to any number of feminine health concerns related to fertility, ranging from heavy menstruation to pregnancy loss or as a symptom of a sexually transmitted illness. The language of these lines recalls the biblical story of the woman suffering from twelve years of bleeding who touched Christ's garment and was miraculously healed ("And [Christ]

key characteristics. While Chaucer's Wife of Bath is brimming with life (and considering the possibility of a sixth husband), both the Wanton Wife and the Worthy Wife are characters of a more moribund nature.

Scholarly attention to this ballad has been notably sparse, despite the fact that it survives in just as many exemplars as does the broadside ballad on which the previous chapter focused. Helen Cooper, in her article on early retellings involving the Wife of Bath, focuses on the earlier broadside ballad without mention of this later variant. Bowden, who has written the most on it, examines it alongside the earlier broadside ballad, focusing in particular on the different sociopolitical contexts under which each flourished and the different formats, lengths, and narratives of these two major variant categories (*Afterlife* 5-7). Most of the scholarly discussions that have considered *The Wife of Beith* have placed it alongside the earlier ballad and focused on the shifting religious implications of the Wife's search for salvation.[98] This is in large part due to the fact that the titles of these different

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said unto her, Daughter, be of good comfort: thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace." (Luke 8.43-48)).

[98] While attention to the changing religious contexts surrounding these two ballads has been fruitful for past scholarship, this shift falls outside of the scope of this thesis. This change does not appear to have had a significant influence on antifeminist interpretations of the Wife as women in both religious contexts were generally viewed through a similarly misogynistic lens in this period. Suzanne Trill observes that "Christianity provided the ideological basis for a patriarchal system of social order that defined femininity negatively and justified feminine subjugation and subordination," which Trill says remained true for both Catholics and Protestants "as both viewed women as subordinate to men" (31–32.)

variants often emphasize that *The Wife of Beith* has been "reformed and corrected," while some versions highlight the allegorical nature of the story or insist their version contains "nothing but what is recorded in scripture," suggesting some anxieties about the Catholic leaning of the broadside ballad (Bowden, *Afterlife* 6). Within the body of the text itself, some variants opened with a brief letter to the reader assuring them of the biblical basis of details in the text and attacking critics and readers looking to be offended, while still others closed with a moral lesson exhorting them to pray and repent. Building on Bowden's work, Marion Turner notes that "[t]his Wife of Bath, produced in Scotland, gives a very different message from the *Wanton Wife* of a hundred years or more earlier," arguing that "it is clear that the revisers wanted to silence the older version of the Wife of Bath and replace her with a cleaned-up version—one who was safely enfolded in reformed religion" (*Biography* 157). Turner reads the later ballad as "remov[ing] some of [the] oppositional, subversive tendencies" found in the earlier broadside variant (*Biography* 159). Hopkins and Mason make only passing mention of the Scottish ballad variant in a footnote, where they describe it as "noticeable for making explicit the theological difficulty of the *posthumous* date of the Wife's repentance" (215 n. 5).

Whether she is read as Catholic or Protestant, the Wife's unruly voice and behavior remain a problem.[99] Both *The Wanton Wife of Bath* and *The Wife of Beith* eventually *do* result in a silenced Wife. The ways in which each ballad reaches this

[99] Turner discusses both ballad variants alongside numerous other adaptations in her chapter titled "Silencing Alison," highlighting once again the importance of attending to presentations of the Wife's voice as well as adapters' responses that seek to minimize or silence it.

conclusion and the distinct performances of verbal unruliness which the Worthy and Wanton Wives present speak to the notion of social obscenity and the anxiety-provoking problem of feminine visibility and spectacle for eighteenth-century readers. *The Wife of Beith* expands on the earlier ballad's presentation of and response to Chaucer's Wife's unruliness through the incorporation of two Scots concepts which address both her volubility and her age: the act of *flyting* and the figure of the *carling*.

"Mistress of the flyting": Verbal Unruliness and Emotional Volatility[100]

If the *Wanton Wife of Bath* made the voice of Chaucer's Wife the defining quality of her character, the expanded *Wife of Beith* continued the development of this theme. As in the earlier ballad, the unruly voice of the Worthy Wife attracts complaints and denigration even as her arguments and justifications are ignored. The application of a Scots term, *flyting*, to this behavior further aligns it with a strand of vocal behavior that invites different interpretations according to the gender of the speakers: celebrated when practiced by male poets and potentially illegal when displayed by women.[101]

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[100] *The Wife of Beith*, line 74.

[101] Feminine verbal unruliness and sexually transgressive behavior in Scotland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could be punished through the use of the "branks" or "Scold's Bridle" (Nash and Kilday 31–32). This punishment required transgressors (nearly always women) to wear a painful metal implement which interfered with speech on their heads and faces and then to be

Building on the character of the Wanton Wife, *The Wife of Beith* introduces an aging Worthy Wife, skilled at verbal combat and prone to rapidly changing emotions. In *The Wife of Beith*, this unruly speech is highlighted and given a specific name: *flyting* which is defined by the aggressive use of quarrelsome or argumentative language, whether employed in a sanctioned poetic battle or in an unsanctioned quarrel between women.[102] Over the course of the ballad, the Scots term *flyting* and its variant phrase *flyting free* are mentioned a total of seven times. In two of these usages, the Worthy Wife is accused of flyting (with the word rhymed with "biting" in both occurrences) and in the third, she is instructed by Peter to "flyte no more, if you be wise" just before Christ arrives at the gate to speak with her (line 529). The meaning of *flyting* is fairly clear-cut: it designates aggressive and insulting verbal attacks and is applied only to the Worthy Wife. However, the phrase *flyting free* is more perplexing. The other four occurrences of *flyting* in the poem appear within the phrase *flyting free*, used as a description of what various interlocutors are *not* doing.[103] The *Dictionaries of the Scots Language* define *flyting free*

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publicly displayed in this state. These public displays were often preceded and accompanied by groups of women singing loudly and making noise with pots and pans to draw attention to the punishment in an example of publicly sanctioned feminine noisemaking (Nash and Kilday 34). While similar punishments were recorded in England as well, they appear to have been more common and more tightly gendered in Scotland.

[102] *DSL, s.v.* "flyting" (*vbl., n.).*

[103] *OED*, *s.v.* "flyting-free" (*adj.*). The fairly sparse entry on the phrase in the *OED* defines it as meaning "[u]nrestricted in administering rebukes" and only includes two sample quotations, one of which ascribes this quality to Christ's interactions with sinners. I have not expanded upon the fourth

as "blameless, and therefore free or entitled to reprimand those who are guilty."[104] In the first usage that occurs within *The Wife of Beith*, the Wife declares Adam a churl and adds that it was his eating from the "forbidden tree" which marks him as not *flyting free* (line 161). In the second usage, Abraham accuses the Worthy Wife of lying and she retorts that he is guilty of the same sin and she hopes he is "not flyting free" – she calls attention to his sins in order to stop his accusations (it works) (line 210). After a brief exchange with the Worthy Wife, Jonas, too, halts his accusations as "he was asham'd" to not be *flyting free* (line 337). In each of these cases, being declared "not flyting free" aligns with the realization of one's own sinful nature and the shame that accompanies the Wife's accusations which prompted these realizations. The Wife, then, is *defined* by her *flyting*, and she turns this accusation around to note that her interlocutors, thanks to their own sinful natures, are not *flyting free*, or worthy of calling out the sins of others. Only Christ remains *flyting free* – his rebuking of sinners is justified by his own holy perfection.

While *flyting* is more commonly used in reference to the practice of celebrated (male) poets, according to Carissa M. Harris, *flyting* also "referred to the crime of obscene verbal wrangling associated with unruly women" (*Pedagogies* 70–71). These two kinds of *flyting*, then, apply to very different situations: one is an

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usage, as the "not" in the fourth example, as reprinted in Bowden's *Afterlife*, appears to be a mistake; all the other variants I referenced online presented the line in question written as "You think you are of flyting free" – changing the "not" in this line to "of" significantly clarifies its meaning and brings it into alignment with the other usages in the ballad.

[104] *DSL, s.v.* "flyting free" (*phr.*). Sense 2.iii.

exchange of insults between women, often in public, that could result in criminal charges, while the other is a highly stylized exchange of poetic insults between well-educated men (Harris, *Pedagogies* 70–75). While the argument between the Worthy Wife and the devil (discussed later in this chapter) defies the strict gendering of these two kinds of flyting (as either women versus women or men versus men), their exchange of insults fits Harris's definition of the term, and the devil's fear of the Wife's abilities appears well-founded. By labelling the Worthy Wife's verbal excess "flyting," *The Wife of Beith* makes its transgressiveness clearer and highlights its undesirability—not even the devil can tolerate it.

As in the case of the Wanton Wife, the Worthy Wife's voice is her chief defining quality. The text's increased length allows the Wife more space to exercise her unruly voice, particularly in her newly added interactions with the devil. Upon her arrival in the afterlife, the Worthy Wife is met by Judas, who offers to act as her guide.[105] Though she initially rebuffs his offer, he easily convinces her, as she "know[s] not well the way" (line 38) and he leads her to the gates of Hell. The Worthy Wife is met by an anxious Satan who declares,

> I will not have you here good dame,
> For you are mistress of the flyting
> If once within this gate you come,
> I will be troubled with your biting;

[105] *OED, s.v.* "Judas" (*n.*). Sense 2. Judas's name continued to carry strong resonances of feigned friendship and betrayal during this time.

Cummer[106] go back, and let me be,

Here are too many of your rout;

For woman lewd like unto thee,

I cannot turn my foot about [.] (lines 73–80)

In this ballad, Satan is depicted as just another hen-pecked husband, emasculated in the face of this "mistress." The devil characterizes her words as a form of physical violence ("biting"), and it is this verbally aggressive behavior that helps to mark her as "lewd."[107] Interestingly, this lewdness does not set her apart from other women but instead identifies her as a member of a large female population already in Hell, so numerous that Satan "cannot turn [his] foot about" without encountering one. According to Sarah F. Williams, "the domestic scold's ability to out-curse the devil" is a frequently occurring trope in ballads (27). These lines paint a picture of Hell as crammed full of argumentative and verbally aggressive women, suggesting that this particular gendered form of social obscenity is an all-too-common problem: the

[106] *DSL, s.v.* "cummer" (*n.*). Cummer can refer to a "godmother (in relation to the parents and other godparents); a female intimate; a woman gossip." While less negative than "carling," "cummer" is still a strongly gendered term.

[107] *OED, s.v.* "lewd" (*adj.*). The OED offers numerous definitions in use during this time period, including sense 3.a. "Of a person, action, etc.: bad, wicked, unprincipled" and sense 5. "Lascivious, lecherous . . . Later usually: sexually explicit, offensive, or crudely suggestive." Taking into consideration both the Wife's reputation for flyting here and earlier mention of her "licentious life," lewd can refer to both her transgressive verbal and sexual behavior. Lewd, then, functions much as "wanton" did in the previous chapter and ballad.

Worthy Wife may be exceptionally unruly, but she is also representative of women in general.

After her interaction with the Devil, the story continues as it did in *The Wanton Wife of Bath*, with the Worthy Wife exchanging words with several interlocutors, culminating in an exchange with Christ. In *The Wife of Beith*, a final instance of *flyting* occurs near the end of the ballad with a significant change: the Worthy Wife becomes the target of the *flyting* rather than the unruly speaker in her final interaction with Christ. In comparison with the Christ of the *Wanton Wife of Bath*, this Christ is far more critical, responding with attacks, accusations, and a "barrage of abuse" (Bowden, *Afterlife* 7). He accuses the Worthy Wife of misinterpreting scripture and religious teachings (lines 537, 566–68), of living in "whoredom" (line 539), of ignoring his commandments and pursuing vice (lines 541–42), and of mis-using the beauty and wit which he gifted her in life (lines 551–52), before calling her a "dog" (line 578) and stating harshly that, "Although my mercies still do last, / There's mercy here but none for thee (lines 579–81). The Worthy Wife's response to this attack represents a complete about-face from her earlier tactics in both approach and tone. Despite the abuse meted out by Christ, the Worthy Wife continually addresses him as "Master" (lines 553, 569) and "my loving lord" (line 581), "my Lord most meek" (line 593), "[m]ost gracious God" (line 601) and finally "Sweet Lord my God" (line 635). She acknowledges and accepts his accusations and insults rather than denying them while citing biblical precedent for her forgiveness. She speaks of her contrition (line 554) and refers to herself as a worm (line 582) as she timidly requests permission to continue talking and making

her request "[m]ost humbly" (line 626). Christ's repeated attacks and refusal of grace have rendered the Worthy Wife attentive and submissive, seeking permission to cautiously speak in her own defense between moments of flattery and groveling. Just as this exchange marks the end of the Worthy Wife's practice of *flyting*, it also indicates a change to her emotional behavior, a quality of her character which is also given additional attention in *The Wife of Beith*.

The Worthy Wife's verbal unruliness is not the only quality of her character expanded and explored in greater depth in *The Wife of Beith*: her emotional state is also explored in a way absent from the earlier (and much shorter) ballad, *The Wanton Wife of Bath*. As the Worthy Wife moves from one location to another on her pilgrimage towards Heaven, her emotional state shifts and fluctuates, with moments of fearfulness and bouts of weeping mentioned multiple times during her journey. The earlier dispute with the devil appears to have left little question both that she belongs in Hell ("here are too many of your rout" (line 78)) and that she is not welcome there, so her fear does not seem to be only a fear of damnation. Rather, the Worthy Wife may also be questioning the possibility of her welcome into Heaven in light of her barring from Hell (line 148). This fear stemming from uncertainty represents a departure from both the earlier broadside ballad, in which the Wanton Wife's argumentativeness leaves no space for her to question whether she deserves Heaven, and also from Chaucer's text, in which the Wife of Bath refrains from any hints of repentance for the life she lived. These emotional displays appear somewhat disconnected from the Worthy Wife's adamant declarations of her arguments against her interlocutors later in the ballad.

Perhaps the most notable detail of the Wife's emotional life added to the expanded ballad is her repeated bouts of weeping.[108] After her brief argument with the devil, the Wife of Bath continues her journey: "Tired and sore she went on still, / Sometimes she sat and sometimes fell" (lines 125–26). Apparently now alone, she travels the long hill away from Hell. Upon reaching a "goodly plain" of fields and flowers, she stops to "rest and weep her fill" (line 131), physically and mentally exhausted from her journey, before she finally arrives at the tightly shut gate to Heaven. This is one of three moments of the Wife's weeping found in this ballad and this weeping can be read in more than one manner: as either a moment of human suffering experienced by the Worthy Wife and presented with compassion by the narrator, or as a more dubious feminine manipulation tactic, as described by Chaucer's Wife of Bath, who cites its usefulness for retaining control in relationships. After the Worthy Wife's vitriolic interactions with the devil at the gates of Hell just a few lines earlier, the three moments of her weeping, all of which occur within the space of fifteen lines, come as something of a surprise.

> Then up the hill the poor wife went,
> Opprest with stinking flames and fear,
> Weeping right sore, with great resent,

[108] Based on his extensive work with both popular and ephemeral literary products of this period, Simon Dickie argues that "sympathetic representations of ordinary women who wept and suffered in realistic environments were extraordinary violations of representational decorum" earlier in the long eighteenth century (223). Later representations of certain strong feminine emotions, as seen in Samuel Richardson's novels for example, would become somewhat more sympathetic.

For to go else she wist not where. (lines 117–20)

Across these three passages, she is twice referred to as "the poor wife" (lines 117, 124) and she is described as being "opprest," or overwhelmed, by the sulfuric smells emanating from Hell but also by her own fear. Even as she moves away from Hell, she remains aware of the uncertainty of her own salvation. Though readers are told she is weeping and oppressed, they are also told her weeping occurs "with great resent" as she is unsure of where she should be going (line 119). Some usages of "resent" in this era note its meaning as indicating a "sense of grievance."[109] Despite the repetitions of seeming narratorial sympathy for the "poor wife," the indications that her weeping is coming, at least in part, from a sense of grievance casts a shadow on the notion that this is a compassionate portrayal. The inclusion of this heightened emotional state complicates the ballad's depiction of the Worthy Wife in a manner that provides support for both positive and negative assessments of her character, depending on the reading audience.

"Knowing" and "unknowing" readers would likely understand *The Wife of Beith* very differently depending on their knowledge of Chaucer's text and/or Bunyan's work. Returning to Linda Hutcheon's distinction between these different readers and their experience of an adapted text, the audience of this text likely included readers who were familiar with Chaucer's work, familiar with Bunyan's

[109] *OED*, *s.v.* "resent" (*n.*). Sense 3.

work, familiar with both or even familiar with neither.[110] In addition, readers of *The Wife of Beith* were also likely to have different levels of familiarity with the earlier *Wanton Wife of Bath* ballad. The expansions highlighting the Worthy Wife's verbal unruliness and exploring her emotional state are generally located within the first 140 or so lines of the text and precede the interactions with biblical figures adapted from *The Wanton Wife of Bath*. These additions set up a notable tension in the poem between the Bunyanesque portrayal of a deeply flawed believer struggling to attain salvation in the face of tremendous odds and the more simplified unruliness of the Wanton Wife. Read alongside Chaucer's Wife of Bath and her refusal to repent for her behavior, the Worthy Wife is further displaced from her Chaucerian namesake. Whereas "knowing" readers familiar with Bunyan will expect a narrative of a striving pilgrim undertaking a difficult journey, "knowing" readers familiar with the Wife of Bath "of whom Brave Chaucer mention makes" may question the sincerity of her emotional displays (line 2).

Though the narrator may seem to extend compassion to the Worthy Wife in the moments in which she weeps, it is worth keeping in mind that Chaucer's Wife of Bath herself declares in her prologue that "[d]eceite, wepyng, spynnyng God hath yive / To wommen kyndely, whil that they may lyve" (III 401–02). Chaucer's Wife would later describe herself displaying these very same behaviors at the funeral of her fourth husband:

[110] Scholars have noted the enormous influence of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (reprinted in 1701 in two parts with a run of 8000 copies for the first part and 5000 copies for the second) and consider it the best-selling English fictional work in the early eighteenth century (Rogers 50).

I weep algate, and made sory cheere,

As wyves mooten, for it is usage,

And with my coverchief covered my visage,

But for that I was purveyed of a make,

I wepte but smal, and that I undertake. (III 588–92)

By aligning weeping with lying and other forms of dishonesty rather than with sincere emotional distress in this instance, Chaucer's Wife of Bath might lead "knowing readers" to question the sincerity of the Worthy Wife's emotional displays. Later in the ballad, the Worthy Wife is in conversation with Peter, who mentions that his salvation "cost many sad tears" (line 447) which prompts the Wife to respond that

It was Christ's gracious look I trow,

That made you weep those precious tears.

The door of mercy is not clos'd,

I may get grace as well as ye" (lines 455–58)

The Worthy Wife's quick response suggests that she is aware of the validity of this tactic and may be weeping her own "precious tears" with a heavenly reward in mind.

And yet, the Worthy Wife *does* seem sincere in her suffering. As she continues her climb, readers are told that the Worthy Wife "sigh'd full oft with sobs and tears, / The poor wife's heart was wondrous sore" (lines 123–24). In other words, we are not just given the mention of her weeping, but also apprised of the

emotional condition of her heart. Notably, her weeping also takes place when she is alone, without audience. Perhaps there is no spinning or deceit – perhaps the Worthy Wife really is just an aging woman trudging up a hill and hoping for the best. By either understanding, she still lives up to her description. Perhaps, though, the Worthy Wife's weeping is intended to emphasize a different point. Bowden notes that some variants claim to have "purged 'What was *Papal* or *Heretical*'" in the earlier ballad (*Afterlife* 5), while Turner argues that Scottish rewriters of the ballad found the Wanton Wife "too Catholic" (*Biography* 163). Whereas the earlier broadside ballad acknowledges the Wanton Wife's "repenting Cry" (line 138) as being the response that earned her salvation, the weeping of the Worthy Wife instead hints at a more Protestant understanding of salvation achieved through a life of trials and suffering (Bowden, *Afterlife* 5). In their final confrontation, Christ tells the Worthy Wife to "speak no more, / Thy faith, poor soul, hath saved thee" (lines 637–38). In this variant, the Wife's salvation is brought about by faith . . . and results in silence. Despite this salvation, the Worthy Wife's early moments—both in Hell and as she continues her journey—are the qualities which this adapted Wife is most likely to be remembered for. These moments of quarrelsome and unruly behavior combined with the ballad's initial brief allusions to her "licentious life" give readers a very precise picture of the Worthy Wife: she is a woman who is immoral, aged (even in her afterlife), loud, emotional, and argumentative—in other words, a *carling*.

"How that the carling made him dread": Aging and Unruliness[111]

While the adapted Wife of Bath retains her transgressive chattiness in both *The Wanton Wife* and *The Wife of Beith*, the latter ballad introduces a new quality to its depiction of her unruly speech: her age. This change is most clearly evidenced by the inclusion of the Scots word *carling*.[112] The *Dictionaries of the Scots Language* defines *carling* (a variant of *carline*) as "generally an old woman and often in a disparaging sense" and "a witch."[113] In other words, it is not only a gendered term with negative connotations, but one specifically associated with advanced age. This suggests that the target of *The Wife of Beith*'s satire is not simply the figure of the talkative woman, but women who are both talkative and *aging*. Just as her volubility was the main target of attacks in *The Wanton Wife of Bath*, this quality remains disturbing to the patriarchs of *The Wife of Beith*, who then further amplify their criticism by denigrating the Worthy Wife's age in tandem with her voice.

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[111] *The Wife of Beith* line 203.

[112] English also has a number of disparaging terms for the aging woman, the development of which Jenni Nuttall has noted "grew stronger and crueler over time" from the sixteenth-century usage of "crone" onward (209). As one example, Nuttall traces the semantic shift of the word *beldame* from its medieval origins as a polite term of address for an older female relative or woman through its eighteenth-century inclusion in a dictionary of slang as a "scolding old woman" and in the 1735 *New English Dictionary* as "a decrepit, or ugly old woman" (209).

[113] *DSL, s.v.* "carline" (*n.*).

Over the course of *The Wife of Beith*, the Worthy Wife is referred to by several of her heavenly interlocutors and by the unnamed narrator as a *carling* nine times. Noah is first to use the term.[114] After his interaction with the Wife, Noah remarks to Abraham "[h]ow that the carling made him dread / And how she all his deeds did ken" (lines 203–4). Noah is alarmed by both the confrontation itself and by the Worthy Wife's knowledge, which he views as threatening rather than as evidence of the wisdom of the elderly ("olde folk kan muchel thyng," as the old woman of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* notes (III 1004)). By focusing on Noah's sin and making no mention of the admirable qualities and biblical significance for which he is most often remembered, the Worthy Wife has managed what Chaucer's Wife of Bath speculates about in her prologue when she declares "if wommen hadde writen stories . . . They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse" (III 693–95). A few lines later, Abraham, recently warned by Noah, tells Jacob that "he thought the carling mad" (line 220). After a confrontation of his own with the Wife, Jacob approaches Lot to ask him to "staunch the carling of her crying" (line 236). The Worthy Wife is disparaged for both her gender and her age; the repetition of *carling* occurs alongside accusations of being too knowledgeable or knowing what she shouldn't, of mental decline, and of unruly noise, all of which frequently appear in

[114] His interaction with the Worthy Wife is not Noah's first literary confrontation with a vocally unruly woman. Many medieval audiences would have been familiar with the character of Noah's wife as another verbally aggressive, insubordinate character prone to gossip (Hallissy 78–79).

caricatures of feminine aging that can be traced back hundreds of years and forward into the present (Ziolkowski, "Old Women" 81).[115]

The interplay between feminine aging and the potential for obscenity speaks to our understanding of the Wife of Bath as a character, and points to a remarkable number of similarities with the cultural treatment of feminine aging today which have remained fairly consistent across time and which I will consider briefly. J. Brooks Bouson writes that the "aging woman, who was an object of desire in her youth, becomes an object of disgust as she gets older" and adds that "to bear the visible bodily marks of old age is to take on a socially devalued, stigmatized identity" (39–40). A similar view finds expression in one particularly poignant moment during the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, when the Wife states that age

> Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith.
> Lat go. Farewel! The devel go therwith!
> The flour is goon; ther is namoore to telle;
> The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle[.] (III 475–78)

Though Chaucer's Wife declares that "ther is namoore to telle," she continues in this vein for several hundred more lines, including the passage in which she discusses what her "bren" has brought her: a husband half her age, Jankyn, who married her

[115] For more on medieval perspectives of feminine aging, see Niebrzydowski. For a psychological perspective on contemporary Western cultural perceptions of middle age, see Shweder. For a collection of essays on feminine aging and literature, see Pearsall. For a historical overview of changing medical views of women and women's health, including menopause, see Cleghorn.

when "[h]e was, I trowe, twenty wynter oold, / And I was fourty" (III 600–01). Immediately after mentioning the difference in their ages, Chaucer's Wife describes herself as young for her age ("yet hadde I alwey a coltes tooth") and points to the qualities that she feels make her attractive—her gap-toothed smile, her "Venerien" birthmarks—which also signal her continuing sexual desirability (III 602). This urge to pre-emptively defend her own sexual qualifications and attractiveness (despite her age) suggests the Wife's—and therefore Chaucer's—keen awareness of the difficulties of aging and the supposed simultaneous waning of desirability faced by medieval women in middle age.

