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What Women Want?

Mimesis and Gender in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*

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But nathelees, syn I knowe youre delit, / I shal fulfille youre worldly appetit.¹

Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* centers on a wonderfully fruitful paradox: she claims for women and for herself the right to "maistrie" and "sovereynetee" in marriage, but she does so by articulating the discourse imparted to her by the "auctoritee" of anti-feminism.² Indeed, this paradoxical challenge to and reiteration of anti-feminist ideas has left Chaucer's readers debating for decades which way the irony cuts: is the *Wife* to be understood as a proto-feminist, or is she merely "a delightful buffoon inadvertently lampooning herself for the ironic pleasure of a knowing, male audience"?³ How we choose to answer this question, moreover, decides in turn how we will answer the questions that arise from Chaucer's representation of the struggle for "maistrie," or dominance, in the prologue and tale generally: what causes violence in human relationships and societies, and how can violence be quelled or avoided? What does it mean to forgive insult or injury, and how is reconciliation achieved?

Chaucer's *Wife*, Alisoun, tells the story of a rapist-knight who undergoes

a process of reeducation and reformation when he is charged with a quest to discover what it is that women want, and then is rewarded when the ugly old woman who supplies him with the answer in exchange for marriage is transformed into a beautiful and faithful young wife; thus, the knight's quest to discover women's desire concludes, ironically, with the fulfillment of his own "worldly appetit." I open the present essay with the lines uttered by the ugly old woman before she magically transforms herself into the object of the knight's desire in order to highlight the way in which the tale's conclusion signals a crucial aporia: insofar as the old woman's claim that women desire sovereignty above all is undermined by her surrender of sovereignty to her young husband, we never do find out, once and for all, what women want.

The *Wife's Tale* is preceded in the *Canterbury* collection by a prologue, also narrated by the Wife of Bath, which serves as her confession, as she recalls her youthful exploits in love and marriage and reveals to her pilgrim-audience the manipulative stratagems by which she was able to control a succession of husbands and their wealth. Many of Chaucer's readers have observed that the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* echo and parallel each other at several key points, particularly in reiterating the male surrender of maistrie: the rapist-knight surrenders maistrie to the magical "loathly lady" just as, in the prologue, Alisoun's husbands surrender to her.⁴ One common reading of this narrative symmetry is to see the Wife's tale as an exemplum of her confessional prologue: as Marshall Leicester puts it, in the prologue the Wife "sets out to make an example of herself" in order to prove by her own experience the "necessity of feminine 'maistrie'"; she thus "offers the tale as a counter-exemplum to set in opposition to those in Janekyn's book of wicked wives and the male misogynist tradition."⁵ Nearly all interpretations that consider these parallels assume the loathly lady figure to be the Wife's analogue and the rapist-knight to be representative of all men, and thus to be an analogue both for her husbands and for the textual "auctoritee" that she "quits" in her prologue: in this allegorical reading of the tale, therefore, "this old 'wyf' is like the Wife herself, her youth vanished, having to devise some way of continuing the 'olde daunce' of marriage—and life itself—in the no-man's land between what women want and what men want."⁶

The problem that remains, especially for gender-aware or feminist readings of the Wife, is the tale's status as mere wish-fulfillment: if, in her tale, Alisoun is imagining herself in the dual role of powerful enchantress and beautiful young woman, she seems to betray an aging temptress's desire both to dominate men and to fulfill male desire. This interpretation of the parallels between prologue and tale also makes the tale's ending especially problematic, for if the tale is meant to illustrate and validate the Wife's experientially based insight that

women deserve sovereignty and mastery over men in marriage, the fact that, at the tale's conclusion, we are told the transformed wife proceeds to "obey" her husband "in every thyng / That myghte do hym plesance or likyng" seems a striking contradiction to Alisoun's purpose, while the question of women's desire is elided altogether in favor of yet another representation of male desire.⁷ Ultimately, and quite conveniently for Chaucer's knight, it would seem that Alisoun deconstructs the moral of her own tale, suggesting that women do not want sovereignty in marriage, after all, so much as they desire to be the objects of male desire.⁸

The parallels between prologue and tale, however, are not divided as neatly along gender lines (Alisoun represented as the old woman, the knight as the representative male) as the wish-fulfillment reading suggests. It is not so much that the Wife does not know that she wants to be subject to another's mastery, but rather that Chaucer depicts the Wife's desire as both an *imitation* and a *model* of male desire; this doubleness, rather than the Wife's own (or, by extension, women's) peculiar and masochistic psychology, reveals the emptiness that drives human desire per se even as it provokes violent conflict. The Wife embodies this violent competition, but she also expresses a vision of human social relations in toto as a "chain reaction of vengeance," consisting of symmetrical acts of aggression.⁹ In this way, the Wife's relationship to male "auctoritee" as well as to the specific men in her life is one characterized by what René Girard calls mediated or mimetic desire; more specifically, it is characterized by internal mediation, resulting in an "intrinsically self-reinforcing" escalation of rivalry.¹⁰ Insofar as the Wife's prologue begins with the exploits of the stereotypical female aggressor and her tale begins with the exploits of the stereotypical male aggressor, therefore, Alisoun's clearest analogue in her tale, her mirror image, is not the old woman but the rapist-knight.¹¹ And in both cases, we are shown first how each type of self-interested aggression ends up punishing itself; in both, punishment gives way to reconciliation as each couple vows lifelong fidelity and love. The prologue and the tale thus act as gendered inversions (rather than straightforward reiterations) of each other, in much the same way as the Wife herself inverts the lessons she learns from her fifth husband Jankyn and his *Book of Wikked Wyves*, when she transforms anti-feminist satire from that which serves the interest of male desire to that which serves the interest of *her* desire. Reading the parallels, not in terms of a stable gender binary but, rather, in terms of the continually and mimetically shifting sands of literal and figurative maistrie opens up new possibilities for understanding the tale's happy ending in ethical terms; it also does far more justice to the complexity of the text's cross-gender mirroring—a text that is,

after all, the effect of a male poet imagining a female perspective as she appropriates and refutes male authority.

Considering the parallels that shape the Wife of Bath, her prologue, and her tale as *mimetic* in a Girardian sense thus emphasizes, first, the imitative, appropriative dimension of the Wife's relationship to anti-feminism; second, the structural parallels that exist between prologue and tale; but also, third, Chaucer's representation of desire as itself imitative and appropriative. In Girard's understanding, desire is never spontaneous, and its object is never unique; rather, desire is always borrowed: it is a highly mobile, mutually reinforcing contagion that emerges *between* subjects. In this way, Girard rejects what he calls the "romantic fallacy" of the dualistic model of desire (subject-object) in favour of a triadic model (subject-model/rival-object).¹² Mimesis can be productive, but when it is "acquisitive"—when the subject imitates not only nonthreatening behavior but also the acquisitive grasp toward the same object as his model—rivalry begins. In turn, the model's response to acquisitive mimesis is to perceive the imitator as her own model-rival, which thus sets up a kind of cybernetic chain of desire, as the desires of each are mutually reinforced through competition.

