

2017

“The Hooly Blisful Martir For To Seke”: The Appropriation of Religious Authority and Scholastic Discourse in The Canterbury Tales

Nikita Nagras

Wellesley, nnagras@wellesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection>

Recommended Citation

Nagras, Nikita, ““The Hooly Blisful Martir For To Seke”: The Appropriation of Religious Authority and Scholastic Discourse in The Canterbury Tales” (2017). *Honors Thesis Collection*. 469.

<http://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection/469>

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. For more information, please contact ir@wellesley.edu.

“The Hooly Blisful Martir For To Seke”:

The Appropriation of Religious Authority and Scholastic Discourse in *The Canterbury Tales*

Nikita Nagras

Advised by Professor Cord Whitaker of the English Department

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the

Prerequisite for Honors in

English

May 2017

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, to Professor Cord Whitaker, whose incredible knowledge and support and patience helped me tremendously through this process. When I would struggle to find the right words for my essay, he would pluck them straight and casually from the recesses of my subconscious, voicing thoughts I didn't even know I had.

Secondly, to Professor James Noggle and Professor Sarah-Wall Randell, for agreeing to serve on my thesis committee and giving me feedback and insight that my coffee-addled brain alone would have completely missed.

Thirdly, to Professor Venita Datta of the French Department, for agreeing to be an honors visitor on such late notice.

To my sister Manami, for making me smile in the grimmest of moments.

And finally, to my lovely, lovely parents. Without their emotional and financial support, I would not have this opportunity. Even if you have never read Chaucer, you encouraged me to pursue an English major and a senior thesis, and answered my late-night FaceTime calls with an almost frightening serenity. I love you, and I am truly blessed.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
The Search For Truth through Scholasticism in The Man of Law's Tale...11	
The Troubling Issue of Female Subjectivity in The Wife of Bath's Tale...31	
Exterior Rhetoric and Counterfeit Meaning in The Pardoner's Tale.....	48
Works Cited.....	65

Introduction:

The Enigma of Geoffrey Chaucer

If William Shakespeare is the father of English literature, then Geoffrey Chaucer would definitely be its slightly neglected grandfather. Born into a mercantile family of vintners, Chaucer eventually rose in the public eye, becoming a lawyer, the king's clerk, a deputy forester, and of course, a poet. His varied career is perhaps reflective of the turbulent and steadily flourishing period into which he was born; social classes were shifting, the mercantile class gained rose in both wealth and power, and ecclesiastical law came to loggerheads with the secular. *The Canterbury Tales*, considered by some to be his finest work, registers through clever usage of rhetoric debates about religion, social class, and gender.

Perhaps the biggest conundrum of *The Canterbury Tales* is its meaning: what message did Chaucer contrive to convey, and what were his feelings on heresy, women, the Church, Lollardy, scholasticism, homosexuality, Spanish wine? In a way, literary critics over the years have paid more attention to Chaucer than his work; *The Canterbury Tales* serves as a code, a puzzle, for his life, and it is our job as literature aficionados to decode his very existence and *raison d'être*. This proves difficult, as most of his tales meander, digress, and even cut off abruptly at the strangest moments. *The Canterbury Tales* is incomplete, and for eons, medieval critics have wondered if the abrupt halt was deliberate or simply a result of life interfering with art. What's often missed in the analysis of Chaucer's life is the analysis of his work, ironically enough—imagine a poet to be more famous than his actual work. Although Chaucer does not exactly fit the category of a poet more famous for his mysterious life, critics have certainly taken text from *The Canterbury Tales* and have attributed it to him specifically, as if he was a porto-

feminist because he seems to eloquently defend women in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* or a Lollard because he seems to declaim *The Pardoner's* fraud. Note that I say seems to, because the enigma of *The Canterbury Tales* lies in its irony and ironies of irony itself.

I want to argue that Chaucer is a literary scientist and aesthetician first and foremost, and that his works make a greater statement about rhetorical usage than about his personal views on contemporary politics. In this dissertation, I have chosen three Tales for my focus: *The Man of Law's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, and *The Pardoner's Tale*. All three characters use scholastic discourse and Biblical exegesis in different ways, but all three seem to yearn for authority in a period heavily influenced by religion.

The Man of Law projects an aura of authority, wealth, and general competence when he first appears in *The Canterbury Tales*. The narrator informs us that The Man of Law has acquired wealth based solely on his ability to write a flawless contract, and has even managed to gain the respect of the nobility by taking up prestigious positions. All in all, The Man of Law seems like a person of great import, a shining example of medieval meritocracy. And yet, in a true Chaucerian style, the narrator exposes cracks in his flawless persona:

A man of the lawe, war and wys,
That often hadde been at the Parvys,
Ther was also, ful riche of excellence.
Discreet he was, and of greet reverence-
He semed swich, hise wordes weren so wise.
Justice he was ful often in assise,
By patente, and by pleyn commissioun.
For his science, and for his heigh renoun,
Of fees and robes hadde he many oon.
So greet a purchasour was nowher noon:
Al was fee symple to hym in effect,

His purchasyng myghte nat been infect.
Nowher so bisy a man as he ther nas,
And yet he semed bisier than he was.

Chaucer's familiarity with legalistic discourse comes across the most here; as a practicing lawyer himself, he employs words like "assise," "patente," "pleyn commissioun," and "fee symple" astutely to point out the careful fabrication of The Man of Law's reputation of "greet reverence" and "heigh renoun." Almost every description that contributes to The Man of Law's great reputation is followed by a sly qualifier of sorts that undermines any venerable qualities previously attributed to him. He is "war and wyse," but he also "often hadde been at the Parvys," where medieval lawyers often frequented to hawkishly advertise their services. The clash of the secular and the religious cannot be missed here; right at God's doorstep, the arbiters of secular medieval law seek material wealth and success. The Man of Law is also said to be "discreet" and "of greet reverence," but the narrator undermines these qualities in the next line: "He semed swich, hise wordes weren so wise." The word "semed," indicating appearance over actual character, appears again when the narrator points out that although The Man of Law looked busy, "he semed bisier than he was." The dubious meaning of the couplet "Al was fee symple to hym in effect/His purchasyng myghte nat been infect" further emphasizes possible corruption regarding material wealth and landowning. The Man of Law is a figure that should be, if not distrusted outright, treated with healthy caution.

The issue of ecclesiastical and secular law in the Middle Ages is complex, one into which we will not delve for the purposes of this thesis. The Man of Law's ability to interpret the Scriptures, however, remains suspect and plays a central role in his narration of Custance's journey later in the text. On the one hand, The Man of Law is university-educated and studied the

same theology and discourse as contemporary clerics; it was only after university lawyers applied their credentials to the secular sphere. On the other hand, medieval lawyers strived specifically for material success, the very nature of their occupation in contradiction to the ecclesiastical studies that allowed them to become lawyers in the first place. The emphasis over material over spiritual wealth led to some resentment amongst serious theologians; circa 1290, theologian Mattheolus went as far to claim that lawyers were “even more perfidious than whores” (Brundage, 275). Even lawyers admitted that their study of canon law hardly brought any spiritual reward, as evidenced by John of Salisbury’s (1180) self-deprecatory question: “Who ever arose contrite from the study of the laws or even the canons?” Chaucer’s portrayal of The Man of Law’s greed registers the squabbling between clerics and lawyers in fourteenth century England.

If competence mixed with hints of greed is The Man of Law’s fundamental characteristic, then freedom with a dash of excess seems to define The Wife of Bath, at least within *The General Prologue*. Ruddy-complexioned and voluptuous, The Wife of Bath serves as a physical representation of the joys and excesses of the secular world: she possesses great wealth acquired from her multiple husbands, as well as talents for business and cloth-weaving. If The Man of Law used his wealth to leverage himself into the noble class, then The Wife of Bath administers her money to create a bourgeoisie class of her own. A close-reading of The General Prologue shows that The Wife of Bath is already beginning to move beyond the confines set by the Church authorities:

She was a worthy womman al hir lyve:
Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve,
Withouthen oother compaignye in youthe, -
But therof nedeth nat to speke as nowthe.
And thries hadde she been at Jerusalem;
She hadde passed many a straunge strem;
At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne,
In Galice at Seint-Jame, and at Coloigne.
She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye.
Gat-tothed was she, soothly for to seye.
Upon an amblere esily she sat,
Ywympled wel, and on hir heed an hat
As brood as is a bokeler or a targe;
A foot-mantel aboute hir hipes large,
And on hir feet a paire of spores sharpe.
In felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe.
Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce,
For she koude of that art the olde daunce.

From the beginning of the verse, the narrator provides us some insight as to how The Wife of Bath transcends boundaries of the Church without actually transcending them: she conforms to Church standards materially but flouts them in essence. For example, the text explicitly states that she has had five husbands “at chirche dore,” indicating that while she legally wed five men as per ecclesiastical standards, many clerics would still label her actions as whorish and excessive. While she is legally allowed to marry five men consecutively, her intentions are far from pure, as we will see later on; she marries for sexual and material satisfaction. Even her pilgrimages are qualified by details that distract from the sacred and religious nature of her journey. She has “thries” traveled to Jerusalem, but with the distinct intention to visit “many a straunge strem” as well as Rome, Bologne, Galice, and Cologne. What strikes us is not her three-time voyage to Jerusalem, but the “muchel of wandrynge” she did “by the weye.” Already, she is transforming the essence of marriage and pilgrimage from spiritual to secular without changing

their materiality. The creation of a new bourgeoisie class also becomes evident in this verse, if we analyze it through the lens of materiality versus essence. She sits “upon an amblere esily” while wearing “an hat/As brood as is a bokeler or a targe” and fancy clothes generally worn by noblewomen; and yet, unlike The Man of Law, she does not aspire to a higher or nobler class, but sits comfortably in the estate she has created for herself. Her most defining characteristics come at the end of the verse: “In felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe/Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce,/For she koude of that art the olde daunce.” Even in her relatively elevated status, she can mingle well with the folks on the pilgrimage, a mercantile quality that further highlights her bourgeoisie status.

Finally, we reach The Pardoner, whose well-crafted sermons and relics still leave something wanting. The Pardoner is peculiar for his ability to draw his audience without actually saying anything of spiritual value. He himself implicitly calls attention to this paradox in his explication of substance and accident:

O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod!
Fulfilled of donge and of corrupcioun,
At either ende of thee foul is the soun;
How greet labour and cost is thee to fynde,
Thise cookes, how they stampe, and streyne, and grynde,
And turnen substaunce into accident,
To fulfillen al thy likerous talent!
Out of the harde bones knocke they
The mary, for they caste nought away,
That may go thurgh the golet softe and swoote;
Of spicerie, of leef, and bark, and roote,
Shal been his sauce ymaked by delit,
To make hym yet a newer appetit.

In lamenting how cooks “turnen substance into accident,” The Pardoner is obviously referring to transubstantiation, in which regular bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ in essence whilst maintaining the appearance of bread and wine: in philosophical terms, the body and blood of Christ maintain the “accidents” of bread and wine in the sense of texture and taste, but their essences are decidedly different. In this case, however, The Pardoner claims that chefs reverse the holy process of transubstantiation by “stampe, and streyne, and grynde” food so it may “go thurgh the goblet softe and swoote.” The essence of God’s fruits turns into something sinful, fueled by gluttony; food that exists for sustenance becomes food for pleasure alone. The reversal of transubstantiation parallels The Pardoner’s Tale itself; he appropriates moral sermons and exemplums and turns them into innuendos and jokes to stoke the vulgar sensibilities of his audience. It is hard to say whether The Pardoner is aware of this irony he himself brings to our attention.

All three figures employ Biblical exegesis in such a way as to expose their own flaws and struggles with authority. The important question is whether these figures can transcend the clerical language by which they are groomed, or if language constrains us in unimaginable ways. And yet, we can again ask whether their struggle with language is in itself powerful, exposing cracks within our purported personas and identities.

Chapter One

“Now Jesu Crist, that of his myght may send joye after wo”:

The Search for Truth through Scholasticism in *The Man of Law's Tale*

We will never truly understand why Custance in *The Man of Law's Tale* suffers so much pain and humiliation, but perhaps we can make a well-reasoned guess: God's mysterious ways control the events within the Tale, and God tests Custance's ability to withstand worldly suffering whilst maintaining her faith in Him. References to tears, blood, and innocent lambs (recalling Christ's suffering and Isaac) and allusions to the Old Testament convey a portraiture of a God who is both merciful and harsh. He imposes trial upon trial on Custance, continuously testing her till her piety finally satisfies him. Reminiscent of the Old Testament, He seems to rescue Custance only when she teeters on the brink of death or humiliation. Even her reward at the end fails to compensate her providential trauma; her husband and king Alla dies a mere year after their reunion, and she leaves her son Maurice to return to Rome. The final part of the Tale implies God's jealous and temperamental nature and dictates that one should prioritize Christian piety even over marital piety; Alla's death reminds Custance of her duty to God.