This same difficulty is acknowledged by the Worthy Wife in at least one variant of *The Wife of Beith*, suggesting its ongoing relevance several hundred years after Chaucer's Wife commented on it. Alongside the frequent repetitions of the disparaging term "carling" in the text, one variant of *The Wife of Beith* ballad includes a brief passage that touches more specifically on feminine aging and desire/desirability:

> Yet I will never go away,
> for altho' in youth I had a sway,
> To whom shall I go in old age?
> or who shall I with sin engage?[116]

[116] These lines are taken from a variant of the ballad held by the British Library, 12331.b.34(25), and quoted by Bowden in *Afterlife* (8).

The Worthy Wife here explicitly refuses to depart or disappear even as she points to the difficulties posed by feminine aging, identifying an existence that sounds quite like "the socially devalued, stigmatized identity" described by Bouson in her consideration of some modern perspectives of aging (39–40). The aging Worthy Wife has seen her power fade alongside her youth and senses herself being pushed "off-scene." She voices these lines during her debate with Christ after his initial denial of her request for entry to Heaven, and seems to imply that, as she no longer has the capacity to engage in seduction, her salvation and entry to Heaven should be granted. This passage both serves as further proof of the Worthy Wife's former "licentious life" and seems to negate the possibility of feminine desirability in later life, a sentiment Chaucer's Wife of Bath pushes back against as she insists she will continue to sell "[t]he bren" even in the absence of "[t]he flour" (III 477–78). Whether accepted or resisted, both passages portray the Wife as aware of and suffering from ageist standards of feminine desirability.

"Placed so high": The Worthy Wife, Reformed and Corrected[117]

While previous sections analyzed the presentation of the socially obscene unruly voice and visible advanced age of the Worthy Wife as well as her sexual transgressions, this section turns its attention to additional adaptational decisions which respond to these qualities in the final passage of some variants of *The Wife of*

[117] *The Wife of Beith* line 659.

Beith. Alongside the introduction of more biblical interlocutors and increased attention to the Worthy Wife's age and emotional state, the anonymous author of *The Wife of Beith* also significantly extended the ending of the earlier *Wanton Wife of Bath*. This new ending includes an expansion of the Worthy Wife's debate with Christ and the addition of a scene of her physical transformation, both of which are relevant to the Worthy Wife's volubility and age.

Having introduced the "problem" of the aging Worthy Wife and all the negative qualities her designation as a *carling* brings, the *Wife of Beith* goes one step further and corrects this quality through a final physical transformation. Following her arrival at the gates of Heaven and her confrontations with various biblical personalities, the Worthy Wife once more finds herself in conversation with Christ, as discussed earlier alongside *flyting*, who instructs her to "speak no more," noting that rather than the "repenting cry" of the *Wanton Wife of Bath*, it is the Worthy Wife's faith that has secured her salvation (lines 637–38). With her vocal unruliness thus dealt with, the *Wife of Beith* continues with one more significant change: upon receiving Christ's forgiveness, the she undergoes a bodily transformation that restores her youth and beauty.[118] She acquires a white robe and a jeweled laurel crown and her appearance changes: "Her face did shine like the sun, / Like threads of gold her hair hung down, / Her eyes like lamps [unto] the moon" (lines 649–51). As a reward for her penitence (and her silence), the Worthy Wife is made young again. This transformation is reminiscent in some ways of that undergone by the old

[118] Not all surviving variants include this scene of transformation. One 1785 edition, for example, ends the ballad immediately after Christ states that the Worthy Wife has been saved.

"wyf" in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, who tells the knight to "cast up the curtyn" and reveal "[t]hat she so fair was, and so yong" (III 1249–51). In both cases, the youthful beauty brought on by the transformation can be read as a signifier of spiritual and physical purity, and of worthiness as each woman is physically altered to embody qualities seen as desirable by male figures of authority.

Such a transformation as that of the ballad is not without literary precedent. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, first published in 1678, features a moment of transformation as the culmination of spiritual striving that, when considered alongside *The Wife of Beith*, highlights the different social expectations for men and women during this period.[119] In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, this moment of transformation occurs in the final pages. The long pilgrimage, narrated in the form of a dream, nears its end as Christian and his fellow traveler are greeted at the gates of Heaven by "a company of the Heavenly Host" with much joyful shouting and "melodious noise" (Bunyan 123). God commands the gate be opened and the pilgrims welcomed inside:

> Now I saw in my Dream, that these two men went in at the Gate; and loe, as they entered, they were transfigured, and they had Raiment put on that shone like Gold. There was also that met them with Harps and Crowns, and gave them to them; The Harp to praise withall, and the Crowns in token of honour[.] (Bunyan 124)

[119] For more on differing gender expectations in the eighteenth century, see Fletcher's introduction to *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500–1800* as well as chapters 4 and 18.

This passage emphasizes the clothing given to the two men and the crowns and harps they receive, with the significance of these gifts further explained: one allows the recipient to offer praise while the other celebrates his worthiness. By contrast, in *The Wife of Beith,* the Worthy Wife's transformation is characterized as a return to ideal youthful feminine beauty. Her robe is of virginal white, rather than gold, and her crown is more richly described as "a laurel crown…spangled with rubies and with gold…of precious stones rich" (645–53). Instead of a harp, she receives a white palm, and the harping of the ballad is offered by King David, who earlier in the ballad had insisted she "knock nae mair" as they were all "troubled with [her] cry" (295–96).[120] The celebration of her salvation/transformation is so monumental that the ballad declares, "Such music and such melody, / Was never either heard or seen, /When this poor saint was placed so high" (ll. 658–60). In a gesture of humility and contented subjugation, the transformed Worthy Wife lays her newly received crown at Christ's feet and begins to sing and rejoice that she has finally acquired "lasting pleasures" in contrast to the earthly pleasure of her former licentious life.

This scene of physical transformation occurs over twelve lines, a relatively minor moment in comparison with the hundreds of lines dedicated to the Worthy

[120] The Worthy Wife's white robe and palm align with the description given in the biblical Book of Revelation: "After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands" (7.9). The robes worn by the members of this multitude are later identified as signifying their wearers' passage through great suffering and tribulation.

Wife's repeated verbal combats. Despite the relative brevity of this moment in her story, the narrative compulsion to transform the Worthy Wife from an aging and argumentative figure to a silent young woman clad in virginal white (a change which is aligned with "lasting pleasure" in the afterlife in contrast with her earlier licentious life (line 672)) presents a stark contrast that reinforces existing social expectations and confirms that the violation of these expectations is socially obscene. Though the Worthy Wife's accusations are just and her use of precedents well thought out, the ballad, like her interlocutors, gives more attention to the disruptive nature of the noise she makes than to the contents of her speech. When the moment of transformation approaches, it is not the content of the Worthy Wife's speech that changes so much as the tone and approach: as she converses with Christ, she becomes humble and repentant. With the ballad's closing lines, both the Worthy Wife's physical and spiritual transformation are complete and her voice is tamed, now exclusively devoted to the more socially and spiritually appropriate task of singing praises. In this respect, *The Wife of Beith*'s depiction of the Worthy Wife's ultimate end exemplifies the point made by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, that "a life of feminine submission, of 'contemplative purity,' is a life of silence, a life that has no pen and no story, while a life of female rebellion, of 'significant action,' is a life that must be silenced" (36). In the scene of her transformation in the Scottish ballad, the Worthy Wife gives up her story and embraces her heavenly reward.

Conclusion

As the reception of Chaucer's Wife of Bath seen in both *The Wanton Wife of Bath* and *The Wife of Beith* so amply demonstrates, the perceived problem with socially obscene phenomena is that they can be seen as dangerously powerful and dangerously contagious. Much of the literature aimed at women in the eighteenth century focused on the qualities women were expected to display to attract desirable suitors and, later, to function as agreeable wives: modesty, humility, and quiet obedience. In contrast, *The Wife of Beith* expands on the ballad from which it derives its source material in order to portray an unruly older woman who violates expectations regarding the standards of acceptable social and sexual behavior set forth by this body of conduct literature. Given the ideals of feminine behavior that eighteenth-century conduct literature aimed to reinforce, it is unsurprising that an early eighteenth-century text like *The Wife of Beith* should respond to these aspects of Chaucer's Wife. Having offered up a new version of the Wife and highlighted the problems of her socially obscene voice and her advanced age, *The Wife of Beith* then seeks to "correct" the Wife in order to bring her in line with cultural expectations of appropriate feminine behavior and beauty. Though the main concern of the ballad's story relates to the Worthy Wife's search for salvation, the patriarchal responses to the character *within* the ballad show how this ageism can be weaponized in the quest to reform the figure of the aging and unruly woman.

If feminine aging in *The Wife of Beith* is viewed as a marker of social obscenity, something meant to be kept "off-scene" or corrected in this eighteenth-century text, most twenty-first-century versions do not share such perceptions. As

briefly noted at the beginning of this chapter, Caroline Bergvall instead identifies this quality one that she shares with Chaucer's Wife; one deserving of discussion. Bergvall's Speaker in *Alisoun Sings*, portrayed in conversation with Alisoun, describes the process of feminine aging as one of:

> menoing out, drenched in hydraproduction, seem[ing] to suffer the onset of a slow slumberous mind, intercut with crazy visions and rebellions, chaotic undoings, memory losses, fevered insomnia, softening limbs, obviously shedding one comfortable skin and cruising-speed for the wilder unpredictable ranges of femaleness and wisdom [.] (57)

Drawing on Chaucer's construction of the Wife as a woman past her youth, Bergvall's Speaker addresses feminine aging as something both unavoidable and significant as it reshapes a woman's bodily and mental experiences. Rather than ignoring this quality or shifting it "off-scene," Bergvall uses it to launch/open up a conversation about the physical and psychological changes accompanying menopause, a subject that retains a degree of social stigma today.[121] Comparison of

[121] Jacquelyn N. Zita argues that "postmenopausal women exist in *increasing* numbers and with *decreasing* social value" in contemporary American society (96, italics mine). This negative assessment of the social value of the aging woman which Zita identifies is exemplified in a recording from a 2020 interview with US politician and future Vice President J.D. Vance which came to light earlier this year, and in which Vance agrees that helping to raise children is "the whole purpose of the postmenopausal female." For a link to the recording, see @HeartlandSignal. For context and

The Wife of Beith and *Alisoun Sings* underlines the ability of adaptation to reinterpret the same text and arrive at wildly different conclusions about what the source text was intended to communicate. Both *The Wife of Beith* and *Alisoun Sings* rely on similar techniques and methodologies in their double processes of adaptation, yet one builds on the antifeminist tradition while the other builds on a feminist practice of re-visioning. This practice of re-visioning, as argued by Adrienne Rich, prioritizes the making visible of that which was hidden or absent in older texts, including a more nuanced understanding of feminine aging and the postmenopausal woman.

Though most twenty-first-century Chaucer readers likely do not associate old age with obscenity at first glance, as it is neither sexual nor scatological, aging women in texts both medieval and modern are often subjected to some of the same treatment as familiarly obscene topics: they, too, are played up for humorous purposes or omitted, altered or dismissed, adapted to serve the author's needs, or even censored. The biblical patriarchs of the Scottish ballad, in other words, are not the only ones hoping to "staunch the carling of her crying." The adaptational decisions made by the anonymous balladeer emphasize the Worthy Wife's voice while demanding her silence and emphasize her age as a problematic quality before then transforming her to a youthful form.[122] These choices follow a similar pattern:

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further response, both on social media and in traditional news media, see Vance and Weiss-Wolf. For increased interest in and discussion of perimenopause on social media, see Bergstein.

[122] Signaling the persistence of anxieties about women and aging, the transformation of an aging feminine body into a youthful one is the premise of a recently released horror film called *The Substance* (2024), written and directed by Coralie Fargeat. The award-winning film has drawn deeply

first to expand upon qualities of Chaucer's Wife that could be read as socially obscene by highlighting them and then to correct these attributes. The anonymous author of *The Wife of Beith* recognized and responded to particular character traits of Chaucer's Wife of Bath, including her unruly voice and advanced age, and imagined a scenario in which both of these aspects might be brought under control. In doing so, this ballad offered readers a reinterpreted Wife even more distanced from her Chaucerian source than the Wanton Wife of the previous ballad. Above all, we can note, the aging women's desire is meant to be kept "off-scene"—a mandate that will be the subject of the following chapter.

divided reviews, including praise for its consideration of the stigma faced by the visibly aging woman and criticism for excessive gore and disturbing body horror imagery. See Horton.

Chapter Three

Too Sexy (Again): John Gay's *The Wife of Bath* (1713 and 1730) and Obscenity on Stage

If ballad singers embodying the Wanton Wife's memorable voice on the streets of London brought the character of Chaucer's Wife to a new and broader audience, they likely also helped to pave the way for the Wife of Bath's move to the eighteenth-century stage in John Gay's comic play *The Wife of Bath*. Putting the Wife of Bath onstage in turn opened up new opportunities to portray her and to shape responses to her character.[123] Gay's *The Wife of Bath* play might have been the first time her character appeared on the professional stage, but it would certainly not be the last.[124] Indeed, the Wife was most recently reimagined for the stage by novelist

[123] Two versions of this play sharing the same title exist: the original version was staged in 1713 and a later version, heavily revised by Gay, was performed in 1730. The two plays share the same title and similar plot structures but also contain notable differences. In this chapter, I focus primarily on the 1713 version of the play but will include brief mentions of the later version where relevant. Portions of my analysis which concentrate on elements particular to one version of the play will include the year of performance for greater clarity. Quotes from the 1713 edition are taken from John Gay, *Dramatic Works* vol. 1, edited by John Fuller. Quoted lines from the 1730 revised play are taken from John Gay, *Dramatic Works* vol. 2, also edited by Fuller. All quotes are cited by volume, act, scene (1730 version only) and line number.

[124] Most performance adaptations include the Wife of Bath as a character within the *Canterbury Tales* context rather than separated from her Chaucerian source. In the early twentieth century, dramatist

Zadie Smith, who was initially attracted by the Wife's voice, which Smith describes as "brash, honest, cheeky, salacious, outrageous, unapologetic . . . one I've heard and loved all my life" (xiv).[125] The vocal qualities admiringly enumerated by Smith also hint at other aspects of the Wife's character: "brash" and "honest" reflect a modern feminist reading of Chaucer's Wife's resistance to the patriarchal hierarchy in which she lives, while both "cheeky" and "salacious" nod to her frank sexuality.[126] "Outrageous" and "unapologetic" taken together suggest Smith's own sense of the Wife's potential for excess, just as Smith's closing response makes clear her opinion on these qualities: they come together to make up a character who is both familiar and worthy of celebration. By contrast, written almost three centuries before Smith's reinterpretation was staged, Gay's play offers a reworking of Chaucer's Wife that, like the ballads considered in the previous two chapters, responds to certain characteristics present in Chaucer's Wife by amplifying them. Gay highlights her unruly voice and advanced age while *also* clearly retaining her

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Percy MacKaye adapted the *Canterbury Tales* first as a play and later as an opera for an American audience (Barrington 43–47). Turner notes that MacKaye's original conception for the play would have made the Wife of Bath the play's main focus, but discomfort expressed by both players and funders led MacKaye to rework the play (*Biography* 161). Twenty-first-century performances have included an adaptation of the *Canterbury Tales* by the Royal Shakespeare Company as well as filmed adaptations for the BBC. For more on MacKaye, see Barrington, *American Chaucers* 43–92. For analysis of the BBC adaptation, see Forni. For the RSC adaptation, see Poulton.

[125] Smith's adaptation, *The Wife of Willesden* (2021), is set in modern-day North London and brings the Wife of Bath to the stage as Alvita, a British woman in her mid-fifties who was born in Jamaica.

[126] *OED s.v.* "cheeky" (*adj.*). Sense 3.a.; *OED s.v.* "salacious" (*adj.*).

lascivious nature, marking a distinct departure from her refractions in both *The Wanton Wife of Bath* and *The Wife of Beith* ballads. As this chapter will show, Gay's reinterpretation of the Wife of Bath makes visible her socially obscene aging feminine desire as it drives her sexually manipulative behavior which provokes negative responses from other characters in the play. This reading of the Wife plays into double standards of gender and sexuality that Gay's Wife herself demonstrates an awareness of in Gay's play and continue to resonate today.[127]

Originally performed in 1713, Gay's *Wife of Bath* casts Chaucer's character in the titular role of a comedy about courtship and marriages. While the ballads of the previous chapters continued the Wife of Bath's story after her death, Gay's play instead creates a new storyline which is inserted into a perceived space in the *Canterbury Tales* source text—in this case, one of the overnight stays along the pilgrimage route.[128] The character of the Wife permeates the play: she is mentioned in the Prologue, shares scenes with almost all of the other characters, and offers the play's Epilogue as well. Before the Wife takes the stage, two characters discuss her

[127] In the late 1970s, Hélène Cixous wrote of these double standards that woman "has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being "too hot"; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing . . .)" (880). Despite some progress, the misogyny underlaying many of these double standards persists as seen in the accusations of excess with which this thesis opened.

[128] For more on classifications of adaptations as continuation, modernization, or insertion, see Introduction of this thesis.

in a conversation that prepares the audience for the character and sets the tone for the rest of the play. Gay's Wife is described as:

> enough to make any Mortal split his sides. She is as frolicksome as a young Wench in the Month of *May*, plays at Romps with the pilgrims all round, throws out as many quaint Jokes as an Oxford scholar;-- and, in short, exerts herself so facetiously, that she is the Mirth of the whole Company. (1: I. 87–92)[129]

This brief description makes mention of the Wife's voice, age, and sexuality—and suggests the excessiveness of all three aspects. The description of her behavior as reminiscent of an amorous young woman makes subtly clear that, though the Wife is no longer young, she does not act her age; use of the word "wench" brings further suggestions of lustfulness or intimate familiarity to this declaration.[130] Building on Chaucer's Wife of Bath's lascivious reputation, Gay describes the Wife as participating in "romps" with her fellow pilgrims. While having an air of playfulness, this usage of "romps" also carries specific overtones pointing to

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[129] The character of the Wife is referred to in Gay's play as both "The Wife of Bath" and "Alison." References to Alison in this chapter indicate the character from Gay's plays and not Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

[130] *OED*, *s.v.* "wench" (*n.*). Usages of "wench" around this time ranged from terms of endearment to implications of illicit sexual behavior; it can also carry connotations of class. For a more in-depth consideration of the evolution of the word "wench" from its origin through the present, see Harris, "Chaucer's Wenches."

transgressive sexual behavior.[131] The possibility, then, that the Wife of Bath is sexually involved with a number of the pilgrims is a significant addition here compared to the more subtle and passing mentions of her licentious life in the ballads.[132] Though the ballads of the previous chapters shifted focus to the Wife's volubility, Gay's Wife of Bath is more clearly lascivious and her sexuality (paired with her unruly voice and feminine aging) both drives the plot of the play and becomes the source of much of its humor. As I will show in this chapter, by emphasizing the Wife's excessive sexuality while portraying her speech as garrulous and her visible aging as either a punchline or a source of disgust, Gay yokes the Wife's socially and sexually transgressive qualities together. By then bringing the Wife to an unhappy ending, the later version of the play reinscribes the misogynistic stereotypes of socially obscene wives and unhappy marriages found in conduct books and other media of the period even as it makes her the play's star.[133] I close by returning to Smith's recreation of the Wife viewed as celebratory rather

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[131] *OED*, *s.v.* "romp" (*n.*) sense 2.a. Romp is defined by the *OED* as "a spell of rough, energetic play; a lively frolic; (now frequently) *spec. a spell of sexual activity, esp. an illicit or transient one (colloquial),*" and this quote from John Gay's play is given as the first example (emphasis mine).

[132] The possibility of the Wife of Bath engaging in sexual relations with her fellow pilgrims is also explored in other adaptations, including the 1985 pornographic film *The Ribald Tales of Canterbury*.

[133] See Defoe's *Conjugal Lewdness* (1727) for an exhaustive collection of anecdotes and admonitions on unhappy marriages in this period. Marriage is also a key theme of Defoe's novel *Moll Flanders* (1722), which features a five-times-married woman recounting her sinful early life and its consequences before finally repenting and changing her ways.

than threatening, and considering how her refashioning of the Wife for the stage invites the audience to laugh with her reinterpreted Wife rather than at her.

"A forward Maid, and a triumphant Wife": The Wife of Bath Takes the Stage[134]

Though the ballads brought the Wife of Bath to a broad new audience, it was John Gay who officially brought her to the London stage, a powerful form well-suited to the dramatic tendencies of the character of Chaucer's Wife. Though this adaptation represents a significant shift in the reception of the Wife, Gay's Chaucerian adaptation has not been the subject of much critical inquiry from either Chaucerians or Gay scholars. Betsy Bowden discusses Gay's sources for the play and further analyzes it with an eye to its audiovisual elements and the ways in which they affected the success of the play. Marion Turner examines both versions of the play within the context of a tendency in this era for adapters to seek to silence the Wife of Bath in their reimaginings of Chaucer's text, which she sees as particularly prevalent in Gay's later version, described by one critic as "prettified, cleaned up, made right for polite society" (*Biography* 160; Winton 147). Adam Rounce describes Gay's play as "an odd attempt to represent the Chaucerian milieu, with an appearance by the poet himself . . . and Alison, the titular Wife of Bath, who appears frequently, rarely failing to mention the joys of marriage, and her own passions being undimmed by age," highlighting Gay's portrayal of these characters as

[134] *The Wife of Bath* (1713) Epilogue line 32.

imperfectly related to Chaucer's work (88). While these earlier critics have touched upon Gay's interpretation and recreation of the Wife as a character meant for the stage, his approach to her potential for obscenity has not been considered in depth.

Written and performed in 1713 and rewritten seventeen years later, Gay's *The Wife of Bath* remains one of his least-discussed works, both among his own contemporaries and, as noted above, in literary scholarship.[135] The initial version of the play, his first dramatic work to be performed, was written and staged at Drury Lane in mid-May of 1713, where it played for only two nights (Bowden, *Afterlife* 93; Turner, *Biography 1*60; Berry 142).[136] Little evidence is available to suggest why the play was not successful and critics have only been able to speculate broadly about the play's failure, often citing the extended run of a preceding play along with opinions relating to Gay's perceived uneven construction of the play.[137] Reginald Berry notes that "[t]he public was not kind to Gay's *Wife of Bath* in the beginning

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[135] A perusal of several critical works on John Gay makes clear that even books specializing in Gay studies, such as Sven M. Armens' *John Gay: Social Critic* (1970), often refrain from much mention of *The Wife of Bath* in either of its forms. Gay scholar Calhoun Winton offers the most in-depth consideration of *The Wife of Bath* situated within the corpus of Gay's dramatic works. See especially Winton, Chapter Three "Chaucer in Augustan England" 26–40.

[136] An earlier play by Gay, *The Mohocks* (1712), had been refused by the players of the same theatre and had instead gone directly to print (Fuller, "Introduction" 1: 5).

[137] Reginald Berry, for example, points to the success of Joseph Addison's *Cato* which preceded and delayed Gay's play as the chief reason for the failure of the early version (142). Winton suggests the possibility of "backstage machinations" or "free-floating hostility toward [Alexander] Pope" as other possible factors (32).

and critical opinion since has not been kind either," pointing to complaints about the play's uneven composition and ineffective plot (142).[138] Seventeen years later, Gay returned to the play and heavily revised it. Despite his recent success with *The Beggar's Opera* and his subsequent growing popular reputation, the later version of *The Wife of Bath* was again unsuccessful, playing for just three nights at the Theatre Royal, Lincoln's Inn Fields, in late January in 1730 (Burgess 88; Winton 146).[139] The decision to rework his earlier *Wife of Bath* play was an unusual one as Gay "made few revisions of significance" to any of his other plays, and his reworking was extensive (Fuller vii). In particular, Gay's 1730 alterations to the character of the Wife of Bath resulted in an even less sympathetic reading of her character, particularly in relation to the portrayal of her sexuality and her age.[140]

Along with the reinterpreted character of the Wife, Gay integrates other details informed by Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* with a newly imagined storyline.

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[138] Gay's *The Wife of Bath* was later published by Bernard Lintot in late May of that same year (Fuller, "Epilogue" 409).

[139] The reworking of the play included changes ranging from the renaming of some characters to the removal of entire scenes. Bowden notes of the later version that "the author himself revised his own play into one regarded as far worse, aesthetically, by even its most sympathetic commentator" and further argues that while the earlier version failed through no fault of Gay's own, "the 1730 *Wife of Bath* deserves the oblivion into which it has sucked its predecessor" (*Afterlife* 93).

[140] Winton, in contrast, argues that Gay was "evenhanded in his treatment of gender in the play" and that he portrays Alison "sympathetically" and "award[s] her the rich Franklyn at the curtain" (38). While Gay may have included a number of women in his play, the different approaches taken to portraying their sexual behavior are difficult to reconcile with this reading.

