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## “WHO PEYNTEDE THE LEON?”<sup>1</sup> THE OLDE WYF CONFRONTS THE WIFE OF BATH AND CRISEYDE

Nancy Rosenfeld

It is a commonplace of Chaucerian criticism that the Wife of Bath's Tale is the first member of the "Marriage Group," followed by the tales of the Clerk, Merchant and Franklin, all of which portray relations between the sexes. At the same time, *Troilus and Criseyde*, for hundreds of years Chaucer's most admired poem, is often compared to the Knight's Tale; both, according to Julian N. Wasserman, share a cosmos based on "the traditional conflict between Providence and Free Will."<sup>2</sup> While these groupings are clearly useful, I should like to suggest that a careful examination of *Troilus and Criseyde* vis-a-vis the Wife of Bath's Tale (hereafter referred to as the Wife's Tale, subsuming the Wife's Prologue and her section of the General Prologue) yields a number of significant parallels between Criseyde and the Wife of Bath. Furthermore, the issues raised by these parallels are resolved in the relationship between the Olde Wyf of the Wife's Tale—"the Hag," as she is often known—and the Knyght. The parallels between Criseyde and the Wife interrogate the following issues: equality between the sexes, possessions (ownership), possession (jealousy) and appearance.

In light of the lack of scholarly attention paid to the similarities between Criseyde and the Wife, it may be necessary to justify the attempt to discuss these seemingly different women in tandem. The first point of similarity is, of course, family situation. Both women are widowed and possibly childless. While Shulamith Shahar notes that

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<sup>1</sup> *The Canterbury Tales*, 3.692. All citations of Chaucer's poetry are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988). Citations of *The Canterbury Tales* are to fragment and line/s; citations of *Troilus and Criseyde* are to book and line/s.

<sup>2</sup> Julian N. Wasserman, "Both Fixed and Free: Language and Destiny in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, eds. Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1989), p. 195.

the maternal role of married women is rarely mentioned in medieval literature,<sup>3</sup> modern readers find the absence of a child in the life of either woman to be significant. The narrator, after all, provides his readers with a wealth of detail about each heroine, but chooses not to mention children; and this at a time when effective contraception was not available. Widowhood and childlessness frame the woman, block out the encumbrances of daily life; in much the same way a painter will often place his subject against a simple curtain or a quiet garden scene in order to concentrate the viewer's attention on the portrait itself.

Another framing device which Chaucer uses in both poems is clothing; in the late Middle Ages fashion was often extravagant and dress forms wildly exaggerated. One of the most memorable vignettes of the General Prologue highlights the Wife of Bath in bright scarlet hose with her hat "As brood as is a bokeler or a targe" (1.471). Criseyde, unlike the Wife, is apparently barred by her widowhood from wearing bright colors; but the very blackness of her dress ("so soore hath she me wounded,/ That stood in blak" 2.533-4) focuses both Troilus's and the reader's attention on Criseyde in much the same way as do the colors of the Wife's extravagant outfits.

In spite of the presence of these frames marking off the heroine from her immediate surroundings, whether physical or cultural, the wider background is palpable in both texts. As Arlyn Diamond notes, *Troilus and Criseyde* can be seen as a response to a period of "social chaos and violence brought on by the disintegration of feudalism and exacerbated by war."<sup>4</sup> Chaucer's portraits, in the words of C.D. Benson, unite the clarity of medieval allegory with "a new immediacy and realism."<sup>5</sup>

There are poets, as H elene Cixous argues, "who would go to any lengths to slip something by at odds with tradition—men capable [...] of imagining the woman who would hold out against oppression and constitute herself as a superb, equal, hence 'impossible' subject, untenable in a real social framework."<sup>6</sup> Could Chaucer possibly

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<sup>3</sup> Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: a history of women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 98.

<sup>4</sup> Arlyn Diamond, "Troilus and Criseyde: The Politics of Love," *Chaucer in the Eighties*, eds. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986), p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> C.D. Benson, *Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 86.