Custance silently accepts her brutal circumstances, but in contrast, The Man of Law puzzles over her every misfortune, violently berates characters that directly or indirectly harm her, celebrates godly interventions, and condescendingly tries to educate his audience on God's miraculous ways. Much has been written about The Man of Law's extensive and impassioned commentary. His overblown rhetoric, exaggerations, and pomposity create a distinct, memorable persona, triumphing over even Custance in terms of presence. Some literary critics suggest that The Man of Law purposely inflates himself and his musings to compensate for a bland

protagonist. I want to propose, however, that The Man of Law serves as a foil to Custance; the pedantic and philosophical jargon he associates with religion clashes with Custance's understated yet exemplary Christian faith. While Custance submits to the admittedly fickle will of God, The Man of Law struggles to detach himself from worldly values and desires such as wealth, power, and other material fortunes. Ironically, his clerical knowledge and background hinders his spiritual growth; he endeavors to compensate for his spiritual lack through a pompous display of intellect, worldliness, and masculinity. The text juxtaposes the worldly Man of Law to an innocent Custance in order to undercut the theological preoccupation with determining fortune and reward; in a sense, Custance's silent piety serves primarily to foil The Man of Law's lamentations and intense study of fortune, and does not necessary function as the "ideal" form of Christianity in opposition to The Man of Law. *The Man of Law's Tale* is primarily about The Man of Law and satirical take on his overblown character, not Custance.

Medieval literature contains ambiguous attitudes towards womanly weeping, and is especially celebratory of women's tears in response to male suffering. In particular, women's tears appear both in classical texts and the Old Testament in place of speech or narrative power, a form of expression powerful yet "erotically receptive and dependent on male authority" (Jones, 16). Even in the New Testament, Jesus's crucifixion is accompanied by a haunting yet familiar image of several women—the Virgin Mary, Rachel, Mary Magdalen, along with several unnamed female devotees—weeping constantly, and being commanded to weep by the Son of God himself: "But Jesus turning onto them said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and your children'" (Luke 23:28). Despite many scholarly and religious debates about whether the Bible permits women to preach, women in the Bible remain

subordinated to the role of quiet (or if they are weeping, incoherent) witnesses to salvation. At the most, they serve as intercessors, fervently praying on the behalf of another from the sidelines, out of everyone's sight but God's. Ritualized weeping appears again in St. Augustine's *Confessions*, where he narrates his conversion to Christianity, spurred into repentance by the sight of his mother's tears (Jones, 18). Peter Abelard makes a similar interpretation of womanly laments, particularly of Heloise's weeping caused by his various musings. Abelard sees himself as "a repeatedly lamented victim...worthy of lament" (Jones, 28), suggesting that womanly grief "flatters patriarchy's self-image and appears to serve the masculine cult of heroism rather than the women themselves" (Jones, 16). In this case, women's tears serve to glorify the male hero or saint of medieval texts—as bystanders, they act as informants to the audience, demonstrating the correct reaction to the suffering and exploits of men.

Taking it further, women's weeping, done at the behest of men, still lies outside the sphere of feminine agency. Nancy A. Jones proposes that women do not weep of their own accord, but act as intermediaries for "the outpouring of God's grace" (Jones, 20). By implication, women's tears are actually God's tears, and thus possess purifying and even baptismal properties. Women's tears have the power to wash away the sins of men and direct them towards a more devout path. In St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Augustine's mother Monica is the recipient of visions from God, and a silent witness to her son's involvement in the Manichean sect. Her role in convincing Augustine to move away from the wrong sect involves interceding on his behalf, but not directly persuading him through words. It becomes clear here how women's tears replace their narrative power; Monica's silent struggles are subsumed into Augustine's narrative, and he repurposes them to highlight his own salvation. Consequently, Monica becomes at once superior

and subordinate to Augustine, a conveyor of God's message yet relegated to the role of a submissive, almost passive sufferer. Female saints generally occupy a similar role, in contrast to their more active male counterparts, who publicize their devotion to God instead of quietly suffering beyond the sight of mortals (although there are definitely some saintly women who serve more outlandish roles, though they are generally accused of witchcraft by the general public.) Similarly, Chaucer's Custance occupies the role of a holy witness and intercessor, as we will see later when examining Chaucer's alterations to Nicholas Trivet's text of the same story, and her spiritual superiority foils the evident subordinate position she occupies on Earth. Simultaneously, her role as God's instrument in the salvation of men brings up the question as to whether women by themselves can understand and interpret the Scriptures, or whether they are eternally relegated to mere spiritual intermediaries instead of active devotees in of themselves. Indeed, as we will examine more closely later, the only time Chaucer allows Custance to speak is when she communicates with God; otherwise, her pleas to King Alla, for example, are summarized as "mediacioun," further undermining women's role as preachers.

The Tale establishes Custance's spiritual prowess from the beginning, diverging from Trivet's and Gower's versions by reinforcing Custance's intimacy with God. Custance does not simply fill the passive role as the ideal Christian daughter, wife, and mother. Her mystical union with God gives her more authority than the Man of Law regarding religious matters. The Man of Law understands his own spiritual inferiority to Custance on some level, as demonstrated by his narrative description of Custance's virtues:

In hir is heigh beautee, withoute pride,
Yowthe, withoute grenehede or folye,

To alle hir werkes vertu is hir gyde,
Humblesse hath slayn in hir al tyrannye,
She is mirour of alle curteisye,
Hir herte is verray chambre of hoolynesse,
Hir hand ministre of fredam for almesse.” (F

The passage goes beyond a laundry list of ideal Christian virtues; she is not simply virtuous, she serves as the very image and vessel for those virtues. In other words, she imitates Christ in His humility, generosity, benevolence, and even holiness, transcending human goodness into divinity itself. Furthermore, Custance’s body and soul serve as instruments for God’s work; they reflect and contain virtue instead of simply being virtuous, allowing the possibility of transmitting God’s love and goodwill to the rest of his subjects. In other words, people who gaze upon Custance, “the mirour of al curteisye,” glimpse her virtue in all its bright reflection, and transform into recipients of her heart, which is compared to “a chambre of hoolynesse.” It is worth noting here that the Syrian merchants do not glimpse Custance’s apparent virtue firsthand; instead, they hear it by the word of others, further highlighting that virtuous women refrain from flaunting their said virtues, but keep to the sidelines and only allow God to be the absolute witness. The idea of serving as a vessel for faith and spilling and reflecting virtue onto others is not unique to Chaucer. In the late 14th century, during Chaucer’s time, Catherine of Siena argued that the soul exists “not for itself but for God...like a water jar filled at the fountain” (Petry, 265). She further proposes the role of “self-giving love” that “enfolds the world” (Petry, 265), buttressing Custance’s role as mediator of God’s love.

Although not evident at first glance, the mystique of Chaucer’s description lies in its resemblance to a letter written by Saint Clare of Assisi, in which she compares the practice of spirituality to gazing upon a divine mirror:

Place your mind before the mirror of eternity!
Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance!
And transform your entire being into the image
of the Godhead Itself through contemplation. (Flinders, 23)

Saint Clare of Assisi explains the analogy further in her later letters, suggesting that the same virtues found in Christ can be found within all of us; thus, when we look upon the unblemished mirror of our souls, we discover our similarities to Christ and by extension, our closeness to God (Flinders, 24). The *Imitation of Christ*, a 15th century handbook on achieving spiritual life, draws upon a similar metaphor: “If your heart were right, then every created thing would be a mirror of life for you and a book of holy teaching, for there is no creature so small and worthless that it does not show forth the goodness of God” (Kempis, Book 2, Fourth Chapter). Although Thomas a Kempis wrote *The Imitation of Christ* years after the publication of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, he still remains relevant in the study of mysticism in *The Man of Law’s Tale*; his notion of recognizing Christ within oneself matches Custance’s intimacy with the divine. Custance’s “verray chambre of hoolynesse” and reflection “of all curteisye” depicts a woman already engaged in the most intimate relationship with God and divinely chosen to “ministre” God’s benevolent works—significant factors that differentiate her from a dutiful Christian noblewoman.

Within this context, Custance serves as a spiritual teacher and mediator while the Man of Law flounders his way through theological misinterpretations. Although Custance’s counterparts according to Trivet and Gower spread the Word of God and convert multitudes to Christianity, *The Man of Law’s Tale* suggests that Custance refrains from preaching directly to the uninformed:

This constable and dame Hermengyld his wyf
Were payens, and that contree everywhere;
But Hermengyld loved hir right as hir lyf,
And Custance hath so longe sojourned there
In orisons, with many a bitter teere,
Til Jesu hath converted thurgh his grace
Dame Hermengyld, constablesse of that place.

In this case, Custance directly communicates to Christ regarding Hermengyld's conversion, and the language implies that Jesus Himself converted Hermengyld through Custance. Chaucer upgrades Custance's position to that of a preacher to a mediator, so intimately connected with God that he employs her body to conduct His work. This particular method of conversion follows the mystical theory of becoming one with God—whatever God does, Custance happily imitates—but the passage also highlights Custance's absolute deference to God in all matters. Regardless of her fixed and unwavering belief in the Word of God, she does not presume to interpret and spread God's message herself; instead, she submits the matter to God's grace with "many a bitter teere," evoking Christ's own tears at the ignorance and folly of humanity. The emphasis on mediating over preaching and the element of affective piety separate mystics from other fervent Christians (Bynum, 251). As Elizabeth Dreyer analyzes in her essay on medieval female mystics, the awareness of the body and excessive passion play a role in the spiritual life of a mystic: "For all the mystics, the passion of their love affair with God is extended to others. When passion has had its rightful place in human life, one is better able to serve others with compassion, authenticity, and spontaneity" (Dreyer, 36). Custance partakes in a "shared life" and a "community of love" (Dreyer, 37) with God, and the passion of her devotion manifests as bitter tears as evidenced in the passage.

The central conflict within the Tale emerges from not Custance's struggle against misfortune and fate, but rather the ideological differences between the narrator and his protagonist. Chaucer's Tale distinguishes itself from the Trivet and Gower versions by employing an additional narrator who impedes and distorts the moral implications behind Custance's journey. Custance serves as the paradigm of loyalty first and foremost, her absolute faith in God and Christian virtue undeterred by death, humiliation, and other harrowing incidents. Many readers misinterpret the Tale as an issue of God's trials and rewards, an arduous quest for a worthy prize at the end. Certainly, the Tale follows several elements of a classic quest tale, in which the protagonist must undergo a characteristic transformation in order to emerge as a better person in the end. However, the trend hardly applies to Chaucer's Tale, not least because Custance exemplifies the ideal Christian daughter from the very beginning; she is already the "mirour of all curteisye," humble, kind, and meek. In any case, nothing in the text suggests a personal defect or flaw she must overcome.

If anything, her story stays within the parameters of an Old Testament tale, in which the trial is its own reward; Custance does not fight against or overcome her trials, but accepts them graciously as gifts from God. When she learns of her engagement to the Sultan, a ruling member of the "Barbre nacioun," she does not ask God to break off her engagement, but requests His guidance throughout the marriage, so she can "his heestes fulfillle." She faces her exile at sea with not lamentation, but another request for guidance and strength till her death:

...

Me fro the feend and fro his clawes kepe,
That day that I shal drenchen in the depe.

The Kyng of Hevene with his woundes newe,

...

Me keep, and yif me myght my lyf tamenden.

Death, pain, and starvation are the least of Custance's concerns. She refrains from directly asking God for salvation, but prays for His guidance instead to defeat the Devil. Suffering is not simply an unfortunate side-effect or misfortune; Custance must dutifully suffer at God's behest, for the sake of her spiritual being. Particularly noteworthy is Custance's trial at King Alla's court, during which she seeks refuge from false blame:

Immortal God, that savedest Susanne
Fro false blame, and thou, merciful Mayde,
Marie I meene, doghter to Seynte Anne,
Bifore whos child angeles synge Osanne,
If I be giltlees of this felonye,
My socour be, for ellis shal I dye.

This passage in particular demonstrates Custance's submission to God; she not only entrusts her life to God, but also refuses to serve as her own moral judge. Even though she remains aware of her own innocence, she does not insist upon it in her prayer; she delegates the responsibility of justice to God, trusting that He will determine the appropriate course for her. The essential moral message of Custance's trial does not revolve around justice, or even God's responses to good and evil, but around adversity and its ability to weaken or strengthen an individual's faith.

Essentially, the trial at King Alla's court is not about whether Custance killed Hermengyld, but whether she can maintain her belief in God and give up control of her destiny even in the face of slander and death. It would be a mistake to call Custance passive; the court trial in particular shows how Custance submits to God actively, if not willingly. In Custance's ideological perspective, the divide between good and bad fortune is nonexistent, as all of God's decisions foster her spiritual growth.