Both versions of Gay's *The Wife of Bath* retain a number of characters from the pilgrimage (including the Chaucer pilgrim in the 1713 version), however the plot, based loosely on the *Canterbury Tales* and possibly also influenced by *The Wanton Wife of Bath* ballad, is entirely Gay's invention. Bowden notes that while two details hint that Gay may have read the original Middle English text, "no Chaucerian reference in the play script of either 1713 or 1730 need come from anything other than *The Wanton Wife of Bath*, Dryden, Pope, assorted modernizations, and undocumented oral tradition" (95).[141] As for what inspired Gay's interest in adapting Chaucer's work, one critic suggests that "using Chaucerian characters and setting may have been suggested directly or indirectly by Pope" (Fuller, "Epilogue" 410).[142] The story of *The Wife of Bath* (1713 and 1730) takes place during a pause in the pilgrimage inserted by Gay and its ending could be read as transitioning into the resumption of the pilgrimage of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* without significant change.[143] The pilgrimage in *The Wife of Bath* (1713 and 1730), as in Chaucer's text,

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[141] Bowden points to Gay's use of a simile that compares women's love to wildfire that appears in Chaucer but not in Pope's modernization as well as the addition of a "Shipman" to the 1730 play as details that appear in Gay's work but not in Pope's (95). In addition to *The Wife of Bath* play, responses to Chaucer appeared elsewhere in Gay's work, including his "An Answer to the Sompner's Prologue of Chaucer" (1717), written in imitation of Chaucer's Middle English.

[142] For more on Alexander Pope's modernizations of Chaucer's Wife of Bath, see Chapter Four.

[143] Though Gay retains the pilgrimage setting, both plays appear vague as to their chronological placement, leaving one critic to describe the play as "Chaucer in ruffs" and further add that "Gay had no very clear idea of period" (Fuller, "Introduction" 1: 10).

serves to bring a diverse group of people together, and it is from these interactions that Gay builds his plays.

The plots of both Gay's 1713 play and his later revision by the same title revolve around the manipulations and deceptions within this group as its members seek to secure spouses for themselves or each other. Characters take on different identities, employ disguises, work in teams to entrap each other, and assist or interrupt in the delivery of poems and letters in their seduction attempts. As mentioned above, the slate of characters includes a number borrowed from the *Canterbury Tales*, including the titular Wife of Bath, Franklyn (later "Plowdon"), Doublechin the Monk (later "Father Hubert"), and Chaucer himself (later "Sir Harry Gauntlet") as well as Myrtilla, a nun. Added to these Canterbury characters are Doggrell, a poet and coxcomb; Florinda, daughter of Franklyn/Plowdon; Merit, Florinda's love interest; an astrologer named Astrolabe; and Busie (later Busy), Myrtilla's maidservant, as well as a few servants and other characters in minor roles.[144] The action of the play takes place between the hours of nine in the evening and nine the next morning during a stop-over on the pilgrimage at an inn between London and Canterbury, where Franklyn invites the pilgrims to celebrate Florinda's upcoming wedding. Berry describes the plot as a generally conventional response to the comedies of marriage of earlier years but with a crucial difference, arguing that

[144] Giving the Astrologer character the name "Astrolabe" further suggests Gay's familiarity with Chaucer's work. The "Treatise on the Astrolabe" was included in the 1598 printed edition of Chaucer's work which Pope owned and to which Gay might have also had access. John Dryden also mentions Chaucer's authorship of that text in the Preface to *Fables* (Brewer 162).

"marriage is not the object of attack or vilification . . . it is more a context for the display of error and folly by man and woman" (142). Berry points to a more general interest in the "satire of unreason in marriage" as a broader Scriblerian theme and writes that "[i]f there needs to be an intermediary between Chaucer and the Scriblerian vision of folly and unreason in the contemporary context of marriage, it must be Alison, the Wife of Bath" (153).[145] Though all the characters in *The Wife of Bath* lapse into "folly and unreason," it is the Wife's behavior against which the most judgement is passed; it is, in fact, to her character that folly is initially attached in the Prologue to Gay's play.

"The Wife of Bath in our weak Wives we find": Meeting Alison[146]

Gay's adaptational decisions made in the recreation of the Wife of Bath as a dramatic character further develop her eighteenth-century reputation as a socially and sexually obscene character and model for audience members how one might *respond* to a voluble older woman whose self-presentation was judged "too sexy." Jean I. Marsden argues that eighteenth-century theatre is notable for the period's "interest in—even obsession with—emotion, and in particular with the communal

[145] The Scriblerus club was composed of a number of authors and satirists of the early eighteenth-century, including John Gay, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Thomas Parnell, Robert Harley, and Dr John Arbuthnot as well as others. Its members occasionally composed satirical works together, often under the name of Martinus Scriblerus.

[146] *The Wife of Bath* (1713) Prologue line 33.

emotion generated within the theatre and the implications of this response" (298). Close reading of Gay's *Wife of Bath* suggests that Gay recognized the Wife's socially obscene qualities and harnessed them to her lascivious behavior in his recreation of her character as a comic figure for the stage. In response to this behavior, Gay's Wife of Bath is occasionally met with ridicule and disgust from others within the play, which can be read as modelling the types of reactions the performance of sexual desire by an aging woman might invite. This reinterpretation of the Wife's character is present in both Prologue and Epilogue, and portrayed in differing degrees in the initial mentions of the Wife of both 1713 and 1730 versions of the play.

Both versions of *The Wife of Bath* consist of a conventional five acts bookended by a Prologue and an Epilogue that touch on themes of theatrical trends, decency and morality, marriage, manipulation, and gender conventions. During the Prologue, the actress playing Florinda, Franklyn's daughter, comments on the disconnect between the complaints of older generations about marriage and moral decline and the actual sexual behavior of these earlier generations, using Chaucer to make the argument:

> He draws his Characters from *Chaucer's* Days,
> On which our Grandsires are profuse of Praise;
> When all Mankind,---(if we'll believe Tradition,)
> Jogg'd on in settled Conjugal Fruition[.] (Fuller 1: Prologue lines 9–12)

For the next twelve lines, Florinda lists traditional declarations about sexual morality and marriage before refuting these statements as fabrications rather than

accurate reflections of the reality of an earlier time, and insists that these earlier generations "knew the World as well as You and I" (Fuller 1: Prologue line 26). This Prologue establishes from the outset that sexuality and related societal expectations will be a major theme of both versions of the play. A few lines later, the Wife of Bath is mentioned by name as the actress offering the Prologue remarks on similarities shared by Chaucer's past and Gay's present:

> Our Author hath from former Ages shown,
> Some ancient Frailties which are still our own;
> The *Wife of Bath* in our weak Wives we find,
> And Superstition runs through all the Kind,
> We but repeat our Grandsires Actions o'er,
> And copy Follies which were theirs before.
> (Fuller 1: Prologue lines 31–36)

These similarities, labeled as "follies," include violations of social expectations for chastity as well as a feminine tendency to superstition.[147] The linking of the Wife of Bath with these "follies" primes the audience to recognize her behavior as both unacceptable (something found in *weak* wives) and universal, running alongside

[147] *OED*, *s.v.* "folly" (*n.*). Sense 1 and 3. As seen with the definition of "wanton" in Chapter One, "folly" suggests a number of possible interpretations ranging from foolishness and "unwise conduct" through behavior assessed lewd or lecherous. Both superstition and sexual immorality could fit under the umbrella of "folly" in this passage.

superstition "through all the Kind."[148] Like the Worthy Wife of the Scottish ballad, this interpretation of Chaucer's Wife of Bath is also a model of unruliness and a representative of a far-too-common type of socially obscene woman.

Florinda's contrasting of "ancient" and "modern" morality (and hinting that both share common ground when it comes to sexual transgression) refutes a view of the past as representing a "nostalgic corrective to modernity," one common approach taken by some later texts attempting to engage with the medieval past (D'Arcens 184–85). Through this Prologue, Gay seems to accuse both eras of sharing similar deficiencies. Gay's use of Chaucer, rather than highlighting "such Tales . . . as savour nothing of Immodesty" as Dryden might have preferred, instead features the licentious qualities of his work that Dryden refused to transmit, including the feminine unruliness particular to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* (Brewer 167).

While the "Prologue" introduced the theme of feminine behavior and pointed to its follies, it is the development of these qualities as portrayed by the four major female roles in the play which hints at Gay's misogynistic tendencies. Margaret R. Hunt, writing about women in Gay's 1716 poem "Trivia," notes that "Gay differs significantly from Addison and Steele who, if not precisely feminist, had taken a rather optimistic view of women's potential to civilize and soften men and society" and argues instead that Gay's writing of women was "arrayed along a narrow spectrum from suspicious to abhorrent" (120). Though the women in *The*

[148] Fletcher traces the widely-held understanding of women as "weaker vessel[s]" back to William Tyndale's 1526 translation of the New Testament, after which it became "an established proverb" called upon to reinforce the gender hierarchy which placed men in the position of authority (60).

Wife of Bath can be read in a marginally more positive manner, much of this would likely depend on the ways in which each character was acted, a key factor in understanding the impact of a performed play but difficult to discern from a written script. Even with a sympathetic reading, though, it would be difficult to argue that any of the female roles are positive or complimentary – and a complete impossibility in the case of the Wife herself. In both versions of Gay's play, the behavior of Alison is presented as a source of risqué humor at best and, more often, responded to with ridicule and disgust: she is a serial manipulator and a lecherous older woman whose speech relies on proverbs, slang and mild oaths rather than the Classical and biblical sources on which Chaucer's Wife of Bath relied.

Though Gay's Wife appears just as talkative as Chaucer's, the manner in which she speaks, as noted above, is often quite different. Gone are the Wife of Bath's references to Ptolemy as well as her extensive biblical knowledge which the Wives of the ballads had retained. In their place, Gay's Wife employs sobriquets and epithets for her interlocutors, speaks in slang and colloquialisms, recites proverbs, and sings popular songs. Her speech includes repetitions of "slidikins," a minced oath of "God's lid," and related mild oaths including "ods-my-life," "i-facking," "i'faith," and "i'dad" also appear frequently.[149] It is notable that Gay's Wife is the only character of the play who speaks in this style on a regular and repeated basis. These speaking habits are both slightly reminiscent of Chaucer's Wife of Bath, who also employs familiar names ("Lordynges" (III 379)), as well as oaths and interjections, ("Lord Crist" (III 469), "A Ha! By God" (III 586), and "Allas, allas!" (III

[149] *OED*, *s.v.* "'slidikins" (*int.*).

614) to list but a few examples), but also function to set Gay's Wife apart from the other characters. Andrew Higl reads the repeated voicing of folk proverbs as "mak[ing] the Wife far less threatening to male authority" (301). While this may be true, in my reading these alterations also make the Wife more easily side-lined and dismissed in general. This adaptational decision, which is notably only applied to the Wife, helps to portray Alison's voice as more socially obscene by aligning her character with a less respectable register of speech more typically used by those considered lower class or less educated.[150]

In the later version of the play, Gay further amplifies the negative responses to the Wife's vocality found within the earlier version of the play. In *The Wife of Bath* (1730), the first description of Alison comes not from Franklyn (renamed "Plowdon"), but from the monk, Father Hubert (formerly "Doublechin"), who comments that "the Wife of Bath is so talkative, and so carnal . . . I am afraid [the Wife of Bath] will joke [Myrtilla] out of her resolution" to become a nun (Fuller 2: I.ii.17–20). This change represents a marked shift in the dramatic portrayal of Gay's Wife. While the Wife's entertaining chattiness was celebrated by one character in the earlier version of the play, the later variant instead implicates her as loquacious and lascivious and points to the dangers of her joking: in this instance, the financial implications that her conversation with Myrtilla might have on Father Hubert's

[150] This type of language was often collected in cant and slang dictionaries which were popular reading during this period. Gay was aware of this language and its connotations and included examples in *The Beggar's Opera*, which some critics credit with bringing cant to a wider audience (Coleman 121).

interests. These introductory remarks are followed by a less generous presentation of the Wife of Bath than the earlier play in which all of her unbecoming habits—her talkativeness, her willingness to manipulate those around her, and her sexual appetite—are retained and in some cases amplified. Though these qualities are initially made more obvious in the description of the Wife in the 1730 version of the play, the portrayal of Alison's character appears more uneven. These changes to the play in general, and to the character of the Wife of Bath in particular, might have been influenced by shifting theatrical and audience expectations in the seventeen years since Gay debuted *The Wife of Bath* (1713).

In a 1795 edition of Gay's collected works, Samuel Johnson commented on the considerable changes that Gay made in his revision of *The Wife of Bath*. In his preface to this edition, Johnson writes:

> In 1713 [Gay] brought forth a comedy called The Wife of Bath upon the stage, but it received no applause; he printed it, however; and seventeen years after, having altered it, and, as he thought, adapted it more to the publick taste, he offered it again to the town; but though he flushed with the success of the Beggar's Opera, had the mortification to see it again rejected (viii).

In attempting to better adapt Alison herself "to the publick taste," the 1730 Wife is less licentious, presented as more preoccupied with marriage than sex; she also discusses matrimony as a source of safety and companionship rather than fixating

on the sexual dimension.[151] Though the 1730 Wife still disguises herself to trick Doggrell into having sex with her, she claims the purpose of this deception is to save Florinda and to secure a husband for herself rather than just to gratify her lust. The kissing exchange and its related mentions of disgust, discussed later this this chapter, are also removed in the later play. Higl describes the Wife of the later version as "younger and less belligerent than Chaucer's" and suggests that "revisions of this Wife further contain and suppress her unruliness and completely take poor Chaucer out of the picture" (303).[152] Though the initial mention of Alison in *The Wife of Bath* (1730) seems to highlight her socially and sexually obscene qualities, much of the sexually suggestive material in the earlier version has been removed or tempered.

While Gay's portrayal of the Wife changes from one version to the other, both versions of *The Wife of Bath* portray and emphasize the Wife's vocality as disruptive. The voice of Gay's Wife is understood and portrayed as excessive in both plays, whether shown in the changing manner by which she is described by others or in the more stable construction of her own speech patterns. This unruly voice is not her only excessive quality. Just as the ballads of the previous chapters

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[151] This sentiment is reminiscent of Chaucer's Wife's declaration that "I holde a mouses herte nat worth a leek / That hath but oon hole for to sterte to" (III 572–73). Pope included these lines in his modernization of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, "The Mouse that always trusts to one poor Hole, / Can never be a Mouse of any Soul" (lines 298–99).

[152] While the 1730 Wife might be "less belligerent," there are no clear indications of her youth in Gay's script, though there are many references and mentions of her as aged.

displayed a tendency to simplify the character of the Wife to her negative attributes, Gay's reinterpretation of the Wife is also shaped through attending to the more controversial aspects of her character as constructed by Chaucer. Where the ballads focused on her voice and refrained from discussing the Wife's "wanton" behavior, Gay makes this potential for lasciviousness central to his Alison. Further, as the next section will show, this sexuality and the responses it elicits within the play are closely associated with the Wife's status as an older woman.

"An old woman's kisses": Desire, Disgust, and Alison's Aging[153]

As seen in Chapter Two, the Worthy Wife's advanced age was disparaged by several of her biblical interlocutors as a tactic to discredit and dismiss her character. Age, then, could be read as further amplifying her socially obscene volubility. The Wife of Bath's age also plays an important role in Gay's play, where it is evoked in relation to her lascivious nature. Thanks in large part to Gay's focus on relationships and courtship in *The Wife of Bath*, sexuality and its related social expectations play a significant role in both versions of the play. Anthony Fletcher notes the anxiety about unruly feminine desire seen in the eighteenth century, which worried that while the "lascivious woman threatens and challenges manhood; the predatory woman unmasks it" (6). In other words, excessive feminine sexual appetites, of which Gay's Alison demonstrates an ample amount, were viewed by some as a

[153] *The Wife of Bath* (1713) 1: III.194.

rampant problem that threatened the patriarchal social order. The sexual behavior exhibited by Gay's Wife of Bath transgresses eighteenth-century boundaries in a number of ways, particularly in terms of her perceptions on when women should become sexually active, what role sexual consent might play, and how women might fulfill their desires later in life.

Gay's Wife of Bath comments frequently on age and desire throughout the plays.[154] In their opening conversation in the 1713 play, as she reads Myrtilla's marital fortunes in her palm, Alison comments on different cultural conventions of appropriate feminine sexuality, claiming:

> 'Tis a strange Thing, that our *English* Ladies should be so backward in coming to Knowledge—Why, an *Italian* Girl thinks at Twelve, meditates at Thirteen, ripens into Perception at Fourteen—and here we shall have an awkward *English* Bride want Advice on her

[154] The part of the Wife of Bath in the 1713 version was played by a 31-year-old Scottish actress named Margaret Bicknell, who performed in numerous plays at Drury Lane. Richard Steele mentioned her theatrical work in an issue of *The Spectator* the previous year, praising her "agreeable girlish Person" and her "Capacity of Imitation" and further stating that she "could in proper Gesture and Motion represent all the decent Characters of Female Life" (Goff). In contrast, the actors playing both Chaucer and Franklyn were in their 50s at the time of the 1713 performance. Despite this age difference, Bowden refers to Franklyn as the Wife's "age-appropriate mate" (*Afterlife* 101).

> Wedding-day, though she is not married 'till Five and twenty"
> (Fuller 1: I.217–22).[155]

This comment comes in the midst of Alison's initial attempts to talk Myrtilla into marrying rather than becoming a nun and remaining sexually unfulfilled. Her word choice here equates a woman's sexual experience euphemistically with knowledge and its acquisition, harkening back to both Chaucer's Wife of Bath's opening line ("Experience . . . is right ynogh for me" (III 1–2)) and to the early age of her first marriage. This passage also further highlights the lustfulness of Gay's Alison, who aligns herself with a tradition favoring the sexual initiation of younger women as opposed to what she describes as an English tradition in which women are less sexually experienced. In this same conversation, Alison makes numerous mentions of Myrtilla's youthful beauty as a justification for why she ought to marry and as the quality which will make finding a husband easier (Fuller 1: I.107, 129). This conversation underscores Alison's lascivious nature even as it makes clear her awareness of the difficulty of pursuing sex and love for an older woman.

Gay's Wife's licentiousness is further developed in her risqué comments on consent and sexual seduction through a number of moments in which she seems to imply rape be considered an acceptable seduction tactic. Simon Dickie notes that in eighteenth-century culture, "[r]ape jokes are everywhere one looks: in cheap

[155] In the 1730 version of the play, Gay decreased these ages to 11, 12, and 13, making this speech even more uncomfortable to a modern audience and likely to an eighteenth-century audience, as well. Pat Rogers notes that women at the start of the eighteenth century "did not marry on average until age 27" (40).

pamphlets and song sheets as well as more literary texts. The same dirty jokes show up in ballad operas and then again as asides in otherwise morbid tragedies" (209).[156] In the third act of the 1713 version of the play, the Wife of Bath is advising the coxcomb Doggrell on his planned seduction of Myrtilla. When Doggrell suggests he will "approach [Myrtilla] with Veneration, and lay my Heart at her Feet with the profoundest Submission," Gay's Alison instead suggests that "one of her Temper, like a Widow, must be carry'd by Storm" and then approvingly describes the appropriate approach in the terms of a martial attack (Fuller 1: III.220–26). While Alison's lascivious nature might align with Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife of Bath, this attitude toward sexual consent represents something of a departure on Gay's part.

As her opinions on sexual initiation and attitude about sexual consent paint Gay's Wife of Bath as a highly sexual character, the added factor of her advanced age is used to amplify the potential obscenity of her sexuality. In a similar manner to that shown in the Scottish ballad *The Wife of Beith*, feminine aging becomes a key characteristic of the Wife of Bath in both of Gay's plays, with her age referred to by the Wife herself and by other characters in the play. By retaining elements of Chaucer's Wife of Bath's frank sexuality alongside repeated references to her age,

[156] Alexander Pope played with this concept in the title of his poem "The Rape of the Lock," the earliest version of which was published in 1712. According to Dickie, the term "rape" itself was a complicated one at this time: he argues that it "conjured up brutal violence" but also "referred to relatively mainstream sexual behaviors [and] carried an erotic charge that would now be pathological" (210).

Gay further explores the intersection of disgust and socially obscene aging femininity, particularly through the responses to the Wife's sexual advances in the 1713 version of the play.[157] Turner identifies an undercurrent of misogyny present in many adaptations of this era, remarking that "over and over again, we see Chaucer's successors re-inscribing the story with patriarchal, misogynist myths about the horror of female sexuality" (*Biography 207*). This "horror of female sexuality" often becomes even more fraught when the desiring woman is viewed as aged, as Gay's work so amply explores. Characters in the 1713 version of the play react to the Wife of Bath's flirtations with derision, disgust, or by simply refusing to acknowledge them. Gay's Alison herself also shows signs of a complex relationship with her own age, insisting on her continued youthfulness one moment and referring to herself as old in the next, oftentimes depending on which approach she seems to think will support her various causes and manipulations. Like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, Gay's Alison comments on the dissonance of feeling younger while being perceived as aged.

Both Gay's Alison and Chaucer's Wife exhibit an awareness of the social stigmas attached to feminine aging. In both plays, Gay's characters repeatedly address the theme of feminine aging and its impact on a woman's desirability; Turner points out that Myrtilla's "innocent femininity is set against Alison's ageing experienced sexuality" in a manner that makes clear which state is preferable

[157] For more on depictions of feminine aging alongside transgressive sexuality in visual art, see Botelho, who observes that "[i]t is with old women that the issues of sex, age, and gender come together in profound and conflicting ways" (193).

(*Biography* 219).[158] In the 1713 play, this awareness often leads Gay's Wife of Bath to speak out in defense of her own continuing sexual desirability, as initially seen in an early conversation with the poet Doggrell. When approached by Doggrell to act as a go-between, Alison accuses him of overlooking her own desires and capacity for sexual fulfillment: "you take me for an O—ld Woman now,—that hath lost all Relish; only fit to set young Folks together, and think of times past" (Fuller 1: II.236–38). Doggrell attempts to refute this accusation through flattery, assuring her that she contains "a World of Vivacity," as he continues to press Alison to help him (Fuller 1: II.241).[159] However, Gay's Wife of Bath refuses to be swayed from the subject of her own aging and appearance. She acknowledges that her face is showing signs of age but then insists that a new marriage would bring back her youthful good looks, "Matrimony would soon smooth and polish my Countenance again," and agrees to help Doggrell if he performs a similar service for her (Fuller 1: II.248–49). She comments that a new marriage (and its accompanying sexual satisfaction) would restore a measure of her youthfulness: "there is not a greater Impairer of Beauty, than the Longing of a Virgin, and the tedious Expectation of a Widow" (Fuller 1: II.250–51). Gay's Alison responds to the perception of waning

[158] The licentious aging woman was a recurring character in literature in this period, often set in opposition to a more socially acceptable character. For example, while the titular heroine of Samuel Richardson's incredibly popular novel *Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded* neatly fit the feminine ideal of the period, her aspirational "perfection" was made more obvious when set against the machinations of the unruly and lascivious middle-aged Mrs. Jewkes.

[159] Gay's Wife of Bath later reuses and reworks Doggrell's words as she asks Franklyn if he will "dare . . . venture on a Girl of my Vivacity?" (Fuller 1: V.408).

sexual desirability in aging women by suggesting that remarrying would "refresh" her beauty and add youthfulness to her appearance, a word choice that nods to Chaucer's Wife's comment on Solomon and sexual fulfillment in her prologue (" As wolde God it leveful were unto me / To be refresshed half so ofte as he" (III 37–38)). Throughout the play, Gay's Alison continues to comment on the disconnect between her own experience of sexual desire and her awareness of the prevailing social expectations for an older woman's sexuality.

If feminine aging is treated as a potential sexual disqualifier in the 1713 version of the play, masculine aging is the subject of only passing attention. Both Gay's Wife of Bath and Franklyn comment on his advanced age, but in a less dismissive tone than that applied to feminine aging. Reminiscent of the manner in which Chaucer's Wife of Bath berates her former husbands with insults that refer to their age, Gay's Wife of Bath addresses Franklyn variably as "old Chronicle," "old Nicodemus," Old Jeroboam," "old Touchwood," "my lusty Nestor," "old greybeard," "old boy," and "old Nestor " yet again. Despite the addition of "old" to each of these monikers, though, Gay's Wife's tone generally appears flirtatious rather than insulting. His age, too, does nothing to discourage Alison from her frequent propositions of marriage to Franklyn even after his initial refusal: "We are too Old now-a-days to pretend to those things" (Fuller 1: I.302). Rather than addressing Frankyln's age in this moment, Gay's Wife immediately turns it to a defense of her own continuing sexual desirability, insisting "this Person of mine . . . grows the sweeter for its age" (Fuller 1: I.306–08). Like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, then, Gay's Alison is also keenly aware of aging and its impacts and also of the double

standards that govern the expression of and responses to an aging woman's sexuality.