Moreover, for Girard, the mimetic nature of desire and the escalating competition it produces lead to the sacrificial violence that underlies human societies; indeed, the problem of violence, the conflict "which the convergence of two or several avid hands toward one and the same object cannot help but provoke," lies at the center of Girard's anthropology.¹³ In Girard's account of originary sacrifice, mimetic rivalry escalates until the community reaches a crisis of "undifferentiation": "in its perfection and paroxysm mimesis becomes a chain reaction of vengeance, in which human beings are constrained to the monotonous repetition of homicide. Vengeance turns them into doubles."¹⁴ In other words, sacrificial violence results not from difference but from a chaotic sameness, from the *loss* of difference. When the conflict that is generated by mimetic desire reaches this crisis point and threatens to destroy the social order from within, however, the group turns and unites against a single victim. The victim usually bears one or more of the traditional marks of the scapegoat: physical disability, ethnic or religious minority, kingship—the scapegoat is typically the outsider *or* the supreme insider, who is also marginal vis-à-vis the group. The victim is then charged with one or a variety of the archetypal polluting crimes, and expelled or killed, thus purging the group of its violent frenzy and drawing it together against a common enemy. The victim is thus perceived as the cause of destructive violence but also as its cure: the peace that returns after the sacrifice of the scapegoat is attributed to the power of

the victim, and the victim is deified.¹⁵ For Girard, this is the (non)origin of the sacred: violence against an innocent victim that is effaced and obscured through religious myth and through any cultural form that refuses to acknowledge its violent foundation.¹⁶

For the postcolonial cultural critic Rey Chow, Girard's account of the paradoxical sacred, which originates in the dual purpose of the scapegoat who is both blamed for causing violence and deified for alleviating it, "challenges us to think of victims not as victims *tout simple* but rather as bearers of a systemic function."¹⁷ Comparing Girard's discussion of victimhood and mimesis with those of Agamben and Irigaray, Chow contends that "the unavoidability and universality of violence" in Girardian theory "ironically implies a basic, incontrovertible evenness and equality among human beings that is absent in other formulations."¹⁸ I agree that the mimetic theory inscribes a radical human equality, but less because it posits violence as unavoidable (according to Girard, it is *possible* to avoid violence) and more because it does not essentialize the identity of the victim, who is chosen more or less arbitrarily:

If . . . everybody becomes the double, or "twin," of his antagonist, it seems to follow that all the doubles are identical and that any one can at any given moment become the double of all the others; that is, the sole object of universal obsession and hatred. . . . The slightest hint, the most groundless accusation, can circulate with vertiginous speed and is transformed into irrefutable proof. . . . The firm conviction of the group is based on no other evidence than the unshakeable unanimity of its own illogic.¹⁹

Thus, the evenness and equality that Chow perceives in Girard's account of the victim emerges out of his theorizing of desire as "interdividual," as imitative rather than original, which posits the self and what it wants as radically social and contingent. Girardian desire without object does, of course, involve an object that is the catalyst for competition, but the point is that the object in itself is irrelevant: it is a cipher that could be easily exchanged for something else without affecting the intensity of the rivalry. Girard contends that we are given a key to the truth of mimetic rivalry in competitions for honor or prestige, such as dueling, which illustrate the structure of human desire as such: "[fighting] over prestige is literally fighting over nothing. In the absence of any concrete object, the 'nothing' of prestige appears to be everything—not only from the adversary's point of view, but in the eyes of all."²⁰ And just as the competitors for precedence struggle for *nothing*, so is the victim of violence persecuted over *nothing*. Consequently, the ethical imperative that emerges in Girard's principal

texts is one of identification with the victim—the only difference that matters to Girard, in the end, is the difference between the perpetrator of violence and the victim of violence.²¹ What marks this imperative as uniquely Girardian is the fact that such identification is not possible, he argues, unless we first recognize the role of mimesis in human violence—and thus that violence is caused not by this or that individual or group but by the mutually reinforcing contagion of our imitative desires. Consequently, this identification is “not reducible to moral sympathy. . . . Rather it is justified, logically warranted, by the victim’s arbitrary selection from the community.”²²

APPROPRIATING *AUCTORITEE*

Girardian theory can help us to understand in a new way the romance world of the *Wife’s Tale* and the problem of desire it articulates, because both the theory and the tale undermine the desire for power by exposing that desire as a kind of mirroring, and thus its object as essentially shape-shifting and phantasmal. Accordingly, even the semantics of desire in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale* have proven difficult for critics to define, as the texts seem to blur the distinction between the two key words in the *Wife’s* texts: “maistrie” (power over others) and “sovereynetee” (the power of self-determination).²³ Susanne Sara Thomas points out that in the loathly lady’s sermon on poverty and gentility, “*sovereynetee* is the ability to define, and thus control, one’s own desires.” And yet, the wyf’s response to the knight’s surrender to her “wise governance”—“Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie?”—implies that the wyf’s sovereignty is in fact authority “expressed by exerting power over a subject.”²⁴ This image of female sovereignty-as-mastery over men and their desires is made explicit in the prologue, when the Wife recalls, “I governed hem so wel, after my lawe, / That ech of hem ful blisful was and fawe / To brynge me gaye thynges fro the fayre”—that is, the Wife governs her husbands so that *they desire* to give her what *she desires*.²⁵ In other words, the Wife ends up collapsing the idea of sovereignty as self-governance into the idea of mastery: sovereignty becomes the ability to define not only one’s own desire but, more importantly, the other’s desire: “I hadde geten unto me, / *By maistrie*, al the soveraynetee.”²⁶ Much like the combatants in a duel, or Girardian doubles, in Alisoun’s world, husbands and wives compete for a kind of precedence and power that cannot be defined except in terms of its deficit in the other: for the Wife, sovereignty has no real essence apart from its relation to the comparative weakness or *nonsovereignty* of the other.

Furthermore, the prologue and tale are structured on the level of plot as

a series of parallel instances of gaining or losing mastery, as the verbal assaults launched by the Wife against her four hapless husbands are mirrored in the verbal and physical assaults she suffers at the hands of her fifth husband Jankyn, and the sexual assault committed by the knight against the maiden is mirrored in the knight's forced marriage to the old woman. While each of these instances is, in ethical terms, quite different—I do not mean to suggest a moral equivalence between literal and figurative violence—the emphasis Chaucer places on the mimetic relation between men and women, masters and subjects, subjects and objects ends up collapsing the differences between the terms in each of these oppositions. Chaucer's representation of these parallels thus underscores the essential sameness of women and men in their pursuit of sovereignty-as-mastery; the only meaningful difference that remains, then, is the one between the perpetrator and the victim of violence.

For what is salient about the Wife is precisely the fact that she *is* a rival for the men in her life: Chaucer presents her as neither a passive victim nor a static, one-dimensional object but a psychologically complex and shrewd player in the field of social and economic competition.²⁷ As a desiring subject-rival who is also a woman in the context of late medieval patriarchy, Alisoun actively appropriates the tools of male privilege and uses them to her own advantage. This appropriation is perhaps best understood as mimicry rather than unconscious mimesis, a literal parroting, as the Wife repeats back to her husbands the anti-feminist complaints that serve to justify the use of women as scapegoats.²⁸ She introduces each conventional anti-feminist attack with “Thow seyst . . . seystow . . . Thus seystow,” attributing the responsibility for authoritative, anti-feminist discourse to her husbands: she repeats this phrase 25 times over the course of 150 lines, thus making the designation of authority an accusation rather than a credit.²⁹ This repetition, and the Wife's mimicry of *auctoritee*, is, as the Wife openly admits, pure strategy in the war for dominance: Alisoun acknowledges that her first three husbands did not actually say any of these things to her (“And al was fals”), but she uses her performance as the female victim as a means of shaming her husbands, in order to gain control over them.³⁰ The Wife's parody of *auctoritee* thus figures the aggression involved in mimetic desire: the reciprocal strikes of rivalry are imagined as rhetorical thrust and parry, ideological attack and revenge: a reciprocity that brings the combatants ever closer in their resemblance to one another.