If Custance indeed exemplifies the submission to the divine, how then does her gender play a part in this? Gender problematizes the dispute between mysticism and theology; it is no

mistake that while Custance in Nicholas Trivet's version is famously learned in the same scholastic disciplines as any renowned clerk, The Man of Law makes no mention of her education or intellectual qualities. Custance's womanliness curtails her ability to perform certain spiritual duties, participate in theological dialectics, and maintain her chastity while married. Custance must contend with gender politics from early on, when she realizes that she lacks the right of self-determinism by secular and divine law:

"Father," she said, "your wretched child, Constance,
Your daughter reared in luxury so soft,
And you, my mother, and my chief pleasance,
Above all things, except Christ who rules aloft,
Constance your child would be remembered oft
Within your prayers, for I to Syria go,
Nor shall I ever see you more, ah no!
Unto the land of Barbary my fate
Compels me now, because it is your will;
But Christ, who died to save our sad estate,

So give me grace, his mandates I'll fulfill;
I, wrecche womman, no fors though I spille!
Wommen are born to thraldom and penance,
And to been under mannes governance."

Custance once refers to herself as a "wrecche woman," a phrase connoting someone who struggles spiritually. In this case, the reference to her gender instead of the neutral "child" as employed in the first stanza problematizes the concept of inner spirituality and salvation. In *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas delineates the physical, intellectual, and spiritual differences between men and women, the latter inferior to the former in every regard (Aquinas). Most medieval clergy and philosophers adopted the Aristotelian belief that women were essentially aborted or failed men, and thus required men's authority in all civil and spiritual matters. Sheila Delany proposes that Custance's womanhood entails submission and passivity,

and thus serves as the ideal model of Christianity: “the emblem of Custance as a model of submission...conveys the moral dialectic of the poem...her passivity is what orthodox Christianity recommends as a response to the human condition” (Delany, 70, 64). The Biblical reference to “thraldom and penance” alludes to Eve’s exile, in which God subjects women to men’s authority (“mannes gouvernance”). Within this framework, Custance as a woman symbolizes the ideal layperson as per orthodox Christianity, obedient and silent towards ecclesiastical and heavenly authority.

Delany offers insightful analysis of the text that highlight Custance’s particular model of Christian submission, but omits this particular passage which further complicates the intersection of femininity and spirituality:

To ship is brought this woful faire mayde
Solempnely, with every circumstance,
"Now Jesu Crist be with yow alle," she seyde.
Ther nys namoore but, "Farewel faire Custance!"
She peyneth hir to make good contenance,
And forth I lete hir saille in this manere,
And turne I wole agayn to my matere.

Particularly intriguing in this passage is Custance’s passivity within the narrative and the rhetorical framework. Custance submits to forces within and outside the Tale; the Emperor desires that his daughter marry the Sultan for potential political and commercial ties, while The Man of Law deliberately removes her agency as a narrator and commentator. The “woful faire mayde” does not simply walk to the ship, but “is brought” instead, implying a mental resistance on the part of Custance, if not physical. In the last two lines, The Man of Law seizes control of the narrative once more and marks Custance as “other” within the world of men. Particularly interesting is the Man of Law’s intrusive narrative style that “lete” Custance “saille in this

manere,” while he turned to the “materes” of men. The last rhyming couplet underscores the divergence between Custance’s otherness as a woman and The Man of Law. The structure of the couplet, the repetition of the beginning word “and,” and the passive voice all contribute to the sense of divide between Custance and the audience. Furthermore, Custance “peyneth hir to make good contenance,” modeling the ideal Christian reaction to suffering.

Instead of protesting against patriarchal Christian standards, Custance maintains her spirituality by completely easing control of her body and mind to the outside forces that determine her fate. Custance’s prayers and submissive devotion to God contain a mystic quality that inspires the people around her with a religious fervor. Although many critics may argue that her character is vapid and uninteresting, her presence certainly engenders more interesting characters, including The Man of Law. Her prayers, for example, are embedded with imagery pertaining to the senses:

O cleere, o welful auter, hooly croys,
Reed of the lambes blood, ful of pitee,
That wesse the world fro the olde iniquitee,
Me fro the feend and fro his clawes kepe,
That day that I shal drenchen in the depe.

Victorious tree, proteccioun of trewe,
That oonly worthy were for to bere
The Kyng of Hevene with his woundes newe,
The white lamb that hurt was with the spere,
Flemere of feendes out of hym and here
On which thy lymes feithfully extenden,
Me keep, and yif me myght my lyf tamenden.

Custance creates a spiritual connection to Christ through appeals of shared physical and emotional pain. Pain and mortification of the body play a vital role in mysticism, with blood as a symbol of atonement and cleansing of sin (Baker, 88). References to “spear” and “claws”

heighten the sensory images, producing an inextricable link between the corporeal and the contemplative. The tone and imagery of the prayer are reminiscent of Margery Kempe, who often evoked sensual images of blood, wounds, and the altar (Kempe, 88). The idea of mysticism and employing one's body to foster a spiritual rapport with God generated a lot of debate throughout the Middle Ages—after all, if God is immaterial and shapeless, how can the corporeality of the human body play a vital role in spirituality (Bachrach and Kroll)? As evident in Custance's prayer, the fragmentation of the body can be used in cases of religious ecstasy, similar to how Christ's blood cleansed the sins of the world and allowed men passage to the heavens; bleeding cleanses the soul and purifies the body (Bynum, 192). The implication behind the prayer is also that the power of her blood is such that its purity prevents the devil from approaching her in the first place.

So far, Custance has refrained from directly preaching the word of God to others; her fervent praying and weeping serve a similar goal of conversion. In order to examine the extent of her authority—and the intersection between worldly and spiritual power—let us briefly go over legislation regarding clerical and theological power in the late Middle Ages. Official religious authority, or *de officio praedictaris*, was under constant debate in the Middle Ages, even after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) emphasized the distinction between preachers and theologians, the latter of whom had the right to teach and preach to the masses. The Man of Law differs from Custance in that he seeks knowledge more than salvation, and avoids directly preaching to his audience the meaning behind God's actions and words. According to Humbert of Romans, elected Master-General of the Order of Preachers in 1254, the office of preaching “is apostolic, angelic, and divine...its foundation, which is holy Scripture, excels all other sciences” (Minnis,

37). Thus, the Man of Law's allusions to astronomy, philosophy, and classics would probably appear extraneous to those intimately familiar with sermonizing, especially in contrast to Custance's silent faith. Even the most celebrated theologians emphasized the distinction between seeking and teaching religious knowledge, and relegated the former to a secondary role with regards to the latter. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes between "doctrine of preaching, which pertains to preaching" and "scholastic doctrine"—Bernard Gui furthers this distinction by highlighting Aquinas's vernacular when sermonizing to his non-scholastic congregations and the "subtleties" of reasoning he engaged in outside his sermons, quietly and directed towards a more select audience. In fact, Bernard Gui dismisses the importance of scholasticism with regards to ordinary folk, implying that in order to behave morally, common folk can accept the word of God "with singular grace and power, without indulging in far-fetched reasoning or the vanities of worldly wisdom or in the sort of language that serves to tickle the curiosity of a congregation than do any real good" (Minnis, 39). In sum, Chaucer's text makes clear that the Man of Law is a lector and not a praedicator. The question, however, is whether the ability to theologize and lecture necessarily entails moral improvement or understanding.

In response to Custance's submissive form of piety, The Man of Law protests the will of God through rationalizations about astrology, philosophy, and praises of God's "miracles" and "werkis." The Man of Law is an interesting figure in *The Canterbury Tales*, straddling the line between religion and secularism as a lawyer well-versed in Latin and Biblical canon. Through his extensive and long-winded commentary on Custance's story, he reveals a proclivity for theology and debate, constantly puzzling over whimsical fortune and God's flighty methods. The origins of theology can be traced back to 500 CE, when Gregory the Great wrote major works

that would later serve as the foundation for canon law and allegorical interpretations in the Late Middle Ages (Moore, 43). The Man of Law's Tale addresses a salient theological debate of the Middle Ages: the overlap and difference between faith and reason.

Although The Man of Law avoids directly confronting the question of God's mysterious ways, he tries to determine God's movements instead of acquiescing to fate quietly:

Paraventure in thilke large book,
Which that men clepe the hevene, ywriten was
With sterres, whan that he his birthe took,
That he for love sholde han his deeth, allas!
For in the sterres clerer than is glas
Is writen, God woot, whoso koude it rede,
The deeth of every man, withouten drede.

In sterres many a wynter therbiforn
Was writen the deeth of Ector, Achilles,
Of Pompei, Julius, er they were born,
The strif of Thebes, and of Ercules,
Of Sampson, Turnus, and of Socrates
The deeth, but mennes wittes ben so dulle
That no wight kan wel rede it atte fulle.

The passage concerns the disputation of predestination and free will, with the added implication that with proper education, men can determine to some extent the manner and timing of their deaths. In contrast to Custance, The Man of Law obsesses over the inevitability of death—a significant indicator of his spiritual failings. Medieval religious scholars often studied astrology as means of understanding the Scriptures and faith, but The Man of Law conflates spiritual strength with an education in the classics. The implication that “sterres [are] clerer than is glas” relies on the assumption that God himself arranged the stars to determine the select few who willingly devoted their years to arduous scholastic learning. The last couplet of the passage acknowledges the futility of verifying all or even most dates of death, but condescendingly

laments “mennes wittes...dulle.” Even if The Man of Law includes himself in the category of dull-witted men, he errs in his belief that their intelligence prevents men from understanding their fate. In the Tale, death is unpredictable, arbitrary, and even unjust—it is not a question of intelligence or survival, but of accepting God’s omniscient power. Notably, The Man of Law refers to a list of Homeric and Greek literary figures in order to make his point about astrology, but remains silent on a rather obvious point: most of these Greek figures understood the manner and timing of their deaths, but embraced their deaths. It seems strange that The Man of Law, who pompously and frequently lectures his audience on God’s greatness and benevolence, should omit the idea of embracing God’s will, whatever it may be. Perhaps his refusal to submit to God’s decisions demonstrates a flaw found in some scholars—the belief that great learning relieves them from the many inevitabilities of life, and promotes them to a spiritual level far above the uneducated.

The Man of Law maintains his notorious silence on the troubling implications of the moral fables he cites, particularly with regards to the necessity of suffering. Custance’s water-bound exile brings forth another barrage of pontifications on and excessive praises of God, infused with parables from the Old Testament. As per scholastic lecture style, he anticipates questions pertinent to his narrative and responds to questions he determines as the most pressing. Why wasn’t Custance killed at the feast? Why didn’t she drown at sea? From where did she get her sustenance? Ironically, his materialistic concerns starkly differ from Custance’s own concern for salvation. Again, The Man of Law fixates on death and chances of Custance’s survival, ultimately misunderstanding the reason behind God’s works:

Men myghten asken why she was nat slayn?

Eek at the feeste who myghte hir body save?
And I answeere to that demande agayn,
Who saved Danyel in the horrible cave,
Ther every wight save he, maister and knave,
Was with the leoun frete, er he asterte?
No wight but God, that he bar in his herte.

God liste to shewe his wonderful myracle
In hir, for we sholde seen his myghty werkis.
Crist, which that is to every harm triacle,
By certeine meenes ofte, as knowen clerkis,
Dooth thyng for certein ende, that ful derk is
To mannes wit, that for oure ignorance
Ne konne nocht knowe his prudent purveiance.

Similar to how he earlier omitted the essential moral of the Greek heroes's deaths, The Man of Law ignores the reason Daniel was trapped in the cave in the first place—a test of faith from God. The harbinger of good fortune similarly distributes misfortune, and its omission from The Man of Law's commentary conveys his materialistic concerns and misunderstanding of God's role as the bringer of reward and temporal satisfaction. The usage of the word "triacle" in particular indicates a shallow interpretation of Christ's mercy, not least because the medical term connotes a temporary relief (Middle English Dictionary), instead of the spiritual awakening Custance and figures of the Old Testament experience. His emphasis that God purposely designs trials to demonstrate "wonderful myracles" and "myghty werkis" is not unfounded in Scripture, but still willfully emphasizes the grandeur and absolute power behind the miracles instead of the spiritual experience they provide.

In his discussion of "purveiance," The Man of Law once again conflates men's "wytte" with spiritual understanding, assuming "clerkis" understand the "certeine meenes" that brings about a "certein ende." This does not mean that The Man of Law believes clerks understand all

or most of God's ways, but that clerks, and other learned men, are spiritually closer to God than laymen. The usage of the word "certein" ironically opposes its intended effect; as a scholar, The Man of Law prides himself on precision, detail, and "certeintee," but the word in this context signifies The Man of Law's ignorance on the topic of faith and spirituality. He tries to pinpoint the exact detail of God's mysterious ways with the word "certein," (or at least to pretend he knows what he is talking about) but the word is indicative here and throughout the Tale of a mystic, spiritual quality he lacks the words and proper faith to understand or express.