Borrowing a theme from Chaucer's Wife of Bath who insists that, despite her aging, she will continue to pursue romantic and sexual fulfillment ("The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle" (III 478)), this pursuit preoccupies Gay's Wife of Bath to the exclusion of all other interests. The existence of the sexual double standards mentioned above then influences the manner in which Gay's Wife seeks to attain sexual fulfillment. In view of the perception that aging has rendered her less sexually attractive, Gay's Alison resorts to deception and manipulation in order to fulfill her sexual desires. While Doggrell is plotting his seduction of Myrtilla, Gay's Alison appears to have set her own sights on Doggrell as her next husband, ignoring his evident disinterest. Doggrell presents his plan for courting Myrtilla to Gay's Wife of Bath, who has plans of her own as revealed in an aside to the audience in which she declares that Doggrell "thinkest to make me only Auxiliary—but I'faith, I'll lay ten to one, I'll make myself Principal in the end" (Fuller 1: III.257–59). Doggrell describes the letter he would like Alison to deliver to Myrtilla and Alison suggests that he send a kiss instead, which she insists he physically give her in order that she might deliver it. The two exchange kisses twice as Alison promises to deliver his sentiments. When the two reconvene to discuss Myrtilla's response, Gay's Wife uses the moment as an excuse to exchange further kisses with Doggrell, who this time comments that "[a]n old woman's kisses, to my taste, are like the embraces of a drunkard" (Fuller 1: III.194–95). This moment makes clear that Doggrell is not merely uninterested in the Wife but actively disgusted by her and

points to her age as being the chief element animating this disgust.[160] By portraying reactions to the Wife's sexuality as a source of disgust within the play, Gay builds on Chaucer's construction of the Wife as middle-aged in a negative manner (which is applied only to her character) that further perpetuates societal perceptions disparaging the aging feminine body more generally.[161]

Despite Doggrell's expressed disgust at her sexual advances, Gay's Wife disregards his professed inclinations and further manipulates him to satisfy her own desire. As Gay's Wife of Bath, disguised in Myrtilla's habit, awaits Doggrell's arrival for a sexual assignation, she comments on her own sexual desire as she notes that "[i]nclination, I perceive, does not only float in youthful Veins" (Fuller 1: III.303–04). [162] This statement by Gay's Wife reminds the audience that sexuality

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[160] Doggrell's disgust at the Wife's kisses calls to mind the knight's response to the "olde wyf" in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, however further consideration of aging and disgust in the tale told by Chaucer's Wife is outside of the scope of this thesis.

[161] Portraying an act, substance, or body as a source of disgust sends a powerful message to viewers and observers. Carolyne Larrington quotes social psychologist Paul Rozin's argument that "disgust is a powerful tool for negative socialization; a very effective way to get people to avoid something and to have this avoidance internalized is to make the entity disgusting" (144).

[162] Gay's decision to portray Alison's stolen veil as crucial to hide her aging in her deception of Doggrell makes literal conversations about aging and desire that remain relevant today. Alison experiences her visible aging as nonrepresentative of her inner feelings and knows she must disguise her aging face. The perception of the aging face or body as a mask or disguise appears repeatedly in both current literary works and in accounts of aging across the social sciences; the concept of the "mask of ageing" refers to the disconnect experienced between one's aging appearance and a sense of inward youthfulness. For more on the "mask of ageing," see Featherstone and Hepworth.

extends beyond one's youthfulness even as it underscores the portrayal of her sexuality as a source of humor within the 1713 play. As she thinks ahead to the approaching affair, Gay's Alison refuses to heed social conventions on aging women's desire, "I shall not, at this time of Day, let the World be Judge of my Constitution," and states that though she has "worn out two Brace and a half of brave jolly Husbands . . . yet I shall dare venture on t'other matrimonial Voyage" (Fuller 1: III.307–09). Gay's Wife of Bath is aware of social taboos aimed at aging feminine sexuality and, in her awareness, she explicitly refuses to adhere to these expectations. She cites her own age and, one assumes, the life experience that aging brings, as justification for following her own desires rather than embracing a retirement to a sexless widowhood. It is notable that only Gay's Wife of Bath is portrayed as engaging in this type of considered thought about the role aging plays in socially acceptable courtship and sexual expression—the Chaucer character's age goes uncommented upon.

In an aside to the audience in the 1713 play, Alison makes explicit the disconnect between her society's view of the aging feminine body and her own experiences. Doggrell and Alison engage in a brief flirtatious exchange before Alison (disguised as the nun Myrtilla) agrees to allow Doggrell to accompany her to her room. Doggrell coyly assures her that he will "presume to take no Liberties but will be agreeable" (Fuller 1: III.380), prompting Alison/Myrtilla's aside:

> *Beauty, like Colour, owes it self to Light;*
> *For Youth and Age boast equal Charms by Night;*
> *And we can still please ev'ry Sense—but Sight*

(Fuller 1: III.381–83, italics in original)

Though she previously stated her refusal to abide by societal conventions related to feminine aging and desire, this aside makes clear Alison's awareness of the prevailing social views regarding the aging female body's loss of desirability despite its retention of its sexual functionality. Gay's Wife emphasizes her continuing ability to gratify masculine sexual desire—as long as she remains veiled, in the shadows, or unseen. It is the *visibility* of her sexual appetite and of her proactive pursuit of sexual satisfaction despite her age, then, that sets Gay's Wife of Bath apart from the portrayals of the other women in the play and specifically marks her desire as obscene.

After her initial success, Gay's Alison continues her pursuit of Doggrell, unaware that he has married in secret that morning. In the closing act of the 1713 play, the Wife suggests he arrange another assignation: "I never think of a Garden, but presently some of my youthful Excursions pop into my Memory" (Fuller 1: V.249–50).[163] In a disconcerting moment, Alison builds on earlier suggestions that Doggrell consider force in his courtship of Myrtilla as the Wife sings him an "Old Song" equating a woman's "no" with consent in a story of a "Swain full fair" pursuing a "Pretty tight Country Lass" (Fuller 1: V.256–59).[164] The song prompts

[163] This line might remind a knowing audience of the lecherous old Januarie of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* (or of Pope's modernization of the same) and thus could align Gay's Alison with his character.

[164] Despite its subject matter, this song became a popular success and was reprinted in broadside form and included in later collections of popular music (Dearing 4). For an extensive discussion of

Doggrell to confess his recent marriage to Alison, who assumes Myrtilla has betrayed her and says "'twas a little Unchristian-like too, methinks, to take the advantage of an Old woman" (Fuller 1: V.304–06).

Aware she will no longer be able to entrap Doggrell in matrimony, Gay's Wife of Bath turns her eye to Franklyn, peppering him with questions on her continued desirability:

> Have I not a bonny Complexion, my Heart of Oak? Dost thou not trace the Remains of Beauty through every feature?—Look again, Man,—view me all over, old Boy—Slidikins, my Face is like an ancient Medal—Antiquity does but add to its Value[.]
> (Fuller 1: V.392–96)

Though Doggrell might have responded to the Wife's desire with disgust, this does not reflect how Alison sees herself. She points to her attractive complexion and insists on the "Remains of Beauty" it retains, and further suggests that she becomes more attractive with age rather than less so. Despite her insistence that Franklyn attentively observe her appearance, he appears to ignore her comments. The Wife's proposal of marriage to Franklyn in Act V is not her first in the 1713 play. After her initial proposal in Act I, Franklyn replies, "We are too Old now-a-days to pretend to those things," prompting Alison to respond, "Slidikins!—Old! Old!— pray do not measure my Corn with your Bushel, old dry Bones—this Person of mine—I would

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the "murky continuum of ambivalence and inconsistency" found in the treatment of rape and rape jokes in the mid-eighteenth century, see Dickie.

have you to know, like a Medlar—grows the sweeter for its Age, Old Grey-beard" (Fuller 1: I.304–06). This comparison is repurposed from Chaucer's *Reeve's Prologue*:

> But if I fare as dooth an open-ers –
> That ilke fruyt is ever lenger the wers,
> Til it be roten in mullok or in stree.
> We olde men, I drede, so fare we:
> Til we be roten, kan we nat be rype" (I 3871–75)

This reappropriation aligns Alison's character with another lustful and aged pilgrim, one who does not appear in Gay's reimagining.[165] Though the Reeve notes that a medlar must rot before it ripens, Gay's Wife instead optimistically describes this aging process as one of sweetening rather than decay. Despite this argument for Alison's continuing sexual desirability, Franklyn remains distracted by his daughter's elopement. Franklyn's refusal to respond to her earlier advances prompts Alison to change tactics and suggest marriage-as-revenge to Franklyn, stating they might "get Heirs in defiance of Age and the World" (Fuller 1: V.426). Alison continues, "Give me thy hand then, old Nestor—I will defie the World to shew another such like Couple, in the decline of their Age. Ours is a meer Italian Autumn, that even excels the Spring in its variety of Beauty" (Fuller 1: V.543–46) to which Franklyn makes no response. Finally, Franklyn appears to accept Alison's

[165] The Reeve's age might prevent him from engaging in sexual activity but he remains able to speak about it: "For whan we may nat doon, than wol we speke" (I 3881). Like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, the Reeve declares "ik have alwey a coltes tooth" (I 3888).

proposal, declaring to his daughter that he "will marry on purpose to get Heirs to disinherit [Florinda]" (Fuller 1: V.528). This acceptance appears to suggest that the Wife of Bath is, in fact, premenopausal despite all the disparaging comments on her advanced age.[166]

This final acknowledgement speaks to the disparity running throughout the play between the Wife's experience of her age and the markedly more negative responses that it provokes. Carolyne Larrington borrows the concept of "moralization" from the psychology of emotion and defines it as the process of "the transfer into the domain of disgust of an activity that has previously been thought innocuous" (138). While the old hag in the tale Chaucer's Wife tells might be

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166 Daniel Defoe's *Conjugal Lewdness* (1727) considers the question of the right and wrong reasons that one might marry and particular attention is given to the marriages and remarriages of older women in chapter IX, entitled "Of Marrying at Unsuitable Years" (161). Defoe argues that marriages in which women are clearly past child-bearing age are pursued solely for sexual pleasure and thus prime examples of "Matrimonial Whoredom" (162). Various examples are given, including one that sounds quite familiar:

> [T]his Woman casting her vitiated Eyes upon a young Fellow of twenty-five or thirty Years old, perhaps her Servant, her Book-Keeper, or her late Husband's Steward . . . she presently takes Care to let him know, that he may be admitted, if he will push at it. The young Fellow takes the Occasion, and, making his easy Interest, she marries him. If any Man is displeased at my calling this by the Name of Matrimonial Whoredom, let him find a better Name for it. (163)

Defoe continues with other examples in which the woman's age and fertility provide either enticement or disincentive to marriage by men either not wishing to expand their families or young men looking to marry wealth, all of which Defoe labels as "Matrimonial Whoredom."

considered a candidate for causing disgust, the Wife of Bath herself is described by the Chaucer pilgrim as still attractive, with her face "[b]oold . . . and fair" and her exact age is never specified in the *Canterbury Tales* (I 458). Gay's decision to show other characters reacting to Alison's sexuality with disgust is consistent with other early eighteenth-century depictions of aging women's sexuality, both in Gay's work and elsewhere. His poem "The Toilette" (1716) describes the ravages of age on both appearance and social opportunity for Lydia, pictured as well past her prime at the age of thirty-five ("twenty springs had cloath'd the Park with green, / Since *Lydia* knew the blossom of fifteen" (lines 1–2)). Though Gay's *Wife of Bath* is a comedy, the issues of stigmatized feminine aging and of gendered social expectations all reflect serious concerns in the early eighteenth century. Dickie points to a tendency in Gay's work to employ a tone "where serious social problems are evoked but comically contained so that the final effect is a wry acceptance" (129). I return here to the concept of social obscenity to suggest that Gay's portrayal of the Wife as a comic figure who is "too old" and "too sexy" both depends on and upholds the existence of gendered social norms about feminine age and sexuality. Gay's reinterpretation of the Wife firmly connects her socially obscene aging feminine body with her licentiousness and affirms through this alignment that both should be recognized as a threat to patriarchal social order. If the Wife's threatening sexuality in the earlier play was evoked with "wry acceptance," this would be significantly altered in Gay's 1730 version of *The Wife of Bath*.

"Every body provided but me!": Endings Happy and Unhappy[167]

Just as Gay's portrayal of the Wife of Bath change noticeably from the 1713 version to the 1730 version, so too does the ending of the play, particularly for the Wife. While both the earlier and later versions of Gay's play end with a string of marriages, only the Wife of Bath's ending changes significantly from one version to the next. In the 1713 version, Gay depicts each character in the relationship they might be understood to deserve by the close of the play. Chaucer has won the superstitious Myrtilla through trickery, but both appear happy. The conceited coxcomb Doggrell, obsessed with status and "Quality," finds himself married to Myrtilla's clever serving woman Busie. Merit and Florinda, the only mutually devoted lovers in the play, have eloped and then returned to seek Franklyn's blessing after the fact. Though the fates of the other couples are clearly noted and their marriages completed, the 1713 play offers only minor textual hints that the Wife of Bath and Franklyn will end up together. After Alison's repeated proposals and suggestions, Franklyn appears to finally be convinced by her argument that they marry as a form of revenge against Florinda. If Franklyn's original description of the Wife in the 1713 version of the play appears to speak admiringly of her talkative nature and flirtatious behavior, he gives no further indications of interest, sexual or otherwise, in her character throughout the play. The notion that her only value to him is in service to vengeance seems to be a somewhat pessimistic ending

[167] *The Wife of Bath* (1730) v.ix.2.

for the Wife; the 1730 version of the play would deny her even this degree of satisfaction. Her longing for a sixth husband, shared with that of Chaucer's Wife of Bath, is left unanswered in Gay's later revision.[168]

Whereas the ending of the 1713 play for the Wife suggests that Frankyln and Alison will pair up, in the closing moments of the 1730 play, Alison's proposal to Plowdon is portrayed very differently. [169] In this later version, her advances are not drawn out, built upon, or repeated as in the earlier play, nor does she offer up the possibilities of heirs: her voice is lessened and hints of her potential ongoing fertility are removed. Instead, her chief enticement is that their marriage would be understood as revenge by Florinda. Alison suggests to Plowdon, "[W]hy should we not divert ourselves? . . . . Revenge yourself by your own marriage" to which Plowdon responds, "And so have the revenge light upon my own head, too.—I wish women would be less impertinent" (Fuller 2: V.vii.66–67). [170] Alison is both rebuffed and insulted, once more cast as but a single example of a gender-wide

[168] In his introduction to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, Larry Benson interrupts a generally positive description of the Wife of Bath to parenthetically note that "there are no volunteers when she announces her readiness for another marriage" (11). John Gay appears to have made a similar observation in his 1730 rewriting of the Wife.

[169] Bowden assesses that the rewritten ending of the 1730 *Wife of Bath*, in which the Wife ends up punished for her lust, was one of the factors which made the later version inferior to the 1713 version (*Afterlife* 94). In the absence of surviving documentation of audience responses to the play, it is difficult to know if this view was also held by Gay's viewing public.

[170] The character of Plowdon in the 1730 play corresponds with Franklyn in the 1713 version.

problem: feminine disrespectfulness.[171] Alison responds to the situation by lamenting "[e]very body provided for but me! This is very hard now. But I have had my husbands, and buried my husbands; and what can any woman wish more? So I must even be content," in a final drastic reversal of character (Fuller 2: V.ix.2–5). Though she appears to be saddened by the ending she has been allotted, Gay's Wife of Bath also indicates a sense of acceptance of her romantic isolation that feels out of keeping with Chaucer's Wife and with the Wife of the 1713 version of the play.[172] Over the seventeen years between versions of the play, in which Gay himself reached middle age, his reworking of the ending suggests that his views on feminine aging and sexuality became harsher. Despite her portrayal as a somewhat less vocal and less lascivious character than the 1713 Wife of Bath, the Alison of 1730 still suffers more deprivation and isolation at the end of the play as a result of her behavior.

This moment of isolation, though, is not the last that the audience sees of Gay's Wife of Bath. In both versions of the play, it is the actress playing the Wife who delivers the epilogue to the play, offering a summation of Alison's life story that adheres fairly closely (if selectively) to that presented in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's*

[171] For more on masculine complaints against unruly feminine disrespectfulness, see Chapter One.

[172] Speculating about Chaucer's Wife's continuing appeal over the centuries, Mary Carruthers observes that "what is extraordinary about the Wife's power is that she keeps it; no effective effort is made in the poem to restrain or squelch it" (43). Chaucer, in other words, does not reform or correct her by removing her power or by attempting to contain her character.

Prologue.[173] Ann Thompson notes that epilogues early in the eighteenth century were often intended to be delivered by women and argues that "[i]f the epilogue determines the mood the audience takes away, then real women did (if only temporarily) get the last word" (113).[174] The Wife describes herself in the epilogue to Gay's play as "[g]rown old in Cupid's Camp" (line 3) and bringing together the topics of love and aging, before offering one final round of advice for catching and keeping a husband, instructing her listeners to "learn from me" (line 19).[175] The violence and martial imagery used through this epilogue paint a portrait of Gay's Wife of Bath as not just one who "koude of that art the olde daunce" as in Chaucer but as an active combatant in the war between the sexes (I 476).

The Wife describes herself as a soldier in Cupid's Camp - and a well-trained one at that, never slow "to single combat" (line 5). She describes marriage as the result of a battle not just between men and women, but between Reason, on the men's side, and a "ready cunning" for women (lines 17–18). The two warring sides, described in this manner, carry a moral weight in favor of the men as women rely on trickery and manipulation. The Wife's many successful conquests, however, argue in favor of the efficacy of the feminine side and hint at her belief that men's

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[173] This Epilogue is widely speculated to have been written by Alexander Pope, the subject of the next chapter, though it is not credited as such within the play (Bowden 94). See Fuller for further evidence.

[174] In her study on early eighteenth-century English theatrical productions, Thompson counts over one hundred epilogues between 1660 and 1710 written to be spoken by actresses (113).

[175] Quotations from the epilogue are cited by line number and taken from the 1713 version of the play as reproduced in Fuller vol. 1. The epilogue appears unchanged from one version to the next.

reason/morality/enlightenment – their refusal to fight dirty, in other words – might be what holds them back. This description of the eminently capable and warlike nature of Gay's Wife marks a distinct contrast to the notion of "weak wives" that opens the play. Alison closes with a prayer to Cupid requesting, should no sixth husband be in her future, that he "indulge me with a Coup de Grace" (lines 33–36). Though these words are lightly spoken, as so much of what Gay's Alison says is, their placement as the final moment of the play lends them an air of seriousness. If the Wife of Bath is not a wife, can she exist at all?[176]

One wonders if the repetition of this epilogue after both versions of the play, despite their very different endings, changed the final perception of the Wife of Bath with which each audience left the play. The final image of the Wife likely depends on the manner in which the epilogue was performed, thus in the absence of contemporary reports on the play, this question cannot be answered. It does, however, emphasize the multi-layered nature of this character: the Wife as written by Chaucer, then reinterpreted by Gay in a play which then closed with an epilogue by Pope. Returning to the interplay of feminine aging and sexuality, Chaucer's construction of the Wife makes clear his own awareness of the difficulties faced by women as they age out of socially sanctioned desirability. Gay's plays suggest he, too, is aware of these difficulties; the discomfort of his portrayal of the Wife is born of the clash between Alison's awareness of these expectations, her willingness to

[176] Though in Chaucer's day the word "wyf" was understood as more broadly defined to refer to a married or unmarried woman, this was less common by the eighteenth century, and in a play that fixates on marriage, the meaning intended by Gay is clear.

deceive to subvert them, and Doggrell's stated disgust with her aging feminine body. The 1730 version of Gay's play, in which the Wife of Bath is pointedly isolated from the rest of the happy couples at the end, suggests Gay's assessment that the social taboos against aging feminine sexuality must be retained if Alison was to be adapted "to the publick taste" (Johnson viii).

Conclusion

If responses to the Wife of Bath as a character are pictured as a continuum, one could locate the initial descriptions of her character in the two versions of Gay's play at opposing ends. The shift from the 1713 description of the Wife as a "frolicksome" source of "Mirth" to the 1730 description of her character as excessively "carnal" and "talkative" is a compelling case study for responses to the Wife's sexuality in general—and as I have discussed, both can be supported with evidence from Chaucer's text. Both versions of Gay's Wife of Bath as a character focus on aspects of her vocality and sexuality, where an excess of mirth-making can become an accusation of loquaciousness, and an excess of frolicsomeness quickly becomes carnality. From one version to the next, Gay portrays the Wife's sexuality and feminine aging, presenting them as sources of disgust or objects of ridicule within the play and, finally, as the cause of her eventual abandonment and isolation in the 1730 version. In doing so, he also chooses to select a small subset of the qualities that make up Chaucer's Wife while stripping her of her friends and gossibs, her profession, her history as a serial pilgrim, and the details of her

experiences with her former husbands that might have helped to shape her thoughts on sex and marriage.[177]

Gay's adaptational choices in reinterpreting the Wife were likely influenced by a number of factors, including adapting for the stage as well as the need to better shape Chaucer's Wife's character to the new story Gay intended to tell. While the simplification of the Wife's character in the ballads of Chapters One and Two can be ascribed at least in part to the brevity of the ballad form, Gay's play is a significantly longer text than Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and thus the choice to limit the qualities making up her character appears more intentional. In a play revolving around marriages and courtship, the decision to focus on the Wife of Bath's lasciviousness makes narrative sense. However, in theorizing social obscenity, the choice to present aging feminine sexuality as a source of disgust or a punchline for other characters in the play is perhaps Gay's most impactful decision. In other literary contexts, Larrington reflects on the use of disgust to stigmatize certain behaviors that can be classified as "apparently innocuous, but ideologically undesirable" in order to control or eliminate them (147). Through his staging of other characters responding to the Wife's sexuality as laughable or upsetting, Gay both devalues and disempowers Chaucer's character, offering her up to audiences as an object lesson in the hazards of socially unacceptable feminine behavior even as the similarly-aged masculine characters in the play are held to different standards. This response to sexuality and feminine age is exactly what Susan Sontag addresses

[177] For more on changes to women's rights and economic opportunities between Chaucer's period and the eighteenth century, see Kelly-Gadol.

in her essay "The Double Standard of Aging" (1972). Sontag writes that "[a]n older woman is, by definition, sexually repulsive—unless, in fact, she doesn't look old at all. The body of an old woman . . . is always understood as a body that can no longer be shown, offered, unveiled" (29).[178] Thus, if this desiring older feminine body *is* "shown" or "offered," acceptable responses are the same as those elicited by more widely recognized forms of obscenity—horror, disgust, derision, laughter.[179]

As more recent adaptations of the Wife of Bath make clear, however, the Wife of Bath's aging sexuality can also be interpreted in a different way: as something to be celebrated rather than censured, an object of admiration rather than disgust. This is made particularly clear in Zadie Smith's adaptation of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, which is acted out by Alvita, the Wife of Willesden herself. At the moment of the old woman's transformation in the *Tale,* stage directions indicate Alvita be revealed as the transformed woman: "ALVITA pulls off the blindfold to reveal her fabulous, thick, middle-aged beauteousness. And DARREN looks

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[178] For more on aging sexuality, disgust, and shame in contemporary women's writing, see Bouson 39–92. For the aging feminine body as "the disgust object par excellence," see McGinn 108–09 (qtd Bouson 41).

[179] As just one example, the "Acting Your Age Campaign" in the UK published an open letter calling for changes to address the unequal treatment male and female actors face, stating that "[t]oday's in-demand actress is tomorrow's unemployed middle-aged actress" and comparing the transitory "shelf life" female actors face as compared to the "whole life" representation allowed for male actors (Bryant). For a feminist perspective, see Sontag. For a review of social science literature on perceptions of body, age, and sexuality, see Gonzalez. For more on "learned cultural shame" and internalization, see Morrison.

delighted" (103). This response marks a profound turn from the disgust with which the Wife is greeted by the younger man in Gay's play. While the advances of Gay's Wife of Bath are spurned or dismissed by those she approaches, Smith's Alvita is embraced, and her clearly stated status as middle-aged is not framed as a sexual disqualifier. At the same time, Smith's Alvita, like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, reflects on her own aging with fond nostalgia:

> Oh, Lawd Almighty! When I think back to
> Them days when I was young, I can't do
> Nothing but smile. I love to remember
> That sweet May time, now I'm in September . . .
> I'm still glad I had my time in the sun!
> Now I'm old. Boobs hang low. Lost my bum.
> But you know what? It's really whatever. (48)

In this passage, Alvita's distinctive voice references her age and her sexual past with an air of good-humored acceptance. This tone and the version of the Wife it represents remains consistent throughout Smith's play. It is the closing moments of each play which most clearly portray the Wife of Bath as understood by each playwright: Gay's Wife is left alone onstage, offering a brief recapitulation of her romantic history and current isolation, while Smith's Alvita has invited the author to join her (and the rest of the cast) as they dance on the stage.

Transporting Chaucer's Wife of Bath from the printed page to the London stage, whether in the eighteenth century or the twenty-first, entails a change of form which, by definition, brings characters to life, often through exaggeration and

amplification. While Gay portrays others responding to the Wife's sexuality in a negative manner, Smith presents this same aspect of the Wife to her audience as realistic and empowering. Though Chaucer's text might leave interpretations of the portrayal Wife of Bath's sexuality (along with judgements of its potential obscenity) in the hands of the reader, Gay and Smith do this work for us.