It is significant, therefore, that the Wife uses the word “quit” to describe her performance, the same word used throughout the narrative frame of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole to describe the rhetorical blows struck in the storytelling competition:

*For, by my trouthe, I quitte hem word for word.
 As help me verray God omnipotent,
 Though I right now sholde make my testament,
 I ne owe hem nat a word that it nys quit!³¹*

The Wife thus conceives of husband-abuse in terms of revenge and repayment: men are owed whatever blows are dealt to them by women, and the Wife herself is merely repaying (“quiting”) the debt incurred by centuries of abuse and misrepresentation, as her indignation makes clear:

*Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?
 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!³²*

In finally giving men their due, in “quiting” them, Alisoun suggests, she is attempting to “redresse” injustice, to seize for women what is owed to them: the terms expressive of mimesis are at once connotative of violence and of economic exchange. Chaucer’s use of the language of commerce and debt to convey the mimetic struggle between the sexes, and between rivals for sex, similarly characterizes the *Shipman’s Tale*, where the male rivals are “bothe two yborn in o village,” and the monk “claimeth” the rich merchant “as for cosynage.”³³ For the Wife and the Shipman, “al is for to sell” in an amoral world governed only by will to power.³⁴ Thus the Wife not only browbeats her husbands verbally but also uses sex as a means of material gain, just as the merchant’s wife in the *Shipman’s Tale* trades sex for money and, in so doing, brings the shame of cuckoldry on her husband. But, as Jill Mann writes, Chaucer seems self-consciously to demonstrate the idea that “the attempt to escape stereotypes”—the “stories” written by men about women—“leads only to different stereotypes, created in the mirror-image of their predecessors, as the Ovidian heroines reverse the picture of the shrew.”³⁵ In these instances, therefore, sex used as a weapon and an instrument of shame prefigures (or echoes, in the case of the Shipman) the rape of the maiden in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*: whether we are considering the exchange of money, bodies, insults, or literal blows, the verbal echoes and structural symmetries suggest an ethos characterized by what Girard calls “the reciprocity of the conflict, or . . . the antagonists’ mutual imitation,” in which we see, above all, “the resemblance between the competitors, the identity of aims and tactics, the symmetry of gestures.”³⁶

With Jankyn, however, Alisoun's fifth husband, the situation becomes more complicated. What marks this union as different from the outset is that the Wife marries Jankyn not for material gain but for love. In her "fair" and "lusty" youth, the Wife used her body to snare husbands and her nagging to cow them.³⁷ But when it came to Jankyn, the Wife recalls,

*I trowe I loved hym best, for that he
Was of his love daungerous to me.
...
My fyfthe housbonde—God his soule blesse!—
Which that I took for love, and no riches.³⁸*

In this sense, Jankyn is not a means to an end (money and property) but is himself the very object she seeks. And, consequently, he has the upper hand in their relationship, at least initially: the Wife's love for him makes her vulnerable just as her previous husbands were vulnerable to her. The Wife explains her attraction to Jankyn this way:

*Forbede us thyng, and that desiren we;
Preesse on us faste, and thanne wol we fle.
With daunger oute we al oure chaffare;
Greet prees at market maketh deere ware,
And to greet cheep is holde at litel prys.
This knoweth every womman that is wys.³⁹*

The Wife here purports to reveal a "fantasye" that women have about men: that they "desiren" men who seem hard to get, and they are turned off by men who are too readily available. But she uses the term "daunger" here (and "daungerous" in line 514) to describe Jankyn's attitude to her; in doing so, she calls on the conventions of love allegory, such as the *Roman de la Rose*, in which it is the "daunger" of the courtly lady—her reticence, purity, and unattainability—that simultaneously excites the suitor and drives him to madness and despair. Strikingly, therefore, the Wife reverses the roles of traditional courtship, suggesting that it is the woman who pursues the man; more to the point, she puts herself in the archetypal position of the wooing male who must convince the reluctant female object to capitulate to his advances.

Girard similarly discusses the role of "daunger" in exciting desire, but he argues that the appearance of narcissism—self-desire that creates an image of perfect self-sufficiency—is in fact illusory, a game designed to attract desire

by means of the illusion of desire: "If the narcissistic woman excites desire, this is because, when she pretends to desire herself [and suggests] a kind of circular desire that never gets outside itself, she offers an irresistible temptation to the mimetic desire of others."⁴⁰ Both accounts of daunger—the Wife's and Girard's—upset the tendency to think of the roles of desire (subject-male, object-female) as fixed and inherent. The Wife does so by occupying the role of the desiring subject who is attracted by precisely the qualities of inaccessibility and distance that characterize the "eternal feminine"—that is, by imitating yet another feature of conventional maleness. Girard goes even further and deconstructs the subject-object dichotomy entirely: there is no desire for the object per se and thus the appearance of "daunger" is a mask; in truth, Girard argues, the mimesis of desire creates a house of mirrors: every time you think you have found the real thing, the original source of desire, you are surprised to find yet another reflection, another mirrored copy.

With her fifth marriage, therefore, the tables have turned: the Wife occupies the place of her previous four husbands, as the older, wealthy party who exchanges material resources in an attempt to find physical and emotional satisfaction. She reports that to Jankyn, the poor clerk of Oxenford,

*yaf I al the lond and fee
That evere was me yeven therbifore
But afterward repented me ful sore;
He nolde suffer nothing of my list.*⁴¹

The Wife used to berate her husbands by playing the *role* of the female victim of male tyranny; she reports that she would "chidde hem spitously" for accusing her of stereotypically female vices, when they did not actually do so.⁴² Jankyn, on the other hand, turns her into the *reality* of the female victim—he really does accuse her by voicing those same stereotypical complaints—and yet these are stereotypes that in many cases the Wife has by now proven accurate.

At this point, it appears that the Wife is simply receiving a merited dose of poetic justice, as January does in the *Merchant's Tale*, when, after using the same arguments as the Wife does in favour of marriage, he fixes upon a much younger spouse in order to gratify his own sexual desires: his self-interested blindness to May's desires fittingly renders him blind to the fact of his own cuckoldry. The parallels between the Wife and January are perhaps surprising, given the Wife's apparent role as champion of womankind and the comical *maleness* of January as the doddering old lecher, but they are clearly intentional and they lend support to the notion that acquisitive mimesis in the *Tales* is not gender specific

and to the idea of the Wife as a model/rival of male desire. Thus, in her defense of marriage against virginity, the Wife acknowledges that St. Paul sets virginity as the ideal, but she argues that “He spak to hem that wolde live parfitly; / And lordinges, by your leve, that am nat I!”⁴³ January echoes this when he rejects the idea of a chaste marriage for the purposes of aspiring to sainthood: “But sires, by your leve, that am nat I.”⁴⁴ Chaucer makes the parallel even more explicit when he has the Merchant engage in a brief metafictional moment, when Justinus, a character in his tale, refers directly to the Wife, who has, he feels, done justice to the topic of marriage.⁴⁵ And in this same cause, both the Wife and January boast of their sexual potency—the Wife speaking proudly of the many uses of her “instrument” and the joys of her “bele chose”;⁴⁶ January testifying that, despite his age, his “limes” are “stark and suffisaunt / To do al that a man bilongeth to.”⁴⁷

But Alisoun’s prologue does not end here: unlike the *Merchant’s Tale*, where January is unaware of his fitting punishment and May succeeds in her deception, in this story, neither the shrewish Wife nor the wife-abusing husband gets off so easily. Rather, Alisoun goes on to recount in greater detail how Jankyn would read to her from his book of wicked wives but breaks off her litany with an outburst of apparent sincerity: “Who wolde wene, or who wolde suppose / The wo that in min herte was, and pine?”⁴⁸ In this way, the Wife rather dramatically re-creates the sense in which she felt oppressed, not by physical abuse (that comes later) but by the mere recitation of the stories themselves. And it is the feeling of being subjected to this monologue *interminably* that causes her finally to reach her breaking point:

*And whan I saugh he wolde nevere fyne
To reden on this cursed book al nyght,
Al sodeynly thre leves I plyght
Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke
I with my fist so took him on the cheke
That in oure fyr he fil bakward adoun.*⁴⁹

This frustrated, frantic act of violence shows the Wife in a very different light from her earlier, gleeful bravado and the frank amorality with which she recalled her exploits in love and marriage. Here, in contrast, having given up her wealth and autonomy, she is utterly lacking control; rather than manipulating the men in her life with cool calculation, she lashes out in desperation. But it is precisely this moment of her total weakness that precipitates the chain of events that causes another shift in the balance of power and makes it possible for husband and wife to reconcile. First, however, Jankyn is enraged and returns

blow for blow—the blow that causes the Wife’s partial deafness, which Geffrey reports to us in the *General Prologue*—and she ends up lying on the floor as if dead. Jankyn fears that he has actually killed her and is “agast.”⁵⁰ Both the Wife and Jankyn here reach their lowest point, and they glimpse, as it were, the brutal truth of their conflict—that the unceasing striving for power and “maistrie,” the continual escalation of acquisitive mimesis, ends not in domination of one over the other but only in destruction, “wo” and “pine” for all. What is shocking and decisive about this moment for the narrative as a whole is the way in which the argument between husband and wife escalates so suddenly from figurative to literal violence, and the way in which this escalation emphasizes the important difference between these two kinds of violence. In the power struggle enacted in the realm of rhetoric and *auctoritee*, Alisoun can give as good as she gets: there is always room for movement and counterattack in the form of ironic subversion and appropriation. But in the literal violence that erupts, there is no ambiguity and no room for strategic reinterpretation: Jankyn falls into the fire, and the blow that knocks Alisoun to the ground causes permanent physical damage. In other words, the effects of aggressive and defensive intellectual parrying about female role and male prerogative suddenly become real, and it is precisely the violent reality of their argument that has such a sudden, sobering effect on both parties.

Nonetheless, as quickly as the tone of seriousness and vulnerability took over the Wife’s performance, it is gone. After this moment, the narrative returns to its lighter, comical tone. But it does so with a crucial difference, for neither wife nor husband is in a position to tyrannize over the other anymore. Alisoun is once again the mischievous manipulator, but she has lost her acquisitive edge:

“O! hastow slayn me, false thief?” I seyde,
 “And for my land thus hastow mordred me?
 Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee!”⁵¹

This is the second critical moment in the narrative, for it is the moment in which Alisoun’s response to Jankyn’s violence decides whether they will continue in their struggle against each other, or whether they will work instead to build some kind of rapport and harmony. The Wife’s melodrama, rather than escalating their rivalry further, defuses the tension with humor and with the assurance, for us and for Jankyn, that no serious harm has been done: the Wife remains her playful, incorrigible self, but she is willing to give Jankyn the chance to make it up to her. Her guilt trip exacts not abject submission but a plea for forgiveness and a vow of peace:

*And neer he cam, and kneled faire adoun,
 And seyde, "Deere suster Alisoun,
 As help me God, I shal thee nevere smyte!
 That I have doon, it is thyself to wyte;
 Foryeve it me, and that I thee biseke!"*⁵²

While the Wife cannot resist taking a few more swipes, literally and figuratively, the mood of the scene is now playfully benign: the desire for mastery, control, and acquisition has been replaced by an underlying desire for accord and a sense of companionship. Thus, although the Wife *claims* that Jankyn has returned to her "al the bridel in min hond" and that she has won from him "al the soveraintee,"⁵³ in truth, Chaucer indicates that their relationship is now one marked by mutuality:

*God help me so, I was to hym as kynde
 As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,
 And also trewe, and so he was to me.*⁵⁴

There is nothing in the world of the prologue as the Wife presents it to dissuade Jankyn from continuing his assaults on Alisoun, even to the point of complete destruction, as in the anecdote of Metellius.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, he appears, somewhat spontaneously, to choose a different response. The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* thus begins to chart a movement from reciprocal aggression and competition, in which men and women are only means to an end for each other, and in which the vulnerability and weakness of one is the advantage of the other, to reciprocal fidelity and kindness. The extent to which we are to imagine Alisoun continuing to use Jankyn's remorse against him Chaucer leaves playfully ambiguous. But whether we read Alisoun and Jankyn's conversion to peaceful reciprocity ironically or not makes no difference to the fact that, on the literal level, the overall narrative movement to this point is from escalating violence to violence defused; in other words, it is a movement from mimetic conflict to a kind of empathetic contagion in which the forgiveness and generosity of one reinforces and increases the forgiveness and generosity of the other—for now. In this way, the prologue shows an escape from conflict without sacrifice: Alisoun and Jankyn come to the brink of destruction, as it were, but something causes them to pull back and reconcile before the fatal blow.

CONTAGIOUS EMPATHY

While the peace achieved at the close of the prologue is tenuous and the motives driving it ambiguous, Chaucer represents in clearer detail what it is that allows for a contagion of empathy without the violence of sacrifice in the *Wife's Tale*, with the difference that the subject is now the male power-broker who must face the shame of defeat and be humbled. And yet, in contrast to the sudden shift from war to truce in the prologue, the knight's empathy is rather slow in coming. What is remarkable about his year-long search, his forced marriage to the ugly old woman, and his relentless self-pity, is that it evinces, in Thomas's words, an "impressive and prolonged desire to remain ignorant of the meaning of his quest"; Thomas thus goes on to articulate a common response to the "conversion" theme: "the knight's resistance to the idea of female sovereignty is so pronounced and overdetermined that his apparent reversal of opinion at the conclusion is too improbable to be believed."⁵⁶ In other words, even after spending all that time asking women how they feel and what they desire, the newlywed knight is led to the bedchamber no less concerned with his own needs and desires, no closer to anything resembling selflessness or empathy, than he was at the beginning. Thomas suggests that this is because the knight does not really *want* to know what women want; and, indeed, we can safely assume that, even as he is asking every woman he meets for the secret, what he is really fixated on is saving his own life. Once this dire urgency has passed and the judgment found in his favor, we reach the crux of the matter: the knight has not been able to ascertain truly, that is to say, firsthand, what women want simply by repeating the words he has been told; his *real* education begins when the old woman corners him in the bedroom, and he faces the prospect of unwanted sexual congress not once but perpetually.

The violation of rape is here reflected as the loss of "sovereignty," not only the loss of mastery and authority in forced marriage but also the loss of the same fundamental bodily integrity, and the concomitant ability to pursue one's own desires, of which the knight "raffe" the maiden by the river.⁵⁷ The "oppressioun" that the knight inflicts on the maiden is described in terms that suggest that this is just the kind of thing that knights do when they are riding through the countryside. In the *Wife's* narration, it is simply a matter of happenstance that the knight comes to rape someone ("And so bifel . . . And happed . . .").⁵⁸ But in the world according to the *Wife of Bath*, the general populace demands justice for this seemingly unremarkable offense, and, perhaps most importantly, a woman holds a key position of authority. King Arthur sentences the knight to death for his act, but Guinevere intercedes, requesting that his fate be left in her hands.

Instead of punishment, the queen proposes rehabilitation: she charges the knight with the challenge of discovering “what thyng is it that wommen moost desiren.”⁵⁹ If he is able to find the answer in a year’s time, he will be set free, but if he does not, he will face the punishment set out by the king. This challenge implies that he must develop a reflective capacity in the first place, but also that he must consider how he might be of service to the desires of others: implicit in the charge, in other words, is a requirement for the knight to self-objectify, to conceive of himself as a potential object of the other’s desire, rather than simply a desiring subject, and thus to see himself as if through the eyes of the other.