<sup>6</sup> H elene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), p. 249.

be one of these poets? The concept of equality between the sexes as we know it was foreign to Chaucer's time, and yet the idea of companionship in marriage was not totally unknown in Church literature of the Middle Ages; according to Shahar, Peter Lombard, writing in the twelfth century, postulated that woman was created from man's rib in order to emphasize her place at man's side, rather than above or beneath him.<sup>7</sup> Chaucer's concern with sovereignty and *maistrie* in the complicated tissues of relationships between man and woman is central to many of the Canterbury stories: while the Wife posits two possibilities—the man dominates the woman or the woman dominates the man—the relationship between Troilus and Criseyde is predicated on a kind of equality.

In the commonly-held view, delineated by Muriel Bowden in her discussion of the General Prologue, the Wife is coarse and uninhibited, friendly and goodhumored.<sup>8</sup> The Wife, however, reveals a sensitivity that is unexpected in the light of this view when she tells her audience that Jankyn's oft-repeated verbal attacks on women were very painful to her: "Who wolde wene, or who woude suppose,/ The wo that in myne hert was, and pyne?" (3.786-7) This woe and pain lead the Wife to tear pages out of Jankyn's "cursed book" (3.789) and then punch him in the face and knock him down. Jankyn's response, a hefty blow to the ear, is the direct cause of the Wife's deafness (3.792-6).

In "Alisoun Weaves a Text" Peggy A. Knapp applies one of the central metaphors of current literary theory—the identity of text and texture—to the Wife's Tale. Knapp teases out the feminist "thread" woven through the Prologue, in which Alisoun is seen as "a layered, 'realistically'-conceived character defending her life without altogether hiding its ragged edges";<sup>9</sup> the Wife defends her position as an independent woman controlling her own property and person, while at the same time playing "her game for ascendancy primarily by managing men through sex."<sup>10</sup> In her discussion of the fight between Alisoun and Jankyn, Knapp observes that the two "reach accord when he agrees to burn the book and she agrees to stop acting it out."<sup>11</sup> Lying on the floor, recovering from her husband's blow, the

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<sup>7</sup> Shahar, p. 67.

<sup>8</sup> Muriel Bowden, *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 214.

<sup>9</sup> Peggy Knapp, "Alisoun Weaves a Text," *Philological Quarterly* 65 (1986): p. 391.

<sup>10</sup> Knapp, p. 392.

<sup>11</sup> Knapp, p. 399.

Wife “understands that a man will be attracted to her in a state of supine helplessness” and therefore “uses her victimization to gain power.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless Alisoun and Jankyn do not achieve genuine accord; the Wife, rather, takes (back) power, after a round of fisticuffs which culminates in her partial deafness.

The Wife’s awareness of “the wo that is in mariage” (3.3) generally and her own woe and pain in particular does not bring her to seek that equality which the modern reader would recommend as the cure for her suffering. Her return to *maistrie* after a comparatively short period during which her husband rules the home is bought at the price of a loss of hearing which can be seen as a loss of sensitivity. Indeed, the impairment of her sense of hearing is a figure for her lack of sensitivity. This, Chaucer seems to be hinting, is the price of being part of hierarchy; he (or she) who has *maistrie* over others will of necessity be limited in his (her) ability to hear the voices of those who rank lower. Susan Crane argues that Alison “revels in the attractions of power”; Crane finds the Wife’s attempt to redefine women’s sovereignty to be “rhetorically and culturally significant”; yet “Alison’s apparent confusions propel her convictions beyond traditional discourses toward a realm of expression where there is as yet no language.”<sup>13</sup> The Wife is ultimately limited in her ability to rise above the conventions of her time; as Crane notes, “the most Alison can tell us about her ideal of female power is that it is not present.”<sup>14</sup>

The Wife, nevertheless, expresses her desire for power quite articulately; at no point does she lack the language needed for “revelling in the attractions of power.” Alisoun, however, does not seem to be aware of her own “apparent confusions.” It is the narrator who calls the reader’s attention to a serious fault in Alisoun’s concept of power: the Wife’s deafness leads the reader to acknowledge the impaired ability of the higher-ranking member of a hierarchy to be sensitive to those beneath. This impairment limits the possibility of accord between man and wife; while the Wife claims that at last she and her husband “fine acorded by us selven two” (3.812), the emphasis should perhaps be on *two* rather than *acord*.