Chapter Four

Too Much: Alexander Pope's "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue" and Transforming Obscenity

While the anonymous ballads and John Gay's plays examined in my previous chapters are the work of adapters seeking to create something new inspired by Chaucer's Wife of Bath, Alexander Pope's modernized "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue, from Chaucer" (1713) adheres closely to Chaucer's text, at least in formal terms. At the same time, it distills and compresses the Wife of Bath in a way that amplifies certain qualities, most particularly her supposed licentiousness and her aging. While these are the same qualities discussed in earlier chapters, the amplification that results from Pope's adaptational decision-making as well as the shift in methodology from continuation or insertion to modernization are my key concerns here. As this chapter will show, while Pope attends to the Wife's unruly voice and refrains from completely omitting facets of her sexuality in his modernization, he also highlights and advances her age as a defining quality while severely condensing Chaucer's text.[180] In this respect, Pope's approach to the character of the Wife of Bath resembles that of the cartoonist: to adopt a phrase from cartoonist and theorist Scott McCloud, Pope simplifies in order to amplify, "not so

[180] In his editorial comments on Pope's modernized "Wife of Bath Her Prologue," Pope scholar John Butt indicates lines and passages from Chaucer which Pope often deemed "redundant" and then omitted. Elsewhere Butt describes Pope's reinterpretations in one instance as "ton[ing] down Chaucer" and in another as a misunderstanding of Chaucer's text on the part of Pope (104, 100, 105).

much eliminating details as . . . focusing on specific details" and "stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning'"(30). And while those twenty-first-century adaptations of the Wife of Bath that I have nodded to throughout this thesis have generally celebrated the complexity of Chaucer's character, others such as Seymour Chwast's graphic novel adaptation of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* have, like Pope, simplified the character in order to amplify specific qualities.[181]

Pope's inclusion and subsequent compression of key attributes of the Wife aligns with his misogynistic views. His work further illustrates how the lens of social obscenity invites us to consider how the definition of obscenity might be expanded beyond the sexual and scatological in order to encompass forms of femininity deemed excessive or deviant. While earlier chapters addressed this extension in texts crafted as continuations of and insertions into the Wife's Chaucerian story, Pope's modernization represents the most extreme example in this era of textual intervention responding to the Wife's potential for obscenity. His heavily compressed modernization, despite its formal similarities to Chaucer's text, depicts a Wife of Bath devoid of much of her liveliness and candor. If Pope's youthful decision to modernize Chaucer's text was meant as a rejoinder to Dryden's earlier refusal to include the "too licentious" *Wife of Bath's Prologue* in *Fables Ancient and Modern*, the end result of Pope's attempt proves Dryden's point even as he seeks to defy it: the retention of this "licentiousness" is critical to the character of the Wife.

[181] Seymour Chwast's graphic novel *The Canterbury Tales* (2011) is currently the only comic adaptation I have found which attempts to include all of the characters and tales of Chaucer's work. I return to it in the closing of this chapter.

To this I would add that the manner in which this quality is presented is also key.[182] In my chapter's closing, I discuss how Pope's response to the Wife's excess, more so than in other adaptations in this thesis, forces us to confront the paradox of character as it relates to our understanding of Chaucer's oft-adapted Wife.

"[H]ear with Rev'rence an experience'd Wife!": Modernizing the Wife[183]

Pope turned to Chaucerian adaptation and modernization several times in his early poetic career, during what Pope scholar Philip Smallwood has termed his "precocious decade," viewing Chaucer as an important model for an English poet trying to teach himself the craft (61; Mack, *Pope's Chaucer* 105).[184] Pope adapted the Wife of Bath in multiple texts including a modernized *General Prologue* of the *Canterbury Tales* (1712), published under the name of Thomas Betterton, and a

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[182] In his "Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope" (1782), Joseph Warton comments on Pope's decision to modernize the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, saying "One cannot help but wonder at his choice, which, perhaps, nothing but his youth could excuse" (Brewer 214).

[183] "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue," line 2. Quotations from Pope's "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue, from Chaucer," "January and May; or, the Merchant's Tale, from Chaucer," and "To a Lady. Of the Characters of Women" are taken from *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A Reduced Version of the Twickenham Text*, edited by John Butt (1963), and are cited by line number.

[184] Smallwood describes Pope's precocity during this period (1702–1714) when Pope was in his late teens and early twenties as seen in his work "not by over-reaching himself in an act of naïve and premature, if charming, self-confidence . . .but because we are surprised to find an understanding . . . so beyond his years" (72).

modernized *Wife of Bath's Prologue* (1713), published under his own name (61).[185] Entitled "Chaucer's Characters, or the Introduction to the Canterbury Tales. By Mr. Thomas Betterton," the modernized *General Prologue* was first published in Bernard Lintot's *Miscellaneous Poems and Translations. By Several Hands*, and was later reprinted multiple times between 1712 and 1795 by Lintot and others (Bowden, *Modernizations* 9). Pope first published the modernized "Wife of Bath Her Prologue" the following year in Richard Steele's *Poetical Miscellanies, Consisting of Original Poems and Translations. By the Best Hands* (Pope 98).[186] Both "Chaucer's Characters"

[185] Debate on Pope's authorship of the Chaucer modernizations ascribed to Thomas Betterton remains unresolved. Betsy Bowden points to Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets, 1779–81* and Warton's *Works of Alexander Pope* (1797) as both declaring Pope's authorship of the Betterton texts (342 n.39). Pope scholar and biographer Maynard Mack suggests the adaptations represented at a minimum Pope's heavy revisions of works by Betterton or even Pope's own work (*A Life* 92–93). Following Bowden and Mack, I will refer to "Chaucer's Characters" as authored by Pope throughout this thesis. The modernized *General Prologue* is not the only Chaucerian texts ascribed to Pope but not published under his name; for more on Pope as the author of the epilogue to John Gay's *Wife of Bath*, see Fuller. This epilogue is also discussed in Chapter Three.

[186] Later collections such as *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer, Modernis'd by Mr. Betterton, Mr. Boyle, Mr. Brooke, Mr. Cobb, Mr. Dryden, Mr. Grosvenor, Mr. Markland, Mr. Pope, Mr. Ogle, Published by Mr. Ogle. To which is prefixed, The Life of Chaucer, Written by Mr. Urry* (1742) and *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer, completed in a Modern Version* (1795) published both "Chaucer's Characters" and "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue" in the same text but in different volumes. The Ogle collection, in particular, included only about one third of the *Canterbury Tales*, and Bruce E. Graver notes that Ogle's selections were informed by his interest in Chaucer as a master of characterization and, as a result, "concentrated on the bawdy Chaucer" (421).

and "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue" compress Chaucer's text significantly (by a third in the case of "Chaucer's Characters" and by nearly half in the case of "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue"). If "[o]ne sign of disinterest is brevity," then Pope's reworking of Chaucer's text might suggest a notable degree of disinterest (Bowden, *Afterlife* 75).[187] Rather than disinterest, however, perhaps this brevity signaled a different response: discomfort, or even disdain.[188]

As earlier chapters have demonstrated, Pope was not the first writer to produce an unflattering adaptation of the Wife of Bath. Like earlier adaptations, Pope's modernization also responds to aspects of the Wife often framed as socially obscene (her voice and her advanced age) as well as her sexual candor. Loquaciousness remains a key attribute of the Wife of Bath, with Pope's modernization using her vocality to paint the Wife as more aggressive and manipulative than her Chaucerian original in both "Chaucer's Characters" and "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue."[189] Added lines in "Chaucer's Characters," suggest that

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[187] In contrast, John Dryden's Chaucerian translations or paraphrases could extend to nearly twice the length of their originals after Dryden's additions and changes (Graver 420).

[188] In "An Essay on Criticism" (1711), Pope declares that "No Pardon vile *Obscenity* should find" adding that "*Obscenity* must prove / As Shameful sure as *Impotence* in *Love*," suggesting that obscenity in poetry is as unwelcome and detrimental as impotence is in love affairs (lines 530–33). Despite this earlier declaration, obscenity (particularly the scatological) would go on to appear in Pope's other work. See Reinbold.

[189] Feminine speech was an often-broached topic in satirical writing in this period. In a survey of relevant texts, Stephen H. Browne rather succinctly sums up the commonly seen misogynistic tendencies regarding women's vocality: "The satiric portrayal of women by men in eighteenth-

not only is the Wife overly talkative, but she also has a habit of speaking beyond her knowledge, calling her trustworthiness into question: "Of various Haps and Perils by the way, / Much had she known, and yet much more would say" (Bowden, *Modernizations* lines 396–97).[190] In addition to being unreliable, the Wife's speech is further described as interminable, unserious, and immoral, devoted to satisfying her lustful nature ("Of *Jests* she had an unexhausted store. / Her Talk did notably *Love's Art* advance, / For she had practis'd long that *Old, New Dance*" (Bowden, *Modernizations* lines 405–07)). Her garrulousness is even implicated as a source of delay for the pilgrimage itself in another added line, which describes the Wife as "Gingling the Bitt, [as she] slack'd her Pace to chat" (Bowden, *Modernizations* line 399). This addition shows the Wife's capacity for making noise in "Chaucer's Characters" as overflowing her speech and readily apparent even in her horsemanship.

The character of the Wife modernized in "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue" shares many of the same attributes described in "Chaucer's Characters." From the opening lines of Pope's "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue," the Wife's voice is presented as more strident and aggressive than Chaucer's Wife as she commands her audience's attention ("hear with Rev'rence an experience'd Wife!") and demands their unquestioning trust ("think, for once, a Woman tells you true") (lines

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century England may be grouped . . . according to two general characterizations: (1) Womens's speech is perverse, and (2) it is meaningless" (21).

[190] This tactic is reminiscent of the manner in which the patriarchs of the ballads diminished and dismissed the Wife's complaints; see Chapters One and Two.

3–4). This shift in tone more closely aligns the Wife's approach to addressing her audience within the poem with the verbally domineering behavior she used to maintain control over her husbands. While her way of speaking becomes more controlling and forceful, Pope also removes all interruptions to her speech: both when she is interrupted by her fellow pilgrims, and those moments in which Chaucer's Wife of Bath interrupts herself or loses her place in her story.[191] These omissions heighten the socially obscene qualities of the Wife's voice by removing scenarios in which she feels (rightly) called to defend herself in the face of masculine interruption and dismissal and also the particularly humanizing moments of repetition, forgetfulness, and remembering that make her speech feel "real."[192] Without these moments of interruption, the speech of Pope's Wife reads more like a well-rehearsed monologue rather than a conversational collection of memories, confessions, and anecdotes. In omitting these passages, Pope also removes Chaucer's Wife's declaration of how her story-telling ought to be understood when she declares her "entente nys but for to pleye" (III 192). These moments of adaptation which might be intended to create a more simplified and orderly text, then, also play an amplifying role through their focusing on the negative attributes

[191] Among the moments Pope omits are when Chaucer's Wife repeats herself twice over less than thirty lines ("Now wol I speken of my fourthe housbonde" (III 452); "Now wol I tellen of my fourthe housbonde" (III 480)), as well as the moment when she loses her place in the story ("But now, sire, lat me se what I shal seyn. / A ha! By God, I have my tale ageyn" (III 585–86)).

[192] For more on the work being done by these vocal markers in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, see Everett 206–07.

of the Wife's voice while removing or changing details which might have helped some eighteenth-century readers to envision the Wife's character differently.

In addition to speaking more aggressively, Pope's presentation of the Wife's vocality further highlights other negative qualities of her character: her excessive pride and her manipulative behavior, two topics about which she is shown to openly brag. One way in which Pope accomplishes this shift is through adding lines not found in his Chaucerian source text; these additions often clarify aspects of her transgressive behavior left ambiguous or unmentioned by Chaucer.[193] The Wife of "Chaucer's Characters" is described as "one who scorn'd to grant / Her Work outdone at *Ipres*, or at *Gaunt*," a change which shifts the origin of the praise for the Wife's skills from the narrator to the Wife herself (Bowden, *Modernizations* lines 372–73). Pope, in other words, reframes the narrator's expression of admiration for the Wife's skill at weaving ("Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt / She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt" (III 447–48)) into an accusation of pridefulness and boasting. Employing a similar tactic in "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue," Pope adds new lines in which the Wife describes herself as one in an extended familial line of overbearing women, claiming "[t]he Wives of all my Family have rul'd / Their tender Husbands, and their Passions cool'd" (lines 195–96). As the lines added to "Chaucer's Characters" show the Wife to be excessively proud of her own work, this addition to "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue" re-emphasizes the Wife's excessively controlling nature and further implicates all of the other women in her

[193] One scholar argues that "what is most quintessentially Chaucerian in the Wife's *Prologue*" is "its playful and deliberate ambiguity with regard to her chastity" (Kennedy 220).

family for the same problematic behavior. In each case, it is the Wife's voice (indirectly and directly) which reveals (and even revels in) this socially transgressive behavior.

Her voice is not the Wife's only attribute to be construed as socially obscene in these modernizations. Pope, like the patriarchs labeling the Wife a *carling*, reads the Wife as old rather than middle-aged and incorporates this aspect into his modernizations.[194] The opening lines of "Chaucer's Characters" highlight the Wife's age by describing her face not as "fair" (III 458), but as "Autumnal" (Bowden, *Modernizations* line 371), while also removing the Chaucer pilgrim's brief moment of sympathy for her deafness, "that was scathe" (III 446). Her age is further emphasized and tied to her excessive sexuality in the closing line of her description which states that "she had practis'd long that *Old, New Dance*" (Bowden, *Modernizations* line 407). Whereas Chaucer closes his *General Prologue* portrait of the Wife with a nod to her knowledge in the "game of love," the Wife of "Chaucer's Characters" is described with language which leeringly underscores her sexual history as something "practis'd long." By bookending the portrait of the Wife with clear indications of her advanced age coupled with suggestions of the excessive nature of her sexuality, "Chaucer's Characters" makes these aspects more central to her description.

In the modernized "Wife of Bath Her Prologue," a more pessimistic interpretation of her aging comes directly from the Wife's own mouth. Whereas

[194] See Chapter Two.

Chaucer's Wife describes herself around the time of her fourth marriage as "yong and ful of ragerye, / Stibourn and strong, and joly as a pye" (III 455–56), Pope's Wife presents her aging in more off-putting terms as she describes herself between her third and fourth marriages as "past my Bloom, not yet decay'd was I, / Wanton and wild, and chatter'd like a Pye" (lines 209–10). In his modernizing of these lines, Pope casts the "yong" Wife as viewing herself instead in a state of early decline as he replaces her declaration in Chaucer of her own strength and stubbornness with a confession of unruly behavior and excessive volubility.[195] For Pope, old age, garrulousness, and a transgressive sexuality all seem to be interconnected in the character of the Wife of Bath.[196]

Modernizing Chaucer's text also required Pope to respond to the Wife's sexuality, and his decisions to euphemize some aspects of her sexuality while omitting others recreates a Wife who reads as less sexually candid but more sexually immoral.[197] Though Chaucer's Wife uses euphemism to both conceal and reveal her stance on sexuality, Pope's alteration of these euphemisms generally portrays the Wife's use of language as less sexually obscene. In a passage whose

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[195] Additionally, the "yet" in line 209 further implies that Pope's Wife of Bath at the time of the pilgrimage should be understood as in a state of *true* decline.

[196] This treatment of the Wife's age shares some similarities with Pope's reinterpretation of January in his modernization of the *Merchant's Tale*. By aligning the Wife's indeterminate age with the clearly aged January, Pope reads the Wife as an old (and, by extension, inappropriate) lover. For more on Chaucerian obscenity and age in adaptation of the *Merchant's Tale*, see Fleming.

[197] This combination sets Pope's Wife of Bath apart from John Gay's reimagining of the Wife, who is both sexually candid *and* immoral. See Chapter Three.

word choice has sparked a notable amount of scholarly debate, Chaucer's Wife demands of one husband if "ye wolde have my queynte allone?" (III 444).[198] In Pope's modernized version of this passage, his Wife more demurely declares, "What? wou'd you have me to your self alone? / Why take me Love! take all and ev'ry part! / Here's your Revenge! you love it at your heart" (lines 199–200). Comparing these two approaches, we see Chaucer's Wife as narrowing her husband's desire specifically to sexual possession of her genitalia whereas Pope's Wife generalizes this desire to her whole person rather than a specific part of her anatomy.[199] Though clearly still referring to a sexual relationship, Katharine M. Morsberger reads Pope's euphemism as rendering the Wife "enclosed and constrained by linguistic decorum" (13). Elsewhere, Chaucer's Wife mentions the market value of her *bele chose* (III 447) which in Pope becomes simply "what Nature

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[198] Larry D. Benson insists that "queynte is not the forerunner of the modern obscenity; it was not a normal word for 'vagina'; and it was not considered vulgar or obscene" and further argues that its use in a sexual context was exceedingly rare before Chaucer's time and "it was intended as a euphemism on the order of Chaucer's *bele chose*" (33, 37). Benson cites scribal willingness to write the word in the vast majority of surviving *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts as further evidence of its lack of obscenity and concludes that "[q]uite clearly the Wife of Bath is not talking dirty. She is talking cute" (40, 43). See Dane for a brief overview of the debate sparked by Benson and a further response. For discussion of the intricacies of translating this word in the twenty-first century, see Flannery and Fruoco and also see Curtis. For more on translation and obscenity in reference to the word queynte in the *Miller's Tale*, see Jucker and Seiler.

[199] Pope's Wife introduces the concept of sex as a tool of revenge which John Gay's Wife also suggests in an attempt to secure her own marriage to Franklyn in the 1713 version of the play. See Chapter Three.

gave" (line 201). These changes suggest that Pope recognizes the Wife's speech about sexuality and sexual desire as socially obscene and responds to this recognition by minimizing or omitting relevant passages. Though these euphemisms remove some of the Wife's sexual candor by modernizing her speech in a more restrained form, they do not remove her sexual behavior itself. One later example appears to make her sexuality *more* explicit by replacing the Wife's own Latin euphemism in Chaucer's text (*quoniam* (III 608)) with the Wife's declaration that she "had a wond'rous Gift to quench a flame" (line 320).[200]

Elsewhere, Pope's decisions tend to heighten the Wife's sexually obscene presentation as he makes her licentiousness central to the construction of her character. In "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue," Pope's Wife, like Chaucer's, calls attention to Solomon as an acceptable example of the multiply married.[201] Rather than merely citing Solomon as moral precedent, however, Pope reframes the Wife's mention of Solomon's sexual activity in Chaucer ("God woot, the noble king, as to my wit, / The firste nyght had many a myrie fit" (III 41–42)) as her own experience: "I've had, my self, full many a merry Fit, / And trust in Heav'n I may have many

[200] This phrase reappears in Andrew Jackson's modernization "The Character of the Wife of Bath" (1750) in a very different context: "She bore a good Repute amongst the Dames, / And quench'd, successively, five Spouses Flames" (Bowden, *Modernizations* lines 19–20). Rather than suggesting a sexual quenching, Jackson seems to be employing this phrase in relation to the husbands' deaths and suggesting the Wife of Bath might have been responsible in some way. For further brief analysis of Jackson's text, see the conclusion of this thesis.

[201] See Chapter One for evidence of a very different view of Solomon from the Wanton Wife.

yet" (lines 23–24).[202] Later, in her heavily compressed commentary on virginity, Pope's Wife acknowledges the virtue of those who pledge to "perfect Chastity" but adds "Pure let them be, and free from Taint of Vice; / I, for a few slight Spots, am not so nice" (lines 37–39).[203] Pope's Wife signals her own lack of concern with social expectations for feminine conduct when she describes herself as "not so nice."[204] If shifting Solomon's "myrie fits" to the Wife of Bath emphasized her excessive sexuality, mentions of both "taint" and "spots" hint at one possible result of this lasciviousness: contagion and disease. The double meanings carried by both "taint" and "spots" can refer to metaphorical moral blemishes but here they might also suggest the bodily lesions resulting from sexually transmitted illness.[205] The Wife's

[202] Though sexually voracious, Pope's Wife's sense of pleasure disappears due to his omission of Chaucer's Wife's declaration "yet to be right myrie wol I fonde" after lamenting her passed youth (III 479). In place of this optimistic statement, Pope's Wife continues directly to heartbreak as she instead immediately references her "fourth dear Spouse . . . not exceeding true" (line 229).

[203] Pope's replacement of Chaucer's Wife's mention of virginity with "chastity" here is in line with a shift Ingrid H. Tague identifies in eighteenth-century conduct literature away from "praise of virginity," which was replaced by an emphasis on chastity in support of a new cultural focus on "the idealized sentimental marriage" (28).

[204] *OED s.v.* "nice" (*adj.*). Sense 3.a. This usage defines "nice" as describing one who is "[p]recise or particular in matters of reputation or conduct," a sense which Pope's Wife appears to define herself against.

[205] *OED s.v.* "spot" (*n.*) senses I.1.a and I.2.a.

sexuality, then, reads as a threat to both morality and mortality.[206]

If our sense of the Wife's overall sexuality is muddied by Pope's modernizing efforts, any uncertainty about her "Constancy, and Truth" is resolved: she lacks both (Bowden, *Modernizations* line 389). Though the topic of adultery is broached in both Chaucer's *General Prologue* portrait of the Wife and in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, these references remain ambiguous (Kennedy 220). By way of example, in the Wife's prologue, she responds to one husband with the following lines:

> For, certeyn, olde dotard, by youre leve,
> Ye shul have queynte right ynough at eve.
> He is to greet a nygard that wolde werne
> A man to lighte a candle at his lanterne;
> He shal have never the lasse light, pardee. (III 331–35)

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[206] An anonymous poem printed in 1713 sought to address what it viewed as a lack of satirical writing on older women. One passage suggests that even marriage to a prostitute afflicted with sexually transmitted illness was preferable to an old, rich wife:

> Much happ'er had I been, some common Punk
> In Marriage to have join'd how e'er she stunk;
> Tho foul Diseases had shed all her Locks,
> A better Portion were her Claps and Pox
> Nay, tho' a rotten, leaky, old Flux'd Whore,
> Than this foul Mummy, with her Wealthy Store (*A Satyr on an Old Maids* 7)

While the poem closes with a postscript stating that women who remain "maids" due to "prudent or pious considerations" exist as an exception to the above and deserve to be viewed with respect, the virulence of the insults aimed at aging women remain disturbing.

This declaration comes just after the Wife advises her husband to refrain from spying on her and to allow her to go where and do what she pleases. Chaucer's Wife seems to be assuring her husband that any potential dalliances outside of their marriage which she *could* explore will not diminish her sexual desire for him. She stops short of actually confessing to engaging in such activity, either to her husband or to the Canterbury pilgrims listening to her recitation. Faced with this moment of ambiguity, in "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue" Pope reinterprets and retells the scene of the Wife's potential adultery as not just a certainty, but also as a serial habit rather than an occasional lapse:

> Tho' all the Day I give and take Delight,
> Doubt not, sufficient will be left at Night.
> 'Tis but a just and rational Desire,
> To light a Taper at a Neighbor's Fire. (lines 136–39)

Pope's Wife's definitive statement of "I give" offers a much clearer indication of her extramarital misbehavior and further justifies this activity as the result of "rational Desire" (line 138).[207] In Chaucer's passage, the Wife attacks the behavior of one who refuses to allow another to light their candle (with both roles notably deflected to a

[207] Tague notes a tendency on the part of social commentators in the early eighteenth century, such as the authors of periodicals like *The Spectator*, to "increasingly portra[y] women as naturally modest, chaste, and obedient, attacking any woman who failed to live up to these ideals as unnatural, even monstrous" (44).

generic and proverbial "man"), labeling this behavior as a form of stinginess or greed. Applying this metaphor, the husband is seen as the owner of the candle representing the Wife's sexual capacity. Chaucer's Wife suggests that hypothetically affording another man sexual access would not diminish her capacity, but she stops short of a clear admission of adulterous guilt. By contrast, Pope's Wife shifts the focus to the active participation of the one seeking to have their candle lit and further argues in support of this behavior. This shift more clearly marks the Wife as an active sexual transgressor. Further, the Wife's insistence that she is able to exchange sexual favors "all the Day" while still retaining a capacity for further activity at night shows her sexual behavior to be truly excessive and the Wife herself to be insatiable. Pope's modernizing efforts in this passage condense Chaucer's lines in a manner that both amplifies and disambiguates the Wife's sexual immorality.

Though this passage indicates more clearly that the Wife has engaged in adulterous behavior, later in "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue" Pope incorporates additional suggestions of her infidelity. The clearest example of Pope's disambiguation of this facet of Chaucer's text occurs during the Wife's descriptions of her springtime walks with Jankyn. Though Chaucer's Wife suggestively mentions "trewely we hadde swich dalliance, / This clerk and I" (III 565–66), Pope's Wife instead declares, "We grew so intimate, I can't tell how, / I pawn'd my Honour and ingag'd my Vow" (lines 296-97). In this couplet, Pope ends one line with the Wife's demure-seeming refusal to elaborate on her relationship with Jankyn and immediately begins the next line with exactly this information. Elsewhere, the Wife's descriptions of her sexual behavior become both more baldly mercenary and

also generalized (by the Wife) to all women.[208] By way of example, Pope modernizes Chaucer's "[f]or wynnyng wolde I al his lust endure, / And make me a feyned appetit" (III 416–17) to "But fulsome Love for Gain *we* can endure: / For Gold *we* love the Impotent and Old, / And heave, and pant, and kiss, and cling, for Gold" (lines 173–75, emphasis mine). Though the language of these passages generally becomes less *sexually* obscene, as other scholars have observed, I argue that these changes make the behavior depicted more *socially* obscene by portraying the Wife as advocating what would have been considered taboo behavior.[209]

The changes to Chaucer's text surveyed above suggest that Pope's alterations sought to do more than merely modernize the Middle English of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue.* Mack argues that, for many eighteenth-century readers, Chaucer was seen as "an ancestor to whose work and world certain mutings and mutations would have to be applied to make him acceptable to contemporary readers" (Mack *A Life* 126). Pope's decisions, particularly those made in response to the Wife's sexual and social obscenity, extend beyond compression or linguistic modernization as he significantly reshapes both text and character while claiming to retain their

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[208] Tague identifies a number of eighteenth-century anxieties about the "deterioration of marriage into a business contract" (36). If Lawrence Stone's assessment, supported by his reading of legal and literary works as "evidence of an abnormally cynical, mercenary, and predatory ruthlessness about human relationships," of the years between 1680 and 1710 as a time in which England "seems to have lost its moral moorings," then it comes as no surprise that Chaucer's Wife would have been such a figure of interest (27–28, qtd Tague 36).