The knight sets off into the countryside once more, but this time he is looking for grace rather than gratification.⁶⁰ The problem is that he is given a different answer from every woman he asks—in a kind of abbreviated recapitulation of the anti-feminist stereotypes rehearsed by the Wife in the prologue, there seems to be no consensus on what woman is and what she wants; every articulation that attempts to define female nature ends up proving insufficient, and he is starting to run out of time. But on the very day that he is supposed to return to the queen, the knight finally finds “grace” in the form of a “wyf” who is so physically repulsive to him, we are told, that “A fouler wyght ther may no man devise.”⁶¹ In the usual way of poor, old women in romance, the loathly lady possesses a kind of mysterious wisdom whereby she promises to deliver him the true answer in exchange for the knight’s vow that he will do one thing at her request. The knight agrees, pledges his word, receives the answer, and appears before the queen’s court of ladies appointed to judge him. We are told that he presents his answer to them in a “manly vois”:

*“My lige lady, generally,” quod he,
 “Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee
 As wel over hir housbond as hir love,
 And for to been in maistrie hym above.”*⁶²

The competitive dynamic of mimetic rivalry is thus in full swing at this point, as the male embodiment of maistrie is made subordinate to the maistrie of women. Once he has escaped his sentence at the hands of Guinevere, the old woman steps forward and reminds him of his pledge to her: the one thing the knight must do in order to repay the old woman for saving his life is to marry her. The knight is horrified and, in desperation, he tries to buy her off with all of his worldly possessions. But to no avail, for the old woman wants nothing but his heart: indeed, she specifies not only marriage but “thy love.”⁶³ And the knight must do it; she holds him in her power in a way that is much more

personal and direct than that of the queen-judge who condemns or releases, and he is powerless to refuse.

Chaucer expresses this feeling of powerlessness as the knight's sense of being "constrained" to his own ruin and that of his family name. If rape constitutes the quintessential instance of female shame, then, for the Arthurian knight, the quintessence of shame is the loss of his name, what the knight here calls "my nacioun," in dishonor: "he / Constreyned was; he nedes moste hire wedde, / And taketh his olde wyf, and gooth to bedde."⁶⁴ The combination of powerlessness, shame, and repugnance the knight feels is aptly conveyed through narrative detail: the knight weds her "prively," presumably to avoid the humiliating spectacle of a public ceremony"; "So wo was him," we are told, because "his wyf looked so foule"; and when they are "ybroght" to bed, the knight "walweth" (that is, he thrashes and flails about) and "turneth to and fro" in mortification, trying to escape his wife's embrace.⁶⁵ In short, we are presented with a picture, as Chaucer imagines it, of a *man* about to be raped by a *woman*: at this point, the knight is as close as he can be to the position of the maiden he attacked.⁶⁶ Marshall Leicester has pointed out that, in his quest to discover women's desire, the knight is put "in a position more familiar to women, who have to cater to male desires."⁶⁷ But on his wedding night, this role reversal becomes even more pointed and even more personal: the knight is forced to imagine not only the perspective of women in general but that of his victim in particular. There is a significant difference, to be sure, between the literal violence of the knight's rape of the maiden and the old woman's coercion of the knight by a verbal agreement; it is not literally the same thing, but I think we are encouraged by the text to imagine it as the closest possible parallel: the shame of violation in rape is here experienced by the knight as an acute powerlessness over his body and the sense of "losing face"—of losing his very identity through the totalizing shame of violation. The knight's education, therefore, brings him from rapist to potential rape victim, and it parallels the Wife of Bath's own progress from manipulative scold to victim of the male tyranny she had previously used to her own advantage.

But the tables turn yet again: as with the prologue, the tale does not end with an easy poetic justice that delivers the punishment to fit the crime. The scene has been set for the old woman's "quiting" of the rapist-knight. They are lying "abedde," and the old woman teases her young husband with a coyness intended to evoke both comedy and queasiness: "Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures hous? / Is every knight of his thus daungerous?"⁶⁸ But then, instead of mimesis or reciprocity in satisfaction—of female sexual desire, but also of the marriage debt and the debt that "al the mark of Adam" cannot redress—the old woman begins to

talk, and she talks not of what is owed to her, but of the emptiness of possession, and the dead end of covetousness. In other words, she talks about the futility of desiring what others have—that is, the futility of acquisitive mimesis:

*Heere may ye se wel how that genterye
Is nat annexed to possessioun,
...
He that coveiteth is a povre wight,
For he wolde han that is nat in his myght.*⁶⁹

Her speech, as many have noted, draws on Dante, Boethius, and the Stoics, and it expresses several medieval commonplaces: true *gentilesse* derives not from birth or material wealth but from virtue and inner merit, and the proper way to respond to poverty and adversity is with patience, in the medieval sense of peaceful acceptance of one's lot. But that her insights are indeed conventional does nothing to mitigate the dramatic effect they have at this point in the narrative, for it is by means of the old woman's speech that the question of sovereignty becomes, as Minnis observes, "desexualized."⁷⁰ In her speech, the old woman says, in effect, "do not look at me (and by implication, women in general) as an *object* that either succeeds or fails to meet your desire for beauty and status; rather, look at me as a *model* of virtue and true gentility." The knight's assumption that nobility derives from external sources—things that can be won or lost—is sheer "arrogance," she tells him: "Thanne am I gentil, whan that I bigynne / To lyven virtuously, and weyve synne."⁷¹ The wyf's discourse on *gentilesse* thus changes the terms of the competition, from those of sexual and material possession and power over another's body to those of moral and spiritual superiority, defined in medieval Christian terms, and guidance. And by phrasing the knight's choice in terms that emphasize the difference between superficial value and inner worth, the wyf sets herself up neither as object nor as rival but as a new, nonacquisitive model for the knight to imitate.

The knight is finally brought to reason, first, through a complete humiliation and, second, through the edifying discourse that flows from the female voice of authority that has vanquished him. But when the wyf asks, "Thanne have I gete of yow the maistrie?" she is no longer speaking of maistrie in terms of physical or sexual power, and thus, as a kind of commodity that fuels the reciprocal strikes of mimetic rivalry, just as, at this point in the narrative, sovereignty refers not to sexual possession but to moral exemplarity.⁷² On the other hand, the point is less about the old woman gaining power and more about the knight's utter lack thereof. Before the knight is *able* to understand the "meaning"

of his quest, his own pride and sense of entitlement—his own blindness to the dead end of mimetic desire—must be thoroughly undermined. In this sense, his trial and quest are not exactly red herrings, but they are devices that put him in the way of the old woman and allow her to exact the promise from him that puts him under her control; the quest itself, in terms of the overall narrative structure, seems intended not to teach him what he needs to know but simply to place him in a position of subordination—to put him literally in the place of the victim so that he is able to identify with the victim of violence. Alternately, we can consider the challenge to find out what women desire as a cognitive exercise, a challenge to discover a certain idea, when what the knight really needs is a fundamental reordering of his ethical orientation, to move from treating women as means to the fulfillment of his own self-interest to the ability to relate to women as ends in themselves. And *only* when he has been divested of his power and his honor, only once his family name has been sullied in marriage to a poor and ugly woman, is he finally able to pass the test.