Materialistic desires hamper The Man of Law's judgment and delude him into thinking that political unions and other secular matters can serve God and complete His work. The Man of Law's commentary on Custance's doomed marriage to the Sultan testifies his blunder in reasoning:

O primal-moving, cruel Firmament,
With thy diurnal pressure, that doth sway
And hurl all things from East to Occident,
Which otherwise would hold another way,
Thy pressure set the heavens in such array,
At the beginning of this wild voyage,
That cruel Mars has murdered this marriage.

Two aspects of this verse stand out: first, the Man of Law states his lament in such a way that he almost appears to attribute the origin of evil to the East ("...hurl all things from East to Occident) and second, he disregards Providence in blaming the alignment of the planets for Custance's doomed marriage ("At the beginning of this wild voyage/That cruel Mars has murdered this marriage"). The Man of Law's scientific knowledge fails to hold in face of religious acceptance; his lamentation of the "primarl-moving, cruel Firmament" is almost comical, as he basically demonizes the natural procession of day and night for Custance's fate. Another mistake concerns

the authority of heavens in the movement of the stars; again, he talks in almost pagan terms when he states how the “cruel Firmament” imposed control over divinity by “setting the heavens in such array.” Basically, the Man of Law struggles to grasp the concept of God’s design or “array,” in that his scientific knowledge fails to account for Providence or God’s plan.

Infortunat ascendent tortuous,
Of which the lord is helplees falle, allas!
Out of his angle into the derkeste hous!
O Mars! O Atazir! as in this cas,
O fieble Moone, unhappy been thy paas!
Thou knytttest thee, ther thou art nat receyved;
Ther thou were weel, fro thennes artow weyved.-
Unfortunate ascendant tortuous,
Of which the lord has helpless fall'n, alas,
Out of his angle to the darkest house!
O Mars! O Atazir in present case!
O feeble Moon, unhappy is thy pace!
Thou'rt in conjunction where thou'rt not received,
And where thou should'st go, thou hast not achieved.
Imprudent Emperour of Rome, allas!
Was ther no philosophre in al thy toun?
Is no tyme bet than oother in swich cas?
Of viage is ther noon eleccioun,
Namely to folk of heigh condicioun,
Noght whan a roote is of a burthe yknowe?
Allas, we been to lewed or to slowe!

Here, the Man of Law posits that misfortune could have been avoided if an astrologer had set the most auspicious date for the wedding, when the course of the Tale reminds us that Custance would have suffered her way to King Alla, regardless of the date of her first wedding. According to Chauncey Wood, who draws upon Boethius’ *The Consolation of Philosophy* to extensively analyze the usage of astrology in *The Man of Law’s Tale*, The Man of Law confuses astrological signs with God’s will to test His subjects, demonstrating his “legalistic, materialistic concern with astrology, literature, and religion” (Wood, 197). In this case, he blames Mars as the

harbinger of misfortune and suggests that if the stars were in conjunction, and if astrologers had figured out her fate using the dates of her birth and impending wedding to the Sultan, Custance need not have suffered. The completely oblivious Man of Law fails to recognize his own folly in understanding the nature of Providence, and laments the unhappy pace of the stars instead of accepting God's will. Furthermore, The Man of Law fails to understand even Boethius, who easily reconciles predestination with astrology in *Consolation*: "...you can indeed alter what you propose to do, but, because the present truth of Providence sees that you can, and whether or not you will, you cannot frustrate the divine knowledge any more than you can escape the eye of someone who is present and watching you..." (Boethius, 92). What is most important here, however, is the Man of Law's disinclination to accept God's plan and actions, and failing to understand the goodness behind all of God's works. In a sense, his constant references to "cruel," "unfortunate" and "unhappy" almost toe the boundary separating theology from heresy; under God's design, the notion of fortune and the immediate gratification it provides do not exist. The ultimate implication that lies within The Man of Law's mistake is that even theological knowledge cannot compete with divine authority.

The Man of Law's Tale registers the struggle to reconcile divine authority with free will and materialistic impulses. While Chaucer may not have entirely channeled his attitude towards free will and fate, he does definitely highlight the materialistic concerns and impulses that have taken over medieval scholasticism.

Chapter Two

“Why sholde men speke of it vileyne?”

The Troubling Issue of Female Subjectivity in The Wife of Bath's Tale

“Experience, though noon auctoritee/Were in this world, were right ynogh to me/To speke of wo that is in marriage,” begins the Wife of Bath, before she launches into an eloquent speech arguably antithetical to this grand statement. Confident in her scholarly allusions and rhetoric, the Wife of Bath relies heavily on male authoritative figures to persuade her audience. The Wife of Bath's Prologue brims with ironies, not least of which includes her simultaneous dismissal and implicit endorsement of “auctoritee.” In this case, “auctoritee” connotes more than the patriarchal figures in her life; it extends to legislation, bodies of law, sermons, exegesis, and language that has shaped and enforced her relatively subordinate position as a non-aristocratic, middle-aged woman in medieval society. Time and time again, she resorts to employing the very devices of “auctoritee” she initially derides—Biblical exegesis, pleading, defense, syllogism, and direct quotations from reputable religious scholars. Her rhetorical strategies extend beyond those employed by her clerical, sanctimonious contemporaries. Perhaps the most intriguing part of the Wife of Bath's speech is how rapidly she switches from one kind of discourse to another. Her interpretation of the Bible or a saint's teachings follows with vulgar jokes about human sexuality and her careful allusions to obscure Greek heroes somehow connect to the bourgeoisie dialectic of the medieval marketplace. Her fierce adherence to the Bible, however, says much more about her insecurity as a woman without a voice in contemporary discourse than about heresy or Lollardy—in fact, although Chaucer registers Lollard ideas into The Tale, he mainly focuses on language as means to power in his larger discourse of scholasticism. Essentially, The Wife of

Bath's inability to enter scholastic dialogue as a woman forces her into appropriating the male authority of the indisputable Bible in order to combat the same clerical discourse that oppresses her. Through *The Wife of Bath's* appropriated voice, Chaucer demonstrates the difficulty of integrating female subjectivity into a predominantly male discourse, especially when the "feminine" voice is inevitably shaped by male authority.

Throughout *The Wife of Bath's* Prologue, Chaucer registers the dialectic between clerical authority and worldly experience primarily by juxtaposing scholarly exegesis with literal interpretations of the Bible. One can read *The Wife of Bath's* Prologue as a layman's—or laywoman's, in this case—attempt to reshape the spiritual discourse of the time into a dialogue less lofty and more suited towards the mercantile, middle-class Christian community. *The Wife of Bath* launches her speech by subtly deriding those that condemn her multiple marriages and supposed sexual impurity:

For lordynges, sith I twelf yeer was of age,
Thonked be God, that is eterne on lyve,
Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve
...
But me was toold, certeyn, nat longe agoon is,
That sith that Crist ne wente nevers but ones
To weddyng in the Cane of Galilee,
That by the same ensample, taughte he me,
That I ne sholde wedded be but ones.

In the first three lines of this particular verse, *The Wife of Bath* uses concrete, numerical measurements of her "experience"—the earliest date of her marriage, and the number of husbands—to establish herself as an appropriate, if not ultimate, authority on marriage. The attention to numerical detail reveals *The Wife of Bath's* focus on literality over vague

abstractions; she is not so much invested in introspective spirituality as she is in explicit divine commandments that dictate the more mundane aspects of her life. For example, she asks her audience to provide her a “nombre diffinicioun,” a clear limit to the number of marital alliances she can rightfully and legally make. The Wife of Bath, bold and forthright and even irreverent in her questions, foils the clerical men who “devyne, and glosen up and down” regarding the Word of God; she demands clear answers written “expresly” in the Scriptures, while implying that theologians can only debate “up and down.” Other juxtapositions in the verse build upon the same argument that pits “experience” against “auctoritee”—in particular, Chaucer enables an implicit comparison between the authority of God, who is “eterne on lyve,” and the authority of the educated, but mortal, religious elite. The Wife of Bath’s claim that she married “at chirche dore,” her multiple marriages consecrated by God Himself, anticipates the audience’s disapproval: after all, how can a mere mortal man, “biside a welle Jhesus, God and manne,” expect his “sharpe worde” to contradict God’s own blessings and command to “wexe and multiplye?” By claiming to understand the “expres” Word of God as denoted in the Bible, The Wife of Bath deviates from contemporary orthodoxy in two fundamental ways: one, she disregards the role of the clerical elite as intermediaries between God and laymen, and two, she disregards the “glosen” and rumination of clerics and essentially renders their role in explaining the Scriptures obsolete.

Chaucer’s manipulation of verse also demonstrates the undeniable influence of “auctoritee” whilst refraining from explicit criticism. The Wife claims that she was told “nat long agoon” that she cannot marry more than once “sith Crist ne wente but ones” to the wedding in Cana. Notably, The Wife of Bath’s detractors are unnamed. She does not inform us of the

detractor's gender or occupation; in effect, she creates suspicion of the reproving person's authority, whilst supporting her own credibility by claiming "experience" of having had "five housbondes at chirche dore." The disapproving voice is disembodied, rendered unreliable in The Wife of Bath's passive sentence construction. The notion that Jesus's one and only participation of a wedding signifies monogamous relationships derives from Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*: "For he who came once to the wedding, taught that marriage should occur once." Nonetheless, Once the looming presence of authority is removed, we can examine the detractor's Biblical interpretation on its own merits—at once, we find Jerome's reasoning fallacious and far too dependent on mere Biblical incidences. The usage of passive tense allows for an implicit observation about the dangers of relying on authoritative figures for religious, moral, or legal guidance; the audience can question The Wife of Bath's detractor because his authority is non-existent, but what if the same fallacious reasoning was endorsed by a friar or a local pardoner?

Chaucer further complicates the question of authority by addressing the tension between core and incidental text, or between the intent of a Biblical gospel versus its explicit textuality. In order to further validate her multiple marriages, The Wife of Bath mentions the Samaritan woman at the well, who also incidentally had five husbands. According to the tale of Christ and the Samaritan woman, Christ reproves the Samaritan for sleeping with a man not wedded to her, despite her having had five husbands previously. The Wife of Bath demands to understand "why that fifthe man was nought housbonde to the Samaritan," and concedes that she "kan not wel" explain Christ's words. An obvious point to be made here is that The Wife of Bath may have misinterpreted the anecdote—the Biblical context suggests that Christ disapproved of the sixth man the Samaritan was bedding, not of her previous marital alliances. More likely is that The

Wife of Bath—already having demonstrated her knowledge of Jerome—ironically criticizes the scholar’s excessive explanation of simple, plain text. Secondly, overall meaning of the gospel, which addresses tensions between Samaritans and Jews and demonstrates the all-knowing power of Jesus, is completely obfuscated by The Wife of Bath’s focus on the number of men a woman can legally wed. The Wife of Bath may choose to focus on this particular detail as part of her “expres” interpretation, but clerical contemporaries would actually have had to gauge the doctrinal importance of this particular bit of information. By filtering Biblical anecdotes through The Wife of Bath’s perspective, Chaucer illustrates the problem of reading the Word of God at face-value, not necessarily condemning Lollardy, but expressing concern over the disconnect between language and its intended (and unintended) effects.

Chaucer primarily channels his criticism of scholarly hypocrisy, especially that of clergymen who imposed their stringent standards of sexuality on the working classes, through an eloquent and commercially-minded woman. Indeed, The Wife of Bath tries to counteract scholarly exegesis using the plain text of the Bible, essentially illustrating the disconnect between the moderate tenets preached in the Bible and the stringent standards demanded by sanctimonious scholars. In particular, The Wife of Bath defends herself against accusations of sexual promiscuity, bigamy, and impurity by suggesting that the Bible never explicitly condemned sexual relations between men and women:

I woot as wel as ye it is no drede,
Th'apostel, whan he speketh of maydenhede;
He seyde that precept therof hadde he noon.
Men may conseille a womman to been oon,
But conseillyng is no comandement;
He putte it in oure owene juggement.
For hadde God comanded maydenhede,

Thanne hadde he dampned weddyng with the dede;
And certein, if ther were no seed ysowe,
Virginitee, wherof thanne sholde it growe?

Al were it good no womman for to touche,
He mente, as in his bed or in his couche;
For peril is bothe fyr and tow t'assemble;
Ye knowe what this ensample may resemble.

