Eastern Illinois University
The Keep

Masters Theses | Student Theses & Publications

1998

"That Gentil Text Kan I Wel Understonde": Textual Authority in Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Prologue

Emilie Roy
Eastern Illinois University

This research is a product of the graduate program in English at Eastern Illinois University. Find out more about the program.

Recommended Citation

Roy, Emilie, ""That Gentil Text Kan I Wel Understonde": Textual Authority in Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Prologue" (1998). *Masters Theses*. 1745.
https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/1745

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

THESIS REPRODUCTION CERTIFICATE

TO: Graduate Degree Candidates (who have written formal theses)

SUBJECT: Permission to Reproduce Theses

The University Library is receiving a number of request from other institutions asking permission to reproduce dissertations for inclusion in their library holdings. Although no copyright laws are involved, we feel that professional courtesy demands that permission be obtained from the author before we allow these to be copied.

PLEASE SIGN ONE OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS:

Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University has my permission to lend my thesis to a reputable college or university or the purpose of copying it for inclusion in that institution's library or research holdings.

Author's Signature — Date: 7/20/98

I respectfully request Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University **NOT** allow my thesis to be reproduced because:

Author's Signature — Date

thesis4.form

"That Gentil Text Kan I Wel Understonde":

Textual Authority in Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Prologue

(TITLE)

BY

Emilie Roy

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1998

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

July 9, 1998
DATE

ADVISER

July 20, 1998
DATE

DEPARTMENT HEAD

Abstract

It has become a critical commonplace to note that Chaucer created the character of the Wife of Bath out of an anti-feminist textual tradition that condemns just the kind of strong-voiced proto-feminist woman that she is. The anti-feminist tradition is deeply embedded in the western cultural framework. Established and perpetuated by a male clergy, it was an integral part of the institutionalized religious structure that controlled education, literacy, and thus access to texts of all kinds. The tradition assumed that woman—viewed as a collective entity—was portrayed as either a moral ideal or a wicked sinner, with little possibility for nuances of human personality or individual expression. This tradition was so pervasive in its scope and breadth that it played a major role not only in determining how men viewed women, but also in determining how women—even rebellious women—viewed themselves.

The dual focus of this study is first to examine the articulation of Alison of Bath's character as it relates to the anti-feminist tradition and second to explore why Chaucer might have created a character such as Alison. It is the contention of this study that even though Alison can be viewed as a social type and a creation based on other anti-feminist literary texts, the presence of a character who is victimized by the textual tradition she attempts to refute makes a powerful statement that produces important questions about the validity of that tradition.

On the surface, the character of Alison appears to be created in opposition to authoritative texts because she speaks out so powerfully and directly against the idea of an absolute authority based on the sacred textual tradition. The problem is that in so

doing Alison fulfills the stereotypical notions of the manipulative woman, thus upholding the misogynist traditions she seeks to control. Alison's use of textual language demonstrates her lowly status in relation to male textual tradition. Furthermore, the contradictions in Alison's character seem to point to the conclusion that Chaucer perceives the woman as an inferior being. Even the *female*-ness of Alison's character, Chaucer's apparent rendering of a feminine rhetoric, is based on a male textual tradition, that of the manipulative woman in secular literature and popular sermons.

Still, because Chaucer is not an author whose intent can be determined with ease, it becomes virtually impossible to perceive Alison simply as a regurgitation of the misogynist tradition. The idea that there is an absolute truth in the gender-based moral hierarchy manifested in authoritative texts is a premise that Chaucer questions. Alison's placement in *The Canterbury Tales* thus demonstrates Chaucer's awareness that the truth in textual authority is not absolute. The arguments given to the Wife of Bath also make her audience aware that there are many facets of the textual tradition that go against the grain of the church patriarchy and its value system.

Having examined Chaucer's creation of Alison's character, I close the thesis by discussing the textual forces that govern the interaction with Chaucer's literary work, in this case, the particularities of late-twentieth-century gender-related language. While the extent of Chaucer's feminist sympathies may never be fully known, an examination of responses to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* brings us closer to an understanding of how literary critics use language and how it affects our understanding of a text. Critics' interactions with Chaucer's tale are revealed for their own highly personal and frequently gender-motivated agendas. Much in the same way that the Wife of Bath's character

questions and exposes the personal motivations of those who use power to maintain control, literary criticism offers the reader a chance to examine critical contexts and the traditions of authoritative language for their personal motivations.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family, especially my parents, Paul and Dahlis Roy, for encouraging me to pursue a higher degree. I would also like to thank my thesis committee for their patience in seeing me through this project. Dr. David Raybin, Dr. Randall Beebe, and Dr. Timothy Shonk contributed their time and expertise in order to encourage my education. I am grateful to my friends and colleagues at Booth Library and the Writing Center for helping me with research and listening to my ideas. And I am especially indebted to my good friends Lin Duden and Jason Logue for allowing me to use their computers and being there during times of frustration.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Background	5
Alison and the Language of Authority: Texts and Interpretation of Experience	10
Alison's Authority: The Discourse of Feminine Experience	26
The Textual Basis for Alison's Discourse of Experience	46
The Problem with Textual Authority	63
Towards a Conclusion: Chaucer's *Entente* and the Gender Politics of Literary Criticism	74
Notes	88
Works Cited	96

"That Gentil Text Kan I Wel Understonde":
Textual Authority in Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*

Who wolde wene, or who wolde suppose,

The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne?

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. (786-92)

In this passage, the Wife of Bath describes the conflict over an anti-feminist book that her fifth husband, a clerk, reads to her. Her endurance of listening to stories about wicked women comes to an end when she reacts by tearing the book, as well as striking her husband. Dame Alison not only recalls an experience she had in one of her marriages, but also symbolically attacks an authority, based on written texts,[1] that is present throughout her prologue. The moment when she rips apart Jankyn's book is one of the most significant moments in her prologue because for Alison the authority of the male literary tradition based on texts goes against the grain of her experience in life. Her discourse is a complex negotiation of how gender-inflected texts relate to one's experience and views of the world. In her case, textual authority has been an oppressive force causing her *wo* as she thinks about her experience and her spirituality in relation to

that experience. In what appears to be one of Chaucer's most consciously feminist texts, a woman speaks about the authority of the antifeminist tradition in her life in a compelling and challenging way. However, it is possible that Chaucer creates a clever illusion in the bold, ostentatious character that is the Wife of Bath. After close examination of what Alison says and the tradition from which her personality is created, it becomes apparent that Chaucer is using the same antifeminist tradition perpetuated by the authority of texts to create a character that reacts against textual authority.

In the last decade, many Chaucerians have discussed *what* the Wife of Bath says and *why* she speaks. They have discussed why it is important to study the creation of Alison's character and the reasons for such a character in *The Canterbury Tales*. There has been much debate about Chaucer's sympathies toward women, and the creation of Alison raises questions about Chaucer's intentions. The wide and varied body of commentary on her also raises questions about the politics of negotiating Chaucer's text in post-modern literary times. Chaucer's works can be examined for how he uses the ideas in traditional texts to portray Alison's character. At the same time, literary criticism can be examined for its complex authoritative language and how that language reflects the importance of gender-issues in Chaucer's works in particular.

Did Chaucer understand the feminine experience? It is important that his purpose in including the Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales* be examined in detail. The words of her name, "A good wif was ther of biside Bathe" (445), confines her to her marital status and evokes a slew of feminist and anti-feminist connotations from this period. Beginning with her description in *The General Prologue* Alison is necessarily viewed in relation to the patriarchal structure: "She was a worthy womman al hir lyve: /

Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve" (459-60). And in relation to the patriarchal structure, the description of her character becomes problematic: "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" (474-76). Chaucer's description of her in his book sets her up as a character who is bold and outgoing, maybe to the point of being foolish, a woman who is self-consciously humorous, but perhaps not to be taken seriously.

Alison's humor overshadows the possibilities of her higher purpose in *The Canterbury Tales*. It forces us to ask a question: if Alison is a character who is not supposed to invoke anything but laughter, then why is her argument so compelling? While Chaucer himself shows that he realizes the value of textual authority by writing books that will survive in written form, the irony and playfulness of his words question the notion of the authority of the written word dictated by an author. In *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages*, Jesse M. Gellrich discusses the nature of Chaucer's fiction in relation to the idea of the sanctified book:

> the idea of copying or rewriting is displaced by a new kind of interpreting, one that no longer allows for the straightforward validation of meaning in an "old book," the sequence of events, or the voice of a speaker. This movement from imitation to interpretation—"from mirror to method"—is an unmistakable concern of fictional writing in the late middle ages, and nowhere more provocatively than in *The Canterbury Tales*. (25-26)

If Chaucer is experimenting with new ways to signify meaning, then it makes sense for a character like Alison to be present in *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer seems to be using "a discourse that recognizes its own impossibilities and proceeds by locating the

authority for making sense no longer in the pages of the past, but in the hands of the reader" (Gellrich 27). Because Chaucer transfers authority into the hands of the reader, authority is slippery. One cannot locate meaning in an authoritative glossing. Chaucer shows that interaction with texts ultimately based on personal experience and motives. Though Alison exposes herself, she also exposes the motives of the authorities. Thus Alison becomes a means by which Chaucer can comment on traditional authority without completely negating that authority.

Alison's relationship to textual authority is especially important because her case raises the level of awareness about the very core of gender politics in the Middle Ages. Also, Alison's negotiations with texts show Chaucer's understanding of textual authority and the relationship it has to an individual's experience. However, before we give Chaucer too much credit for creating a character that seems to prove his feminist tendencies by going against the dictates of textual authority, we must examine his writing in relation to the authoritative tradition. While Chaucer's fiction undercuts the concept of absolute truths behind the sacred nature of the written word, Chaucer grounds himself firmly in that tradition for the very validation of his writing in general. As this thesis will show, Alison's seemingly proto-feminist rebelliousness is itself largely the product of the male textual tradition, and as the product of traditional literary ideas, her discourse is necessarily a perpetuation of the authoritative system that she seeks to control. Chaucer's possible intent notwithstanding, Alison ultimately is defined and confined by the male literary model and therefore cannot properly be read as the unproblematic feminist character that many would wish her to be.