Walter C. Long makes a fairly convincing case for the Wife’s role as a “constructive moral agent,” arguing for “the morally revolution-

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<sup>12</sup> Knapp, p. 398.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Crane, “Alison’s Incapacity and Poetic Instability in the Wife of Bath’s Tale,” *PMLA* 102, 1 (1987), p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Crane, p. 27.

ary concept of sexual equality.”<sup>15</sup> Aware of the danger of “irrationally confounding sovereignty and equality,”<sup>16</sup> Long suggests that the traditionally patriarchal nature of Chaucer’s audience forced him to make a “proto-feminist” statement through the Wife’s use of self-irony and indirection.<sup>17</sup> This line of argument, however, ignores the significance of Alisoun’s deafness: the result of her struggle with her husband was not equality, but *maistrie*, gained, moreover, at the cost of insensitivity, of an impaired ability to hear, not only herself, but her partner.

While sometimes stressing the Wife’s role as an independent, even liberated woman, modern critics tend to emphasize Criseyde’s passivity. She is, after all, subject to the protection and authority of a man, whether Hector (“youre body shal men save”—1.122), Troilus, her uncle, her father or Diomedes. Gretchen Mieszkowski contends that when Criseyde “imagines loving, she thinks of herself as acted upon. [...] Loving is painless violence for her—as if she were submitting to a painless rape.”<sup>18</sup> Although I do not claim that the relationship between Troilus and Criseyde is predicated upon that political-economic-social equality which defines twenty-first century conceptions of sexual liberation, it is possible to find in their love an equality of feeling: the two lovers share the same emotions at a number of points. It is not surprising that we find this unity of feeling in book 3, in which the lovers’ sexual unity is described. There was little need for speech, we are told, because “It semed hire he wiste what she thoughte/ Withouten word” (3.465-6). Troilus and Criseyde are compared to a tree and ivy; but if the image of a (male) tree and (female) vine making love was commonplace, Chaucer’s version emphasizes the equality of the two parts of the figure, rather than depicting the clinging vine as a parasite upon the strong, independent tree: “with many a twiste [...] Gan ech of hem in armes other wynde” (3.1230, 1232). Later on the equality inherent in their lovemaking is expressed directly, without recourse to symbol: “ech of hem gan others lust obey” (3.1690).

Ownership of property was an important issue for Chaucer, who at one point in his varied career earned a living as comptroller of customs and foreign trade during a period of economic develop-

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<sup>15</sup> Walter C. Long, “The Wife as Moral Revolutionary,” *The Chaucer Review*, 20, 4 (1986), p. 275.

<sup>16</sup> Long, p. 274.

<sup>17</sup> Long, p. 281.

<sup>18</sup> Gretchen Mieszkowski, “Chaucer’s Much Loved Criseyde,” *The Chaucer Review* 26, 2 (1991), p. 116.

ment and change. Questions of property rights and control of possessions are, of course, intimately connected with notions of control of one's own person. The Wife of Bath treats with this question directly, while Criseyde, who also seems to be a woman of substance, addresses the problem of possession implicitly.

Luce Irigaray has argued that woman represents a mystery "in a culture that claims to enumerate everything, cipher everything by units, inventory everything by individualities."<sup>19</sup> Possession is delineated in both the Wife of Bath's Tale and *Troilus and Criseyde* by means of imagery centering on looking and mirrors. Chaucerian scholars have made much of the scenes in which Alisoun is on display in church and Criseyde in the temple. Bowden points out that the Wife is "conspicuously overdressed" in church on Sundays in order to draw attention to herself and her success as a businesswoman.<sup>20</sup> The narrator of the General Prologue notes the importance which the Wife places on being observed by her fellow townspeople as she makes the weekly offering in church: "In al the parisshe wif was ther noon/ That to the offrynge bifore hire shold goon" (1.449-50).