Moreover, the purpose of asking him whether he would prefer a wife who is ugly but true or beautiful but possibly unfaithful is not to see if he has learned the lesson of inner merit *per se*, but to see if he has learned the humility to know that it is not his place to decide what “woman” is and how she should be for his sake. The (trick) question itself assumes a thoroughly male perspective, in that it considers marriage solely in the terms supplied by the anti-feminist discourse against which the Wife rails in her prologue. The old woman reiterates—mirrors—this male perspective in her consolation to the knight, that her ugliness will be a guard against infidelity, and, more pointedly, when she asks him what kind of woman is of greater benefit to her husband—or rather, which is the lesser of two evils—but the knight’s answer turns this perspective on its head. We must keep in mind that his wife is still the “loathly lady” whose appearance and poverty has driven him to despair when he answers thus:

*My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
I put me in youre wise governance.
Cheseth yourself which may be moost plesance,
And moost honour to yow and me also.
I do no fors the wheither of the two,
For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me.⁷³*

We might say that he has been defeated, as Thomas argues,⁷⁴ that there is less understanding and more baffled resignation in his “Ye, certes, wyf”;⁷⁵ but, if so, it is a defeat both necessary and humane (the knight’s alternative to defeat by

the old woman is to lose his head), and one that evinces psychological realism instead of glib optimism. In answer to the question of how the violence of mimetic desire can be subverted—and converted—into mimetic, reciprocal love, both the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* represent the possibility of forgoing resentment in response to insult and injury, not out of superhuman magnanimity but in a moment of total powerlessness and humiliation.

In the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, therefore, even as the aggressors are brought to their knees in shame, they are presented with the possibility, both unexpected and somewhat mysterious, of grace. And it is a kind of grace that depends upon mimetic appropriation for its fulfillment: out of remorse for his own violent act, Jankyn relents, which, in turn, provokes Alisoun to relent; in response to the knight's newfound generosity to her, the old woman generously becomes both beautiful and true. In this way, the prologue and the tale challenge the idea that human beings are somehow fated to competitive struggle and violent retaliation, even as they recognize—and anatomize in some detail—the human propensity for violence and selfishness.

That the Wife's vision of reconciliation is idealistic is indisputable: her tale is literally a fairy tale, a genre elegantly defined by Jill Mann as "the imaginative embodiment of aspirations towards a transfigured reality, a vision of the way things might be"—and therefore precisely *not* the way things actually are.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, Chaucer's representation of mimetic desire unsettles the idea of object-directed desire and, at the same time, severs the essential links between objecthood and femaleness, desiring subjecthood and maleness. Moreover, the fact that Chaucer yokes the question of violence and reconciliation to the question of women's nature shows remarkable insight into constructions of gender and suggests a corrective to Girard's near-exclusive focus on male rivalry. Indeed, we may well ask Girard a version of the question that Guinevere poses to the knight: does the mimetic theory also tell us what, or how, women desire?⁷⁷ Chaucer's Wife cannot answer this question directly, but she does draw out some of the intriguing, perhaps even disturbing, implications of what it means to say that women too desire mimetically—that they desire what men desire, and vice versa. As Chaucer becomes the Wife, the Wife becomes her husbands, the knight becomes the maiden, and all are epitomized in the shape-shifting figure of the old woman, who is both powerless and all-powerful, we are given a picture of gender and of power that is not so much fluid as it is utterly insubstantial. In this picture, power inheres neither in one's sex nor in one's role but appears only fleetingly; and in the model of desire the wyf would have us imitate, there is truly neither male nor female.

Equally indisputable is the fact that, in the final eight lines of her tale, the

Wife gears up to begin once more the cycle of reciprocal strikes: again, Chaucer favors psychological realism over glib optimism. The possibility of forgoing resentment in the tale is glimpsed, briefly, and then we return to the dynamics of the Canterbury pilgrimage, which is, of course, a competition among rivals. Indeed, the *Canterbury Tales* abound with examples of mimetic or triadic desire, as well as the sacrificial violence that such desire creates. In the *Knight's Tale*, Palamon and Arcite are rivals who are also virtually indistinguishable from one another in their mimesis; they evoke the Girardian "monstrous double," as their competitive desire for Emelye threatens, and eventually succeeds in undermining, the tenuous order of chivalry imposed by Theseus.⁷⁸ The *Miller's Tale* parodies the triangular desire of epic heroes and heroine, but the rivalry between Nicholas and Absolon is complicated by another, the triangular desire most common to the fabliau: the wife, the cuckold, and the suitor. On the level of the narrative frame, the Miller's ribald "quiting" of the Knight establishes a competition between the pilgrims characterized not by the civility befitting "pleye" but, rather, by an undercurrent of violence and violent reciprocity: the Miller tells a story mocking a carpenter, the Reeve tells a story designed to humiliate the Miller, and the Friar and Summoner soon follow suit. The mimesis of desire and one-upmanship continues throughout the pilgrimage and culminates with the Manciple, who tells a tale about a crow who imitates human speech and a cuckolded god who kills his wife and makes of his crow a scapegoat. Moreover, the Manciple concludes his tale about violent jealousy sparked by triadic desire with an injunction against all speech and storytelling and, in doing so, threatens to undermine the tenuous order imposed by the Host.⁷⁹

For both Chaucer and Girard, then, violence is a dangerous effect of mimetic rivalry, but it is also a means of organizing the social order and purging the community of destructive, internal conflict: violence is controlled and cast out by violence. Again, the *Knight's Tale* records the way in which Theseus attempts to control violence by means of the institution and ritual of the tournament, as the arbitrary death of one (Arcite) allows the rest of the community to unite in grief. In the narrative frame, the violence is figurative, in the form of rhetorical "quiting," but the dynamics of the Girardian scapegoat are no less crucial to the smooth progress of the pilgrims on the road to Canterbury. One of the most arresting moments in the entire collection comes in the final lines of the *Pardoner's Tale*, when Harry Bailly responds with angry, biting contempt to the Pardoner's invitation to kiss his fake relics. Until this moment, the Pardoner held court with an impressive display of penitential double-speak, preaching to the pilgrims a compelling yet twisted message about the wages of sin. But the Host's reaction subverts the entire balance of power held precariously through

the Pardoner's self-vaunting: in one sudden and swift moment, the Pardoner turns from victimizer to shamed victim, the despised outsider. The Pardoner had boasted of his ability to "win," to convince his unwitting audiences to give him their money, but, through the Host's violent rejection, the laughter of "the peple," and the Knight's dismissal, he is effectively cast out of the communal circle;⁸⁰ "I wol ne lenger pleye / With thee."⁸¹ All of the Pardoner's clever irony, the richly symbolic texture of his tale, and his own self-revelations dissolve into silence ("This Pardoner answerde nat a word; / So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye"),⁸² into moral and spiritual nothingness, as the Knight simply changes the subject and the pilgrims "riden forth hir weye."⁸³ Indeed, for the Canterbury pilgrims, whose mode of rivalry is tale-telling, silence is violence—the act of silencing in shame is analogous to the act of sacrifice—for it is silence that constitutes a sacrificial interruption in the exchange of aggression, and thus it is silence, at the expense of the one silenced, that saves the group from its own, mimetically proliferating conflict.