Background

The tradition of female subjection in texts that Alison is particularly perturbed about has its roots in the early church and early monastic Europe. Even though Alison is presumably a successful business woman of her time and, therefore, a woman with some social status and respect, she nonetheless feels the effects of how the early church shaped the medieval view of women in Western culture. In her world, re-marriage, while a common occurrence, was discouraged, or at least considered imperfect by the dictates of this tradition. Donald Howard summarizes the origins of the degrees of perfection which Alison is so consciously aware of:

> With respect to sexual matters medieval theologians characteristically devised a system of three—marriage, widowhood, and virginity. Using the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:3-23), the Fathers conjectured that these grades produced different amounts of return. By this device, St. Paul's view that it is better to marry than to burn (1 Cor. 7:9) was turned into a tidy system in which marriage was allowable and righteous but less meritorious than widowhood or virginity. (249)

From a series of interpretations of sacred works, the church fathers set up a hierarchy that automatically places the highest good in virginity. St. Paul, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, and others wrote many treatises on the importance of virginity for men and women.[2] It should be noted that not all these treatises were meant directly to influence women. In order to influence men to be celibate, many of the teachings contained anti-feminist material.

Because of the controversial nature of the issue, the church patriarchy had varying opinions on the female virgin/saint. Most early church and monastic writings stress the importance of virginity as a necessary criterion for a woman's sanctification. In "The Heroics of Virginity," Jane Tibbets Schulenburg discusses the politics of *virginitas* in the context of early Medieval and monastic Europe, arguing that total virginity, what she calls a life of "sexless perfection," was the means by "which women could transcend their unfortunate sexuality and free themselves from their corporeal shackles" (31). It was popular belief that the woman who gives her life to God and remains celibate is the ultimate example of the Christian woman. This was the ideal that was sought after by many women and the ideal that many women were judged against.

For the most part, the early Medieval woman, especially the ecclesiastical woman, was expected to be a moral model, which meant a woman's body was restricted, and to some extent, controlled. Male ecclesiastics, such as St. Jerome, stress only women's sexuality when they emphasize that the virgin woman was a bride of Christ: "she needed to be carefully guarded so as to remain 'unwounded' or 'untarnished' for her eternal bridegroom" (Schulenburg 32). If a woman could not live up to this ideal, she was chastised, sometimes disowned by the spiritual community. Jerome warns the virgin that if she falls "she will not be saved, but rather turned away from Christ's bridal chamber" (33).[3] The fallen woman is barred from heaven; there is no hope of salvation if a woman fails to keep herself chaste.

If the authority of the virgin woman is, for the most part, given to her by the male hierarchy, the ideal which women were expected to uphold is based on their inferior position in relation to the male system. There is evidence for this in early monastic

Europe. For example, nuns were taught their values by the patriarchal structure of the church. Schulenburg states, "Patristic and monastic treatises, homilies, and lives of saints were read to nuns during their meals or read privately during their reading periods. In their *scriptoria* they copied, glossed and illuminated these works. They embroidered religious vestments and hangings vividly depicting scenes from the lives of virgin/martyrs" (40). Schulenburg further argues that by learning, copying, and reciting church texts, women internalized the ideas inherent within these texts, and therefore became a part of the system that sought to control them. Women's values, then, were largely a product of a system of textual control.

A parallel can be drawn between the perpetuation of an ideal female image and the driving forces behind the cult of the Virgin. In *The Lady and the Virgin*, Penny Schine Gold discusses the attempt by the male clergy to reconcile Mary's role as a female divinity to her status as ordinary woman. Mary has a dual nature: she is a mother and a wife, yet she is also an extraordinary woman; she is the model for women, yet she simultaneously surpasses all women; she is perfect, yet she is of the weaker sex (69-72). Gold's description of Mary in relation to the patriarchal church demonstrates the control of feminine images by masculine power structures:

> The artistic (and theological) images of the Virgin were, like the images of women in secular literature, the creations of men, and can be understood as fulfilling the emotional needs of the monks and clerics who created them. The Virgin serves as a perfect embodiment of the conflicting ideals of virginity and motherhood that men believed in for women, and celibate men might feel particularly attracted to such female

> imagery exactly because of their isolation from real women. Rosemary Ruether has suggested that the Virgin was a kind of fantasy love object, compensating for the lack of real sexual relations, and that the creation of this ideal love object contributed to a negative attitude toward the real women who were forbidden objects of desire. (73-4)

Because women are trapped between the two stereotypes they do not have control to interpret their own experiences. Alison is aware that the perpetuation of feminine perfection is manipulated and perpetuated through texts. Furthermore, if woman is not the moral model, she is the opposite extreme which also complicates Alison's views of herself. Eileen Power, in *Medieval Women*, elaborates on this dichotomy in the medieval church:

> Janus-faced, it looked at women out of every sermon and treatise, yet never knew which face to turn on her. Who was the true paradigm of the feminine gender…Eve, wife of Adam, or Mary, Mother of Christ?…Both ideas entered into the Church tradition and both wrought their influence on the medieval mind. (14)

Church authority is threatened by the kind of woman Alison is, *sexual* and *real*. Because of the reality of her sexuality, Alison is automatically defamed, and because of her defensive stance, Alison's language sets up a gender opposition that affects how she describes the female experience in relation to the male: the real woman is seen as a negative influence and a temptress, a latter-day reflection of Eve.

Apart from a life in the church, economic forces prescribed that women were necessary for the continuation of the estate, the income, the family, etc.[4] Therefore, there

is a conflict between women as a threat and women as a necessity. Since the image of the ideal was stressed, there was little room for a woman to be independent outside the institution of marriage if she did not choose a celibate life. A woman's place in the social system was thus complicated by the dichotomy of the *ideal* woman and the *real* woman in the Middle Ages and this dichotomy is particularly pertinent to Alison of Bath because she continually defends her rights as married woman and a widow.

Alison and the Language of Authority: Texts and Interpretation of Experience

Upon close examination, it becomes clear that Alison's experience is dictated by authority of a textual nature. *Texts* and their *authority* are so closely intertwined for Alison that it is difficult to separate the two, and sometimes we see that even she cannot always differentiate between them. Most of her discourse is related to the language of an authoritative system; she begins her prologue as a kind of dialogue with authority and even when she recalls her experiences we can see her continually conversing with and against the dictates of this authority. Still while it is useful to pinpoint specific sources that she rephrases or quotes in her own behalf, it is also apparent that authority cannot be defined simply as sources from books and treatises written by church fathers and clerks. Elaine Tuttle Hansen notes that Alison defends

> herself against a much vaguer and more obscured force of social disapproval, powerfully unnamed and unnamable, and her later attempts to meet specific arguments are self-defeating efforts to pin down and triumph over that generalized, mystifying, and hence invincible hostility that she meets from all sides. (*Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 30)

Hansen argues that Alison is powerless against a force which she does not and cannot fully understand. This "much vaguer and more obscured" authority runs deeper than the words that Jankyn or anyone else says to her. Hansen therefore believes that instead of freeing herself of the anti-feminist tradition, Alison "is not essentially more free, self-determined, or self-expressive than the good, silent woman, like Griselda or Constance, and her own words oblige us to understand the constraints upon her" (29). Her act of using authoritative language represents her attempt to construct an argument in her own

behalf based on the same textual authority that is frequently used against her. However, she is not able to combat her opposition in a fully convincing manner because she fluctuates from asserting experience as her right to using the authoritative system as a validation of that right. She becomes lost in the loop of defending herself by using a system of thought that automatically subordinates her individuality; the male textual force is always embedded in a social framework that is threatening to her position.

The "constraints upon her" can be viewed with more clarity by examining the way Alison uses textual authority to discuss and defend her own personal experiences. For example, Alison sets *herself* up as an *authority* in the first lines: "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / to speke of wo that is in mariage" (1-3). Alison tries to assert that experience *is* an authority. However, the very fact that she must cite experience as supreme is an insight into how authority controls the way she views her own life. Ralph Hanna III outlines how this passage operates as a *non sequitur*:

> Her locution implies in some way that "authority" might properly belong elsewhere, "out of this world"; it also suggests her oppressive consciousness that in the here and now "authority" has usurped the primacy of "experience." This is also true—event and fact only become isolated and recognizable as such by perception, and perception isn't free but organized ideologically, by the categories of our belief, the unprovable *donnees* which point elsewhere, to the "out of this world." (30)

The *authority* she argues against is the "non-experience" of a celibate male clergy. She argues that in the here and now of this world experience is primary and if it were the

norm by which lives were judged, instead of the existing *authority*, she would have no need to defend herself. Alison's words, if taken literally, might appear to be in favor of anarchy: if everyone's experience were primary, there would be no social system, no guiding moral by which to live and hence no judgment of anyone's experience. Authoritative texts negate what she knows as true. Nonetheless, Alison sees the *unprovable givens* as a threat to her existence. Alison is so much a part of the authoritative system that she fears she is in spiritual danger; she would like the same spiritual rewards that others have and therefore, she cannot ignore the textual stance on her situation. In other words, the way she sees the world has already been imprinted upon her as it reflects in her thought and action and interpretation of herself.

Alison's unwillingness to accept authority while simultaneously admitting to her inability to escape it is further proof of her ambivalent relationship to the larger social forces against her. Marshall Leicester sees the lack of a textual introduction for her opening statement as evidence for the vagueness of the thing that she wishes to combat. He points out that the first lines come from nowhere as if she were already in the middle of an ongoing argument: "It is precisely the lack of context here…that stresses how much the situation and the speaker are dominated by a larger and more threatening context that has preempted her possibilities of expression" (70). Before Alison begins to speak, the system is operating against her. For example, *The Knight's Tale* reinforces the male hierarchy at the very start of *The Canterbury Tales*; Emeyle is not free to choose between her independence and a husband. Her fate has been decided for her. Similarly, Alison's relationship to the male patriarchy is pre-judged. She battles the authority of the male literary tradition, but cannot prove the "disprovable" to be false. Her claim to a

legitimate authority based on experience actually is a part of her dialogue with the church patriarchy that claims her experience is invalid. One could spend many words discussing how Alison's opening passage loops around on itself; it is this very effect that shows that she always views herself in relation to a system of thought that is based on authority.