[209] In 1782, Warton noted that Pope "omitted or softened the grosser and more offensive passages" (Brewer 214). For modern assessments, see Morsberger 13 and Turner, *Biography* 163.

Chaucerian origin.[210] Two additional conceptual lenses bring into focus the true import of these changes: first, the idea that adaptations should be understood as existing along a "reception continuum"; and second, the concept that simplification can function as a tool of amplification. Linda Hutcheon conceives of a "reception continuum" of textual responses arranged according to how closely they adhere to their source text, with literary translations at one side of the spectrum and spin-offs, sequels and prequels, and "expansions" at the other (171).[211] Hutcheon locates retellings around the middle of the continuum and places another category around the midpoint between literary translation and retelling: "forms like condensations and bowdlerizations or censorings in which the *changes are obvious, deliberate, and in some way restrictive*" (171, emphasis mine).[212] Texts, in other words, that structure their recreation efforts around a sense of judgement applied to the source text. Along this continuum, then, we might locate Pope's modernizations closer to one end while the ballads and John Gay's plays would be located towards the opposite

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[210] Though A.D. Cousins refers to Pope's modernization efforts as akin to "mere remodelling and refurbishment," I argue that the changes Pope made are far more than cosmetic (113).

[211] Hutcheon describes works at the "literary translation" end of the spectrum as "forms in which fidelity to the prior work is a theoretical ideal, even if a practical impossibility" indicating the impossibility of thinking about adaptation and translation as completely separate practices (171).

[212] This approach is different from the "fidelity debate" which discussions of adaptation can easily devolve into – it instead invites us to read these texts for the different ways in which the character of the Wife invites response and then interpret these responses as a visible manifestation of lurking biases and expectations in these male adapters.

pole. Though Pope likely envisioned his text as a form of literary translation similar to Dryden's, the extent of his alterations moves Pope's work more firmly toward the middle section of this continuum, dedicated to what Hutcheon suggests we might typically view as "the realm of adaptation proper" (171).[213] More importantly for this thesis, by referring to his reworkings as "modernizations," Pope aligns his work with Chaucer's without acknowledging the changes he made. And for an eighteenth-century reader whose only access to Chaucer's work is through modernizations, Pope's changes would *not* register as "obvious, deliberate, and . . . restrictive" – they would likely not even register as changes. The impact of this modernization on the reception of Chaucer's Wife of Bath as an allegedly obscene character would therefore be profound.

I would like to return to McCloud's conception of "amplification through simplification" as a means of reflecting on Pope's decision-making, which results in a modernized Wife whose simplification to her "essential 'meaning'" paradoxically creates a character whose obscenity is both dulled and amplified. As I have shown,

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[213] John Dryden's writing on translation theory was influential and well-known in this period, including to Pope. Dryden himself described his approach to Chaucer's work in his preface to *Fables*: "I have not ty'd my self to a Literal Translation; but have often omitted what I judg'd unnecessary, or not of Dignity enough to appear in the Company of better Thoughts. I have presum'd farther in some Places, and added somewhat of my own where I thought my Author was deficient" (Brewer 168). Pope also made additions and omissions, though less likely animated by a concern for the "dignity" owed the text. For more on Dryden and translation, see Frost and Sloman. For more on Dryden's inclusion of Middle English texts as well as translations in *Fables*, see Alderson and Henderson, 53–68. For more on translations of Chaucer, see Ellis 98–120.

choices Pope made in his modernizations often result in contradictory results: he minimizes the Wife's voice by compression of Chaucer's text even as he amplifies her vocal unruliness. He uses omission and euphemism to soften some of the Wife's potentially obscene sexual candor as he disambiguates her sexual immorality as conceived of by Chaucer. In compressing Chaucer's text, Pope also stripped the character of the Wife down to what he viewed as her essential meaning—in this case, her sexual immorality, her advanced age, and her unruly voice. By focusing on these attributes while removing other details, digressions, and dialogues with her fellow pilgrims, Pope paradoxically amplifies her potential for social obscenity as he seeks to combat it through linguistic decorum. Though many of his alterations amount to little more than a few words here and there, the cumulative impact of these changes ultimately calls attention to this licentiousness and renders it the Wife's defining characteristic at the cost of her Chaucerian complexity.

"I, for a few slight Spots, am not so nice": Women and Character[214]

In the Preface to his *Collected Works* (1717), Pope himself notes that "the reputation of a man generally depends upon the first steps he makes in the world, and people will establish their opinion of us, from what we do at that season when we have least judgment to direct us" (Pope xxvi). If Pope's youth at the time of writing his modernized "Wife of Bath Her Prologue" could be read as a reason to dismiss the

[214] "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue," line 39.

text's misogynistic tendencies as merely a product of his age, his later writing proves this is not the case.[215] Instead, Pope's satirical writing on women's behavior, clearly demonstrated in "To a Lady. Of the Characters of Women" (1735), grew more pointed as his literary career advanced.[216] In this latter poem, Pope paints "a scandalously vivid gallery" of verbal portraits of women exhibiting what he judges to be unbecoming and excessive behaviors (Baines 245). These transgressions range from displaying an inconstant nature to adulterous behavior; from attempting to be witty to behaving correctly but with the wrong attitude ("She speaks, behaves, and acts just as she ought; / But never, never, reach'd one gen'rous Thought" (lines 161–62)).[217] Pope's own disparaging comments about these feminine types bear some

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[215] Pope claimed to have written both "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue" and "January and May; or, the Merchant's Tale: from Chaucer" when he was around sixteen or seventeen years old (Pope 76, 98).

[216] Feminist scholar Joan Kelly describes Pope's "To a Lady" as "coarse and malicious" and notes it, like other misogynistic satires of the period, drew response from women writers. (17). One verse response written by Anne Ingram and entitled "An Epistle to Mr. Pope Occasion'd by his Characters of Women" (1744) places the blame for the state of the women Pope disparages on cultural factors, and a lack of educational opportunities. Stephen H. Browne identifies a paradoxical approach to women in periodicals of the period in which some expressed a "very genuine concern for female education" even as they perpetuated and expanded upon the caricature of the "learned female" within their pages (21). Browne suggests that many of these eighteenth-century misogynistic satires might be understood as "a reaction to the rise of schooling for girls and women" (25).

[217] Perhaps anticipating a hostile response to the work, Pope included a note claiming that his "politeness and complaisance to the sex is observable in this instance, amongst others, that, whereas in the *Characters of Men* he has sometimes made use of real names, in the *Characters of Women* always

resemblance to his modernization of the antifeminist complaints that his Wife of Bath mimes her husband's spouting:

> If highly born, intolerably vain;
> Vapours and Pride by turns possess her Brain:
> Now gayly Mad, now sow'rly Splenatick,
> Freakish when well, and fretful when she's Sick."
> ("The Wife of Bath Her Prologue" lines 88–91)

Writing about feminine desire and sexuality, Pope notes that, though men may follow different paths (prioritizing career or pleasure), "ev'ry Woman is at Heart a Rake" (line 216).[218] Around halfway through the poem, Pope goes so far as to hint that perhaps *any* public attention paid to women might be "too much," writing that "A Woman's seen in Private life alone: / [Men's] bolder Talents in full light display'd, / Your Virtues open fairest in the shade" (lines 200–02). If Pope's poetic

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fictitious" (Pope 560 n.). Several of the female characters to whom he assigned fictitious names in this poem were later identified; they included a number of women friends with whom he had fallen out (Pope 561, 564).

[218] This was not the first time Pope used this line in a poem: it also appeared in an earlier work, "Sylvia: a Fragment" (1727), where Pope included with it with a far more damning assessment of women:

> Frail, fev'rish Sex! their Fit now chills, now burns;
> Atheism and Superstition rule by Turns;
> And the meer Heathen in her carnal Part,
> Is still a sad good Christian at her Heart. (lines 16–20)

approach was typified by a tendency to "identif[y] a chaotic problem and suppl[y] a balancing solution" as Pope scholar Paul Baines understands it, then these lines from "To a Lady" suggest that the solution to the chaotic problem of feminine behavior might be to make it less visible, and to move it off-scene (247). Written around thirty years after Pope modernized the Wife of Bath, "To a Lady" demonstrates the degree to which Pope remained preoccupied across his career with women's social and sexual behavior, particularly when it exceeded his vision of cultural norms of ideal feminine comportment.

Some Pope scholars have written about his misogynistic tendencies considered within an eighteenth-century cultural context, though they have not shown much interest in Pope's "Wife of Bath Her Prologue" as relevant to these discussions, possibly assuming the modernization's antifeminism as inherent to its Chaucerian source text.[219] Rather than setting his work apart, Pope's antifeminist tendencies further situate his work within what Felicity A. Nussbaum identifies as a "clear line of continuous antifeminist poetic portrayal throughout the Restoration and the eighteenth century"(2).[220] Baines points to "a number of 'problem' female figures haunting Pope by stepping over some sort of line," including in the list

[219] In his biography of Pope, Maynard Mack notably lists Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* as an example of "the genre of satire *against* women" (*A Life* 627, emphasis mine).

[220] Tague offers a slightly more optimistic view on Pope's attitudes towards women, describing him as "more willing than [his] Restoration predecessors to balance vicious attacks on women with highly idealized portraits of female examplars" (19). I would suggest that the creation of "highly idealized portraits" has the potential to be just as harmful to women as his "vicious attacks" might have been, and that both support the understanding of feminine excess as socially obscene.

"Chaucer's wanton wives" (240). In the case of Pope, this antifeminist portrayal resonates persistently with the concept of social obscenity. The Wife's excess – perhaps interpreted by some as a hyperbolic satire of women's alleged flaws – is framed as existing in clear violation of gendered social expectations. Nussbaum also notes that satire in this era approached masculine targets and feminine targets very differently, with masculine targets generally singled out for "peculiar aberrations" while feminine targets often stood in for women in general, "rebuked for those characteristics of their sex that make them inferior to men and make them more similar to each other than to the rest of humanity"(1). In other words, not only does Pope's reading of Chaucer interpret the Wife of Bath as more clearly in opposition to eighteenth-century expectations of correct feminine behavior, but it also then (re)creates her character as a kind of stand-in for feminine transgression at large. And as one of the best-known poets of the time, Pope created a Wife who was seen and read by a considerable audience.

"And think, for once, a Woman tells you true": Audience and Adaptation[221]

Though the ballads I discussed in Chapters One and Two may have reached a larger audience simply by virtue of their long publication history, Pope's reputation as a widely read and well-known (if often controversial) author suggests that his modernizations and the ideas they carry were likely highly influential among his

[221] "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue," line 4.

reading public.[222] Both the "Chaucer's Characters" modernization of the *General Prologue* and "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue" were frequently reprinted, initially separately and later brought together, in different collections through the end of the eighteenth century.[223] These texts and reprints circulated in a literary landscape that viewed poets as "cultural spokespeople" whose reach extended both high and low and whose work had "significant impact on public opinion" (Hunter 15). By compressing Chaucer's text in a way that clarifies moments of ambiguity according to Pope's interpretation and further reduces the Wife to a caricature of an ill-behaved woman, Pope reframes the Wife of Bath to align with—and perpetuate—his own misogynistic tendencies. His own status as a celebrated author then assured the wide dissemination of his reimagined Wife.

While initial publications did not name Pope as the author of "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue," later reprints often included Pope's name alongside that of Dryden and "other eminent hands," emphasizing the degree to which his literary reputation had grown over the years since his teenage composition of these Chaucerian modernizations. Baines describes Pope's poetic trajectory as "single-mindedly devoted from the outset to ensuring a position" in what would become

[222] For more on negative opinions of and controversies surrounding Pope, see Reinbold (forthcoming); for mockery aimed at Pope, see Dickie 77-78.

[223] In later reprints, these works appear together in edited multi-volume collections that often spanned hundreds of pages and emphasized the modernized language. These collections indicated the various authors involved as well as the portions of Chaucer's text which each author modernized. For examples of these collections, see Ogle (1742) and Lipscomb (1795).

the "canon" (235). Modernizing Chaucer and other highly regarded classical authors was not just intended to hone Pope's poetic education: this practice was also intended to align Pope more closely with a specific poetic lineage and to buttress his own reputation; it was largely successful.[224] Caroline E. Spurgeon writes that "Dryden and Pope set the fashion [for modernizing Chaucer], each in his turn clothing the poet anew, and it was in the dress provided by them that Chaucer was principally known to readers of the eighteenth century" (I, xliii, qtd Cousins 133n7).[225] While Pope and Dryden had access to copies of Chaucer's text in Middle English, the majority of eighteenth-century readers, then, only knew Chaucer's work as seen through their eyes and recreated through their pens and, as a result, the three names became connected.[226]

Despite Pope's developing poetic skill and reputation (and the fact that he was also an unnamed editor on a number of these collections and miscellanies), these modernizations do not appear to have been revised in any significant way across the decades of their reprinting. Pope remained a more conservative voice,

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[224] Cousins suggests that Pope's Chaucerian modernization and adaptation efforts were carried out with the intention of supporting Pope's place as a direct poetic descendant of Chaucer and Dryden and to "advance his own progress towards fame" (113).

[225] Hugh Dalrymple's poem "Woodstock Park: An Elegy" (1761) points to the ongoing influence of Pope's Chaucerian work decades after its composition and publication, suggesting his opinion that these modernizations and retellings are responsible for the survival of Chaucer's work, "And all his blithesome tales their praise derive / From Pope's immortal song and Prior's page." (qtd Jost 10).

[226] At the age of thirteen, Pope was given a copy of Speght's 1598 edition of Chaucer's works. The copy shows minimal annotation and is currently held at Hartlebury Castle (Mack, *Pope's Copy* 106).

though some other eighteenth-century writers acknowledged shifting social expectations and the changing roles of women in their work. While the Wife of Bath's shadow flits through Pope's other Chaucerian works, suggesting the impact her character had on Pope and his understanding of Chaucer, his interpretation of her character does not appear to change over time and he does not return to or significantly rework either "Chaucer's Characters" or "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue."[227] Indeed, Pope's attitude towards women moved in a more antifeminist direction across his career. Reading Pope's "January and May," Smallwood observes in Pope's modernization a "corresponding warmth of poetical laughter at men and women alike" which he argues sets it apart from other satires in this period – and from Pope's later works, including "To a Lady" (67). Smallwood also suggests that we might consider Pope's early works, including his Chaucerian modernizations, as "test runs" when read alongside "'major poetic work[s]' in his later career" (72). If we read Pope's modernizations in this light, I argue that the misogynistic tendencies he aimed at the Wife of Bath were also a "test run" for the sentiments that would inform his later and better-known works, many of which were also consumed by female readers.

Though Pope did acknowledge some of the difficulties faced by women in

[227] In contrast, Pope continued to make changes to and re-issue new versions of other works, including *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad* after their initial publications. *The Rape of the Lock* was initially published in 1712 and the final version only published five years later, demonstrating that Pope more heavily revised other poetic works during the same time period in which his Chaucerian retellings were published.

his writings, including in "To a Lady," his later verse on women and their behavior were far more likely to be critical than compassionate. Feminist philosopher Kate Manne suggests that we might reframe our thinking about misogyny "as more about the hostility girls and women *face*, as opposed to the hostility men *feel* deep down in their hearts, helps us avoid a problem of psychological inscrutability" (9, emphasis in original). Chaucer himself was clearly aware of the hostility faced by women, and this awareness feeds directly into his construction of the Wife. Later in her prologue, Chaucer's Wife points to the uneven and hypocritical literary portrayal of women across history when she declares in frustration:

> By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,
> As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
> They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
> Than al the mark of Adam may redresse. (III 694–96)[228]

If the Wife in this passage is arguing against the negative portrayal of women in texts, she is also acknowledging the power of the pen to (re)shape reality—she is aware that how people are written about matters, as does who is doing this writing. With this frustration and sense of powerlessness expressed by the Wife in mind, rather than labeling Pope an outright misogynist, I have tried to isolate and consider the misogynistic *tendencies* apparent in his modernizations of the Wife in relation to

[228] Pope includes a similar sentiment, echoing the Wife of Bath, voiced by the "Queen of Fairies" in his "January and May" modernization: "But since the Sacred Leaves to All are free, / And Men interpret *Texts*, why shou'd not We?" (lines 676–77).

the concept of social obscenity and its treatment in different eighteenth-century adaptations. Pope's portrayal of the Wife of Bath makes clear his interpretation of her character as both socially and sexually obscene. His cultural status ensured that this simplified version of the Wife would reach a large audience even as his claim of the work's Chaucerian origins augmented its authority. The hostility of Pope's modernizations of the character of the Wife, particularly when read alongside the ballads and plays discussed earlier in this thesis, is a troublingly vivid indicator of wide-spread cultural antifeminism. As for what Hutcheon might consider an "adaptation proper," any more generous readings of the Wife of Bath during this period remained unwritten.[229]

"Such as are perfect, may, I can't deny; / But by your Leave, Divines, so am not I": The Wife of Bath?[230]

The question of to what extent character can remain unchanged across the adaptation process has persisted over the course of this thesis. Hutcheon reminds us that adaptation is "repetition *without* replication," but at what point does an adaptation of a character cease to *be* that character (7, emphasis mine)? Despite (or perhaps because of) his misogynistic views regarding women, the character of the Wife of Bath clearly retained a strong hold on Pope's mind. While I would agree that Pope's modernized Wife fits Hutcheon's definition of adaptation (he does not

[229] The closest possible contender might be Andrew Jackson's mid-eighteenth-century modernization which I discuss briefly in the conclusion to this thesis.

[230] "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue," lines 44–45.

"replicate" Chaucer's Wife, despite sticking closely to the details of his source text), he nevertheless positions his work as an *act* of replication or derivation when he designates it in the title as being "from Chaucer." In interpreting Chaucer's writing of the Wife as unambiguously antifeminist and then recreating her character to make this clearer, while also reiterating the text's Chaucerian origins, Pope removes precisely the ambiguity of Chaucer's text that has supported contradictory readings and scholarly debate for the past several centuries. Yet by claiming to modernize Chaucer's text, Pope equates his character of the Wife to Chaucer's, as if they were one and the same. And it is this claim, coupled with Pope's own reputation and reach, that makes this reinterpretation of the Wife so potentially harmful in its re-inscription of antifeminist views.

The paradox of literary character is particularly important when considering these adaptations of Chaucer's Wife: though we acknowledge that fictional characters are formed entirely of words on a page, our responses to them are often closer to that which we experience with a "real" person.[231] This notion is particularly relevant in discussions of the Wife of Bath—whom some Chaucerian scholars explicitly acknowledge the difficulty of refraining from writing about as if she were a real person.[232] If the Wife is difficult for professional scholars to avoid

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[231] For recent arguments outlining productive approaches to analyzing character in the field of literary studies, see Anderson, Felski, and Moi. See also Fowler.

[232] Marilynn Desmond argues that the responses and treatment of the Wife of Bath that begin with Chaucer's references to her with *The Canterbury Tales* and in "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton" and continue through other medieval and early modern texts create a Wife of Bath who is "[m]istaken for

responding to in this manner, this complication has a different relevance for those seeking to recreate her character through creative means, which are often intended to elicit an emotional response. According to Hutcheon, not just texts, but characters, can be adapted and "transported from one text to another" and she suggests that when this happens, "[p]sychological development (and thus receiver empathy) is part of the narrative and dramatic arc" (11). In the case of the Wife of Bath, however, empathy does not seem to be the emotive response that eighteenth-century adapters aim to elicit. Instead, these adapters respond to the Wife's transgressive nature with shock, disgust, dismay, and mockery, and these responses then manifest in literary interventions to bring her unruliness and obscenity under control, to remove these tendencies off-scene, or in the case of Pope, to amplify them in a way that reduces Chaucer's Wife to her vices. Put another way, the potential for obscenity inherent in Chaucer's construction of the Wife of Bath appears so vivid to these eighteenth-century adapters that they repeatedly respond to her transgressive nature as they might to the behavior of a living woman; they are then unable or unwilling to recreate her without at the same time passing judgement on her character.

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an author" and "consequently appears to be a female speaker whose subjectivity is compellingly accessible" (118). Susan Crane identifies and speaks out against "recent critical trend[s] that analyz[e] Alison as if she were a real, fully developed personality" (20). Elizabeth Scala notes that Chaucer's construction of the Wife's voice is largely responsible for the sense readers have of its modernity across time but that it is also what "placed the Wife of Bath at the center of nearly every critical controversy" about the *Canterbury Tales* (105).

This paradoxical view on literary character is further complicated in the eighteenth century as adapters responding to the Wife's obscenity take measures to control her unruliness and, perhaps inadvertently, recreate Chaucer's formerly open-ended text as more clearly antifeminist (an outcome which is particularly pronounced in Pope's modernization). In a period rife with changing gender roles and expectations, the conflating of literary characters and "real" women highlights the widespread cultural embrace of some misogynistic views. Claudia Thomas Kairoff notes that Pope often included works "designed to attract female readers" in printed collections of his works and describes both Pope's "January and May" and his "Wife of Bath Her Prologue" as works which "invite a female readership" (86).[233] For female readers, these contradictory responses to the Wife of Bath which reform her in some instances and punish or minimize her in others would have been the only version to which they might be exposed. By simplifying the multifaceted Wife of Bath into a less ambiguous character, Pope (and his fellow adapters, to varying degrees) shaped the reception of Chaucer' Wife for "unknowing" audiences. In doing so, these adapters also deprived them of a complex and contradictory feminine character who might have invited very different readings from a female audience processing a time of social change.

This is not to say that twenty-first-century adaptations always exhibit a

[233] Kairoff describes Pope's Wife of Bath as "outrageously comic" as she "brags about cheating on and lying to her old husbands and literally wrestling her younger spouses into submission," and further speculates that "the Wife's story would have seemed fantastical, if hilarious, to contemporary women readers" (87).

broadening acceptance of the Wife, however. Cartoonist Seymour Chwast's graphic novel adaptation of the *Canterbury Tales* (2011) simplifies the Wife of Bath in a manner reminiscent of Pope.[234] Chwast's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* spans just six pages of stark black and white illustration and opens with a half-page image of the Wife straddling a motorcycle with her skirt hiked up high, as she begins with a mention of her five husbands and a declaration that "virginity is overrated" (Chwast 48). Across the six pages of his recreation, Chwast's removal of significant portions from Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and severe shortening of others amplifies the Wife's sexuality while diminishing her voice both visually and textually. The second and third pages include various drawings of the nude female body, depicting hairless genitalia and high, round breasts, as the Wife speaks briefly on virginity and her own behavior in her earlier marriages (Chwast 49–50). Indeed, every panel in which Chwast depicts nudity or sexuality focuses only on the youthful female body; once age becomes a factor in the Wife's prologue, these depictions cease. Chwast's graphic adaptation diminishes the Wife's voice by abbreviating her speech and highlighting her interactions with her male interlocutors on the pilgrimage. The antifeminist grounding of the text is visually amplified, with a two-page spread dedicated almost entirely to illustrating Jankyn reading from his Book of Wicked Wives (Chwast 52–53).

[234] It is important to clarify that cartooning itself is by its nature neither harmful nor incapable of nuance: simplification of form does not automatically lead to a flattening of character. Rather, it is Chwast's decisions as an adapter to simplify the Wife of Bath in this specific manner that lends the work its misogynistic air.

With the Wife's voice minimized, Chwast, like Pope, focuses on her sexuality as the key aspect of her character. As in several of the other adaptations considered in this thesis, Chwast also understands the aging Wife's sexual desire as socially obscene. One panel depicts a younger man violently stabbing an older woman lying in a bed. This panel corresponds to the passage in which the Wife invents a dream that she recounts to Jankyn in Chaucer's text and claims to have actually had in Chwast's. Alongside the image is a caption reading "I thought I could satisfy him even though he was twenty to my forty," an apparent admission of the Wife's age-related sexual inadequacy that bears no relation to Chaucer's text (Chwast 52). Chwast's linking of sexual desirability and youthfulness is evident in other panels, such as those on the second page, in which Chwast's Wife shares a condensed version of her thoughts on virginity and marriage, gesturing towards a gallery of three inset images picturing genitalia and a partially opened mouth, as mentioned above (Chwast 50). Chwast describes such changes as the result of his approach to the *Canterbury Tales*, which focuses on "distilling the original story down to its very essence" (*SeymourChwastArchive.com).* Like Pope's reimaginings of the Wife of Bath, Chwast's treatment suggests that reinterpreting the "very essence" of the Wife of Bath justifies diminishing her voice and portraying a shallow and simplified version of her character.