If Ovid were reading Chaucer, according to Michael Calabrese, "he would want to argue that Criseyde went to that temple that day for the same reason," i.e. to be seen.<sup>21</sup> Calabrese contends that the Wife attempts to return to the Golden Age which was, according to extant antifeminist tradition, brought to an end by female greed and male domination. The Wife, in his words, would go "beyond treachery and the claims to authority and power that prevent love."<sup>22</sup> Yet Alisoun is quick to notice "oure apprentice Janekyn's" "crispe heer, shynnyng as gold so fyn" (3.304). Having inherited her gold from her numerous husbands, the Wife does not intend to yield it; you shall not, she announces to her (mostly male) audience "be maister of my body and of my good" (3.314): the Wife's retention of power over her *good* (which puns with *gold*) does not sound like a wish to go beyond power and authority, even at the price of preventing love.

One of the central metaphors in current criticism figures woman as a mirror, a reflection, and in one sense Criseyde serves as a mirror

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<sup>19</sup> Luce Irigaray, "This sex which is not one," trans. Claudia Reeder, *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), p. 101.

<sup>20</sup> Bowden, p. 216.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Calabrese, *Chaucer's Ovidian Arts of Love* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1994), p. 94.

<sup>22</sup> Calabrese, p. 82.

image of the Wife. Both heroines succeed in keeping their own goods while yielding their bodies to men; but while the Wife struggles to retain control of her property, Criseyde appears to keep her own goods (her mansion in Troy) without effort. And while Alisoun yields her body to her various husbands as a matter of course, Criseyde grants Troilus possession of her body as one who bestows a great treasure.

Mieszkowski, moreover, argues that Criseyde is a mirror of men in general: "She responds to the men around her and mirrors them, but she is not someone herself";<sup>23</sup> Criseyde is "Simone de Beauvoir's quintessentially appealing woman of Western culture: emptiness of being reflecting being, the Inessential that mirrors the Essential."<sup>24</sup> Yet Criseyde herself compares Troilus to a mirror: "she felte he was to hire a wall Of stiel, and sheld" (3,479-80). Walls of steel and shields serve a protective function; but *steel* and *shield* also recall the shiny surface which reflects as it protects. If Criseyde does in fact see Troilus as a mirror, a reflection of herself, this may be an example of being reflecting being, rather than emptiness reflecting being. Although Criseyde had hesitated to enter into an affair with Troilus because "I am myn owene womman, wel at ese" (2.750), by envisioning her lover as a mirror of herself Criseyde is able to remain the owner of herself.

Jealousy, the wish to possess another person, is an integral part of the tissue of relationships of which Criseyde is a part. The Wife of Bath, on the other hand, consciously uses jealousy to achieve certain ends. Alisoun tells her audience that she accused her elderly husbands of running after "wenches" in order to explain her own "walkynge out by nyghte" (3.397). The Wife gleefully notes that this charge doubly pleased the husband by hinting that he was interested in pursuing women despite his advanced age; at the same time, the charge was perceived by the husband as a sign of his wife's fondness for him.

The Wife's apparent acceptance of the validity of her husband's expectation that she be faithful contrasts with her earlier statement that: "He is to greet a nygard that wolde werne/ A man to lighte a candle at his lanterne" (3.333-4). Perhaps Alisoun does, in fact, suffer from the same kind of jealousy of which she accuses her husbands. What might be the nature of the Wife's jealousy? She has,

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<sup>23</sup> Mieszkowski, p. 107.