During Alison's attempt to prove that experience is an acceptable authority, she demonstrates her reliance on authoritative language by constructing her argument around those social rules which make her into a product of the system. She uses authoritative texts as a way to create and re-create her experiences as valid. Furthermore, by citing one authoritative source after another she tries to "argue" in the style of learned discourse. She announces her topic as the "wo that is in mariage" (3), a topic that stems from her experience. She knows first hand that marriage is not a happy state, and her next statement backs up her claim with more about her own experience: "For, lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age, /Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve, / Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve—" (4-6). The interjection about God seems like a sarcastic remark that compliments her narrative style. Its design is humor; it makes it more comfortable for her audiences to listen to her. Yet, even within the tone of her humorous good nature, her words continue to remind her audience that her problem lies in her relation to authority. She admits God's eternal presence at the same time that she thanks him for her good fortune. However, it is exactly this good fortune that puts her in danger spiritually, for she calls it *wo* in marriage. Her happiness is also her sorrow, because it may be dangerous to her according to the spiritual terms that authority has laid down for her.

Her uneasiness shows despite her bold narrative style. For example, she continues in the next lines with the generalities of her experience, then retreats behind a mask of authoritative language. She describes her husbands as "worthy men in hir degree" (8) asserting that each has good qualities according to his individual personality. This is her opinion and can also be viewed as a statement about her own experience. She demonstrates a certain amount of choice in this line whether she refers to determining marriage partners or making the best of her situation with each one. Perhaps she chose them because of some worthiness or good qualities. However, instead of recalling how they are worthy and what they are worthy of, she leaves her specific experiences in the background and shifts focus by using Biblical scripture and its glossators on the subject of multiple marriages to expound on her experience:

> But me was toold, certeyn, nat longe agoon is,
> That sith that Crist ne wente nevere but onis
> To weddyng, in the Cane of Galilee,
> That by the same ensample taughte he me
> That I ne sholde wedded be but ones. (9-13)

Even as she moves away from directly addressing her personal experiences with her husbands to what the existing authority states about a situation such as hers, we can see that her interaction with the language in these texts is highly personal. She knows much about the Bible and how its words can be used for moral force because she uses the same method to support her own claims. She has obtained her knowledge of scripture from a source, probably a personal interaction with someone who knows much about the subject considering that the Biblical passage may have been interpreted for her. Her reiteration

of examples from texts is a complex mimicking of the language of privileged scholars and preachers. For example, she argues in a style very similar to Jerome's in which a question is put forth for the listener or reader, then answered.[5] She uses this language as she has heard it used before through the teachings of the church and through her encounters with the men in her life. For this reason, authority in Alison's life is not simply the texts of St. Jerome, or St. Paul, and other saints (most likely, she would not have read them herself); it is also many others, men in particular, who presume to teach her what church patriarchs say about her own spirituality. It is not only a few experiences that color her view of herself. Woman's inferiority is embedded in the culture, and therefore her use of authoritative language is based on a set of experiences in which she has been witness to a person(s) of authority speaking.

If authority is not only to be found in texts but is also based on something that reflects a particular experience or set of experiences, how *exactly* did Alison come by her notion of texual authority? She reveals that she obtained her knowledge of authority from experiences which always remind her of her inferiority. For instance, Hansen analyzes her sentence structure in the Cana marriage passage: "The use of the passive transformation, 'me was told,' puts the Wife first in the surface structure of the sentence; she is indeed self-absorbed" (*Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender,* 29). Hansen goes on to compare Alison's word order as way of making herself preeminent, but in the actual meaning of the sentence, Alison is the object of the verb: "the Wife occupies a place in the surface structure of her utterance that disguises her fundamental status...as a person acted upon rather than acting" (29-30). Alison's understanding of authority is contingent

upon what she has been told. Nonetheless, she proceeds to relate the story of this passage as *she* understands it to be true:

> Biside a welle, Jhesus, God and man,
>
> Spak in repreeve of the Samaritan:
>
> 'Thou hast yhad fyve housbondes,' quod he,
>
> 'And that ilke man that now hath thee
>
> Is noght thyn housbonde,' thus seyde he certeyn. (15-19)

It is clear she has some inner anxiety about her five marriages and therefore takes the lesson to heart. However, she continues by refuting the argument based on the ambiguous nature of Christ's words:

> What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn;
>
> But that I axe, why that the fifthe man
>
> Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?
>
> How manye myghte she have in mariage?
>
> Ye herde I nevere tellen in myn age
>
> Upon this nombre diffinicioun. (20-25)

She does not buy the standard interpretation of this passage and in fact, suspects the interpretation she receives from her source. While she uses a case that goes against her own situation, her ability to argue her own side is established. Her logic is sound. Where is it stated the exact number of husbands that she is allowed? Yet, while her voice is strong in her own favor, she reveals the uncertainties that still linger in her mind. She cannot and does not present the answer with complete confidence. Alison seems to have

internalized that she may be in danger in the next world; according to authorities, her argument for experience in this world becomes one that endangers her.

We are constantly reminded that there is something beneath the words that she is not able to express fully to the audience. Yet, uncovering the reasons for her words is a difficult process because Alison often does not provide enough details to enable her audience to convict her of gross wrongdoings. For instance, B. S. Lee views the Cana passage as evidence that Jankyn is gone: "If Jankyn has fled, Alison's fifth husband is no husband to her…she is trying with her customary *evasion of logic* to gloss over the unpalatable conclusion that Christ would condemn her intention to 'Welcome the sixte, whan evere that he shal' (45), as He did the life-style of the Samaritan woman" (my italics, 2). Whether or not Alison is attempting to gloss this passage in such a way that will allow her another husband (if she is, in fact, still married) is a point of debate that can never be resolved. If Alison were confident in either her current situation as a woman who has married five times or in her intentions as a woman who wishes to find yet another husband, there would be no need to go over the meaning of this passage with her audience. But without the certain knowledge of her current situation that she does not provide, it is not clear why this passage is particularly important to her except that she is concerned with numbers of husbands and what that makes her. Her method of logical argument, therefore, is to say just enough for it to appear that she knows her argument well. As Hansen describes it, Alison reveals her "own nebulous insecurity,": "She asks her bold questions of no one in particular, and of everyone. We see again the generalized feeling that someone out there knows more than she does" (*Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 30-31). Thus within her very first bold statements, Alison

demonstrates that she is unable to argue her points with the clerical authority which ensures the validity of her argument.

One can pinpoint Alison's sense of insecurity not only in her broader questions, but in the specific details of her language. The pronouns she uses in the Cana passage shed light on the ambiguous nature of *who* it is that has authority over her. For example, it is likely that the "he" in the lines "thus seyde *he* certeyn" (19) and "That by the same ensample taughte *he* me" (12) is not Christ at all because to refute Christ's actual words would be blatant heresy. Perhaps the *man* who taught this lesson to her was Jankyn, another husband, or even a priest or preacher. If the *exempla* she uses come from more than one book, treatise, or sermon, and more than one person that represent authority, it makes sense that Alison's sense of injustice comes from more than simply the experience with one husband. She is fighting against textual forces that invalidate her as an individual because of her gender.

Because Alison's defense of her own married state is based on language imbedded in the patriarchal system, she reveals contradictions in herself. The fact that she can call marriage a state of sorrow while she thanks God for it in the same sentence is just one example of the unresolved tensions that have built up inside her. Nevertheless, she uses authoritative language to contend with the ideas of the church patriarchy on the subject of marriage.

That there is a value system placed on her sexuality implies that not only were her marital experiences far less than ideal (as her autobiography will demonstrate), but also that her insecurity stems directly from the authority of texts because they perpetuates the spiritual hierarchy. Because Alison is aware of the degrees of perfection as a social

force (the spiritual hierarchy which distinguishes women according to sexual activity), she is aware of her imperfect state. Yet, even as she accepts her own imperfection, she feels it is unreasonable to expect perfection of everyone: "Virginity was the dart set up, as she puts it, for Christians to aim at, but only a privileged few were called to that state... it is hard to find fault with her theology. Fallen man, everyone knew, could not be expected to follow the highest counsels of perfection, and those not specially called should not envy those in higher states of perfection" (Howard 250). Alison is aware that she is not perfect, and she spends much time discussing the perfect state in relation to her own position. For example, she points out the virtue of virginity, "And many a seint, sith that the world bigan; / Yet lyved they evere in parfit chastitee" (140-41) but also asserts, "I nyl envye no virginitee" (142). It is precisely because Alison is aware of the ideal that she can use the powers of her logic to show that marriage as essential for the production of more virgins: "And certes, if ther were no seed ysowe, / Virginitee, thanne wherof sholde it growe?" (71-2).

The language of authority becomes a way Alison can use her own powers of logic to prove that marriage is a valid state, that she will not be condemned for having five husbands. In more than one instance, Alison uses this method to make Jerome's words fit her argument. Jerome addresses the choice of virginity with a question much like Alison's: "you are afraid that if the desire for virginity were general there would be no prostitutes, no adulteresses, no wailing infants in town or country....Be not afraid that all will become virgins: virginity is a hard matter, and therefore rare, because it is hard" (Wurtele 213). Even though Alison neatly leaves some parts of Jerome out, she stresses the productivity of marriage for herself, "I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age / In the

actes and in fruyt of mariage" (113-14). Furthermore, where she can get away with it, she uses the language of authority to provide a reason for her choices. In this instance she uses St. Paul as her justification: "For thanne th'apostle seith that I am free / To wedde, a Goddes half, where it liketh me" (49-50). This too echoes the letter *Adversus Jovinian* in which Jerome uses St. Paul's teachings for the purpose of validating his own authority on marriage: "the Apostle says of a wife that 'if the husband be dead, she is free to be married to whom she will' " (Beidler 21-22). Marriage is a sanctified act, one which continues the essential cycles of life, and it is also necessary for one like herself.