Though the work of Chwast and Pope is separated by significant differences of time, technique, and audience, their responses to the Wife as a socially obscene character share some similarities, proving "social obscenity" to be a valuable lens for recognizing misogyny even if/when its authors did not intend to communicate

such a sentiment. The lens of social obscenity reveals a persistent and wide-spread misogynistic view of normal feminine behavior and normal feminine biological processes as excessive and transgressive. These views can be both displayed and upheld in literary representations of women—but they can also be acknowledged and refuted. Nicky Hallet identifies a pattern in Chaucer's work of "draw[ing] attention to the sets of literary as well as social expectations surrounding women to reveal the ways they reciprocally reshape each other" (515). If Chaucer's construction of the Wife of Bath creates space for her to be read as both an antifeminist stereotype and a character designed to subvert antifeminist rhetoric, Pope's modernization does no such thing. Ingrid H. Tague argues that the impact of conduct literature and other didactic texts in the eighteenth century was "to create a woman who was constantly aware of the fact that she was a woman, one who never stopped checking her behavior and thoughts against the standards of ideal womanhood" with the intention of creating a "completely self-regulating woman, who would always behave as if she were being observed even when she was alone" (22–23).[235] Though these modernizations are not didactic texts, the "standards of ideal womanhood" still permeate the other literature of this period as well. By modernizing the Wife of Bath in a way that clarified the obscenity of her character through both amplification and omission, Pope reinterpreted Chaucer's creation as a perfect foil to this "self-regulating woman" and a clear example of how (and who)

[235] Social desire for feminine self-regulation was, of course, not unique to the eighteenth century. For more on women's self-regulation, see Flannery, *Practising Shame: Female Honour in Later Medieval England* (2020).

not to be.[236]

Pope's misogynistic response to the Wife was given further credibility by his claim that his text was "from Chaucer," which embedded a degree of added authority for his audience, male and female alike. Returning to Miranda Fricker and the concept of hermeneutical injustice: the lack of a term to refer to this social and cultural response to feminine excess as if it were a form of obscenity allows this denigrating behavior to be normalized. Much as it was in the eighteenth century, the tendency to think about women as too loud, too old, and too much is still present today. Susan Crane argues that "when we make the Wife of Bath coherent, she becomes too easy to dismiss. She inscribes something more complex in her inconsistencies themselves, and it is important to consider how they too comment on gender and power" (26). Modernizations of the Wife of Bath, whether reinterpreted in Pope's eighteenth-century verse or in Chwast's twenty-first-century comics, often bring Chaucer's character to audiences unlikely to encounter her in her original form. The same misogynistic biases and impulses that lead adapters to decisions which simplify the Wife's character, which seek to make her "coherent" in response to her excess, are reflected in aspects and interactions of our day-to-day lives. Attempts to shame and control feminine behavior deemed excessive by responding to it *as if* it were obscene, to make us more "coherent," are an ongoing concern which the concept of "social obscenity" better equips us to face. Our "too muchness" does not belong off stage.

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[236] Mack emphasizes the Scriblerian belief that "satire had a legitimate shaming and ridiculing function" as essential to understanding Pope's work (*A Life* 636).

Conclusion: Shadows and Successive Generations[237]

Less than fifty years after Pope's modernization was published, a London bookseller named Andrew Jackson penned a modernization of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* as well as her character portrait and published them alongside his other Chaucerian retellings of the *Shipman's Tale* and the *Manciple's Tale*. Jackson introduces his intentions in verse on the title page of his collection entitled *Matrimonial Scenes*:

> THE first *Refiner* of our Native *Lays*
> Chanted these *Tales* in Second *Richard's* Days;
> *Time* grudg'd his *Wit*, and on his *Language* fed!
> We rescue but the *Living* from the *Dead*;
> And *what* was *Sterling Verse*, so long ago,
> Is here *new-coin'd* to make it *Current now*.

[237] This Conclusion considers further the co-authored writing of biologist Gary R. Bortolotti and literary theorist Linda Hutcheon on the approaches to adaptation studies made possible by comparing scientific knowledge of biological adaptation with the process of literary adaptation. The biological definition of adaptation as "a process of change or modification by which an organism or species becomes better suited to its environment or ecological niche," points to three distinct aspects of the process: the changes that occur, the context in which this change occurs, and the potential impact this change then has on future generations. These same three aspects are relevant to consideration of literary adaptations and encourage us to expand our thinking beyond fidelity discourse. *OED*, *s.v.* "adaptation" (*n.*). Sense 7.a.

(Bowden, *Modernizations* 151)

In these six lines, Jackson hits upon many of the concerns seen elsewhere from modernizers and adapters coming to Chaucer in this period: the idea of Chaucer's work as English heritage, the problem of changing senses of humor and changing language, and the need to remake Chaucer for contemporary audiences. Speaking on behalf of himself and other modernizers, Jackson describes the work of the modernizer as a battle against time itself. His opening line lays out the stakes for this work, highlighting Chaucer's importance to English literary history before laying the blame for the near-"death" of his works on a personified Time (rather than attacking eighteenth-century audiences unlikely to be familiar with Middle English). Jackson uses imagery of precious metals and the stamping of new coins to highlight the notion that old material can retain value and be reshaped to meet current demands. As both a scholar and practitioner of adaptation, however, I find the fourth line most compelling: "We rescue but the Living from the Dead." It suggests that not all of Chaucer can be resuscitated—not everything can be saved. Adaptation involves selectivity as well as rebirth.

Throughout this dissertation, adaptation has proven again and again to be an act of interpretation: a written proof of how one person in a particular time and place read and understood a text. In the long eighteenth century, as social anxieties manifested in numerous attempts to contain and control women, the character of the Wife of Bath served as a warning of women's potential for unruliness and

obscenity, sexual and social.[238] The Wanton and Worthy Wives of the two ballad variations are loquacious, loud, and borderline heretical, women only a forgiving Savior could ever accept (and then only after initial misgivings). John Gay's 1713 Wife of Bath is funny but not clever, manipulative but no mastermind, and governed by the insatiable desires of her aging body.[239] Alexander Pope's heavily condensed Wife of Bath displays the severest degree of intervention and containment. In an era where so much writing of and for women seemed to have a didactic purpose aimed at controlling their social behavior, Chaucer's Wife of Bath repeatedly appears in a simplified form with a single quality made the focus and expanded upon in order to "paint the lion" with all the colors of an unruly and socially obscene woman. Dryden judged her "too licentious" and the eighteenth-century adapters following on his heels chose to highlight this licentiousness. On some occasions, these adapters then follow it to its expected moral outcome: either she changes and is redeemed, or she suffers. If these responses to the Wife of Bath gained prevalence in the eighteenth-century, the twenty-first-century writers whose work I read juxtaposed against these early adaptations have pushed back, seeking to recover and expand on the complexity written into the Wife as Chaucer constructed her. This very different response to the same Chaucerian source

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[238] *OED*, *s.v.* "character" (*n.*). Senses II.9.a. and II.14. Here, "character" can refer both to the Wife of Bath as a literary figure and to the understanding of "character" as indicating moral value as both the literary character of the Wife and her moral character were sources of adaptational anxiety.

[239] When Gay rewrote the play later, in his own middle age, his vision of the Wife of Bath was not more generous. See Chapter Three.

material suggests that the process of adaptation does not automatically result in simplification: it can also re-vision, create more complexity, and invite new forms of recognition.

This dissertation has examined the ways in which different eighteenth-century adapters dealt with Chaucer's Wife of Bath across a variety of formats, including ballads, stage plays, and modernizations. At the start of this project, I anticipated the Wife of Bath's potential for sexual obscenity would be the focal point of adaptational intervention in these texts. Instead, I found adapters deeply troubled by and responding to *other* aspects of the Wife in addition to her sexual candor, most particularly her unruly voice and supposedly advanced age. These responses broaden our understanding of the obscene beyond the sexual and scatological and push us to consider the circumstances in which a woman's *existence* might be treated as an obscenity and pushed "off-scene": the realm of what I term the *socially obscene*. I return to Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice to illustrate the value of naming this very specific misogynistic response to feminine qualities viewed as excessive.

By way of a conclusion to this dissertation, I consider two more brief adaptations of the Wife in the eighteenth century—one a broadening of Pope's modernization, the other a complete sanitization—as well as my own experiences with both social obscenity and the practice of adaptation. Though these two texts did not meet the criteria designated in this thesis to merit their own individual chapters, taken together they can be read as bookends of the eighteenth-century adaptational response as a whole. These final two examples, in effect, draw the

boundary lines of what it might mean for a reinterpreted character to *be* the Wife of Bath.

"Recounted by herself": One More Modernization

Jackson's *Matrimonial Scenes* is a fitting endpoint for a dissertation interested primarily in the eighteenth century for a few reasons. The first and most obvious is its chronology as it appears nearly forty years after Pope's modernization and Gay's first version of the play. In a dissertation primarily structured around theme, however, Jackson's piece also gives closure to several of the threads I have explored thus far. One factor that makes Jackson's work so interesting within this corpus is that, by virtue of being a bookseller, it is not unlikely that he would have known the Pope modernization, the broadside ballad, and possibly John Gay's plays as well. Certainly he knew Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Jackson, then, had multiple reinterpretations of the Wife to work from—and to push back against. As I will show, Jackson's modernization of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* presents a retelling of the Wife that largely resists the constraining approach taken by Pope as well as the simplifications exhibited by the ballads and by Gay's dramatic adaptations. Jackson instead can be read as embracing Chaucer's Wife's potential for both social and sexual obscenity without necessarily approving of it (or of her). More than the previous adapters of this era, he retains her unruly voice and her frank sexuality, though he does give in to the urge to amplify her age beyond the evidence available in the text. Anthony Fletcher notes that as the eighteenth century progressed, women's voices "are much more in evidence" and that "gender is now

being contested openly and directly" (xxii). This trend, then, also appears to be reflected in Jackson's approach to Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

Though Pope's modernized "The Wife of Bath Her Prologue" seeks to contain the Wife's voice, Jackson's takes an entirely different approach, hints of which may be found in the title he gives his text: "The Tale of the Wife of Bath, and her Five Husbands, recounted by herself" (Bowden, *Modernizations* 159).[240] The actual tale told by the Wife in Chaucer's text is omitted; in Jackson's modernization, the Wife's autobiographical recitation of her marital history *becomes* her tale, a shift that seems to treat it almost as the equivalent of the fictional tales of the Shipman and the Manciple related by Jackson earlier in his text.[241] In addition, the title clarifies that the tale is not only of the Wife of Bath, but also of her five husbands. The potential scandal of the Wife's multiple marriages thus moves into the title, potentially coloring the reader's approach to the text before the Wife has uttered a word. Jackson adds one more notable detail to his text as he indicates that this tale is "recounted by herself," putting the Wife's voice front and center. By indicating from the outset that her story can be read as a fiction while also emphasizing it as the

[240] No other tale collected in Jackson's text includes such a detailed and descriptive title. Jackson, it seems, also sensed that dealing with the Wife of Bath's character requires something beyond what Chaucer's other tales and taletellers call for.

[241] This is reminiscent of a gendered tendency that some modern writers have identified to automatically view writing by women as autobiographical. Pearl Andrews-Horrigan cites several recent examples and notes that "there is a difference between being informed by your experiences when writing and writing your own experiences, and female novelists are much more often assumed to be doing the latter than their male counterparts."

Wife's words, Jackson makes space between himself and Chaucer's most socially obscene pilgrim.

As Betsy Bowden notes, Jackson's Wife—unlike Pope's—is "a woman who speaks openly about sexuality" (*Afterlife* 80).[242] Like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, Jackson's Wife uses a number of euphemisms for sexual acts and genitalia, often drawing on the language of the market and of warfare. She refers to her genitalia as the "Treasure with which by Nature I'm endow'd" (line 89) and as her "Women's Ware" (line 228) and celebrates her own enjoyment of and availability for sex: "I'm at my Spouse's Service ev'ry Night; / He keeps the Key that opens all my Store" (lines 92–93). [243] Foreshadowing the antagonism to come later in their relationship, Jackson's Wife describes the dynamics of her relationship with Jankyn yoking sex and violence together: "In Bed, tho' dang'rous his protended Spear, / I lov'd him more, the more I suffer'd there" (lines 389–90). Later her description of her genitals

[242] While Bowden argues that it is Pope's "Wife of Bath Her Prologue," rather than Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, that serves as Jackson's main source, this is one aspect that appears taken directly from Chaucer. Bowden further notes that, of his three adaptations, Jackson's Wife of Bath does not stand apart for this as she speaks "less openly than does an indecorous Seaman, or a Manciple bluntly retelling a Greco-Roman tale of adultery and murder" (Bowden, *Afterlife* 80). Sexuality appears to be the main theme tying together the texts Jackson included in *Matrimonial Scenes*.

[243] Quotations from Andrew Jackson are taken from his collection of modernizations entitled *Matrimonial Scenes: Consisting of The Seaman's Tale, The Manciple's Tale, The Character of the Wife of Bath, The Tale of the Wife of Bath, and her Five Husbands. All modernized from Chaucer* (1750) as reprinted in Betsy Bowden's *Eighteenth-Century Modernizations from* The Canterbury Tales, 158–164. Passages are cited by line number.

(rendered as *quoniam* in Chaucer) takes a more pastoral turn that hints at fertility as she states "[m]y Glebe was pleasant, all my Spouses own'd, / No Parson cultivated finer Ground" (lines 478–79).

The Wife's use of euphemism extends to her descriptions of relationship dynamics as well. As she details her treatment of one of her husbands, the Wife claims to have instructed him to "[b]usy your Shuttle in its proper Loom" (line 152). This metaphor has an emasculating effect as it compares his sexual organs and pursuits to the traditionally feminine craft of weaving—one at which we have already been told the Wife excels.[244] This mocking of masculine sexual performance extends even to Jankyn in Jackson's modernization as the Wife states that "[m]y Husband, who in Learning took Delight, / With Books wou'd oft amuse himself at Night" (lines 522–23). Jackson's Wife is not only disturbed by the contents of Jankyn's book of wicked wives, but also by his bookish tendencies—she seems to mock him for spending time reading rather than with her. The use of "delight" and "amuse" hint at an almost sexual pleasure being taken in the book, and she builds on this idea (and on the dangers of obsessive reading for masculine virility) a few lines later when she declares, "[h]ence the vile Cynic his foul Pen directs / (Himself grown impotent) to stab the Sex; He cannot taste, nor give Delight" (lines 542–44).

[244] Earlier, she reflects on her husbands' sexual capabilities, declaring, "Good Heav'n forgive me, but I laugh outright, / When I revolve their Warfare of the Night, / How piteously they toil'd, yet toil'd in vain" (lines 106–08). This line marks a distinct shift from Chaucer's "How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke!" (III 202): Jackson's Wife takes no responsibility for the instigation of the "work" the husbands are made to perform and instead further underlines their sexual deficiencies.

Too much time spent in the company of books, she suggests, renders men incapable of sexual performance and prevents them from receiving or giving pleasure. These passages demonstrate Jackson's ability to retain Chaucer's Wife's sexuality without resorting to an overall simplification of her character. Jackson's further modernization of both Chaucer and Pope's work, then, demonstrates that this containment and reform of the Wife as a character is not an unavoidable part of the adaptation process when reinterpreting Chaucer's Wife of Bath as an obscene character.

It is telling that, in re-adapting Pope's text, Jackson's version reverts to something of a more Chaucerian nature and, correspondingly, reinvigorates the Wife. If Pope's adaptation represents the narrowest point in the hourglass-shape of her six centuries of reception, Jackson's text might indicate the gradual broadening of her reception that ultimately leads, over the next few hundred years, to the robust wave of adaptations of the Wife being created today. As I will now consider, however, this broadening does not occur without some continuing echoes of the same misogyny rampant in earlier times.

Feminine Attributes and a Divided Existence

Stepping back from these individual adaptations and considering the larger picture: if the wide variety of adaptational approaches to the Wife of Bath tells us anything about the gendering of social obscenity, it is that the conversation is on-going and necessary. It is also, for me, personal. When I was in my early teens and puberty was just ramping up, I remember my father, a medical professional, joking at one

point that any problems originating from the neck up should be brought to him while anything from the neck down could be taken up with my mother. In other words, problems of the mind (intellectual and not psychological) fell in the domain of masculine competence, while any problems of the body (particularly the lower body and all its menstruation-related upheaval) were "lady troubles." In the years since, my father has patiently and competently answered any number of health-related questions, to be sure, but this image of the neck-up/neck-down world, even as a passing joke, always stuck with me. In particular, to my adolescent mind, there was a sense of shame connected with the problems of the neck-down world. They were something to be hidden, to be spoken of in whispers; they were sources of inconvenience at best and disgust at worst.

Chaucer's Wife of Bath, particularly as she is refracted in the eighteenth-century adaptations considered in this thesis, reflects aspects of the neck-up/neck-down world as her knowledge is dismissed and her sexuality portrayed as something to be alternately omitted or played up for laughs. And it is significant that I have encountered her in these texts not as an adolescent, but as a middle-aged woman myself. The first time I read through the eighteenth-century adaptations considered in this dissertation, I was immediately struck by their treatment of the Wife's age and her aging. The notion of the invisibility of the middle-aged woman is not a new one, but reading Chaucer's treatment of his middle-aged Wife of Bath (Chaucer's text only tells us she is at least "fourty, if I shal seye sooth" (III 601)) and noticing the text's embrace of both her visibility and her complexity felt revelatory to me, a 41-year-old master's student seated in a sea of 20-something colleagues. It

was this same sensitivity that led my eye to the eighteenth-century descriptions of the Wife as a *carling*, as autumnal, as in the decline of life. This eighteenth-century aging up of the Wife always occurred alongside assumptions of her moral failings and her physical decline. It was the ageist misogyny of this approach coupled with my awareness that these beliefs about feminine aging still hold sway that made me increasingly confident that woman's social or publicly visible existence could *also* be viewed as obscene. Yet the definitions of obscenity that I encountered were not capacious enough to include these less obvious but no less pernicious forms of social othering. Applying the lens of social obscenity to eighteenth-century adaptations and to modern women's experiences alike provides a new and urgent framework for understanding this process.

Returning to written texts and the responses they invite, Zadie Smith's description of the Wife of Bath as a voice (and character) "I've heard and loved all my life" is not an uncommon reaction to Chaucer's character for many modern female readers (xiv). Rita Felski explores "the perplexing and paradoxical nature of recognition" as it relates to the experience of a reader experiencing "a flash of connection" or "an affinity or an attunement" incited by the text itself (*Uses* 23–25). Felski further describes this moment of recognition as "[s]imultaneously reassuring and unnerving, it brings together likeness and difference in one fell swoop" (*Uses* 25). It is difficult for me to read this and *not* think of the Wife of Bath as a frustrated

reader herself.[245] She speaks out against the literary treatment women have received at the hands of clerks (III 688–96) and outlines how women might do things differently, were they the wielders of the pen. Chaucer's Wife as frustrated reader would likely be infuriated were she to sit down with this collection of eighteenth-century adaptations and reimaginings and find herself "addressed, summoned" and "called to account" to borrow Felski's words (23). If recognition can draw one further into a text, lack of recognition can compel one to respond.

My initial shock and glee at reading the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* as a student sprung from these moments of recognition existing alongside my internalized conception of the inherent obscenity of the "neck down" world.[246] I was thrilled to see how she flouted this convention, and my readings of modern feminist adaptations identified this same spark of recognition and joy on the part of their authors. In my earliest readings of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, I responded most strongly to the characteristics of the Wife which I feel I least embody. A certain boldness and bravery that I lack is what first spoke to me in that initial introduction to Chaucer's Wife.

As I have been struggling to articulate my own personal views on feminine

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[245] This notion of Chaucer's Wife as a frustrated reader responding to adaptations of her character across time served as a guiding concept for my own creative work. For sample pages, see the appendix of this thesis.

[246] This visceral experience of "shock and glee" during my initial reading dovetails nicely with Carissa M. Harris's observation of obscenity as that which "horrifies, scandalizes, entices, offends; and . . . incites laughter" (*Pedagogies* 2).

excess and obscenity over the last four years of this project, Anne Helen Petersen was able to sum up the matter in six words: "[r]efuse to disappear, you're the problem" (xiv). Now, I read the news each morning and witness the purpose and value of women as a whole become the fodder of debate before I sit down to work with these eighteenth-century adaptations: an often jarring and disheartening experience.[247] If I recognized a boldness and celebratory excess in Chaucer's Wife of Bath, the Wife of the eighteenth century feels cut from a different and far more constricting cloth. The *OED* suggests that the verb *constrict* came into usage around the same time as these adaptations and retellings were experiencing such a surge in popularity. To constrict is to "draw together as by tightening an encircling string; to make small or narrow (a tube or orifice); to contract, compress."[248] A sense of something becoming smaller than its nature intended it to be—exactly the task a corset accomplishes. The notion of constriction, then, returns me to the question of adaptational change and the reinterpretation of character that I have asked myself about my own work and considered when reading adaptations created by others. At what point does the adapted Wife of Bath cease to be the Wife of Bath?

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[247] In the days immediately following the re-election of Donald Trump to the office of President in the United States, several media outlets ran stories about misogynistic comments flooding social media including statements like "[y]our body, my choice" and threats of sexual violence against women (Herchenroeder). Jia Tolentino sums of the difficulty of knowing what to make of the current social media landscape, writing, "On the one hand, we should be wary of reducing the world to what people are posting on social media. On the other hand, *posting now creates political reality*," a reminder of the power of the written word to (re)shape our lived reality (emphasis mine).

[248] *OED*, *s.v.* "constrict" (*v.*). Sense 1.

"How perfectly new": Meeting Arietta and Un-becoming[249]

The adaptations I have considered over the course of this dissertation are largely well-known and easy to read for a general audience. They are also acknowledged by the adapters, to varying degrees, as having come from Chaucer's work. One text stands apart from this pattern, yet I cannot quite dismiss it. I found myself thinking about readers and listeners and what different versions of the Wife might have signified for or said to these audiences, whether the adapter and modernizers cited her Chaucerian origins or not. I would like now to examine another character that appears to bear some relation, though indirect, to the Wife of Bath, in her words if not in her demeanor: Arietta, a fictional character from the eleventh issue of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's periodical *The Spectator* (13 March 1711), who shares a surprising number of parallels with Chaucer's Wife of Bath.[250]

Though it only ran for a few years, Addison and Steele's periodical *The Spectator* grew to great popularity and had a significant impact on shaping various aspects of London society as it frequently touched on contemporary themes and concerns.[251] Consumed widely in coffeehouses, and predominantly by male readers,

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[249] Bond 1:47–51.

[250] Addison and Steele's *Spectator* ran from 1711–1712. The current publication by the same name was founded in 1828.

[251] Writing about *The Spectator*, Manushag N. Powell observes the presence of "strong, often gendered, differences between the discourse and behavior appropriate to either domestic or nondomestic settings" whose consideration Powell describes as "a huge concern of the period's literature" (256).

Addison and Steele's periodical was also intended to be read by women in the home. In laying out his intentions in the tenth issue of *The Spectator*, Addison declares that "there are none to whom this paper will be more useful than to the female world," a world in which he states, "the right adjusting of their hair [is] the principal employment of their lives" (Bond 1: 46).[252] Piling judgement upon judgement, Addison states his desire to "divert the minds of my female readers from greater trifles" and adds that he hoped "these my gentle readers, who have so much time on their hands," will find time to read his paper on a daily basis (Bond 1: 47).

The majority of the texts written in the *Spectator* are narrated by the fictitious "Mr. Spectator" who is introduced in the initial issue. In the eleventh issue (13 March 1711), Steele writes of Mr. Spectator's visit to Arietta, a woman between "the Follies of Youth" and the "infirmities of Age" who is popular with visitors "of both Sexes" and "agreeable both to the Young and the Old" (Bond 1:47–48). In the opening paragraph, Steele goes on to assure the reader that Arietta, free of "any amorous or ambitious Pursuits of her own," is both "frank" and blameless in her behavior (Bond 1:48). This general description somehow manages to tell the reader quite a bit and not much at all about Arietta. As described by Steele, she exists in a vague, pleasantly sexless and non-threatening middle age, the apparent opposite of Chaucer's Wife of Bath. When Steele arrives, Arietta is already entertaining another guest, described by Steele as "a Common-Place Talker" possessing only "a very

[252] References to *The Spectator* are taken from the collection edited and introduced by Donald F. Bond and are cited by volume and page number.

slight civility" (Bond 1:48). Steele does not mince words in conveying his disapproval of this other man, describing his talk as "repeating what he talks every Day," and offering "Arguments by Quotations" with which Steele speculates the Talker hoped to impress Arietta; her angry reaction to the Talker's misogynistic statements becomes the main subject of this issue as she argues against his maligning of women (Bond 1:48).