The Wife of Bath makes a firm distinction between “conseillyng” and “commandement,” implying that the former holds little power against God’s explicit commandments. Implicit in the verse is a debate between Paul and Jerome—with the latter arguing that marriage itself is a sin—and The Wife of Bath points out that even Paul the Apostle defers to the explicit text of the Bible. Unlike Paul, however, Jerome falls into the category of clerics who “conseille” on and “glosen” the more obscure matters of morality. Without clear commandments condemning or reproving sexual relationships, Paul refrains from making a moral argument explicitly for or against marriage, admitting instead that any “precept thereof hadde he noon” and allowing laypeople to make their own judgment. Although The Wife of Bath abstains from directly naming Jerome or his works, she seizes upon some of his more inconsistent arguments to undermine his censure of marriage. Despite his polemics against sexual intercourse in general, Jerome grudgingly admits that celibates themselves originate from the very act he loathes, an inconsistency which The Wife of Bath mocks with glee: “And certein, if there were no seed ysowe/Virginitee, wherof thanne sholde it growe?” The exposure of Jerome’s erratic and often distorted arguments undermines the male, clerical authority that holds sway in medieval society, and functions as a criticism of scholastic hermeneutics that deviated from the Scriptures. In order to fully distinguish between

the irresolute nature of Biblical interpretation and the literal text of the Bible, *The Wife of Bath* reminds the audience of the true universal hierarchy: “Poul dorste nat comanden, atte leeste, A thyng of which his maister yaf noon heeste.” God remains the true master, and as long as He makes no explicit condemnation of sexual intercourse, mortal men cannot presume to chide others against the act. Once more expounding on the inconsistency between hermeneutics and the Bible, Chaucer exposes the hypocrisy of the Church elite.

The Wife of Bath's fierce defense of Biblical text serves a purpose beyond boycotting tenuous hermeneutics: it is her way of seizing control of a discourse that both degrades and excludes her, and she achieves control by referring to a universal (Christian) truth that cannot be disputed by any man, cleric or not. As mentioned before, theologians often interpreted the Bible in such a way that they ended up setting stringent guidelines that suited the celibate clergy, but failed to accord with the materialistic culture of the middle-class. More specifically, strict notions of sexual purity alienated medieval women, who married as means to obtain financial or social power in society. In other words, medieval patriarchy forced women into matrimony, but still maintained that women were “sinful” because they engaged in sexual activities with their husbands. (Men were often trapped in the same paradoxical conundrum, of course, but they had the choice to remain unmarried and celibate while being able to gain employment and wealth.)

In order to validate her own status as a wife, *The Wife of Bath* adopts an Augustinian view of marriage, a more moderate counterpart to Jerome's condemnation. *The Wife of Bath*, clothed in “ten pound” of “coverchiefs” and “hosen” of the finest “scarlet red,” has clearly obtained not only wealth, but also knowledge, status, and self-assurance through marriage, and has no intention of playing the redeemed virgin for some higher spiritual purpose. On the other

hand, she acknowledges virginity as a “greet perfeccioun,” and openly sexual, admits that she herself could not adhere to the clerics’ frugal ways, especially with regards to sexual intercourse:

I graunte it wel, I have noon envie,
Thogh maydenhede preferre bigamye;
Hem liketh to be clene, body and goost.
Of myn estaat I nyl nat make no boost,
For wel ye knowe, a lord in his houshold,
He nath nat every vessel al of gold;
Somme been of tree, and doon hir lord servyse.
God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wyse,
And everich hath of God a propre yifte -
Som this, som that, as hym liketh shifte.
 Virginitee is greet perfeccioun,

...

He spak to hem that wolde lyve parfitly,
And lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I.
I wol bistowe the flour of myn age
In the actes and in fruyt of mariage.

In this verse, The Wife of Bath refers to Timothy 2:20, an analogy also employed by Jerome to demonstrate the validity of marriage. Similar to how a man may possess and use both vessels of gold and wood, God’s kingdom requires followers of all types, including those who are married and are unable to remain sexually pure. The Wife of Bath’s lack of “maydenhede” does not hinder her from her Christian duty to God; she cannot practice frugality or austerity like the clergy, but in her argument, the Scriptures preached a more moderate form of Christian living different to that demanded by the likes of Jerome. Implicitly, The Wife of Bath argues that her role as a wife is not only valid, but necessary as part of her service to God. She employs the explicit text of the Bible to not only undermine the notion that everyone should seek to practice austerity, but also to remind the audience that her wifely role is mandated by God Himself.

Her lofty claims, however, are at odds with the descriptions of her own marriages; she insists on devoting herself to the “actes and fruits of mariage,” and yet, she manipulates her husbands, produces no children, and seems more interested in worldly, rather than spiritual, pursuits. Her fierce defense of marriage, then, is not just an attack on self-aggrandizing clerics, but a way of substantiating her identity and power as a woman and wife. A parenthetical aside, while jocular in tone, reminds us that The Wife of Bath identifies herself in relation to her numerous husbands:

Yblessed be God, that I have wedded fyve;
(Of whiche I have pyked out the beste,
Bothe of here nether purs and of here cheste.
Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes,
And diverse practyk in many sondry werkes
Maketh the werkman parfyt sekirly;
Of fyve husbondes scolei yng am I.)

Sexual undertones enhance the levity of this verse. In the previous lines, The Wife of Bath jokes that Solomon received “a yifte of God...for all hise wyves,” and expresses a wish to be “half as refressed [sexually] as he.” When she speaks of “scolei yng,” she could be referring to sundry sexual “practyck” with her husbands’ “nether purs” to garner laughs from her tipsy audience. In comparing the role as a wife to the occupation of a clerk or workman, however, Chaucer conveys the inevitability of external influence in the formation of one’s identity. “Clerkes” cannot become “clerkes” without studying “diverse scoles,” and a “werkman” cannot master his craft without “diverse practyck in many sondry werkes.” Furthermore, The Wife of Bath’s “scolei yng” in her five marriages also substantiates her “experience” as a wife and serves as a counterargument to celibate clerics who try to impose their discourse in the domestic sphere. In other words, “clerkes” with their myriad schools of study lack the marital or sexual experience to judge

marriage. On the other hand, The Wife of Bath's declaration—"Of fyve husbondes scholeiynge am I"—is central to understanding The Wife of Bath's obsession with marriage, or more specifically, authenticating marriage as a legal and religious institution. Note that she prides herself on picking "the beste" of men, defined here as those of great wealth (both sexually and monetarily); the social and financial standing of her husbands heavily influence society's view of her. The ambiguity of the declaration further complicates the matter of "scoleiynge," which is used in place of "experience"; the word could simply serve to make the analogy to "clerkes" stronger (and add to the sexual jocularly of the verse), but it makes us wonder as to whether The Wife of Bath refers to any formal education given by her husbands, or marital experience in general. In any case, The Wife of Bath juxtaposes her lived marital and sexual "experience" with the artificial "auctoritee" of the clergy in order to invalidate the voice of the latter in the private sphere.

In order to convey her control of the domestic sphere, The Wife of Bath builds upon the concept of the physical body as both a space and object of scholastic discourse, a tangible reality against the "glose" of the clergy. The physical body represents the true substance and shape of reality, a concrete existence in contrast to the abstract and alienating discourse of scholasticism. Medieval Church placed emphasis on improving the spirit, primarily achieved by denying the the body via fasting, abstinence, and in some cases, physical penance. The Wife of Bath's intense awareness of her own body and that of others thwarts scholastic discourse that seeks to label her body as inherently sinful or tainted; rather, The Wife of Bath unabashedly uses her own body as an argument against clerical polemics, deploying Biblical text to justify the existence of her

body. She makes explicit references to her genitals, sardonically dubbed “instrument” and “belle chose” to mock the clerical discourse against sexuality:

Glose whoso wole, and seye bothe up and doun,
That they were maked for purgacioun
Of uryne, and oure bothe thynges smale
Were eek to knowe a femele from a male,
And for noon other cause, -say ye no?
The experience woot wel it is noht so.

The reality of her body and its functions serves as a counterargument in and of itself in response to Jerome’s thoughts on the use of genitals: “If our members are for generation, must we always be using them?... Why does Paul have masculine characteristics (and not swelling breasts) if he doesn’t use them” (Smith)? The Wife of Bath adopts similar euphemisms to describe genitalia, heightening the mocking tone of her passage, and fires back with a snappy retort: “Why sholde men elles in her bookes sette that man shall yelde to his wyf hire dette? Now wherwith sholde he make his paiement, if he ne used his sely instrument?” Here, The Wife of Bath is referring to 1 Corinthians 7:4, in which Paul states that “the wife does not have authority over her body, but the husband does... Likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife.” The Wife of Bath not only engages in a simulated dialectic with Jerome regarding sexual intimacy, but also satirizes the clerical tendency to impose control over secular matters without using the appropriate terms. In other words, The Wife of Bath highlights the hypocrisy of the Church in being able to dictate the sexual expression of laypeople, and yet refrain from using specific sexual terms in fear of sounding too vulgar—a subtle commentary on the scholastic trying, and failing, to essentially school the vernacular.

Indeed, The Wife of Bath's emphasis on her control over her husband's body as a legalistic and religious right underscores that her concerns are primarily material, not spiritual; furthermore, her focus on bodily aspects of marriage derive in part from the same scholastic discourse that has constantly deployed the woman's body as an argument for women's spiritual inferiority. In response, The Wife of Bath uses the male body as argument for women's sovereignty in marriage:

An housbonde I wol have, I wol nat lette,
Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,
And have his tribulacioun withal
Upon his flessch whil that I am his wyf.
I have the power duryng al my lyf
Upon his propre body, and noght he.
Right thus the Apostel tolde it unto me,
And badoure housbondes for to love us weel.
Al this sentence me liketh every deel."

While correctly stating that a wife has sexual rights to her husband's body, The Wife of Bath neglects to mention that her husband has the same rights to her body; in fact, husband and wife each owe a sexual debt to one another, negating the "power duryng al [her] lyf" The Wife of Bath claims to possess. The Wife of Bath's control over her husband's "flessch," as opposed to the entirety of his being, demonstrates an interesting situation in which The Wife of Bath, always scholastically defined by her feminine flesh, can only truly obtain "maistrye" over the corporeal form. Galatians 3:28 clearly states the spiritual equality of men and women under God's eyes: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Of course, the "glosen" of medieval theologians inadvertently countered the Word of God. And yet, The Wife of Bath does not claim spiritual equality to men, but rather bodily. I propose that since scholastic discourse primarily excludes women based on

their “inferior” feminine flesh, and since The Wife of Bath has been shaped by this male authority, she can only enter the discourse as womanly flesh and thus talk only about corporeal matters.

The Wife of Bath’s fight with her fifth husband Jankyn illustrates most poignantly the former’s struggle to integrate feminine subjectivity into scholastic discourse; in the stead of her feminine voice, The Wife of Bath relies on sheer violence to physically combat clerical discourse. Although it may be strange to consider physical violence pitted against the abstraction of discourse, the following passage illustrates that The Wife of Bath has to force Jankyn into becoming violent so they are on the same level, so to speak:

And whan I saugh he wolde nevere fyne
To reden on this cursed book al nyght,
Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght
Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke
I with my fest so took hym on the cheke,
That in oure fyr he ril bakward adoun.
And he up-stirte as dooth a wood leoun,
And with his fest he smoot me on the heed
That in the floor I lay, as I were deed.
And whan he saugh how stille that I lay,
He was agast, and wolde han fled his way,
Til atte laste out of my swogh I breyde.
'O, hastow slayn me, false theef,' I seyde,
'And for my land thus hastow mordred me?
Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee.'

Scholastic discourse, as manifested by “this cursed book,” is essentially torn out of Jankyn’s hands; he loses the verbal and rhetorical power he lords over her, and has to “smoot her on the heed” to subdue her. The sight of The Wife of Bath’s broken body convinces Jankyn to forgo his book and verbal abuse against her, to the extent that he hands over “the governance of his hous and lond.” In replacement of female subjectivity, The Wife of Bath employs her feminine flesh to

not only entice men, but also to combat scholastic discourse. I say “feminine” because despite her initial violence, what wins Jankyn over is the sight of her mangled body, supine and vulnerable, compounded with her sweet request for a final kiss. In a way, this is fitting for The Wife of Bath; as per her name, she fits the role of a feminine wife defined by the sexuality of her body, and she employs that against patriarchal constructs. The final purge of scholastic discourse, then, occurs through fire—Jankyn burns the “cursed book” for her, and with that purge follows a more equitable marriage.

Chaucer presents the dilemma of self-expression and restrictive language through The Wife of Bath’s simplification and obfuscation of Biblical anecdotes and scholarly works. As mentioned before, The Wife of Bath struggles to reconcile her experience with male authority; given by her liberal use of Biblical and scholarly quotations, she cannot extricate her experience from the authority that oppresses her, and consequently, she is forced to articulate herself in the same language that denies her authority, credibility, and even humanity in some cases. For example, she uses Paul’s acceptance of marriage to validate her marital status:

For thanne th’apostle seith that I am free,
To wedde, a Goddes half, where it liketh me.
He seith, that to be wedded is no synne,
Bet is to be wedded than to brynne.
What rekketh me, thogh folk seye vileynye
Of shrewed Lameth and of bigamy?
I woot wel Abraham was an hooly man,
And Jacob eek, as ferforth as I kan,
And ech of hem had wyves mo than two,
And many another holy man also.
Whanne saugh ye evere in any manere age,
That hye God defended mariage
By expres word?