Alison provides further justification of her marriages by providing St. Paul's statement about sexual relations in marriage: "He seith that to be wedded is no synne; / Bet is to be wedded than to brynne" (51-52). Alison knows that if she does not marry, she cannot enjoy legitimite sex. Jerome says, "Paul said that second and even more marriages are permitted to a widow, but that is only because it is better for a woman who cannot or will not remain chaste to prostitute herself to one man than to many" (Beidler 22). This authoritative logic is simple enough and supports her stance. But the parts of this particular text she leaves out also tell us something about how she uses her examples. In the above instance, Alison fails to mention more of St. Paul's words (used by Jerome): "Surely it is better voluntarily to embrace chastity than to return to the filth of marriage" (22). Even though Alison boldly defends marriage against virginity, she must ultimately admit that chastity is a state of perfection above all else, especially her own *estaat*.

Alison's use of authoritative language is a way for her to assert, in an accepted way, her situation. However, by her somewhat effective use of these authorities, she actually follows orthodox thought fairly closely. Howard comments that Alison's

statements are actually not deviant from orthodox beliefs (248). Her use of the authoritative textual sources actually grounds her in the tradition of authority. For example, her analogy of the vessels in a lord's household upholds a hierarchy, even though it is aimed at defending her *imperfection* as the will of God: "For well ye knowe, a lord in his houshold, / He nath nat every vessel al of gold; / Somme been of tree, and doon hir lord servyse" (99-101). She emphasizes that the wood vessels also serve the lord well, and because of the nature of her analogy, the lord's house can easily be likened to God's kingdom: "God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wyse, / And everich hath of God a propre yifte— / Som this, som that, as hym liketh shifte" (102-4). Each person has a purpose according to his or her gift from God. Some are more perfect than others, but the important insight that we gain is her reaction against the notion that she is *expected* to be an ideal woman. The virgin woman, as Schulenburg puts it, is " a treasure, a sacred vessel to be cherished" (12). And even as Alison adheres to orthodox thought, she wishes that the married woman might be seen as the vessel for life and therefore, as equally important in God's eyes.

Alison is aware that she cannot always argue some of her points effectively and, therefore, creates an authority higher than any of these controversial interpretations of sacred texts and their glossings. She is aware that texts are glossed by men, and so she directly refers to the highest authority of all: God. Yet the manner in which she cites the authority of God in her own defense is controversial because she refers to God with a mixture of authoritative citations and sarcastic swearing. The instances in which she uses the word God are numerous, but there are a few in which she takes his authority and her use of that authority seriously. For example, Alison refers to a text that defends

marriage using God as the primary authority: "God bad for us to wexe and multiplye / That gentil text kan I wel understonde" (28-29). By citing the authority of God, she tries to give these words an authority that supercedes the text and those who would tell her what it means. But this use of God for her purposes is problematic. "God's authority" or the justification that she cites is perpetuated and provided by the male tradition. She claims that she understands that *gentil* text, a text which is based on a patriarchal system and perpetuated and interpreted by men.

Alison uses God as a witness in defense of the married state in many examples from texts besides the one mentioned above. By using God's name with confidence and conviction in statements such as "That hye God defended marriage / By express word? I pray yow, telleth me" (60-61), "For hadde God comanded maydenhede, / Thanne hadde he dampned weddyng with the dede" (69-70), and "But this word is nat taken of every wight, / But there as God lust gyve it of his myght" (77-78), she challenges the meaning of God's commandments as interpreted by others. She asserts that men are so inconsistent in interpretations they cannot really know what God wants women to do. Marriage is sacred in the sight of God and therefore she argues that it is holy. These statements show confidence in the support of an authority that is beyond the confines of gender-motivated glossings, but many of her statements come from the authority of St. Paul or are a twist on the beliefs of St. Jerome about the subject of virginity and marriage.

Even as Alison admits that chastity is the highest perfection, her statements shows her true opinion of such a doctrine. She cites God again in one of her most important defenses of sex in marriage. Because God is an instrumental force in the act of fulfilling

what comes naturally, she discusses the purpose of sex organs in explicit terms. She challenges her audience, "Telle me also, to what conclusion / Were membres maad of generacion /.../ Trusteth right wel, they were nat maad for noght" (115-18). Then she refers to Jerome's words as she refutes his argument, "Glose whoso wole, and seye bothe up and doun / That they were maked for purgacioun / Of uryne" (119-21). In her opinion, this argument is weak because experience has taught her a different truth, one that the clerks deny: "The experience woot well it is noght so. / So that clerkes be nat with me wrothe" (124-25). Again, there is evidence of her struggle with the authoritative text as she uses it to support her arguments. She follows the statements quoted above with her opinion and the proof from God "I sey this: that they maked ben for bothe; / That is to seye, for office and for ese / Of engendrure, ther we nat God displese" (126-28). But as she uses God as an authority, she refers back to the authority of Jerome's text. Thus, her justifications from God as the highest authority are based not only on her experience, but on her interactions with texts which claim authority on God's intent. In this way she reveals, most likely without knowing the extent of what she reveals, that she is really trapped by the system. By using the language of authority to try to escape the same authoritative structure, she becomes entangled in it.

While one can see Alison struggling to find an authority that will show the validity of her stance and thus elevate the meaning of her experiences, her use of the word God also seems to be an aspect of her personality. She frequently uses God as her witness with humor, much more frequently in fact than she uses him as a serious authority. In these instances she has a good amount of fun with swearing to God and swearing by God. For example, statements like "As help me God, I laughe whan I

thynke" (201), "They loved me so wel, by God above" (207), "For by my throuth, I quitte hem word for word, / As help me varray God omnipotent" (422-23), and "But he was quit, by God and by Seint Joce!" (483) are not serious references and often appear when she is talking about how she mastered her husbands. Alison uses them as a kind of framing device; she qualifies her example with these phrases for the effect of saying: *I did this, by God, believe it or not. Ha, ha.* Her search for an acceptable method of validation reveals aspects of her personality that are difficult to reconcile to a woman who is attempting to argue seriously. Her humor can be viewed as clever rhetoric devised to place an audience, particularly her authoritative audience, more at ease when she confronts authoritative language by using it herself.

Alison's use of God as both the highest authority and a personal rhetorical device creates problems when one wishes to discover her true intentions. Using God an authoritative source, namely as a method of her own self-validation, is obviously a manipulation of the Christian moral system on her behalf. This demonstrates a relationship to authority that is not only lacking in its knowledge of the learned tradition, but makes her into a woman who is occasion for humor. Her sources are ultimately based on the authority of the written word which make her attack on textual authority a joke for some of the more learned members of her audience. But if there is a reason for the indecision of the Wife of Bath's character in *The Canterbury Tales*, it is revealed in the way in which she expresses herself. It is important to examine her attempt to construct a valid, logical, argument in detail, because it shows her relationship to the male literary tradition. And if we are to get still closer to what Chaucer is doing in his

creation of Alison, it is also important to look at what makes Alison *female*, that is to say, of how she is a representation of woman and femininity in her time.

Alison's Authority: The Discourse of Feminine Experience

Even though Alison speaks from the tradition of using texts and their authority, she often shows, presumably without intending to, that the authority of these works and those who endorse their authority is not absolute. Her own acts of glossing may be carried out with her self-interest in mind; however, she exposes how glossing authoritative texts can be a manipulative act, usually done by men to women. The gender opposition that affects her narrative is, according to Alison, based on fundamental differences in the way the sexes view the world. Men interpret experience using authority and women talk from the mode of experience. Alison *appears* to argue for an alternative to textual authority, a feminine system of passing on knowledge that other women like herself recognize. Yet even as Alison says this in her opening lines and in other places throughout the *Prologue*, she converses with a male social authority by using a very similar language and style. Some critics contend that Alison does not speak in ways that deviate from the norms of the system except to invert the male-centered hierarchy on her behalf. For example, Willi Erzgraber points out that Alison "only seeks to alter the paradigm in the relations of the sexes insofar as she wants to replace male dominance with female dominance. The Prologue to her Tale culminates, as does the Tale itself, in the claim that woman is entitled to 'maistrie, soveraynete' " (84). Helen Cooper also believes Alison is simply arguing for a reversal of the power structure: "Her own Prologue is a misogynist male text rewritten from the female point of view, where men deserve all they get" (149). Alison claims that the "feminine experience" she knows about is different from the "masculine authority." We can discuss why Alison uses authority to claim her right to experience, but we must nonetheless ask the question of

whether she actually creates and maintains a feminine discourse as well. From *her* text we can understand the problems she has when she *attempts* to speak with unquestionable authority. We are aware that she has internalized the standards by which authority judges her. In order to see if she is a representation of a strong feminine voice, we need to examine her language directly related to and about her experience. This will allow us to better understand whether she is a mockery of a woman who speaks with authority or a true spokesperson on behalf of her gender.

According to textual tradition, Alison's position is inferior; however she has much to say about this conclusion. Alison combats the authority created and perpetuated by the church by speaking of what she knows. Thomas A. Van states that she uses her experience as a tactic: "Far better to pick the trench farthest from their headquarters, where the proliferation of theory is inversely proportional to their own existence and power: the marriage bed" (180). However, by the standards of the male texts that she confronts, we might expect Alison to make logical and coherent connections; her arguments should make sense and be in logical order. As readers we may therefore be frustrated and/or delighted by her inability to stay on one thread of argument.