<sup>24</sup> Mieszkowski, p. 129.



after all, made it clear that she set no store by the lovemaking of her elderly husbands (3.203). Nevertheless she becomes jealous when she is denied: when the Wife is refused something that she desires, its price at once goes up and she will “crie al day and crave” it (3.518). This image is reminiscent of the Wife’s use of the figure of the husband as debtor, obligated by the marriage vows to pay his debt to his wife by having sex with her. The husband must “yelde to his wyf hire dette” (3.130); “paye his dette” (3.153); “be bothe [...] dettour and thral” (3.155). The repetition of the figure may lead to a perception of the Wife as mercenary and manipulative. Yet theologians, as Shahar notes, often justified sexual relations within the bounds of marriage as a mutual obligation (*debitum*) for the spouses, which moreover implied recognition of the woman’s sexuality.<sup>25</sup> It is thus possible to discern in the Wife’s insistence on being rendered her debt an expression of jealousy, based on her awareness of her own sexuality and her wish for her partner’s recognition of it.

When Criseyde first considers the possibility of entering into a love affair with Troilus a major cause of hesitation is her memory of a husband’s jealousy: “Shal noon hosbonde seyn to me ‘Chek mat!’/ For either they ben ful of jalousie/ Or maisterfull, or loven novelrie) (2.754-6). It is ironically prophetic of Criseyde’s later betrayal that in order to bring the lovers together Pandarus tells her that Troilus suspects her of betraying him; i.e. Troilus allows a falsehood to be told and thus leads Criseyde to believe that he is suffering from jealousy. Criseyde herself figures jealousy as —“that wikked wyvere” (3.1010). While *wyvere* is glossed as *snake*, the pun on *wyf* is clear. Indeed, the reflexive irony is palpable: Criseyde warns her lover of the dangers of jealousy—and he is presumed to be the jealous party at this point—by using the conventional figure of jealousy as a snake. Yet the pun on *wyvere/ wyf* indicates the presence of jealousy within Criseyde herself. Is it intentional? Perhaps we are intended to see it as the proverbial Freudian slip, revealing concerns of which the speaker is not fully conscious.

In any discussion of a female character it is impossible to avoid asking: What does she look like? Do others find her appearance attractive? Does she see herself as beautiful? Were I attempting to make movies of the stories of the two heroines I would probably photograph the Wife of Bath’s Tale in color, while filming *Troilus and Criseyde* in black and white. The Wife’s Tale is suffused with color: scarlet and gold are its dominant hues. There is Alison’s scarlet hose

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<sup>25</sup> Shahar, p. 70.

in the General Prologue; on her various outings she wears “gaye scarlet gyter” (3.559); Jankyn, as already noted, has hair which the Wife compares to gold so fine that it might almost be a crown. Scarlet and gold unite in the Wife’s retelling of a dream which she had previously told to a prospective husband in order to attract him (3.575-84). Alisoun exposes her motives to herself when she describes her manipulative use of a dream which she did not, in fact, have, and then explicates it for her audience: “Blood,” the Wife notes, “bitokeneth gold” (3.581).

The color red is also associated with the Wife’s body. She tells her audience that “have I Martes mark upon my face,/ And also in another privee place” (3.619-20). Mars, the red planet, has apparently imprinted a red birthmark on Alisoun; this may be taken as a sign of pugnacity, certainly present in the Wife’s character, although Mars would conventionally be associated with the supposedly more aggressive male. Blood, nevertheless, is surely evocative of the female. In the Wife’s narrative the color gold (wealth, power) thus conflates with red (violence, femininity), emphasizing the connection between outward appearance and some of the threads woven into her narrative.

In contemporary criticism the text is often figured as woven cloth; indeed, the identity of text and texture is a defining metaphor of current literary theory/ theories. Bowden notes that the narrator’s claim of the Wife’s great skill as a weaver may be an “ironical twist,” since in Chaucer’s day West Country English weavers did not enjoy as good a reputation as their colleagues on the Continent.<sup>26</sup> The irony, however, may go deeper. Women’s language, according to Irigaray, is predicated on “‘other meaning’ which is constantly in the process of weaving itself.”<sup>27</sup> Chaucer’s weaving wife is thus archetypal: the eternal Eve, portrayed as a weaver.