The Wife of Bath correctly attributes the statement “bet is to be wedded than to brynne” to Paul, but fails to recognize that the statement does not signify Paul’s approval of marriage, but rather his resigned acceptance. Paul suggests marriage to those who cannot control their sexual urges, but primarily as a last resort for those truly unable to control their sexual urges. By understanding that the tone with which Paul speaks of marriage is far from approving, we immediately gauge that The Wife of Bath overwrites Paul’s words with her own assertions of independence and desire. She uses Paul’s name to claim that she is “free” to wed “where it liketh [her],” misunderstanding Paul’s authentication of marriage as permission to unbridle all sexual impulses. For Paul, marriage was meant to control and subdue sexual desire; however, The Wife of Bath erroneously uses Paul’s words to support her own sexual independence. Furthermore, The Wife of Bath chooses to heed Paul’s validation of marriage, but ignores the spiritual responsibility that comes outside and within marriage, that of reigning in worldly and physical desires to focus on God and ultimate salvation.

Through The Wife of Bath’s manipulation of Paul’s words, Chaucer also addresses the issue of building moral arguments on improper information, especially prominent amongst the medieval bourgeoisie that were at once familiar with and alienated from scholastic discourse. The Wife of Bath claims that “to be wedded is no synne,” again attributing this to Paul; and while Paul does explicitly state that marriage in itself is not a sin, he argues that marriage introduces a host of temptations and problems that could possibly lead one to sin. Interestingly enough, The Wife of Bath unwittingly refers to Abraham and Jacob, two holy men who practiced polygamy. In alluding to these figures from the Old Testament, The Wife of Bath ironically ends up proving Paul’s point about inevitable catastrophes in marriage: the bitter feud between Sarah

and Hagar and Hagar's consequent banishment demonstrate the trials of polygamy, and Jacob's son is betrayed and sold as a slave by his own half-brothers, a legacy of the sour relations between Rachel and Leah. Indeed, one can point out that The Wife of Bath herself has had five destructive marriages, facing the same consequences of those "hooly men." The Wife of Bath's obfuscatory speech becomes the most apparent here; she "woot wel...as ferforth as [she] can" that Abraham and Jacob were "hooly," but seems unable to name other Biblical polygamous figures. She also fixates on the word "hooly," repeating it twice as a way of validating their multiple marriages, and by extension, her own. Essentially, one can consider marriage under religious law as indulgentia, or pardon for sinning, which complicates the matter of sin and virtue. St. Augustine took a similar line of argument, claiming that "evil habits" impel a couple to intercourse, but such habits could be pardoned within a legal marriage. By failing to acknowledge sexual desire as something to be curbed, The Wife of Bath ignores the intent behind Paul's grudging acceptance of marriage—that of restricting sexuality—and portrays herself as a woman free from sin. In depicting The Wife of Bath's linguistic manipulations, Chaucer underscores a significant drawback of language, that of grappling with misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and partial information, and using the aforementioned to make moralistic arguments.

The tension between the literal and the figurative occurs throughout the text; in a sense, "auctoritee" encompasses not only Biblical exegesis performed by the clerical elite, but also metaphors, parables, allegories, and other creative forms of textuality employed to disempower women. The Wife of Bath's fierce adherence to literal interpretations of the Scriptures functions as a response to the patriarchal constructs of language that has shaped her role and status in

medieval society. Primarily, *The Wife of Bath* rebels against these constructs of language by employing the words of the Bible and medieval saints in response to the male figures in her life, who she claims are full of “lyes,” “proverbes,” and “parables.” Critics have deconstructed the phrase “wo that is in mariage,” which appears in the beginning of *The Wife of Bath*’s prologue, in many ways; most will argue that *The Wife of Bath* laments the most over lack of financial, physical, and sexual freedom in a male-dominated society. In analyzing her complaints, however, we find that she lacks vital control of another kind: that of speech. *The Wife of Bath* devotes a large part of her Prologue to the myriad ways in which men insult and degrade womankind, but resorts to the language of violence, not reasoning, to combat the discourse that degrades her: “With wilde thonder-dynt and firy leve/Moote thy welked nekke be tobroke!” *The Wife of Bath* primarily demonstrates the foolishness of the misogynistic parables written by men through clever arrangement: the sequential progress of metaphors more and more absurd. The most important point, however, is that *The Wife of Bath* cannot rhetorically combat scholastic discourse without employing the Bible; male authority can only be opposed by another male authority, thus negating her claim that her “experience” proves sufficient enough to “speke of wo that is in mariage.”

Chapter Three

“Substance Into Accident”:

Exterior Rhetoric and Counterfeit Meaning in The Pardoner’s Tale

After The Physician’s depressing Tale about a father forced to behead his daughter, the Host requests from The Pardoner “som myrthes or japes” to lighten the mood. Anticipating The Pardoner’s lechery, however, the other pilgrims oppose the Host and demand “som moral thyng” so they may “leere som wit.” The irony of this request, of course, derives from The Pardoner’s immoral and relatively irreligious character, completely at odds with his occupation and preaching. Furthermore, it makes us wonder as to whether the pilgrims actually expected a moral tale from The Pardoner; clearly, The Pardoner’s infamous deeds precede him, and compounded with the general ill-repute of pardoners, we have to wonder if the pilgrims are mocking or challenging him. In the past, critics have tried to ascertain whether The Pardoner’s Tale functions more as a “jape” or a “moral thyng.” Some reject the sermon entirely, highlighting myriad vulgar jokes and writing off The Pardoner’s Tale as the ramblings of an intoxicated man; others perceive a psychological depth in The Pardoner, interpreting The Tale as evidence of his desire for spiritual transcendence despite his many moral failings. Like the fictional pilgrims of The Canterbury Tales, critics themselves are caught between “pleye” and “soothfastedness,” between the tavern and the destined church. Chaucer experiments with his characters in such ways that ultimately, his body of work resists both religion and revelry and leaves his audience shifting uneasily from mirth to sobriety and backwards. I argue that the most startling aspect of The Pardoner lies in his ability to sermonize without sermonizing, crudely fulfilling both requests for a “jape” and “a moral thyng.” In The Pardoner’s Tale, Chaucer parodies the same religious truths

The Tale purports to disseminate and creates a counterfeit tale of morality devoid of spiritual meaning in order to convey the occasional emptiness of rhetoric: in other words, it is us as listeners who derive meaning from rhetoric, and not the speaker.

An examination of The Pardoner's physiognomy reveals an effeminate or emasculated character, which emphasizes his fraud (as he essentially parades as a man without actually being a man in the literary sense) and reveals a certain lack. Chaucer compares him to "a geldyng or a mare": The Pardoner's "heer as yelow as wex," styled like a woman's to the point it "lay by colpons oon and oon," and voice as "smal as hath a goot" bring to mind a eunuch or at least a thoroughly emasculated man and would have evoked distrust in a medieval audience. Critics have long analyzed The Pardoner's unconventional appearance; discourse about The Pardoner's possible homosexuality, sexual impotency, and insufficient crotch has always fascinated literary critics, to the point that The Pardoner's apparent effeminacy has come to define him to the exclusion of anything else provided in The Tale. Although one must tread carefully when applying queer theory to a medieval context, one also cannot deny the metaphoric possibilities The Pardoner's emasculation offers. One interpretation widely accepted amongst critics is the idea of spiritual castration as mimicked by the physical state of being. The Pardoner's sexual deficiency only highlights his spiritual lack, according to some critics, and associates moral degradation with the physical inability to "wexe and multiply"—the inability to produce progeny is linked with the inability to create moral persons through preaching. In this sense, Chaucer's depiction of The Pardoner as sexually deficient functions as a Lollardian criticism, disproving Thomas Aquinas's notion that God can perform good deeds through people of evil character. I wish to interpret The Pardoner's sexual "lack" a little differently, however; I propose that The

Pardoner's effeminacy does not necessarily entail deficiency, but a rhetorical emptiness. As illustrated in *The General Prologue*, The Pardoner possesses the trappings of a preacher—a “vernycle” stitched onto his cap and a “walet” full of “pardoun come from Rome al hoot”—but is wanting in the spirit of a preacher, or the meaning behind the rhetoric.

Indeed, one can even interpret The Pardoner's lewd behavior as a performance of masculine virility that masks his “castrated” state; in metaphoric terms, The Pardoner himself functions as a paragon of counterfeit masculinity, which symbolizes the void behind his rhetoric. Despite being described as “a geldyng or a mare,” The Pardoner seems keen to prove his way with women. Upon hearing The Wife of Bath proclaim her control over men, The Pardoner laments that he was “about to wed a wyf” and begs her “to teche us yonge men of [her] praktike.” Interestingly, The Pardoner makes the interruption immediately after The Wife of Bath claims “power duryng al [her] lyf upon [her husband's] propre body,” suggesting perhaps a desperate attempt to assert masculine dominance by simultaneously interrupting a woman and refusing to marry anyone who would impose sexual control over him. The Pardoner's interjection obviously contradicts his effeminate appearance and proves humorous in the context of his character, but it also reveals an insecurity behind his bravado. The fact that his appearance completely functions to negate his masculinity shows that behind his rhetoric of machismo, there lies nothing to provide meaning to his words. In another example, The Pardoner completes his Tale and then almost immediately tries to sell his pardons and relics to his audience, demanding that his listeners “kneleth here adoun” before him to receive God's pardon. Eugene Vance suggests that the holy act of kneeling before God is rendered meaningless by Chaucer's sexual innuendo, writing that “the kneeling posture to which The Pardoner summons his pilgrims would

place their noses right before his deficient crotch” (Vance). The Host himself, upon hearing The Pardoner’s advertising, jokes that The Pardoner “woldest make [him] kiss [The Pardoner’s] olde bryche” and “swere it were a relyck of a saint though it were with [The Pardoner’s] fundement depeint.” He also jokingly proposes to castrate The Pardoner and have his testicles “shryned in an hogges toord.” The Pardoner, typically quick-witted, does not answer, “so wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye.” What’s interesting about this is that The Host is simply engaging in tavern banter, something that should be familiar to The Pardoner; when he senses The Pardoner’s anger, The Host exclaims that “he wol no longer pleye with [The Pardoner], ne with noon oother angry man.” Even The Knight has to step in, urging The Pardoner to “be glade and myrie of cheere.” Clearly, something has angered The Pardoner, but what, exactly? It makes little sense to say that The Pardoner becomes angry because The Host hinders his selling of pardons—The Pardoner should have anticipated this, as he already exposed his own fraud in the beginning. We can only assume, then, that The Host’s jokes about his genitals renders The Pardoner speechless with anger. By comparing The Pardoner’s “coillons” to his counterfeit relics, The Host essentially emasculates him—The Pardoner’s testicles are just as useless as the relics he sells. It is important to note here that although The Pardoner has disclosed the fraudulent nature of his job, he still takes pride in being able to “maken oother folk to twynne/From avarice, and soore to repent.” It’s not his spiritual deficiency that bothers him, but his rhetorical lack, which is exposed by The Host’s refusal to buy his “relics.” The Pardoner’s sexual insecurity and consequent performance of virility parallel the performative aspect of his so-called sermons and the lack of meaning behind them.

Indeed, The Pardoner's obsession with providing performance, rather than spiritual insight, emerges most prominently in his self-introduction where he boasts the outward trappings of his position whilst deemphasizing the required spiritual work. Before launching into a sermon of any kind, The Pardoner delineates the process of establishing and proving his religious authority, which he does through flamboyant flourishes of the seals, papers, and miscellaneous bones that entitle him to the role of pardoner:

First I pronounce whennes that I come,
And thanne my bulles shewe I, alle and some;
Oure lige lordes seel on my patente,
That shewe I first, my body to warente,
That no man be so boold, ne preest ne clerk,
Me to destourbe of Cristes hooly werk.
And after that thanne telle I forth my tales.
Bulles of popes and of cardynales,
Of patriarkes and bishopes I shewe,
And in Latyn I speke a wordes fewe,
To saffron with my predicacioun,
And for to stire hem to devocioun.
Thanne shewe I forth my longe cristal stones,
Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones;
Relikes been they, as wenen they echoon.
Thanne have I in latoun a sholder-boon
Which that was of an hooly Jewes sheepe.