She begins the *Prologue* by discussing the subject of marriage based on what authority dictates, then ends with stories about her husbands and her battle for mastery. The full effect of the *Prologue* is not realized until the end when it is apparent that the textual authority she combats at the beginning is based on personal confrontations with others, others who seek the sovereignty that she claims to be seeking as well. However, if we recognize that she uses a uniquely feminine way of speaking, then we can argue that her techniques are deliberate. Susan K. Hagen elaborates on Alison's style of

discourse in relation to authoritative language: "By their criteria her narrative lacks focus: it turns back on itself, the Wife apparently losing her place at times; it contains asides and interjections that seem little more than chatty gossip or the results of a woman's inability to stick to the subject" (110-11). If we accept, for the most part, that textual authority is male and the "authority" of experience that Alison speaks from is female, then we could argue that she does in fact create a kind of *feminine text* by speaking about experience. Critics such as John Alford and Hagen suggest that Alison represents an oral mode of communication and that she passes on knowledge by speech and the act of performance. For example, Alford posits that Alison is the medieval embodiment of *rhetoric*, while the clerk is the living symbol of *philosophy*, or learning and logic.[6] Alford argues that the clerk has superior depth because Alison is simply engaged in the act of speaking; she "weaves" words effectively (120). Hagen, in the title of her article, calls Alison "Chaucer's Inchoate Experiment in Feminist Hermeneutics" because Chaucer, though he may attempt to portray a woman's discourse, cannot fully understand a woman's experiences. Nevertheless, Alison's tactics of storytelling appear to demonstrate a way of using language in relation to authoritative structures that alters former meanings. For example, Hagen cites Ruether's opinion that Alison "expresses herself in a fashion contrary to the linear and exclusive models of the patriarchal literary tradition" (110). One can easily point to instances where Alison employs non-linear methods of speaking. For example, Alison announces that she will tell her tale, but begins to elaborate on the experiences with her husbands, "Now, sire, now wol I telle forthe my tale. /..../I shal seye sooth; tho housbondes that I hadde, / As thre of hem were goode, and two were badde" (193-96). She does not speak in this fashion only once. For

example, as she tells about the blossoming relationship with Jankyn she says, "Now wol I tellen forth what happed me. / I seye that in the feeldes walked we…" (563-64). She continually announces what is to come, then digresses to the specifics of the situations. She employs similar rhetoric when she losses her place: "But now, sire, lat me se what I shal seyn. / A ha! By God, I have my tale ageyn. / Whan that my fourthe housbonde was on beere…" (585-87). Hagen comments further on Alison's methods:

> Rather than relying on a traditional, single line of thematic development, the Wife of Bath turns to a development more akin to an epicycle: always moving essentially forward, but marking out an ever-widening background of experience that proves essential to her theme. Her method is certainly not linear, and it may not be efficient, but it is efficacious. (114)

While Hagen comments on her prologue, Alison's personal experiences can be seen as a part of the whole of her narrative. In effect, Alison is giving us the background to her story. What she says in her prologue colors her narrative and her listeners' responses to her tale, including the issues it raises, the conventions it questions, and all of its assertions and contradictions. The audience's understanding of her tale depends on her telling all beforehand.

Alison's narrative technique can be criticized or even praised as a refreshing alternative discourse in relation to a linear model. Nonetheless, the fact that she continues to tell her audience that she is *going to tell* them something important clarifies that her experiences are also *her tale*. Her rhetoric *is* the rhetoric of experience. However, it is not only her experience that comes out in her narrative, but her act of interpretation of her experience. She demonstrates an awareness of her audience, and

employs devices of performance. Van comments on Alison's performance logic: "[it is] an enactment of self which sarcastically dramatizes the assumptions threatening to fragment and diminish that self" (179). She continually modifies her stances on authority and about herself as she moves through her prologue. Her speech sometimes raises questions about the "truth" of her stories. Leicester sees Alison's performance as an act of "retrospective revision." Because it is not "a preplanned theoretical argument that has to move through a certain number of points to a conclusion" it becomes "something practical that happens and alters as it goes along in response to a set of more immediate and unstructured contingencies" (83). She works through her uncertainties as she comes upon them in the narrative. In other words, as the memories surface in her mind Alison recalls and interprets, sometimes revealing herself to her audience, sometimes holding back details. Leicester is concerned with tracing the "vagaries of memory as it doubles and redoubles on itself. We, like the Wife, must concern ourselves less with the plot she remembers than with *the plot of her remembering* in the now of narration" (Leicester's italics, 83).[7] Whether Alison employs a style that is uniquely feminine or not can be questioned, but "*the plot of her remembering*" can be seen as a statement about how she applies existing authority to her experience.

If Alison speaks about herself and interprets herself in a feminine way, then she presumably would have obtained her knowledge from an authority, an authority that is not masculine and/or textual. While Alison does not use female ecclesiastics and saints to validate her experience (because this is not something she can relate to), she does cite an authority in the matters of love and practical living and this person is an important feminine authority for Alison. Her reference to *my dames loore* is a phrase used to

describe expertise she has been taught by an authoritative figure, supposedly her mother or a similar person. The *olde daunce*, a reference to her knowledge of love mentioned in *The General Prologue*, suggests her vast amount of personal experience. Charles Sleeth describes her version of female authority as it relates to *The Canterbury Tales*: "the Wife does not represent her mother as a spiritual or even an ethical counselor [unlike the Prioress and the Second Nun], but solely as a counselor of secular self-interest, and that in the realm of sexual achievement" (183). Furthermore, an older wife's expertise is knowledge based on experience, which she applies to herself in certain appropriate situations. In describing her confession to Jankyn about her feelings, she provides a clue about how she applies this knowledge: "I bar hym on honde he hadde enchanted me— / My dame taughte me that soutiltee—" (575-6). Here she applies the knowledge to her situation and uses it to catch the next husband. She never says directly that she loves him, and this is the point that she wants her audience to see; her wooing of Jankyn is a trick of woman's *soutiltee*.

She mentions this authority again a few lines later when she recalls herself telling Jankyn about the dream:

> And eek I seyde I mette of hym al nyght,
> He wolde han slayn me as I lay upright,
> And al my bed was ful of verray blood;
> 'But yet I hope that ye shal do me good,
> For blood bitokeneth gold, as me was taught.'
> And al was fals; I dremed of it right naught,
> But as I folwed ay my *dames loore*,

> As wel of this as of othere thynges moore. (577-84)

The passage recalls an intense event between the two where she tells him in an indirect way what she sees for their future. The dream suggests that she feels young again; the blood in the bed suggests the imagery of a bridal chamber. Furthermore Alison expresses hope for a future bond: "But yet I hope that ye shal do me good" could signify a marriage vow and refer to the sex act which seems almost vivid in these lines. She juxtaposes blood and money, also implying the benefits for both parties. Yet she suddenly tells her audience that "al was fals; I dremed of it right naught." This dream did not really happen. It was a piece of fiction to convey the sincerity of her feelings for Jankyn without having to go as far as telling him directly that she loved him, or wanted to marry him, or whatever she was really thinking. Furthermore, she was taught how to behave this way by *authority*. According to Alison this is how women operate.

But do we believe her? Leicester, who follows her methods of telling and interpreting such events, offers an explanation of what is happening in this situation:

> Since all we have in the text is the Wife's performance in the virtual now of the pilgrimage, no item of her reminiscence can be taken unproblematically as fact. She may always be falsifying, as I fear she is doing here, and the question of falsification itself is by no means a simple one... whatever may have happened as experience in the past, in the now of speaking the prologue the dream takes on importance as a focus of certain fundamental themes of the text. (101)

In other words, the falsification of the dream may be a falsification to cover up certain unresolved emotions about the situation. There is evidence that the meeting with Jankyn

took place before her fourth husband died. She admits she is guilty of looking at Jankyn during the funeral: "me thoughte he hadde a paire / Of legges and of feet so clene and fair / That al myn herte I yaf unto his hoold" (597-99). Staring at his legs is a humorous way of passing off her true feelings. Jankyn may not be aware of the authority of her *dames loore* the same way the audience is because as she tells her stories she reveals herself. Yet, Jankyn, if he did not know, might just as well have suspected because he read to her from his book of wicked wives. She expresses regret about the marriage: "But afterward repented me ful soore; / He nolde suffre nothyng of my list" (632-33). These lines suggest that he did know what she could be like and he sought control over her as a result of her ability to manipulate situations. She may be unhappy because she cannot have the mastery that she is used to, but it goes beyond simple issues of control. She reacts to his treatment of her: "By God, he smoot me ones on the lyst, /For that I rente out of his book a leef, / That of the strook myn ere wax al deef" (634-36). As she tells it, the violence appears almost comic: she rips his book of wicked wives; he hits her on the side of the head, the ear to be exact. However, there is something about her words that suggests that this situation is more painful than simply her injury. She does not let her audience know the exact certainties of the situation. For example, we do not know for sure if Jankyn is gone or not because she does not tell us. She recalls stories Jankyn told her: "Another Romayn tolde he me by name, / That, for his wyf was at a someres game / Withouten his wityng, he forsook hire eke" (647-49).

Alison herself does not realize the full implications of what she says about herself until the moment her interpretations of the situations are revealed because she works out their implications as she speaks. Whether Jankyn actually fled or not may not be as

important as how she tells us or does not tell us if he has gone. The passages that she recalls for the audience about the Roman men who leave their wives suggest how she remembers the threat. Authority has taught her by example that his leaving her is a possibility. Her experience is colored by her previous contact with authority but this particular reference is revealed as an act of remembering in speech.

Her prologue holds more clues as to how feminine knowledge is passed on from generation to generation, woman to woman. Feminine authority is directly related to Alison's performance because it is performance that women like Alison have the authority to speak about. The knowledge she obtains from women influences the way she views life, love, sex, money, power. It relates back to the image of woman as Eve, for women who employ the methods of tricks and tears are the embodiment of the negative stereotype. The kind of feminine performance Alison endorses, is, for the most part, a way to use the power of persuasive language for manipulation. Alison has the experience of a *wys womman*, the kind of woman who has learned how to use sex as a weapon: "A wys womman wol bisye hire evere in oon / To gete hire love, ye, ther as she hath noon" (209-10). She refers to the tricks of catching a man; a woman is constantly busy in employing them if she is without a husband. However, when the man is under her control, she is able to obtain wealth and power—"But sith I hadde hem hoolly in myn hond, / And sith they had me yeven al hir lond" (211-12)—and once she has mastery, the purpose of sex is for her to make a profit: " What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese, / But it were for my profit and myn ese?" (213-14). Her idea of love is clearly linked to economics here. Her marriages have been profitable and so has her manipulation of her husbands. In this case, Alison places herself in the position of having already won the

position of sovereignty, seen in terms of land, and so she does not have to do anything for her power over the man after a certain point in the marriage. This is the wisdom of married women. Alison knows it so well that she is herself an authority on the subject. She states, "I governed hem so wel, after my lawe" (219). Her first three husbands are subject to Alison's feminine authority.