Yet in her Prologue the Wife weaves a tale which reveals the defects of her own erudition; and W.F. Bolton calls attention to the many inconsistencies in her narrative.<sup>28</sup> It may not be farfetched to find ironic the Wife’s apparent skill as a weaver of cloth, when compared to the unevenness of her ability as a narrator. Is her discourse truly uneven, however? It may appear so to Chaucer the pilgrim; Chaucer, the poet, on the other hand, was probably proud of his

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<sup>26</sup> Bowden, p. 215.

<sup>27</sup> Irigaray, p. 103.

<sup>28</sup> W.F. Bolton, “The Wife of Bath: Narrator as Victim,” *Gender and Literary Voice*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980), p. 61, 63.

creation. He may have felt that, despite its appearance, the Wife's narrative is an honest reflection of reality. When Alisoun asks "Who peyntede the Leon, tel me who?" (3.692) her question displays her awareness of the fine line separating appearance and reality. Are the bright colors a mere layer of paint, spread upon the lion's body, or perhaps like a woven cloth the colors are the essence.

Alisoun's question—"Who peynted the leoun?"—refers to Aesop's fable of the man and the lion, in which a man shows a lion a statue of a man in the process of killing a lion; the lion then asks, "Did a man or a lion make this picture?" The surface meaning of the tale is clear: in modern terminology, a text cannot be interpreted unless one knows the identity, and therefore the agenda of, the narrator. Alisoun is, however, making another point: when a statue or bas-relief is painted, the colors are added to a previously-created essence, which can exist with or without the addition of the colors; and in a so-called two-dimensional painting a layer of color is spread on a cloth, skin or piece of paper. In weaving, on the other hand, the colors cannot be separated from the essence. The tapestry, the very cloth itself, is a synthesis of color and form; without the colored thread the cloth does not exist. The man who "peynted the leon," therefore, claims that color and essence, i.e. appearance and reality can be separated. The Wife, a weaver of cloth, argues that appearance and reality are indivisible.

While the Wife of Bath speaks of "peynting the leon," Criseyde accuses her uncle of using overly elegant, and possibly dishonest language—"this peynted process" (2.424)—to convince her of the truth of Troilus's love. Here, too, there is more than a hint of possible falsity in the addition of color as a separate layer: paint, of course, is often used to conceal. The color-scheme of *Troilus and Criseyde* is not multicolored, however, but rather black and white: Criseyde is draped in widow's weeds when Troilus first sees her; the lady is compared to a bright star under a black cloud (1.175); the heroine herself speaks of "Blake nyght, as folks in bokes rede,/ That shapen art by God in this world to hide/ At certyn tymes wyth thi derke wede" (3.1429-31). The apostrophe to night, which enables lovers to meet but too hastily separates them by yielding to daylight, is a convention of a literary tradition which glorifies illicit love affairs. Yet in the above address Criseyde reflexively compares night to the dark widow's weeds which she herself wears. Surely it is ironic that Criseyde blames the black-robed night for leaving too quickly, since this is what she herself eventually does.

When Criseyde realizes that she must leave Troy she promises

that her clothes “Shul blake ben in tokenyng, herte swete,/ That I am as out of this world agon” (4.779-80). It is, again, ironic that the heroine, who has been wearing black for one man and is about to become a (grass) widow again, speaks of going out of the world; it is Troilus, after all, who is about to go out of the world. In our last view of the hero he is compared to a star, high above, looking down on “this wrecched world,” (5.1819-20), reminding us of our first view of Criseyde, that bright star surrounded by black.