If there is one thing absolutely certain about The Pardoner, it is that he takes pride in his appearance, especially in appearing capable in front of a gullible audience. Note the careful detail devoted to each step of his performative sermon: he “first” pronounces his place of origin, “thanne” he presents his “bulles” with the “lige lordes seel on [his] patente,” and “after that thanne” only does he begin his sermons. The repetition of “thanne” further emphasizes that The Pardoner has not only memorized his sermons “by rote,” but also the actions preceding the actual sermon. It is hard to ignore The Pardoner's focus on these preceding steps and complete neglect

of his sermons or their actual content. The only evidence of his sermons we receive is his Latin, in which he “speke a wordes fewe/To saffron with my predicacioun.” The tone in which he speaks of his Latin is almost dismissive; we do not hear what he quotes or constructs, but only how they induce his listeners into “devocioun.” Considering the fact that his usual audience would not understand Latin, his Latin only functions on a superficial level—the sounds, not the content, “stire hem to devocioun.” His refusal to elaborate upon the content of his Latin also highlights deliberate obfuscation; his Canterbury audience contain those who understand the language perfectly, and The Pardoner may be trying to hide his meaningless Latin. Similarly, The Pardoner follows the sentence “after that thanne telle I forth my tales” with a description of the bulls he received from various ecclesiastics. The couplet rhyme of “tales/cardynales” alerts us to the suspicious nature of The Pardoner’s “tales,” notably to the fact that he refrains from outlining these tales but quickly backtracks to the redundant topic of his legitimized authority. In addition, heshows his patent first in order to “warente” his body, which suggests both a preoccupation with his physical appearance and perhaps hostility from those that mistrust him or pardoners in general. The Pardoner’s obsession with proving his authority to the exclusion of actually providing spiritual insight anticipates his rhetoric in which only the exterior exists.

More interesting to examine is The Pardoner’s counterfeit relics. His relics not only illustrate the emptiness behind his spiritual promises, but also suggest that relics reflect the desires of their buyers; in parallel, listeners, not the speakers, are the ones who derive meaning from rhetoric. After entrancing his listeners with a few Latin phrases, The Pardoner pulls out “cloutes and bones,” described as “relikes been they, as wenen they echoon.” The rags and bones that comprise the relics are meaningless, but the ambiguity of the line allows us to interpret that

relics only become relics upon the buyers' belief, or "wenen they echoon." The emphasis on the buyers' belief in relics instead of The Pardoner's persuasive technique suggests that The Pardoner's various "bulles" and "seel on patente" are enough to convince listeners of the relics' validity. The juxtaposition between The Pardoner's plain description of the relics and his listeners' immediate belief in their mystery illustrates the gap between the exterior and the interior, the trappings and the meaning—even the sacred reliquaries, or containers for relics, are reduced to "long crystal stones." One would assume that the boastful Pardoner would emphasize his persuasive ability, but instead, he relies on his listeners' naivety (and possibly desperation) to sell his wares. This verse is not only demonstrative of expectations placed upon relics, but also a subtle commentary on the authority behind the rhetoric. The Pardoner's seal of ecclesiastical approval essentially does the work for him, and serves as an example of how the exterior trappings of rhetoric—in this case the appeal to authority—can render the interior redundant and meaningless. Finally, The Pardoner mentions a "shoulder-boon" of a "holy Jewes sheepe," or a bone of a holy Jew's sheep. The qualifier "holy Jew's" adds to Chaucer's subtle mockery of relics and their occasional absurdity; under medieval ecclesiastical law, every church was obliged to have at least one relic at the altar, which led to a thriving trade in relics. As a result, even the most insignificant body parts of saints were in demand, the most prominent example being the foreskin of the Christ. Again, desperate listeners heaped expectations upon the most unlikely relics, even possibly the shoulder-bone of a sheep of some Hebrew who was holy. Obviously, the many degrees of remove further obfuscate the origin of the relic. Nonetheless, The Pardoner would find someone willing to spend money on this suspiciously fake relic—his

ecclesiastical authority alone enables him to peddle random bones that become relics only when their buyers attach meaning to them.

The next verse reveals the link between rhetoric and relics; The Pardoner's crude mimicry of a sermon, while registering the syntactical strategies employed in sermons, highlights the displacement of the spiritual in favor of the physical, or the soul in favor of the body.

According to The Pardoner, the myriad bones he sells are used for various ailments and domestic matters:

'Goode men,' I seye, 'taak of my wordes keepe;
If that this boon be wasshe in any welle,
If cow, or calf, or sheep, or oxe swelle,
That any worm hath ete, or worm ystonge,
Taak water of that welle, and wassh his tonge,
And it is hool anon; and forthermoor,
Of pokkes and of scabbe and every soore
Shal every sheepe be hool that of this welle
Drynketh a draughte. Taak kepe eek what I telle,
If that the goode man that the beestes oweth,
Wol every wyke, er that the cok hym croweth,
Fastynge, drinken of this welle a draughte,
As thilke hooly Jew oure eldres taughte,
Hise beestes and his stoor shal multiplie.

The Pardoner adopts the imperative tone in selling his relics, reminiscent of God or Christ's commandments or counsel in the Bible. He requests that his audience "taak of [his] wordes keepe" twice in the verse, and employs the auxiliary verb "shal"—commonly used by God in the Bible to command something into being, as per His will—when promising that his relics would cure "every sheepe." His imperative voice in this situation may signify the conflation of the ecclesiastics with God, or at least the abuse of power exercised by pardoners; in any case, the

verse hints at The Pardoner's possible arrogance regarding his position. The verse reads like a crude imitation of Deuteronomy 28:11, which also promises an increase in material wealth:

The Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your beast and in the produce of your ground, in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers to give you.

Similarly, The Pardoner promises the customer that "his beestes and his stoor shal multiplie," and that "he shal have multipliynge of his grayn." The difference, of course, is that while God rewards people for their faith in Him, The Pardoner demands "pence or grotes" in return. This exchange displaces spiritual salvation entirely in favor of material wealth on both sides—the relics will only perform miracles when a material price is paid, and the notion of holy reward for spiritual faith is reduced to a mere barter of charms and amulets. One also cannot ignore the reference to "sheepe"; sermons commonly refer to the listeners as "sheepe" and Christ as their shepherd, but in the context of The Pardoner's Tale, the literal meaning of sheep in a pseudo-religious structure only adds to the absurdity of The Pardoner's narration. Through the lens of The Pardoner, the Word of God is appropriated and then cheapened, becoming an imitation absent of spiritual meaning.

Furthermore, The Pardoner's peculiar focus on healing domesticated animals demonstrates that he essentially performs the role of whatever his listeners or buyers expect from him. From The Pardoner's description, we can deduce that his usual customers are impoverished farmers who rely on husbandry for their income. Essentially, The Pardoner adopts the trappings of a physician, using his spiritual position to treat physical ailments. Janet Adelman points out the irony in having The Physician's Tale directly precede The Pardoner's Tale: "The Host's medical joke reinforces the connection between the doctor of the body and the supposed doctor

of spirit...Moreover, the exemplum of the rioters explicates in narrative form The Pardoner's own disease [which is] his substitution of his physical cures for spiritual salvation" (Adelman). Building upon Adelman's premise, I argue that The Pardoner's spiritual emptiness enables others to impose their desires upon his body; for the struggling farmers, he becomes their one and only chance for a better life, despite his complete inability to actually help them.

Upon examining The Pardoner's counterfeit relics and his obsession with appearing authoritative, we stumble upon another orthodox truth The Tale purports to champion: the mystery of the Eucharist. The counterfeit Eucharist present in The Pardoner's Tale functions as an uncomfortable link between the tavern and the Church, forcing us to recognize that the Church's moral deterioration occurs in the tavern. Although more subtly parodied than the relics, the Eucharist in The Pardoner's Tale appears in the form of the bread and wine consumed by the rioters, transforming Christ's divine sacrifice on the cross into a senseless homicide driven by greed. The link between the tavern and the Church operates both figuratively and literally in The Canterbury Tales. In The Pardoner's Tale, the tavern serves as a crude imitation of the Church, but The Wife of Bath has already exposed the uncomfortable truth about immoral ecclesiastics:

But now kan no man se none elves mo,
For now the grete charitee and prayeres
Of lymytours and othere hooly freres,
That serchen every lond and every strem,
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,
Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes,
This maketh that ther been no fayeryes.

The Wife of Bath is well aware that many priests, friars, and pardoners frequent taverns and engage regularly in drink and sex—hardly seemly behavior for upright members of the Catholic

Church. The issue, however, goes beyond a few stray members of the clergy. Although medieval holidays were mostly religious and observed in celebration of various saints, many took the opportunity to visit local pubs instead of attending mass or church services. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Church tried to pass many laws that forbade the opening of drinking establishments during Sundays and other observed holidays (Martin). More problematic was the lay-folks' habit of celebrating riotously in alehouses after mass. As Martin further elaborates, "the struggle over Sundays reinforced the impression that a tavern or an alehouse was an 'anti-church.'" Compounded with the fact that pardoners and friars often found their listeners (and prostitutes and other sources of worldly pleasure) in drinking establishments, the tavern became a medieval symbol of all things unholy, or in The Pardoner's own words, a "develes temple." By registering the ecclesiastical concern regarding taverns, Chaucer highlights that the tavern is not simply an irritating concern, but a dark parody of the Church itself.

The Pardoner's lewd speech is not the only aspect of his behavior that implicates him. When The Host requests a tale from The Pardoner, the latter asks to refresh himself first: "'But first,' quod he, 'heere at this alestake/I wol bothe drinke and eten of a cake.'" The Pardoner seems to be performing a crude imitation of the Eucharist, with the "alestake" serving as the holy altar and the "drinke" and "cake" as the blood and body of Christ, respectively. Generally, a priest would first partake of the blood and body of Christ before sharing them with the rest of the congregation; however, The Pardoner is no priest, and despite launching into a "moral" tale, the parodic quality of his so-called sermon demonstrates that the emptiness behind his "Eucharist" mimics the emptiness of his rhetoric. Similarly, the three rioters in The Pardoner's Tale illustrate the inextricable connection between a fake Eucharistic ceremony and empty rhetoric:

Togidres han thise thre hir trouthes plight
To lyve and dyen, ech of hem for oother,
As though he were his owene ybore brother;
And up they stirte al dronken in this rage,
And forth they goon towardses that village,
Of which the taverner hadde spoke biforn.
And many a grisly ooth thanne han they sworn,
And Cristes blessed body they torente -
Deeth shal be deed, if that they may hym hente!

If the link between the Eucharist and rhetoric was not clear before, it should become clearer upon analyzing the last couplet of the verse: by swearing “many a grisly ooth,” they “torente” the “blessed body” of Christ. The Pardoner delves into detail about the sin of swearing upon God’s blessed name, but only here does he clearly compare swearing to bloody violence. The tearing of Christ’s body brings to mind the Eucharist, in which pieces of His body are distributed amongst the masses; the perversion of having Christ’s body torn apart by false rhetoric and empty promises about brotherhood reminds us of Judas’s betrayal at The Last Supper, which actually did result in the bloody sacrifice of the Christ. Indeed, the rioters end up turning on one another, resulting in the deaths of all three. Unlike Christ’s sacrifice, however, their deaths are sudden and abrupt and almost comically insignificant:

What nedeth it to sermone of it moore?
For right as they hadde cast his deeth bifoore,
Right so they han him slayn, and that anon.
And whan that this was doon, thus spak that oon:
"Now lat us sitte and drynke, and make us merie,
And afterward we wol his body berie."
And with that word it happed hym, par cas,
To take the botel ther the poysoun was,
And drank, and yaf his felawe drynke also,
For which anon they storven bothe two.

The Pardoner's dismissal of the three rioters—"what nedeth it to sermone of it moore?"—proves strikingly ironic, as the all three rioters talked greatly and swore terrible oaths only to be met with death. The Pardoner's refusal to elaborate more on their faults as conventional in a moral exemplum only illustrates the silence following their deaths: there is no redemption, no salvation, no grace of God to save the three rioters from themselves. Their deaths ultimately serve as a perversion of Christ's death: their Last Supper, only with poisoned wine.

Other elements of three rioters' journey further invalidate the religiosity of The Pardoner's Tale; Biblical phrases connoting salvation are rendered meaningless by their context. Upon finding gold under the oak tree, the "worste of hem" speaks up first: "For wel ye wot that al this gold is oures/Thanne were we in heigh felicitee." The usage of the phrase "heigh felicitee," often proclaimed in medieval mass in celebration of God's grace, rings false in the context of the rioter's evil scheming. Like the oaths he utters, the phrase "heigh felicitee" may denote a religious link, but the rhetoric proves meaningless like the "brede and wyn" they consume and The Pardoner's relics. Furthermore, the phrase appears in Psalm 71:19: "The righteousness also, O God, is very high. Very sublime, unsearchable, exalted, and glorious is the holy character of God...it is a high doctrine gospel, gives a high experience, leads to high practice, and ends in high felicity." In other words, the rioters' "heigh felicitee" refers to their exultation upon finding gold; but like their treasure, their exultation is material and brief, unlike the feeling of receiving God's salvation. Similarly, the third rioter, while scheming to poison his so-called brothers, wistfully ponders upon the joy of having the gold to himself:

"O lorde," quod he, "if so were that I myghte
Have al this tresor to my-self allone,
Ther is no man that lyveth under the trone

Of God, that sholde lyve so murye as I.”