In the *Prologue*, Alison clearly speaks against the male literary tradition in general. She also often addresses men, men who are not actually present, such as her husbands, or men who are present, such as the Pardoner, and she adapts her addresses for these different groups of men. For example, she degrades some of the men not present, calling some or all of her past husbands "old dotard" and "old kaynard." She tells the Pardoner, ironically considering his ecclesiastical position, that she will teach men for their benefit. Even the occasions when she speaks from the feminine viewpoint to a feminine audience are ultimately directed towards her male listeners. For example, in a sequence of lines similar to the one above where she mentions the wisdom of women, she shifts the focus of her audience to *wyse wyves*. The following lines are addressed to women, women who are not present on the pilgrimage:

> Now herkneth hou I baar me properly,
>
> Ye wise wyves, that kan understonde.
>
> Thus shulde ye speke and bere hem wrong on honde,
>
> For half so boldely kan ther no man
>
> Swere and lyen, as a womman kan. (224-28)

She confides that a woman should and can bear false witness in order to get what she wants. This address is symbolic of the way she was taught. Perhaps someone said

similar words to her when she was young or she witnessed women performing manipulative acts herself as a maid. Moreover, while her words seem like an appeal to women to "listen up," they are actually an address to men. She is providing insight into the ways women pass on the knowledge of manipulation and trickery. Her appealing to women is an act; she dramatizes the situation for the men she addresses in order to give them the impression they are being let in on a feminine secret. After she addresses the women who are like herself, married and successful at it, she pretends to remember the male audience and shifts her focus again:

> I sey nat this by wyves that been wyse,
> But if it be whan they hem mysavyse.
> A wys wyf, if that she kan hir good,
> Shal beren hym on honde the cow is wood,
> And take witnesse of her owene mayde
> Of hir assent... (229-34)

She no longer refers to women in the second person, but in the third. If wise wives already know all this, Alison would not have to tell them. In this case, Alison becomes her own authority on women and she uses the idea of other women like herself who also are wise in the ways of love to validate her authority. If using a community of women's knowledge is an alternative kind of authoritative action, a feminine way of seeing the world, her terms will be different from the terms of existing male literary authority. A man's wisdom, according to Alison, is based on texts and not on the experience of life. Her first three husbands submitted to her without a fight; therefore, her kind of wisdom was not under direct fire until later in her life. She does not really distinguish this

problem until she speaks about her fifth husband. The experiences with Jankyn make her more aware of her textual inheritance because of his use of texts to suppress her. All she has been taught by her feminine authorities is called wrong and dangerous. A woman who is not saintly is named wicked and evil.

Alison is angry at the injustices of the male literary system and therefore seeks the validation of wisdom of a different kind, one based on oral communication, performance, rhetoric, and most importantly for Alison, experience. However, it is disturbing that women, the way Alison portrays them through herself, resort to deceitful methods in order to get what they want. This is one of the instances where she fulfills the anti-feminist expectations that are inherent in the arguments of her opposition. She brings this up again in more specific terms when she says, "And al was fals, but that I took witnesse / On Janekyn, and on my nece also…" (382-83). Her niece is a witness to the lying and manipulation, and it is more than implied that women teach other women by such methods. And Alison's niece is not the only witness to her actions. Alison tells her audience that she confided in a friend with her own name:

> With my gossib, dwellynge in oure toun;
> God have hire soule! Hir name was Alisoun.
> She knew myn herte, and eek my privetee,
> Bet than oure parisshe preest." (529-32)

This friend is her confidant; Alison says, "To hire biwreyed I my counseil al" (533). This is one example of how women befriend each other and how the friends share in what is happening. Alison does not state any instances when her friend shared knowledge with her, but since this friendship supposedly happened during Alison's

fourth marriage, it is possible that the other woman is younger and learning from Alison. For example, Alison makes clear that this woman witnesses what appears to be the beginning of her relationship with Jankyn: "That Jankyn clerk, and my gossyb dame Alys, / And I myself, into the feeldes wente…" (548-49). Perhaps at this stage, the three are friends. Alison does not tell her audience any certainties: "I sey that in the feeldes walked we, / Til trewely we hadde swich daliance, / This clerk and I" (564-66). Her *gossib*, the other Alisoun, disappears in the lines about her *daliance* with Jankyn. It is not clear whether Jankyn and Alison walked in the fields alone after this instance or if they all three went to the fields. If Alison's female friend is present, she may be a silent witness, perhaps learning first hand of women's discreet ways in which to obtain a lover.

Perhaps Alison does not need to be more specific because her audience already understands that this is how women pass on knowledge to other women. As Hanna describes it, Alison speaks "with the accumulated wisdom of women, she speaks for a communal knowledge" (32).[8] It is interesting to note that in the tale many believe was originally assigned to Alison, *The Shipman's Tale*, the merchant's wife who plans an affair with another man keeps her niece, a young female child, near her during the negotiations; Alison's prologue is not the only instance in *The Canterbury Tales* in which women pass on knowledge to each other by example. This communal knowledge, however, is not positive. Alison is not making a strong case for the feminine side, and in fact she actually sustains the literary tradition of the dangerous and manipulative woman that infuriates her.

While it is assumed that Alison must, to some extent, invent her discourse, any assertions that she relies completely on a *feminine* discourse can be examined for their

foundations in the anti-feminist literature and, hence, the male literary tradition. For example, Alison admits that she lies and manipulates words. While this can expose texts for their less-than-noble uses, it also exposes her own narrative as possibly false. For example, the similarity of her friend's name to her own makes this friend's very existence questionable; the duplication might be too much of a coincidence. She tells her audience, after all, that there is no man on earth that can "Swere and lyen, as womman kan" (228). If Alison uses language for her own benefit, it is possible that such examples can serve her as symbolic fictions. Her *dames loore* can be questioned for its validity. She may be playing a game of words, acting out a series of expectations. Her feminine knowledge is exactly what men think it is supposed to be and Alison simply delivers what they want to hear. She makes it clear that her *entente* is to talk in fun, that her words are *pleye* (192). While this statement makes a neat disclaimer for the controversial nature of the things she says, it is also her way of stating that her words are meant for shock value. Perhaps she is not being serious about anything.

Van provides some insight into Alison's motives: "She is deliberately parodying the charges against her and her sex... She of course means to be outrageous here. But there is a smile behind her smile. Alice knows that some in her audience see her as a thing to be subordinated and explained, which to them means rendering her uncontradictory" (180-81). Alison may be aware of the fact that if she delivers what men want to hear, they will be tricked into categorizing her as a certain kind of woman. In reality, Alison does not reveal anything about herself or other women except what is expected. What on the surface appears to be her admission of guilt for behaving like a woman, may be the opposite. For example, in one of the more famous passages Alison

tells men what women want. She gives them an important insight into the female mind when she describes why she loved Jankyn the most out of all five husbands:

> I trowe I loved hym best, for that he
> Was of his love daungerous to me.
> We wommen han, if that I shal nat lye,
> In this matere a queynte fanasye:
> Wayte what thyng we may nat lightly have,
> Therafter wol we crie al day and crave.
> Forbede us thyng, and that desiren we;
> Preesse on us faste, and thanne wol we fle.
> With daunger oute we al oure chaffare;
> Greet prees at market maketh deere ware,
> And to greet cheep is holde at litel prys:
> This knoweth every woman that is wys. (513-24)

This passage is interesting for a few reasons. First, it appeals directly to the idea that women share methods of learning about how to behave through communal avenues. However, Alison's generalizing can be questioned for its validity. In the first line of this passage, she makes a statement about herself, but *I trowe* implies that she is a little uncertain about why she loved Jankyn best; she believes it was because his love is *daungerous*, which relays the memory of the excitement about their fights and perhaps even their sexual relationship. She attempts to apply the reasons for her behavior and feelings to her situation as she tells her audience about it. In effect, since she is not sure what the reasons are, she searches for them. Perhaps because of her feelings for Jankyn,

she thinks women want what they have to fight for or want what they cannot have at all. Because she is a woman, it is expected that she be uncertain of her thoughts and wavering emotions, so she expresses her uncertainty as a woman would. Because she is a woman, she is expected to be inconstant, so she proves she is a woman by her very inconstancy. But since Alison's rhetoric is a rhetoric of performance, her inconstancy is not necessarily insight into her mind but simply her attempt to make such an assertion into a joke. She is so open about her falseness it seems that she seeks to undermine her own authority on the subject, therein proving the expectations that she cannot have any real authority because she is a woman. Alison's anti-feminism can be viewed as a complex narrative device; authority would label her anyway, so she beats them to it. Even though she uses her inferiority as a manipulative device with her husbands, the possibility that she may be making fun of the tradition that labels her instead of actually behaving according to the conventions of that tradition makes any real authority, especially that of the male-centered texts she argues with, very slippery and difficult to define. She makes a mockery of those that would define her.[9]

Alison apparently makes herself into the typical woman of the anti-feminist tradition for the sake of her performance in order to reveal the absurdities of such a tradition. Alison's way of learning and passing on women's knowledge cannot be necessarily pinned down as good or evil if she is making things up that are predictable and expected by her audience. Similiarly, as Sleeth points out, the concept of *dames loore* in *The Canterbury Tales* is difficult to pin down as either a totally positive or totally negative kind of authority, which makes Alison's use of it slightly problematic. Sleeth concludes that Alison's *dames loore* is a parody of the way other females use the

Virgin Mary as a spiritual authority (183). This would place Alison in opposition to basic Christian morality. However, the representation of women's knowledge in other parts of *The Canterbury Tales* is not absolutely positive or negative. For example, in *The Pardoner's Tale* the young boy warns the three men to always be prepared for death because they could meet him anywhere which is what his mother has taught him, and the tavern owner supports this theory (176). Sleeth argues, "In the entire context, what the boy has learned from his mother is a counsel not to be ignored by anyone" (179). In this case the boy's *dames loore* is something that should be listened to; it is a virtuous authority and a moral guide. It is interesting to note that the Pardoner, who converses with Alison, has obviously been listening to her. By portraying women's teachings as good, he may be showing the audience another side of the coin from what Alison reveals in her prologue. Moreover, the knowledge the old woman conveyes during the pillow speech is particularly Christian in character. For example, the old woman of her tale discusses the true origin of nobility: "Thy gentillesse cometh fro God allone. / Thanne comth oure verray gentillesse of grace" (1162-63). The old woman gets much of her authority from textual sources. She points this fact out to her husband:

> Thenketh how noble, as seith Valerius,
>
> Was thilke Tullius Hostillius,
>
> That out of poverte rose to heigh noblesse.
>
> Reedeth Senek, and redeth eek Boece. (1165-68)

The men she mentions are all male figures, three of them authors. The virtue of poverty, a particularly Christian virtue, also has a textual basis:

> ...Jhesus, hevene kyng,

> Ne wolde nat chese a vicious lyvyng.
>
> Glad poverte is an honest thyng, certeyn;
>
> This wole Senec and othere clerkes seyn. (1181-84)

The old woman uses authority in order to prove a moral point. If Alison actually believes the teachings of the old woman in her story, then it would be safe to assume that her *dames loore* in her prologue is a mockery of a male textual tradition that attempts to make her into a certain type. However, even the old woman shows signs of the stereotypical anti-feminist idea of woman. Like Alison, she manipulates her husband with the power of language to get what she wants. It is precisely these contradictions in Alison's character that make her so difficult to define. Her preamble may shed light on the dynamic she sets up in the story she chooses to tell, but her inconsistency, while defining her as a woman, also makes her into a character that has an awareness of a tradition of textual power and control by the opposite sex.

To make matters even more complicated, the authority of women's knowledge is problematic in *The Manciple's Tale* as well. Sleeth summarizes the tale:

> This crow, witnessing the adultery of Phebus' wife while Phebus is away from home, tells Phebus of it on his return. Phebus, in anger, kills his wife, but almost immediately repents and believes that his wife was faithful and the crow a treacherous liar. So he rounds on the crow, plucks out its white feathers, turns it black, takes its power of speech and song, and flings it out into the world. (179)

The moral becomes confused. If one upholds the truth, then one risks being condemned for it. Sleeth points out that the Manciple's "mock-modest disclaimer" of his textual

knowledge is really an admission that his mother is the source of his knowledge (180). The mother's knowledge upholds the preservation of self over truth, but the lesson, not to talk too much, appears to be a solid piece of advice. In *The Manciple's Tale*, *dames loore* is a confused authority; women's logic, in this case, is not logical.

By making herself into an authority on the nature of women, Alison raises the question of from where this authority ultimately comes. *Dames loore* can be viewed as an insight into Alison's experience and the way she thinks the world works. Alison's niece who sees Alison use Jankyn as a witness against her husband, and her woman friend, who is present when she begins her relationship with Jankyn, are examples of how knowledge is taught from generation to generation. But is oral storytelling and manipulation of situations by clever rhetoric a uniquely feminine way of passing on knowledge? Alison clearly utilizes texts and the language of authority to refute the arguments already against her. If the oral basis of a written work is hidden by the power of the written word, then men actually employ similar methods of sharing knowledge. Hanna points out that the oral nature of stories disappears if it is passed on through texts and this is the advantage that men have over women. As an example, he cites an antifeminist analogy cited by several authorities comparing a wife to a tight shoe.[10] Because it appears in many texts, with many variations in language and expression of the metaphor, Hanna argues that the "profusion of tellings indicates the persistence of the oral technique: just as women exchange oral teachings on the control of husbands, married men tell one another rueful horror stories," making men just as guilty as women of perpetuating negative stereotypes and passing them on to one another by giving "to their experimental discoveries, just as ephemeral as those of women, the sanction of

textuality" (31). This sanctification of texts causes the oral to disappear, which is why Alison recognizes it as different from her experience. If we conclude that Alison is really employing a feminine discourse, or one that Chaucer thinks is a feminine discourse, then we can ask the question: is there any kind of female authority and, if there is, is it valid in relation to the male patriarchal structure?

As one explores the gender issues in relation to texts and the creation of the sense of self in Alison's prologue, the problem becomes blurred. Is a text solely a male creation? Is performance or speaking entirely female? The creation of texts and oral performances are fundamentally similar in many ways. The way Alison manipulates textual authority comes from her experiences with language: "she insists on interpreting any given text—even Scripture—in accordance with her experience rather than their dicta" (Hagen 110). But as Alison makes claims for a feminine experience, her language never really escapes the confines of the textual tradition. The examples of her tribulation in marriage are drawn from textual sources, their authority permanently imprinted in her mind so that any recollection of experience brings them forward, directly or indirectly. Thus, Alison's feminine language is a negotiation which attempts to validate the self based on her way of presenting textual authority.

The Textual Basis for Alison's Discourse of Experience

Alison's discourse has many characteristics of a feminine way of speaking and she provides insight into how women presumably talk and act on an everyday basis. These revelations make her audience aware of the danger inherent in marrying an experienced wife. However, even as she provides knowledge based on her experiences in marriage, her use of language that is reminiscent of the texts she cites does not totally disappear. In other words, her feminine discourse or how she relates her experiences can be examined for its textual basis. Actual instances of her experience that she recalls for the audience show that she is continually conversing with an idea of authority that she uses to define herself. She never escapes the confines of the male literary tradition.

Alison speaks to men specifically, and it is helpful here to take a look at how they respond to her in her prologue. The Pardoner reminds her of her original topic after she has been using authoritative language for justification of marriage. After his interruption, she returns to the topic that she lost after her opening lines:

> And whan that I have toold thee forth my tale
>
> Of tribulacion in mariage,
>
> Of which I am expert in al myn age—
>
> This is to seyn, myself have been the whippe— (172-75)

She reiterates that *her experience* is *her authority*, an authority which has served her well because she has often been the master. She also announces her purpose; she will teach others, specifically men, from the vast knowledge of her experience. She warns men by comparing marriage to drinking: "Than maystow chese wheither thou wolt sippe / Of thilke tonne that I shal abroche. (176-77). Marriage may seem like a good thing but

there are inherent dangers. Immediately, though, she forgets that she is going to tell the details of her marriages, or her tale, as the Pardoner has asked for and hopes for,[11] and reverts back to the authority of text to support and color her experiences: "For I shal telle ensamples mo than ten / 'Whoso that nyl be war by othere men / By hym shul othere men corrected be' " (179-81). Men warn other men and she is offering the same sort of favor. She can teach men just as well, if not better, than other men because she is the thing that they warn each other about. But similar to her method of speaking at the beginning of her prologue, she cites the authoritative source instead of talking about herself: "The same words writeth Ptholomee; / Rede in his Almageste, and take it there" (182-83). She makes herself into an authority based on experience, but Alison assumes that her audience requires the sanctity of an authoritative text. Perhaps the Pardoner interrupts her again to keep her from continuing the same kind of discourse from which he just discouraged her, for after she quotes the above textual source, he asks her again to tell her tale: " 'Dame, I wolde pray yow, if youre wyl it were,' /…/ 'as ye bigan, / Telle forth youre tale, spareth for no man" (184-86). He gently reminds her that she is off the subject she claims to be discussing, hinting perhaps, that she is not allowed to take such liberties with the authoritative texts that she uses.

Her characteristic good humor enables Alison to move forward after the Pardoner's interruption and she continues to reiterate the specifics of her marital experiences. However, Alison frequently slips back into dialogue with authoritative texts even though her references to texts are more "hidden" than before. Often the references to the anti-feminist lore that she attributes to one or more husbands (sometimes it is unclear as to which one or ones she attributes them) are responses to some opinion of

authority that she has internalized. This authority is usually taken directly or indirectly from textual sources. Douglas Wurtele provides some examples of how Alison treats Jerome's summary of "Theophrastan maxims" about marriage.[12] For example, Alison recounts how someone has criticized her in the past with a maxim that compares women to the manner in which material goods are bought and sold:

> Thou seist that oxen, asses, hors, and houndes,
> They been assayed at diverse stoundes;
> Bacyns, lavours, er that men hem bye,
> Spoones and stooles, and al swich housbondrye,
> And so been pottes, clothes, and array,
> Til they be wedded—old dotard shrewe!—
> And thanne, seistow, we wol oure vices shewe. (285-92)

Not only does she comment on the marriage system by comparing women to goods bought at market, she demonstrates an acute awareness of how authority seeks to control her. Her opening, "Thou seist..." implies that she was told this by someone, probably someone with authority, and her interjection "old dotard shrewe" reveals who this may have been (one of her "older" husbands, perhaps). She reacts by reiterating this list for her audience as she recalls an experience or a set of experiences from the past. Her name-calling indicates that she is to the point of being emotionally involved in the event(s) again. Yet, this experience is brought forth in her discourse from an authoritative source. Wurtele points out:

> This reflection by the Wife's "old dotard shrewe" matches Jerome's reporting of Theophrastus... This absurd list... Alison takes seriously

> enough to reproduce almost verbatim, putting it, truthfully or not, in the mouth of an earlier husband than Jankyn. (217)

Alison is presumably aware of the textual basis of this list, and she shows how its authority has been used against her in the past. It is not impossible that earlier husbands also controlled her and used authoritative sources to make her feel inferior. Perhaps her mastery over them is part of her performance. Authority has been passed to her through several avenues and perhaps by many men, and thus the sovereignty she claims to have had may be more of a fiction than she makes it out to be. Her conversation with textual authority is an ongoing one based on her encounters with men who have used this language against her.

There is much controversy about the way she rephrases the words of her husbands because she quotes examples of textual authority, such as the example mentioned above, as coming from the mouths of the men. Thus her experiences are a reiteration of authoritative sources, both personal and textual. Words such as "siestow" (292) and "Thou seist" (293) often frame her recollections of her husbands' anti-feminist teachings, which suggest that she is responding personally to certain husbands, most likely Jankyn but possibly others as well. She also responds to the authorities themselves as if she is aware of the textual basis of these remarks. Indeed, if she were not aware of the way words are used against her before marrying Jankyn, he brought the textual origin of some of her troubles into focus.