In looking for parallels between Steele's Arietta and Chaucer's Wife of Bath, one does not have to look far. Though Steele's Arietta initially seems a far more reserved character than Chaucer's Wife of Bath, this appearance changes very suddenly as the Talker continues. Arietta experiences what Steele describes as a "serious Anger" from which she must "recover" herself before she will answer the Talker (Bond 1: 48). In response to the Talker's Jankyn-like rehearsal of old stories and "Arguments by Quotation" about "the Perjuries of the Fair, and the general levity of Women," Arietta replies not with Chaucer's Wife's physical attack on a book, but with a tale of her own (Bond 1: 48). Before starting on her tale, though, Arietta cites her source: "the Fable of the Lion and the Man," known from Aesop. Arietta, a woman of "Taste and Understanding" according to Steele, prefaces her tale by addressing the Talker and including him with the other male writers she goes on to criticize. Arietta briefly relates the fable, saying:

> Your Quotations put me in Mind of the Fable of the Lion and the Man. The Man walking with that noble Animal, showed him, in the Ostentation of Human Superiority, a Sign of a Man killing a Lion. Upon which the Lion said very justly, We Lions are none of us

> painters, else we could show a hundred Men killed by Lions, for one Lion killed by a Man. (Bond 1: 48–49)

Her choice of descriptives for the lion as noble and just make very clear which side Arietta sees as the victim of aggression in this passage. Through the lion's words, she equates Man's actions with ostentation, lending support for her expansion of the moral when she adds that:

> "You Men are Writers, and can represent us Women as Unbecoming as you please in your Works, while we are unable to return the Injury...These, and such other Reflections are sprinkled up and down the Writings of all Ages, by Authors, who leave behind them Memorials of their Resentment against the Scorn of particular Women, in Invectives against the whole Sex." (Bond 1: 49)

Chaucer's Wife of Bath in the *Canterbury Tales* follows her mention of the same fable with:

> By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,
> As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
> They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse…
> The clerk, whan he is oold, and may noght do
> of Venus werkes worth his old sho,
> Thanne sit he doun, and writ in his dotage,
> That wommen kan nat kepe hir mariage! (III 693–95; 707–10)

Chaucer's Wife opens with a statement calling attention to the lack of women's writing contrasted with the abundant writing of the "clerkes." Both the Wife of Bath and Arietta delve deeper into the moral of the fable and apply it to their current situations, aligning themselves with the unfairly treated lions. Though the imbalance on which each focuses is written rather than physical aggression, both complaints are remarkably similar. Arietta complains that men write about women, focusing on their representation as "unbecoming," a complex word that carries hints of unattractiveness, incorrect behavior, even a sense of incompleteness.[253] Arietta stresses that when women are represented in this manner, it is a question of male perception rather than reality. For Arietta, these male writers suffer from bitterness at their own lack of success in love and project this bitterness onto women in general rather than onto the individual woman who is the target of their resentment. For Chaucer's Wife of Bath, it is the age-related loss of sexual potency that leads to the bitterness with which these men write. Both Arietta and Chaucer's Wife of Bath stress the preponderance of abuses that men perpetrate on women, both written and unwritten.

In addition to referencing the same fable, both women seek to bolster their arguments through the telling of a tale, the Wife of Bath in the context of the tale-telling contest of the pilgrimage and Arietta from the comfort (or confines) of her

[253] *OED*, *s.v.* "unbecoming" (*adj.*).

own drawing room.[254] Nicole Horejsi examines at length the social goals of the *Spectator* and the tale told by Arietta of Inkle and Yarico which is adapted and expanded from a brief passage in *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes* by Richard Ligon, which first appeared in 1657 (206).[255] Horejsi writes that one tactic used by Addison and Steele in their "efforts to reform the excesses of fashionable London" was to provide examples "meant to provide positive models from the past" (201). If Arietta, indeed, is a character whose origins lie in Chaucer's Wife of Bath, then in Steele's telling, she, too, has been reformed and brought in line with the moral expectations espoused by *The Spectator*. While Steele might have admired the intelligent and outspoken Arietta (two qualities also shared by the Wife of Bath), his specific references to her sexlessness serve to distance her from Chaucer's Wife. Arietta, in this respect, appears to be the opposite of an "unruly woman."

With the *Spectator*'s large audience and its ready availability in coffee houses, Arietta's appearance as an echo of the Wife of Bath might serve to bring a version of Chaucer's character, renamed and newly "civilized" by Steele, to the same audience likely familiar with the Wanton Wife of the broadside ballad.[256] Despite the lack of an explicit allusion to Chaucer in *The Spectator's* portrayal of Arietta, the parallels

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[254] Horejsi argues that Arietta's storytelling seeks to "ad[d] new levels of meaning to old ideas" and "create[e] new narratives to combat and supplant old ones" (209). This argument is notably reminiscent of Adrienne's Rich's call for feminist re-visioning of older stories and texts.

[255] Though Horesji writes about Arietta's borrowing of the fable from Aesop, she does not appear to consider the possibility that Arietta may be coming to the Aesopian fable by way of Chaucer and the Wife of Bath.

[256] For more on this ballad, see Chapter One.

between Arietta and Chaucer's Wife of Bath are too numerous to ignore. If a main goal of *The Spectator* was to improve the morals and manners of its reading audience, it is this goal that serves to connect Arietta as a "reformed" Wife of Bath character to our greater project on canonicity and obscenity, specifically through its absence of both. And if Steele based Arietta on the Wife of Bath in such a way that only a small portion of the Wife's original words and thoughts are preserved while none of her sexual or social obscenity are, then he has given readers a Wife of Bath more in keeping with the moral and social conduct he and Addison hope to instill in readers of *The Spectator*.

By identifying qualities of the Wife of Bath which can be read as socially and sexually obscene and *then* recreating a version of the character devoid of all these complications, this treatment of the Wife's "unbecoming" behavior ultimately leads to what I have taken to viewing as an un-becoming of her character. Though this parallel does not follow the ordinary rules of grammar applied to the prefix un-, I believe the concept is useful in drawing attention to the ties between the Wife of Bath's attributes and her existence as a character. Changing audiences and changing social expectations have helped to shape reinterpretations of the Wife of Bath for over six hundred years now, providing a particularly rich stream of data through which to consider her character. Reading Chaucer's Wife of Bath alongside both eighteenth-century adaptations (falling at the midpoint between Chaucer's writing and the present day) and twenty-first-century reinterpretations results in an overall picture of shifts in reception that might cumulatively be visualized as an hourglass, or even a corseted female waist: the wide part of the shape at the top represents

Chaucer's creation of the Wife of Bath through an intentional complicating of the stereotype of the lascivious old woman.[257] Eighteenth-century responses, culminating in Pope's interventions, which often sought to compress and control Chaucer's Wife to different degrees, can be imagined as the narrow midsection of this shape, in which depictions of the Wife of Bath are narrowest and least complex.[258] Twenty-first-century adaptations that celebrate and expand on the Wife's character make up the wide section at the bottom of this visualized shape.

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[257] According to Minnis, in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, "Chaucer took one of the most despised stereotypes in medieval literature, the sexually rapacious widow, and provided her with a powerful scholastic-style defense of sexual desire . . . . In her *Tale* this character depicts an even more despised stereotype, the *vetula* or *vieille*, dispensing wisdom of the highest order rather than talking dirty and teaching the art of sexual promiscuity" (*Fallible* 309). Like Minnis's reading, I believe Chaucer offered readers a new example of a powerful aging woman.

[258] Isabelle Paresys observes the connections in this period between feminine fashions and social expectations for bodily and behavioral restraint:

> Although the details of women's clothing changed during the Age of Enlightenment, this should not lead us to forget that the female system of dress had in essence not evolved since the Renaissance . . . [n]either had the social control over her body changed—a body that was, after all, more constrained by its clothes than was the male anatomy. The corset clearly marked out the territories of public and private. Its upright posture carried symbolic meanings about female virtue and chastity, as well as bodily self-discipline. *An uncorseted woman was considered morally lax.* (78, emphasis mine)

In other words, even as a body that was seen as out of control suggested other moral failings occurring alongside this lack of constraint, behavior seen as uncontrolled pointed to the possibility of other transgressions. Just as corsetry had the power to contain and transform the feminine body, so too did modernization and adaptation offer an avenue of control over the unruly text.

In constructing the character of the Wife of Bath, Chaucer started from a stereotype and complicated it; through this creative process that altered stereotype *became* the Wife of Bath. Should an adapter then choose to simplify the character or to reform or correct her (in response to qualities viewed as unbecoming), Chaucer's accomplishment is reversed and the character of the Wife then un-becomes. The responses that her sexuality, voice, and age provoke in these eighteenth-century adaptations can lead to textual interventions which distance the Wife from her Chaucerian origins and render her somehow both more sanitized and less recognizable. This un-becoming of the character of the Wife is most visible in adaptations that most heavily respond to her aspects that would be considered *unbecoming* in this period: her socially obscene voice and aging feminine desire.

(Re)painting the Lion: Adaptation as Practice

After having spent an extended amount of time with all these different versions of the Wife of Bath, thinking about who her character was, would be, and could be, I suspect I can never again read Chaucer's Wife in exactly the same way.[259] Indeed, oddly enough, my drawing of the Wife of Bath as the ghost haunting my PhD has

[259] Over the course of my research, I have read a number of adaptations that fell outside of the scope of this thesis but have nonetheless informed my thinking. These adaptations include (but were not limited to) children's adaptations, twentieth-century novelizations, a war memoir, a board game, play scripts, and an interactive digital tool to converse with a number of Chaucer's pilgrims, including the Wife of Bath. For two particular twenty-first-century adaptations focusing on the Wife of Bath that I believe deserve more critical attention, see North and Brooks.

also impacted how I see the original Wife of Bath and all of her later selves.[260] Chaucer's writing obviously informed my original envisioning of her when I was working on my master's degree, but as I worked on the comic I made alongside my doctoral dissertation as a way to explore my process and share my research with a more extended audience, "my" Wife of Bath began to take on a life of her own. This is particularly interesting to me as a creator as, at least initially, her role in the comic was to be my conversational partner: my Wife asked questions that I thought the reader might be asking, prodded me to go further with my speculations, and acted as a sounding board as I examined both my work process and my thoughts on my corpus of texts. She functioned as an outward manifestation of the thoughts in my head. Despite all the time I have spent with the Wives of Bath, examining the treatment of each reinterpreted character's obscenity, my Wife of Bath feels surprisingly tame. This brings me a certain amount of anxiety as I question whether I am doing her and her creator justice. By working with a tame Wife of Bath, prone to the occasional *double entendre* but little more, am I expanding her character by letting her consider her literary legacy and giving her other interests or am I flattening her as I work around the anxious walls cast up by my own mind? Have I given her the "Arietta treatment?" In my re-visioning of the Wife of Bath, have I managed to "enter an old text from a new critical direction" as Rich calls upon

[260] I include a handful of pages from my comic that I feel either demonstrate my own adaptational decision-making or that address (or fail to address) the Wife's potential for obscenity as an appendix to this dissertation. Further pages can be found online at hellomizk.com/comics/repainting-the-lion/.

feminist adapters to do or have I reinscribed her character with my own prejudices and biases (18)? Though I have not yet tackled these questions in my cartooning work, I keenly feel the double-edged threat of her character and I know I am not yet communicating her complexity as I would like. Thinking through my comics project alongside my dissertation research and writing has given me a valuable window into the difficulties of adapting her character (obscenity and all) that I might not have had otherwise.

After having spent many hours with her (and written and drawn nearly fifty pages related to this project), I "see" her in each version that I read. I compare my Wife of Bath to Chaucer's, Dryden's, Gay's, Pope's, Jackson's and even the one I think I spy hiding in the guise of Arietta. With recent adaptations by Patience Agbabi, Caroline Bergvall, Douglas North, Zadie Smith, and Karen Brooks, a whole population of new Alisouns have joined the successive generations of Chaucer's Wife of Bath. This new generation of Wives of Bath, largely adapted by women, will likely prove generative for consideration of new directions Chaucer's Wife might follow as she continues to entertain new audiences of readers, both knowing and unknowing. With the completion of this project, I look forward to revisiting my own illustrated Wife of Bath and deciding how I might best share both Chaucer's character and my own research with a new audience who deserves to meet the Wife of Bath in all her socially obscene complexity.

Naming Social Obscenity

Returning to Kate Manne's definition of misogyny as "the 'law enforcement' branch

of patriarchy," it is precisely these feminist efforts to escape the strictures of misogyny that tend to prompt efforts to reinforce them (7). In her book *Empowered* (2018), Sarah Banet-Weiser observes that:

> the intensification of misogyny in the contemporary moment is in part a reaction to the culture-wide circulation and embrace of feminism. Every time…it spills beyond what are routinely dismissed as niched feminist enclaves—the forces of the status quo position it as a peril, and skirmishes ensue between those determined to challenge the normative and those determined to maintain it. (3)

Banet-Weiser argues that as feminism grows and expands, so, too, does the popular misogyny that responds to the threat it views this growing feminism to be. Though Banet-Weiser is referring to the current incarnation of misogyny, the eighteenth century was experiencing its own moment of changing gender roles and expectations and of antifeminist response. One tactic by which such "threatening" feminine behavior might be contained is by painting it as obscene, thereby enabling public condemnation, shaming, and social policing to help keep unruly women in line. Deana Heath argues that "[o]bscenity is not, therefore, inherently intrinsic to an object: an object becomes obscene, in part, by virtue of the response of the viewing subject" (807). In other words, aspects of feminine existence are not themselves obscene—indeed, nothing is—but can be *portrayed* as obscene through the responses they invite. This portrayal can then be turned against women whose

behavior falls outside social standards of the ideal feminine, included those labelled as excessive.

Though many women of my acquaintance have acknowledged the existence of these types of response to their voices, behavior, and age as a form of obscenity, anecdotal evidence is not enough: a pattern of response is difficult to combat without a fitting name. In her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007), philosopher Miranda Fricker argues that:

> The social experiences of members of hermeneutically marginalized groups are left inadequately conceptualized and so ill-understood, perhaps even by the subjects themselves; and/or attempts at communication made by such groups, where they do have an adequate grip on the content of what they aim to convey, are not heard as rational owing to their expressive style being inadequately understood. . . . their social situation is such that *a collective hermeneutical gap prevents them in particular from making sense of an experience which is strongly in their interests to render intelligible*. (6–7, emphasis mine)

Through the concept of social obscenity, I hope to address this gap by opening a new way to think about what it means to consider responses to certain types of femininity ("too loud," "too old," "too sexual", too *much*) as if they were obscene. This thesis has argued that while adapters' treatment of the Wife's lasciviousness indicates an understanding of her character as sexually obscene, their responses to the Wife's volubility and status as an older woman suggests that they also viewed

her character's excessive voice and her feminine aging as socially obscene. Though it was initially the existence of these responses in eighteenth-century adaptations of Chaucer's Wife of Bath which caught my attention, I believe this term has wider relevance in the current cultural and political climate facing women across much of the world.

The complex interplay of taboo and gendered social expectations reflected in this literature mirror experiences of actual women; both literary characters and "real" women have attracted these types of harmful and controlling responses. The decision-making process behind the act of adaptation, particularly of a text containing charged material, can expose cultural preoccupations that benefit from a broadened understanding of what constitutes obscenity and how this constitution might then be weaponized. Obscenity itself, then, can be understood as a double process that depends on both interpretation and recreation/response and, like adaptation, is constantly changing to reflect the context surrounding it. And like adaptation, this double process is ongoing and invites our participation as well. As the Wife of Bath herself reminds us, the hand that "peyntede the leon" shapes the story—a statement that can be read as both a warning and as an invitation to push back against cultural responses that seek to render the ordinary as socially obscene (III 692).

Appendix: *Repainting the Lion* (selected pages)

Linda Hutcheon's discussion of adaptation as both "process and product" has been a guiding principle in my research approach since my initial experiments with graphic literary adaptation during my master's studies (9). I find that the act of adaptation explored as a form of practice-based research can be particularly illuminating in its ability to highlight different challenges and opportunities provided by a particular text. My ongoing comic *Repainting the Lion* was designed to bring together multiple threads, including brief adaptations of texts and passages from my corpus, personal observations of the process of research itself, and my own particular experience doing doctoral work in Switzerland. To accomplish these goals, I cast the Wife of Bath as the ghostly presence haunting my doctoral work.

Rather than being a comic retelling of Chaucer's text, my adaptation (like several of the others considered in this dissertation) removes the Wife from her Chaucerian context and reinterprets her in a new story. In this case, my Wife of Bath is an adapted character informed by her Chaucerian construction and set in conversation with myself as a researcher as well as with other versions of her character as portrayed in the texts which form the corpus of this thesis. *Repainting the Lion* was created and published online in serial form as one of my contributions to the COMMode social media presence. The comic was initially shared at a rate of one to three pages per month for the first two years of the project. Though posting frequency diminished as my academic writing took priority, I have kept extensive notes for several undrawn pages which I hope to return to in the future.

Adapting the character of the Wife from Chaucer's poetic text into a comic necessitated adaptational decision-making relating to both a new medium and form. My character design for the Wife was intended to visually evoke certain qualities through my interpretation of details taken from her description in the *General Prologue* of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Because creating comics requires an artist to repeatedly and consistently create drawings of the same people and places, I intentionally kept her character design simple. Her nose is formed from a stylized "W" in a nod to her status as a serial wife. The shape of her dress was inspired by her euphemistic reference to her *bele chose* upon which I based her bell-shaped clothes (III 447). I also highlighted her oversized hat, which became the source of repeated gags as she lost it, found it, and interfered when other character attempted to try it on.

Like the other adapters I discuss in my thesis, creating this work required me to reckon with and make decisions related to the depiction of the Wife's potentially obscene behavior and characteristics. As mentioned earlier, in their study of the employment of humor by women and other marginalized comedians, Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett argue that "moral judgements are themselves part of the power apparatus. This apparatus constructs reason as codes, standards, and habits that render some of us or some of our experiences abnormal, disgusting, or even obscene" (37). In my attempts to adapt the Wife of Bath, I found myself having to come to terms with my own internalized "moral judgements" that certain aspects of femininity were "disgusting, or even obscene" as I regularly caught myself refraining from addressing certain aspects of the Wife, particularly when relating to

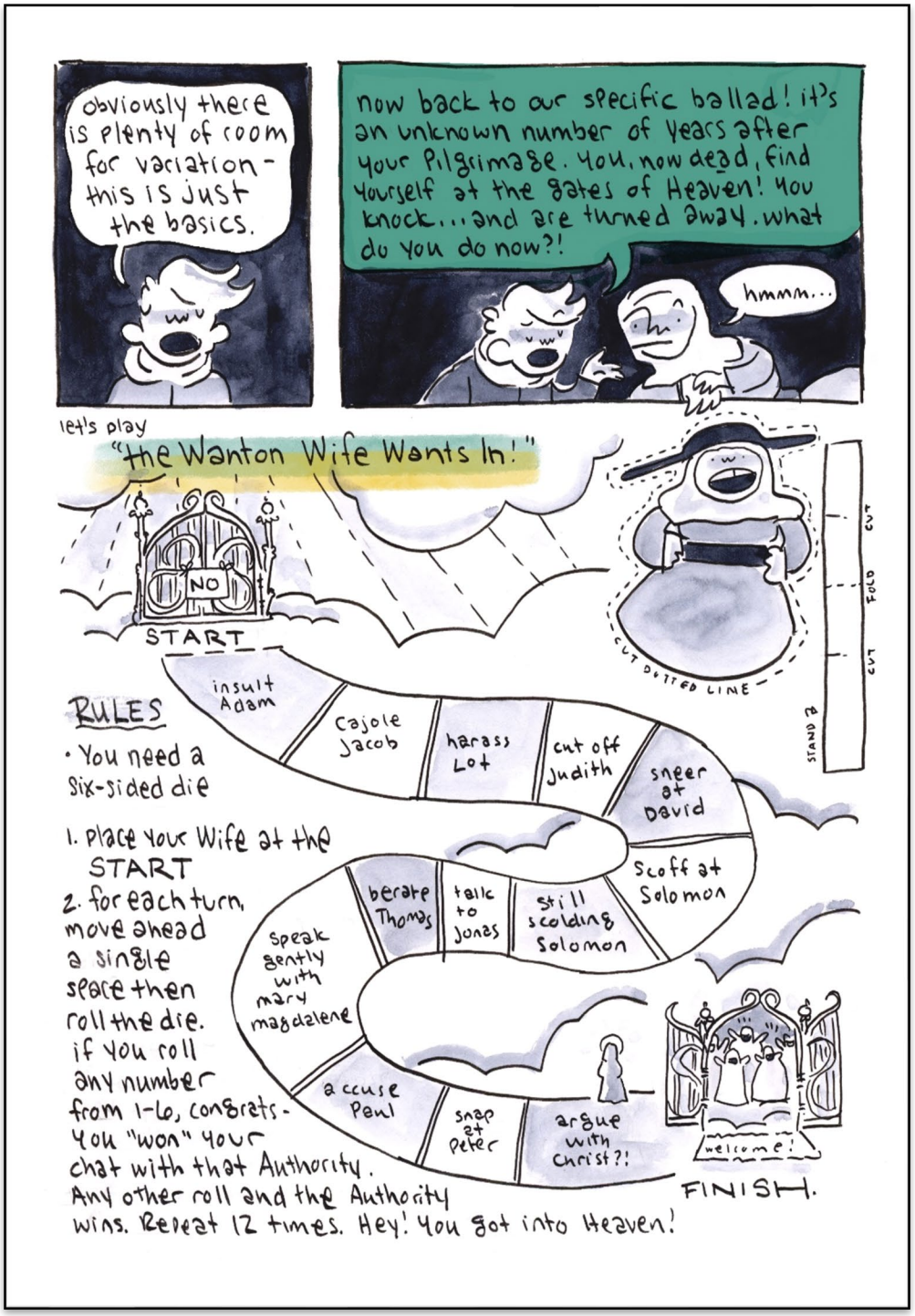
her sexuality. Throughout my comic, the Wife's sexuality becomes a source of humor and exaggeration, but I suspect this can also be read as a moment of adaptational omission. Perhaps this comes from my concerns regarding mixed audiences and a desire not to offend; perhaps it is a manifestation of my own discomfort. Maybe it is just the natural result of the genre and medium I have chosen for this work. Whatever the reasoning, when I revisit these pages at a later date, I suspect my own future "repainting of the lion" will be a more deliberate and expansive work, thanks to all I have learned from these early pages.

To date, all of the completed pages from this work are hosted on my personal website and can be viewed online at https://hellomizk.com/comics/repainting-the-lion/ .

My earliest conception of this work was that it would be serialized and published online in short passages of one to three pages at a time, rather than being completely planned from start to finish before drawing began (as a typical graphic novel might be approached). Serialization required me to make a number of adaptational decisions without knowing what the final story might require. I decided early in the process to use color for clarity and organization rather than naturalistically. As this work was envisioned as a kind of "process memoir" from the start, I also opted to include these moments of adaptational decision-making as a part of the story being told, as seen in the page above.

As part of envisioning this work as a serialized process memoir, I wanted to highlight moments of discovery made in my research in order to give my readers the sense of being a part of my academic journey rather than outside of it. One technique I used for this was the anticipation of questions a reader might have which were then put into the mouth of my inquisitive and opinionated Wife of Bath. Using this technique above and responding through illustrated definitions to bring them to life, the Wife of Bath and I examined the shifting definitions of the word "wanton" in a more playful and visually memorable manner.

This page introduced one of the key theoretical concepts I would be working with throughout the COMMode project: the different ways obscenity can be defined across place and time. Moving forward, I more fully recognize the importance of this concept and would expand this section by several pages in order to develop these definitions in a more nuanced fashion and to include the category of scatological obscenity, which I initially omitted. I would also incorporate Carissa M. Harris's notion of the different responses obscenity invites and Mary Caupti's comments on obscenity and control.



Because the eighteenth-century adaptations I discuss in my thesis remain relatively unknown to a wider reading audience, I decided to include "miniadaptations" designed to provide readers with a brief summation of what each text was doing with Chaucer's character (in a single page whenever possible). For the broadside ballad, I took inspiration from children's board games to highlight the inevitable progression of the Wife across the text. This format provides a clear overview of the plot of the ballad while humourously underlining the Wife's unruly vocal presentation as being the driving factor in the story.

While the visual character design of the Wife is based largely on details taken from Chaucer's description of her in the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*, the behavior of my Wife of Bath is influenced by my reading of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. My nod to the Wife's sexual candor comes in the form of her bawdy sense of humor, on this page centered on the biblical Solomon, which contrasts sharply in the final panel with the Wanton Wife of the ballad's response.

The middle row of panels on this page offers a visual contrast of three interpretations of Solomon seen in three texts: the Bible, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, and *The Wanton Wife of Bath* ballad. The left and right panels visually mirror each other to emphasize the similar antifeminist sentiments in each. The inclusion of Solomon as a character reflecting on his own literary legacy in the bottom tier of panels allows me to remind readers how the "double process" of adaptation can allow a story or text to be reworked to serve different purposes.

In framing the character of Chaucer's Wife of Bath as my ghostly conversational partner, I was able to build on my own reading of her optimism and good-humored nature to set in contrast with my moments of anxiety and frustration in order to keep the tone of my work generally upbeat and inviting. On this page, I set the Wife's bawdy humor against my own perplexity with the research process as we converse about "challenges" we both faced.

As mentioned in more depth in the conclusion to my thesis, the subject of character and adaptation was one which I considered from the first day of my time on the COMMode project right through the last. I anticipate that, should I choose to rework the concept of this process memoir into a full graphic novel as I am considering, the question of what goes into adapting a character will form the main focus of that book. I would then address the treatment of the Wife of Bath's potential for obscenity in these adapted texts as a case study (and perhaps a cautionary tale) for how certain adaptational responses can change a reader's experience of a work.

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