Again, “the trone of God” rings reminiscent of the metaphor often employed in the Scriptures to describe the holy seat on which God resides in heaven, bestowing humans with His grace and mercy. Thus, the happiest man “under the trone of God” would be the one who has abandoned the material pleasures of life and found joy purely through his faith in God. Furthermore, “under the trone of God” may refer to Revelation 6:9: “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.” It is important to note here that although some theologians consider “the altar” and “the throne of God” one and the same, others still differentiate between them when analyzing the Revelations. Nevertheless, the preposition “under” hints at the specific Revelation passage in which the souls of dead martyrs dwell under God’s throne or altar. In a perverse twist of humor, the rioter is a martyr of sorts; instead of dying for the salvation of God, however, he dies for material wealth. The couplet “allone/trone” is almost oxymoronic, in the sense that God’s mercy does not extend to only one person, but to everyone in His kingdom; in addition, “allone” suggests a self-priority over faith in God, which certainly does not earn one the grace of God. Finally, the emphasis on the word “lyve”—repeated twice—contradicts “under the trone of God,” especially when we contextualize it in the light of the Revelation passages. The rioter’s emphasis on bodily living “murye” and neglect of spiritual care negate the religious rhetoric used in the passage, ultimately creating what we call empty rhetoric.

In another example, The Pardoner’s Tale perverts another Biblical allusion, this time pertaining to the price of life and death. The apothecary sells poison to the third rioter, and in doing so, compares the price of life to a kernel of wheat:

The pothecarie answerde, "And thou shalt have
A thyng, that al so God my soule save,
In al this world ther is no creature
That eten or dronken hath of this confiture
Noght but the montance of a corn of whete,
That he ne shal his lif anon forlete.

The verse alludes to John 12:24-26, in which Jesus encourages his followers to shed the outer husk of life in order to become a fruitful and productive member of His Kingdom:

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. 25 He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor.

Like said previously, the apothecary essentially equates the price of life to a single grain of wheat; similar to how the death of a single grain leads to the flourishing of harvest, the death of a man can lead to greater spiritual salvation. On the other hand, a single grain that does not die has no productive use, and in a parallel vein, a person who clings to his life cannot flourish spiritually and will remain alone—note that this is the same rioter who desired to “have al this tresor to [himself] allone,” the last word reinforcing the spiritual emptiness of a person who clings to the stalk of life. Life is cheap in the spiritual sense, but bartered as a commodity in the secular world; even the Old Man begs anyone he comes across to exchange their youth for his old age, despite the fact that he would age quickly once more. The Pardoner’s equal obsession with the outward trappings, the husk of life, becomes absurd in this light cast by Chaucer.

We have established how the rhetoric employed by the three rioters prove devoid of meaning, but what about The Pardoner? After all, the rioters’ rhetoric is The Pardoner’s rhetoric, and could he not simply conveying a message about life and spirituality through the *exemplum*?

While one can consider The Pardoner's rhetoric in the exemplum as meaningful, we have to consider the sermonic structure The Pardoner imitates in his Tale. Within the structure and convention of the sermon, The Pardoner's rhetoric is devoid of meaning specifically because he fails to explicate the meaning behind his *exemplum*.

Even in the sermons that frame his *exemplum*, every rhetorical strategy generally used to explicate the Word of God devolves into vulgar puns or "japes," highlighting the parodic elements of the sermon and rendering them empty of spiritual meaning. For comparison, let us briefly examine *The Parson's Tale* in order to gain an idea of rhetorical convention in a sermon.

The Parson often employs a rhetorical structure that follows thus:

- (1) "Now..." with a clear statement of the sin or virtue to be lectured next
- (2) "Saint/Apostle says..." followed by a direct quote from the Bible
- (3) "For..." followed by an explanation of the preceding passage from the Bible
- (4) "Therefore..." followed by an encouragement or discouragement OR "Allas/Invocation of God or Christ" followed by a lament with a counsel or warning

The most important difference between The Parson and The Pardoner lies in their explication of Biblical passages; while The Parson dutifully explains the passage, The Pardoner more often than not follows a Biblical passage with a tavern-style joke, once more reinforcing the tavern as a parody of the Church. Consider the following passages in which The Pardoner nulls the spiritual meaning behind his rhetoric with ridiculous jokes. After quoting 1 Corinthians 6:13 in his sermon on gluttony, The Pardoner laments the "stynkyng cod" of the belly and adds that "at either end of [the gut] foul is the soun." In another example, he addresses a drunken man and chides him for the sourness of his breath and foul embrace, and likens the drunken snore that emits from the man's nose to the onomatopoeia of "Samsoun, Samsoun." Samsoun, or Samson, is a teetotaling figure of the Old Testament, which makes this reference even more bizarre. And

in yet another sermon on gambling, The Pardoner tells us to take heed of King Demetrius and his downfall triggered by his love of gambling, and concludes with a slightly tongue-in-cheek remark about myriad other leisures lords may find besides gambling: “Lordes may fynden oother manere of pley/Honeste ynough, to dryve the day away.” Perhaps the most damning about The Pardoner’s empty rhetoric is his tendency to refer his audience to the Bible, despite knowing full well that there are those who cannot fully access it due to the orthodoxy of the time. At one point, he suggests rather arrogantly that his audience “redeth the Bible and fynde it expresly,” and then immediately follows with “namoore of this, for it may well suffise,” despite knowing that for at least half of his listeners, a casual reference to the Bible would not help or enlighten them in any way. Even if The Pardoner’s Biblical references contain meaning, the way he frames them within his “sermon”—without proper explanation, and imperatives to read the Bible that would never be followed due to clerical elitism—render his rhetoric empty.

Ultimately, the emptiness of his rhetoric creates a “moral thyng” that remains only a “jape” and an “accident” in its mimicry of religious trappings. Through The Pardoner, Chaucer reveals that even scholastic or religious rhetoric framed in certain ways can render moral tales meaningless.

Conclusion

The Man of Law, The Wife of Bath, and The Pardoner all have their identities mired in medieval clerical discourse; possessing mostly orthodox discourse at their arsenal, they define themselves through the language of the clerical while simultaneously subverting the same language that binds them. What becomes apparent through a close-reading of the text, however, is their struggle, not their success, in establishing their own authority in medieval society as represented by the circle of Canterbury pilgrims. The Man of Law boasts of his occupation and credentials in order to substantiate his claims of understanding God's mysterious ways, but comes across as rather bumbling and foolish in his futile attempts to apply religious concepts to material success. The Wife of Bath strives to establish herself as an alternative authority to the male-dominated Church, but finds herself, in her concerns and spirit, confined to clerical language; she can only use the literal interpretation of the Bible to defend herself against the slander made by the Church, and this is not so much an example of heresy as it is evidence of being constrained by the language we seek to subvert. The Pardoner is perhaps the most difficult figure to read. Ultimately, however, he faces the same problem of trying to pin down his authoritative value within clerical discourse. Perhaps The Pardoner demonstrates the concept of hollow identity—the rhetoric of his language, heavily borrowed from the clergy, is rendered empty by his own emptiness. It is not so much his lack of morality or spirituality, but rather his lack of substantial sense of self separate from the clerical language in which he dresses himself, that renders his sermons hollow.

By understanding the fundamental inner struggles of these characters, we can begin to tease out other, more complex threads of thought within the incredible patchwork of ideas

Chaucer has built. The Man of Law's Tale, in particular, raises questions about subverting and blending genres. Custance's story, narrated by Gower and Trivet prior to Chaucer, is supposed to be a traditional tale of the romance genre; however, The Man of Law's pontifications undercut the romantic aspects of the tale he purports to narrate. In a similar fashion, heavy-handed examples of Custance's own intense piety dissolve our own expectations of a traditional tale of the romance genre; while the main focus of the romance genre is the physical journey to foreign and distant lands with some religious themes, Chaucer subverts the genre of Custance's tale by emphasizing the physical journey only so far as it contributes to Custance's religiosity. The crux of Chaucer's version of Custance's tale is not the heroic nature of her journey or exploits, but her non-reactions to the suffering imposed upon her. Chaucer's Custance remains fixated on God regardless of her location or circumstances, and this constancy serves to highlight The Man of Law's own dizzying struggles for material identity through religious discourse. Perhaps Chaucer's blending of medieval romance and hagiography underscores the inextricability of the secular from the religious, and vice-versa; similar to how The Man of Law ends up trying to apply religious philosophy to his own material successes and failings, secular concerns will inevitably clash with the religious.

Another thread of thought lies within The Wife of Bath's and The Pardoner's Tales: the relation between materiality and spirituality, between essence and substance. The Wife of Bath employs both the materiality of the Bible (in the sense of literal text rather than its "glosen") against the criticism of the Church. Her lived experience, as manifested in her womanly body, is proof against the Church's "auctoritee" and condemnation of the secular world. The Pardoner directly addresses this question of essence and representation by showing off his meaningless

relics and various clerical authorizations. A close-reading would expose the inherent emptiness of his sermons and moral exemplum. But the fundamental question remains thus: can The Pardoner still lead his audience morally through his empty rhetoric? After all, we concluded that it is us as listeners who put meaning into the text, rather than the speaker. Thus, can material substance without essence still induce morality? Similarly, does the Bible function well enough on its own as a moral guide without the scholarly interpretation or “glosen” of clerics?

A careful reading of *The Canterbury Tales* exposes Chaucer not as a satirist, but a literary provocateur. Readers, both casual and critical alike, mistakenly try to underpin a single meaning or message of *The Canterbury Tales*; the impossibility of finding a meaning, rather than the meaning itself, is the only thing that becomes clear. Nevertheless, one cannot write a critical dissertation without isolating a few aspects of the literary work, and I strived to explicate a few common trends within Chaucer’s work without neglecting the context in which *The Tales* are mired. If any reading of *The Canterbury Tales* can be compared metaphorically, I would liken it to a minuscule segment of thread, less than an inch, that ties together various other interpretations, all of which come together to create a patchwork quilt of Chaucerian discourse.

And Chaucer himself is a master of quilting, seamlessly stitching the multiple facets of medieval society into a rich, echoing work.

Works Cited

Adelman, Janet. "That We May Leere Som Wit." *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Pardoner's Tale*. Edited by Dewey R. Faulkner. Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Bacharach, Bernard. Kroll, James. *The Mystic Mind: The Psychology of Medieval Mystics and Ascetics*. Published 2006, New York and London, Routledge. Web.

Bartlett, Anne C, and Thomas H. Bestul. *Cultures of Piety: Medieval English Devotional Literature in Translation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999. Print.

Blumenthal, Landau, and Winroth (Edited). *Canon Law, Religion, and Politics: "Liber Amicorum" Robert Somerville*. The Catholic University of America Press. 2013. Print.

Boethius - Douglas C. Langston - New York - W.W._Norton_& Co. - 2010

Bynum, Caroline W. *Jesus As Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. Print.

Delany, Sheila. "Womanliness in the "man of Law's Tale"". *The Chaucer Review* 9.1 (1974): 63–72. Web.

Dreyer, Elizabeth. *Passionate Women: Two Medieval Mystics*. New York, Paulist Press, 1989. Print.

Flinders, Carol. *Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics*. San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993. Print.

Johnson, William C.. "Miracles in "the Man of Law's Tale"". *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 28.2 (1974): 57–65. Web.

Jones, Nancy A. *Sex and Tradition in Medieval and Renaissance Texts: The Latin Tradition*. Edited by Barbara K. Gold, Paul Allen Miller, and Charles Platter. Published by State of New York Press, Albany. 1997. Print.

Kempe, Margery, and McAvoy L. Herbert. *The Book of Margery Kempe: An Abridged Translation*. Woodbridge, Suffolk, U.K: D.S. Brewer, 2003. Print.

Moore, R.I. *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, Second Edition, 2007. Print.

Schibanoff, Susan. Worlds Apart: Orientalism, Antifeminism, and Heresy in Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale." *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 8, 1 (Spring 1996): Pages 59 - 96.

Smith, Warren S. *The Chaucer Review*. Vol. 32, No. 2 (1997), pp. 129-145. Published by: Penn State University Press. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25096004>.

Wood, Chauncey. "Astrology in the Man of Law's Tale". "Astrology in the Man of Law's Tale". *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars: Poetic Uses of Astrological Imagery*. Princeton University Press, 1970. 192-244. Web.