NOTES

1. *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.1217–18. All quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987).
2. On the issue of the Wife's relationship to textual, patristic, and biblical authority, see, for example, Theresa Tinkle, "Contested Authority: Jerome and the Wife of Bath on 1 Timothy 2," *Chaucer Review* 44 (2010): 73–93; A. J. Minnis, *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), esp. 199–245; Thomas C. Kennedy, "The Wife of Bath on St. Jerome," *Mediaevalia* 23 (2002): 75–97; Warren S. Smith, "The Wife of Bath Debates Jerome," *Chaucer Review* 32 (1997): 129–45. On Chaucer's characterization of the Wife in the context of medieval anti-feminism, see, for example, Stephen Rigby, "The Wife of Bath, Christine de Pizan, and the Medieval Case for Women," in *Chaucer Review* 35 (2000): 133–65; and Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 130–51.
3. This is how Al Walzem summarizes the Wife's status in the early history of Chaucer scholarship in "Peynted by the Lion: The Wife of Bath as Feminist Pedagogue," in *The Canterbury Tales Revisited: 21st Century Interpretations*, ed. Kathleen A. Bishop (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 45. See also Helen Cooper's survey of the critical reception of the Wife, "The Shape-Shiftings of the Wife of Bath, 1395–1670," in *Chaucer Traditions: Studies in Honour of Derek Brewer*, ed. Ruth Morse and Barry Windeatt (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 168–84. Catherine S. Cox has explained the Wife's ambiguity this way: "The Wife's narrative therefore comes across as an anti-antifeminist (rather than a 'feminist') misogynous discourse that may be read as a kind of antifeminist feminism" (*Gender and Language in Chaucer* [Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997], 37). Suffice it to say that Chaucer scholarship remains undecided about whether the Wife's text makes a case for feminism or not.

4. It has become conventional in Chaucer studies to refer to the unnamed old woman in the tale as the “loathly lady,” a folklore figure known to medieval readers through the Middle English romance *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* and the “Tale of Florent” in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, among others. But while the Wife’s *Tale* shares several points in common with these analogues, most notably the knight’s forced marriage to an ugly and low-born old woman, Chaucer’s is the only version in which the knight who faces this predicament is a rapist performing a kind of penance for his mistreatment of women, and who is being held accountable by a supreme court of women. For critical studies of the loathly lady motif and comparative studies of the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and its sources and analogues, see S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter, eds., *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007).
5. H. Marshall Leicester, “Of a Fire in the Dark: Private and Public Feminism in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*,” *Women’s Studies* 11 (1984): 159.
6. William F. Woods, *Chaucerian Spaces: Spatial Poetics in Chaucer’s Opening Tales* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 129. That the parallels between prologue and tale are based on this basic analogy (Wife-wyf is assumed in countless interpretations. In addition to Scala, whose article I discuss here, see, for example, Carolyn Dinshaw, who writes of the tale’s conclusion, “This is the Wife’s fantasy of the perfect marriage” (*Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989], 129); Elaine Tuttle Hansen, in contrast to Scala and Dinshaw, attributes agency (and blame) to Chaucer rather than to the Wife for her ultimate endorsement of medieval anti-feminism, but similarly aligns the Wife with the wyf (“Of his love daungerous to me’: Liberation, Subversion, and Domestic Violence in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*,” *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Wife of Bath*, ed. Peter G. Beidler [Boston: St. Martin’s Press, 1996], 273–89; and *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992] esp. 35–40, 56). See also Louise O. Fradenburg, “The Wife of Bath’s Passing Fancy,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 8 (1986): 31–58; and H. Marshall Leicester, “My bed was ful of veray blood’: Subject, Dream, and Rape in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*,” in *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Wife of Bath*, ed. Peter G. Beidler (Boston: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 234–54.
 Robert J. Meyer, in his 1984 article “Chaucer’s Tandem Romances: A Generic Approach to the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* as Palinode” (*Chaucer Review* 18 [1984]: 221–338) comes closest to my point here, although he considers the tale on its own and not in connection with the prologue, when he observes that what “Chaucer achieves in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* is nothing less than a remarkable experiment in romance narrative: back-to-back, or tandem romances—mirror images reflecting ironically on each other—each of which treats a distinct phrase in the growth of the bachelor (and, to a certain extent, the storyteller) toward a moment of truth. . . . His quest to find out what women most desire is only part of a larger quest, vicariously shared by the Wife, to discover the meaning of love” (225–26). I argue, however, that when we consider the mirroring effect created by both prologue and tale together, we do not discover the meaning of love so much as we discover the deconstruction of desire.
7. *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, III.1255–56.
8. See, for example, Elizabeth Scala, “Desire in the Canterbury Tales: Sovereignty and Mastery Between the Wife and the Clerk,” *SAC* 31 (2009): 81–108, at 82. According to Scala, in telling a story that is supposed to be about women having their cake and eating it too but ends up, inadvertently, to be about men having their cake and eating it too, the

Wife reveals an unconscious desire to be made subject to another's mastery—a desire, therefore, that contradicts her stated, conscious purpose in telling a tale to justify the sovereignty of women in marriage. Scala's psychoanalytic reading thus echoes, on one level, Elaine Tuttle Hansen's earlier feminist reading insofar as both find a disturbing element of masochism in the text. Hansen is highly critical of this element ("The Wife is apparently a woman who enjoys being beaten up by her young husband" ["Of his love dangerous to me," 278] while Scala's tone is more playful ("Looking at [the Wife and the Franklin, and the marriage group in general] in terms of sovereignty/mastery, and thus as what we may more playfully restyle as an "S/M group," gives us a more precise picture of what the *Canterbury Tales* sees at stake in marriage and the stories told about it" ["Desire," 108]).

9. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 12.
10. René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), 57.
11. That Alisoun's account of her past conduct in marriage does indeed conform to the stereotype of rapacious and deceitful femininity is well established in Chaucer studies: that is, Chaucer borrows almost entirely from the very anti-feminist tirades cited by the Wife for his characterization of her. As Carolyn Dinshaw has commented, "rather than embodying what patriarchal discourse can't say, she is enacting precisely what patriarchal does say, and says endlessly (in the univocal chant of Theophrastus, Jerome, Walter Map, Andreas Capeolanus, Jean de Meun, Matheolus, Gautier le Leu, Deschamps, and others such as are contained in Jankyn's book)" (*Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 118–19). I want to emphasize Alisoun's status as a textual creation in order to make clear that the point is not to draw a moral equivalence between a woman's defiance vis-à-vis patriarchy and a man's raping of a woman, but rather that Chaucer draws on the most censorious statements on female nature available to him for his depiction of the Wife, for the purposes of imagining a female counterpart to the male sexual predator: both are properly understood as types, even if the Wife herself ends up challenging the one-dimensional caricature she seems to embody.
12. For Girard's discussion of the specifically "romantic" nature of this fallacy, see his *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 1–17. In this early work, Girard focuses on the basic structure of mediated or triangular desire as consisting of male rivals, who typically vie for a female object. On the subject of female desire in romance, in his essay "The Mimetic Desire of Paolo and Francesca" (in René Girard, *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* [Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978]), Girard points out the fact that Dante's lovers have modeled their desire on the "fictional" desire of Lancelot and Guinevere; in *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], Girard explores the role of mimesis in the romantic desire of such couples as Troilus and Cressida (121–66) and the four lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (29–79). Girard has not, however, considered mimetic desire specifically in terms of a cross-gender mimesis.
13. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 8.
14. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 12.
15. For a clear and succinct discussion of collective persecutions and the "scapegoat mechanism," see Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,