What, then, would Chaucer have us conclude when he suggests that we “Have here a light, and loke on al this blake” ink (2.1320)? The growing darkness all around, which makes “white thynges wexen dymme and donne/ For lak of lyght” (2.908-9), tells us about the nature of reality in the eyes of the narrator. When white is set next to black, Pandarus declares at the beginning of the story, each seems “more” because of the other: “Eke whit by blak, by shame ek wirthinesse,/ Ech set by other, more for other semeth” (1.642-3); when Troilus and Criseyde are set next to each other, each seems more because of the other. Chaucer’s use of imagery based on black and white creates a reality composed of extremes.

Although Troilus and Criseyde were able to achieve a temporary equality, the presence of a strict hierarchy in the wider social framework precluded the possibility of that equality being permanent. The Wife’s tale of the Olde Wyf and the Knyght, too, would seem to strengthen the claim that equality between the sexes is not possible; in the end, according to Carolyn Dinshaw, “the hag has conformed herself—her whole body—to [her husband’s] desire [...]. Men’s desire is still in control,” although female desire must be acknowledged.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless the Olde Wyf and the Knyght achieve an equality prophetic of modern concepts of equality between man and woman. Their relationship is an ideal, not only for the fourteenth century, but for us as well: “thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende/ In parfit joye” (3.1257-8). The Wife, of course, sees the denouement of her tale as a victory for the Olde Wyf, who has achieved *maistrie* over her husband. Yet the Wife’s view of what actually takes place between husband and wife in the tale which she tells is incomplete. The Knyght, of his own free will, puts himself in his wife’s “wise governance;” the Wyf decides, of her own free will, to obey him “in every thyng/ That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng” (3.1255-6). The Wife does not

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<sup>29</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989), p. 129.

seem able to directly envisage a non-hierarchical love between a man and a woman, although this is, in fact, what the Wyf and Knyght achieve; in the persons of the Olde Wyf and the Knyght, on the other hand, the poet appears to be articulating a love which is outside the framework of sovereignty.

The question of ownership, of possessions, arises in the tale told by the Wife. On learning that he is expected to marry the Olde Wyf, the Knyght complains that she is poor. This leads to a long lecture by the Wyf on the value and advantages of poverty. Her message is twofold: firstly, "Genterye/ Is nat annexed to possessioun;" (3.1146-7), i.e. *gentillesse* is not inherited from wealthy parents, but is a function of individual behavior, and secondly: poverty is a "possessioun that no Wight wol challenge" (3.1200). The poor man, in other words, can be merry, since nobody covets what he has.

Both the Wife of Bath and Criseyde keep their own goods while yielding possession of their bodies to a man; the Knyght at first takes possession of a woman's body by force, for which he almost loses his life. On realizing that he may be forced into marriage—a situation in which women more commonly found themselves—the Knyght pleads: "Taak al my good and lat my body go" (3.1061). The Knyght, however, in marked contrast to the Wife of Bath and Criseyde, does not appear to have much in the way of goods with which to bargain.

While specific information as to the Knyght's finances is not provided, the young man seems to exist in a protracted adolescence, characterized by lack of a regular income, and is eventually made to marry an older woman. By insisting that the Knyght keep his word and marry her, the Olde Wyf forces him into a traditionally female situation: lack of sovereignty over one's body. In her tale the Wife of Bath thus turns the tables on the man, showing him and the males in her audience what it is like to be treated as a possession. The Olde Wyf, however, is generous: by releasing the Knyght from being forced into marriage with an ugly, old woman and allowing him to choose, she mitigates the difficulty of his situation. By granting his wife the possibility of choice the Knyght helps to create a model of marriage in which neither partner is the possession of the other.