- 1986), 1–23.
16. As Andrew McKenna writes, “in the beginning is the trace, the body of the victim being the trace of a violence that, being mimetic, does not originate with it or with anyone. The origin of this violence, improperly attributed to the victim whose destruction ends violence, is properly unrepresentable; it is proper only to the rivalry of combatants, to their mimetic conflict. The sacralisation of the victim erases this nonorigin—the nonoriginal but only repetitive, mimetic origin of violence—when it enshrines the victim of the community” (*Violence and Difference: Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 83–84).
 17. Rey Chow, “Sacrifice, Mimesis, and the Theorizing of Victimhood (A Speculative Essay),” *Representations* 94 (2006): 145.
 18. Chow, “Sacrifice,” 144.
 19. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 79.
 20. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 305.
 21. René Girard considers the Christian concern for victims to be the source of one of the defining characteristics of contemporary Western culture: see, for example, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 161–69.
 22. McKenna, *Violence and Difference*, 63.
 23. Susan Crane, for example, has argued that the Wife “constantly alter[s] and even cancel[s] each of her versions of sovereignty”; Crane thus concludes that Alison is “inarticulate, even about the meaning of the sovereignty she imagines” (“Alison’s Incapacity and Poetic Instability in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*,” *PMLA* 102 [1987]: 24–25). On the Wife’s conflation of mastery and sovereignty, see also Donald C. Green, “The Semantics of Power: *Maistrie* and *Soveraynetee* in *The Canterbury Tales*,” *Modern Philology* 84 (1986): 18–23. For Green, Alisoun stands out as a negative exception in the *Canterbury Tales*: “[Alisoun’s] confounding of *soveraynetee* and *maistrie* is a heresy, whatever her intent” (23).
 24. *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, III.1231; III.1236; Susanne Sara Thomas, “The Problem of Defining ‘Sovereynetee’ in the ‘Wife of Bath’s Tale,’” *Chaucer Review* 41 (2006): 87–97, at 89.
 25. *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, III.219–21.
 26. *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, III.817–18, my italics.
 27. On the Wife as businesswoman, see Mary Carruthers, “The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions,” repr. with a new “Afterword” in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*, ed. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (London: Routledge, 1994), 22–53.
 28. Cf. Dinshaw, who applies Irigaray’s concept of mimesis in her discussion of the Wife as glossator: “it is through her mimicking patriarchal hermeneutics—incarnating the excluded letter and repeating the masculine hermeneutic moves—that Chaucer suggests a revision of the paradigm of reading as a masculine activity that would acknowledge, even solicit, feminine desire” (*Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* 120).
 29. *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, III.235–394.
 30. *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, III.382.

31. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.422–25.
32. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.692–96.
33. *Shipman's Tale*, VII.35–36. For a Girardian reading of the *Shipman's Tale* and Fragment VII as a whole, see Curtis Gruenler, "Desire, Violence, and the Passion in Fragment VII of *The Canterbury Tales*: A Girardian Reading," *Renascence* 52 (1999): 35–56.
34. *Shipman's Tale*, III.414. See Leicester's relevant analysis of the Wife's "economy" in terms of "disenchantment": the "economic account is presented as a kind of key that makes sense of the details of the Wife's biography and at the same time renders her exemplary. The particulars are finally subordinated to, and transcended by the general truth. This passage [Leicester refers specifically to lines 505–24] is characteristic of the way the disenchanted economic, appropriative, and competitive perspective functions throughout the poem" (*The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* [Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990], 77).
35. Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 66.
36. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 11.
37. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.605–6.
38. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.513–14, 525–26.
39. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.519–24.
40. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 370.
41. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.630–33.
42. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.223.
43. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.111–12.
44. *Merchant's Tale*, IV.1456.
45. *Merchant's Tale*, IV.1685–87.
46. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.149, 510.
47. *Merchant's Tale*, IV.1458–59.
48. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.786–87.
49. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.788–93.
50. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.798.
51. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.800–802.
52. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.803–7.
53. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.813, 818.
54. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.823–25.
55. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.460.
56. Thomas, "Defining 'Sovereynete,' " 87.
57. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.888.
58. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.882–88.

59. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.905.
60. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.919–20.
61. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.999.
62. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.1036–40.
63. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.1066.
64. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.1067–72. For an illuminating discussion of the role of shame in Arthurian romance, see Stephanie Trigg, "Shamed be . . .": Historicizing Shame in Medieval and Early Modern Courtly Ritual," *Exemplaria* 19 (2007): 67–89.
65. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.1080, 1082, 1085. "Walweth" is not a common word in Chaucer. In the *Reeve's Tale*, he uses it in a metaphor to describe how the fighting men are like pigs who wallow in the mud (I.4278). But he also uses it in "To Rosemound," to describe the feeling of being "walwed and ywounde" in love (18), when speaking of Dido in *The Legend of Good Women* (F.1166), and when speaking of Troilus acting like Nyobe (*Troilus* I.699). In all three cases, as in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the word connotes "feminine" helplessness in matters of love.
66. On this point, it is helpful also to keep in mind the various meanings of rape or "raptus" in medieval English law. "Raptus" could just as easily refer to abduction and forced marriage as it could to forced intercourse. On the medieval understanding of the term, see, for example, Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 33–75.

The fact that the knight commits himself to the old woman freely in order to get the answer he seeks does not, in my view, mitigate the sense in which Chaucer emphasizes the idea of reciprocity in the *marriage* rather than the quest, as a clear instance of shaming the knight in return for the maiden's shame. See also the *Franklin's Tale*, in which Dorigen freely "promises" her love to Aurelius but, when he fulfills her conditions, she understands her supposed obligation to him in terms of rape and dishonor.
67. Leicester, "Of a Fire," 160.
68. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.1089–90.
69. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.1146–47, 1187–88.
70. Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 316.
71. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.1112; 1175–76.
72. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.1236.
73. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.1230–35.
74. Thomas connects the implausibility of the knight's transformation to the fact that the meaning of sovereignty is never sufficiently defined in the tale: "the opposite of *sovereynete*, the state of non-authority and non-mastery, occurs when one allows others to define for one what is desirable and valuable. And that is what the wise woman ends up doing for the knight at the conclusion of the tale, because he proves incapable of defining his own desires. Thus the knight ultimately never learns the meaning of the word he seeks, nor does he acquire the power it signifies" ("Defining 'Sovereynete,'" 90). On the contrary, I argue that it is not the case that the knight is incapable of defining his own desires but that he chooses to deny them in order to give up the "maistrie" to his wife. He does not say that he *does not know* what kind of wife he would rather have, but that he will

- defer and give the old woman the prerogative to decide what kind of wife she wants to be.
75. *Wife of Bath's Tale*, III.1238.
 76. Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, 70.
 77. Girard's mimetic theory has found a mixed reception among feminist and gender 77. See, for example, Sarah Kofman's critique of Girard's response to Freud on narcissism, "The Narcissistic Woman: Freud and Girard," *Diacritics* 10 (1980): 36–45. Kofman diagnoses Girard's own rivalry with Freud and his fear of the feminine. But cf. Martha Reineke, "'This Is My Body': Reflections on Abjection, Anorexia, and Medieval Women Mystics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (1990): 245–65, sees a fruitful complementarity between Girard and Kristeva around the idea of the sacrificed (m) other: "the linguistic code of society, structured around a sacrificial crisis and a murder, is ordered according to the Law of the Name-of-the-Father that conceals society's origins by inscribing in language the first Other—the mother—only as an absence" (Reineke, "'This Is My Body,'" 262). For an overview of feminist engagement with Girard, see Susan Nowak, "The Girardian Theory and Feminism: Critique and Appropriation," *Contagion* 1 (1994): 19–29.
 78. See Laurel Amtower, "Mimetic Desire and the Misappropriation of the Ideal in the *Knight's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 8 (1996): 125–44.
 79. See Ann W. Astell's description of the escalation of mimetic conflict on the pilgrimage, "Nietzsche, and Chaucer, and the Sacrifice of Art," *Chaucer Review* 39 (2004–5): 323–40.
 80. *Pardoner's Tale*, VI.961.
 81. *Pardoner's Tale*, VI.958–59.
 82. *Pardoner's Tale*, VI.956–57.
 83. *Pardoner's Tale*, VI.968.