If the *Canterbury Tales* is a poem working "toward a code of marital affection that is beyond treachery," according to Calabrese, we must see Jankyn's and Alisoun's mutual cessation of hostilities as an attempt to "look toward a marriage and a romantic world that are free of art and game."<sup>30</sup> I would claim, however, that it is really

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<sup>30</sup> Calabrese, p. 104.

the Olde Wyf and the Knyght who achieve this. When making her offer to the Knyght the Olde Wyf warns him that should he choose a young and fair wife he will have to take his "aventure of the repair/ That shal be to youre hous by caus of me" (3.1224-5). This threat, let us note, is not specific; the Wyf may not be unfaithful to her husband, but the Knyght will have to take his chances. The Wyf is merely warning her husband that if he has a young, attractive wife he may feel jealous. The wife may not give the Knyght genuine cause for jealousy; the husband, however, will probably suffer the proverbial pangs of jealousy because he does not expect an attractive woman to limit her sexual favors to one man.

The problem of jealousy raised by the Olde Wyf is resolved through mutual consideration initiated by the Knyght when he asks the Wyf to choose "which may be moost plesance/ And moost honour to yow and me also" (3.1232-3). The Wyf, as we know, chooses to be both fair and good; the former will give *plesance* to the Knyght and the latter honor to them both, obviating the necessity to manipulate each other's emotions by awakening jealousy. The Wife of Bath is a middle-aged woman, worried by the approach of age which has bereft her of beauty (a supposedly outward attribute) and pith (inner content). Criseyde is said to be beautiful (5.806-826) not only in her outward appearance but in character. The Wyf, who is old and ugly and then becomes young and beautiful, synthesizes youth and age, ugliness and beauty.

The Wife's Tale, let us not forget, is a *bildungsroman*: having undergone a transformation that is difficult, or, some would say, even impossible—from casual rapist to sensitive lover—the Knyght is rewarded by a woman who is both beautiful and good. There is no discrepancy, in other words, between her outward appearance and inner essence. She first demands that he choose between appearance (beauty) and reality (goodness); the necessity of choice is predicated on the idea that the two are not identical, and that outward appearance and inner reality can, in fact, be separated. The harmony reached by husband and wife brings about the eventual unity of appearance and reality in the person of the Olde Wyf.

The correspondences between the Wife of Bath and Criseyde have been synthesized in the relationship of the Olde Wyf and the Knyght in Alisoun's tale. Through this relationship Chaucer indicates ways in which binary oppositions such as mastery/ equality, dependence/ independence, appearance/ reality can be transcended, or indeed invalidated. The Wife accepts the need for hierarchy; she is not capable of envisioning a system of non-hierarchical relations

between men and women. Troilus and Criseyde can avoid issues of hierarchy temporarily, but in the long run they cannot ignore hierarchy. Yet the Olde Wyf and the Knyght finally succeed in achieving equality by transcending hierarchical frameworks.

The Wife uses her own body to gain and retain power over her goods; Criseyde seems to set a value on her body, but ultimately does not rebel against her role as a man's possession. When told that he must marry an old woman the Knyght becomes an object; he must learn first-hand what it means to lose control of his body before he can be part of a relationship in which questions of ownership are irrelevant.

Jealousy is knowingly used by the Wife to manipulate men in order to guarantee retention of her own power. Criseyde does not want a jealous lover and does not herself seem to be jealous; jealousy is used, however, by Pandarus and Troilus to convince her to enter into a sexual relationship with the hero. The Olde Wyf does not appear to be motivated by jealousy, although she takes pains to warn the Knyght that he may suffer from jealousy if he has a beautiful wife. The two, again, transcend jealousy through mutual yielding and consideration.

Underlying the poet's portrayal of the Wife of Bath and Criseyde is the interrogation of the validity of a clear separation between appearance and reality. The Wife is worried that aging will bereave her of "beauty and pith"—appearance and substance—while Criseyde's act of betrayal does taint the beauty of her outward self. In the tale of the Olde Wyf and the Knyght, however, Chaucer demonstrates that the separation of appearance and reality is not always valid, and can indeed be transcended. Appearance and reality, like the colors of a cloth and the cloth itself, are not to be separated. Might not this declaration be another example of the way in which Chaucer, as Bolton declares,<sup>31</sup> is not only ahead of his time, but of ours as well?

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<sup>31</sup> Bolton, p. 64.