Alison's experience with the antifeminist tradition *centers* around her relationship with Jankyn because he represents the authoritative control over texts and their meaning that Alison wishes to gain. He also represents, in part, the social oppression that makes

Alison a victim and gives her narrative a twinge of sadness and regret underneath her humor and boasting. Thus, he also represents how texts can have control over individuals such as Alison. Alison picks up on this and in the process learns about authoritative text and its uses. She tells her audience: "He hadde a book that gladly, nyght and day, / For his desport he wolde rede alway; / He cleped it Valerie and Theofraste" (669-71). She is aware of the names of Jankyn's authoritative sources, sources which he blatantly uses against her. For example, she is aware of Jovinian's anti-authoritative stance because of Jankyn's book: "A cardinal, that highte Seint Jerome, / That made a book agayn Jovinian" (674-75). Alison makes a list of the texts that are in Jankyn's book of wicked wives: "In which book eek there was Tertulan, / Crisippus, Trotula, and Helowys, /.../ And eek the Parables of Salomon" (676-79). She also is provided with textual debates on love, for Jankyn's book also contained "Ovides Art, and bookes many on" (680). The way she uses authoritative language comes full circle when we hear of her experience with Jankyn's book and it becomes clear where she gets her textual sources that she so adamantly quotes in the opening lines of her prologue.

When Alison tells about her experience with Jankyn she returns to using authoritative language, but her interest is no longer in advancing her moral arguments, but in recounting how language from books is used by Jankyn for *his* arguments. Jankyn's list of wicked wives is recounted for the audience:

> Tho redde he me how Sampson lost his heres:
> Slepynge, his lemman kitte it with hir sheres;
> Thurgh which treson loste he bothe his yen.
> Tho redde he me, if that I shal nat lyen,

Of Hercules and of his Dianyre,

That caused hym to sette hymself afyre... (721-26).

The list continues for at least another 50 lines, all based on ancient stories of terrible wives, stories that Alison is forced to listen to. And not only does he tell her stories, he quotes proverbs to her: "And therwithal he knew of mo proverbes / Than in this world ther growen gras or herbes" (773-74). These are meant to subdue her and they make her feel degraded as well. For example, a proverb that would be a precise stab at Alison is this: "A woman cast hir shame away, / Whan she cast of hir smok" (782-83). References to a woman's sexuality would be particularly negative considering that Alison gave herself and all her property to him for love or what she thought was love. Alison's inability to find love in Jankyn's book makes her interaction with the antifeminist tradition personal. As Jankyn uses authoritative texts against her, it becomes apparent that he represents the clerical argument of the marriage debate and its textual relationship to Alison.

Jankyn is the embodiment of a tradition that is automatically against the idea of seeing a woman as an individual with feelings and valid desires. While not all the intricacies and interesting aspects can ever be known about a partially lost textual tradition, it is interesting to note an aspect of debate about learning and experience that may have more than just a passing link to Alison. Those of the learned traditions debated about whether or not a philosopher could also be a lover (Astell 147). This relates directly to Alison's complaint because she comes into direct contact with how the smug notions of traditional learning relate to women and marriage. Ann W. Astell discusses the tradition:

> At the positive pole, a series of epithalamic, pedagogical works celebrated in allegorical terms the bliss of learning and thus persuaded the cleric to dedicate himself undividedly to the pursuit of Wisdom as a surrogate spouse. At the negative pole, a notorious body of misogamous (and frequently misogynist) texts maligned marriage to flesh-and-blood women on the grounds of the incompatibility of scholarship with the married state. (149)

Both of these aspects within the literary tradition demonstrate the tensions in choosing the experience of life and marriage over a life dictated by spiritual authorities. Such texts are meant to teach men, and they portray women as dangerous to learning in general. Because Alison is a garrulous woman, her rhetorical strategies are in direct opposition to learning and Wisdom. Because a woman's rhetoric is considered dangerous to men, a woman can argue and lead a man to false conclusions no matter how much education he possesses. Astell argues that a woman like Alison knows how to lead a man through "a female repertoire of rhetorical and logical strategies that leads ultimately to the imposition of an inverted female grammar whereby the male 'predicate' (as the active, verbal element) becomes the passive 'subject' of the female subject with the social syntax of marriage" (159). This makes the woman dangerous to the "reasonable" man. While Alison's "female rhetoric" is not on par with the learned traditions of the time (according to those traditions) it is still threatening for its opposing force. Alison asserts that a man should have patience with a woman because of his ability to reason: "And sith a man is moore resonable / Than womman is, ye moste been suffrable" (441-42). Alison claims she is inferior to the point of not knowing what she is talking about. Yet,

she cites her inadequacy as a way to disarm the male authorities around her. Therefore, with her rhetorical strategies, she manipulates men into listening to her.

A woman's ability to mislead and to oppose learning perhaps explains why Jankyn believes he gives her exactly what she deserves, but his acts of reading to her are highly ironic considering the kind of clerk he is. His representation parallels another aspect of the learned tradition, one that allowed clerks to have love affairs, often adulterous ones, but remain celibate (Astell 149). Jankyn is not only not celibate, but marries, presumably for capital gain. His reason for marrying may not be entirely foreign to the cleric's lifestyles since the universities had problems with gambling and prostitution (Astell 148-9). Also, he does not uphold the authority of equality in marriage (preached in sermons) when he treats Alison badly. Alison does not say this directly, but there is evidence that she is aware of Jankyn's ill intentions too late. She states, "This joly clerk, Jankyn, that was so hende, / Hath wedded me with greet solempnytee, / And to hym yaf I al the lond and fee" (628-30). It might seem as though she is simply angry that he does not put up with her chiding, but earlier on she slipped in a clue that shows how she was abused by him: "And yet was he to me the mooste shrewe; / That feele I on my ribbes al by rewe" (505-6). Her suppression is not only a psychological one based on his reading nasty stories, but a physical one too. Her struggle with textual authority is not only is a struggle over the interpretation of her own marital experiences, but a struggle to control the words which, for Alison, are a symbol of the power she has always been denied.

Alison's indignation towards her fifth husband over his negative book is not without good reason. Not only does the clerical tradition reflect misogynist attitudes, but

the popular literature does as well, and Chaucer also uses more popular texts for the creation of Alison's character. Power points out several literary traditions which paint women in a negative light, such as didactic poems that list the bad qualities of woman (29). It is no wonder that Alison cannot argue effectively against the male literary tradition because of the widespread negative views of women in the literature. Power comments on how the popularity of *The Romance of the Rose* influenced the literature: "From thenceforward the chorus of anti-feminist literature sounds more strongly than ever, and the courtly note is drowned by other, mostly bourgeois, voices... which the French called *fabliaux*, and in which there is hardly one which does not turn on deceit or viciousness of women. The old are all evil-minded hags, the wives all betray their husbands, the girls are either minxes or fools" (28). The hen-pecked husband was a favorite theme of the genre and the stories often were far more degrading than what clerks wrote (11). While Power cautions that such stories cannot be taken as offering an absolute social image of middle class women, the stories reinforced anti-feminist views from other written traditions, such as the clerkly tradition with which Alison comes into direct contact.

Furthermore, *The Romance of the Rose* itself shows up unmistakably in Alison's dialogue with authority. The old woman, referred to as La Vieille in the French, and Duenna in a few English translations, is an example of a woman who, by her authority based on experience, talks too much about the matters of love and in doing so reveals that women are a danger to men. For example, Alison claims that she will teach men about women so they will know their ways. To the same effect, La Vieille talks in order to teach men. There are other instances where Alison's words echo La Vieille's speech.

For example, La Vieille mourns the loss of her beauty because it brought her many men: "For then I was a very great beauty, but now I must complain and moan when I look at my face, which has lost its charms" (p. 222).[13] Alison also mourns the loss of her youth: "That I have had my world as in my tyme. / But age, allas, that al wole envenyme, / Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith" (473-75). La Vieille claims her beauty "made the young men skip. I made them struggle that it was nothing if not a marvel" (p. 222). When Alison tells her audience how she made her husbands work in bed, this passage from *The Romance of the Rose* comes to mind for its similarities. La Vieille's act of using men for the acquisition of wealth is also very similar to Alison's sexual economics. La Vieille states, "If I could, I wouldn't leave them anything worth one bud of garlic until I had everything in my purse and had put them all into poverty" (p. 224). La Vieille also argues that a woman has good reason for inconstancy. She tells Fair Welcoming, "keep you heart in several places, never in one. Don't give it, and don't lend it, but sell it very dearly and always to the highest bidder" (p. 226). This list could continue, because, also like Alison, La Vieille talks quite a bit. Jean de Meun, in the text of *The Romance*, calls her a false old woman who babbles like a serf (p. 225). He clearly regards her as a one dimensional woman, the example of a *femme fatale* who has lost her youth and thus, her ability to use and trap men.

The Romance of the Rose is one of Chaucer's most important sources for Alison's character. Chaucer's woman then is loosely based on the male anti-feminist tradition. Even Alison's "feminine" discourse and her concept of *dames loore* are based on the male-dominated antifeminist tradition. However, Alison's voice, while sometimes indignant about the hand life has dealt her, is not nearly as negative and loathly as that of

the old woman of *The Romance of the Rose*. Biedler points out that Alison is more interested in the problem of marriage versus virginity, that she is not as old as La Vieille, and that she tells a story that is unique to her character rather than regurgitating someone else's text (20). Alison may have accumulated wealth through her marriages, but there is in her words a sense of the injustice in a system that forces a woman to become a master of the situation whatever way she can to feel worthy. Alison uses sex as a weapon because that is what is expected of her in the economical aspect of marriage agreements. And while Alison may claim her morals are not in line with the existing authority, she reveals that she is very concerned with having the approval of the spiritual authorities in the long run, no matter how flawed in character she admits that she is. In contrast, the old woman in *The Romance of the Rose* is a character to be feared and despised because Jean de Meun made her extremely immoral and one-sided. Furthermore, Alison knows much more than the old woman about texts and their authority over individual experience. Her voice is vibrant and interesting from the very moment she begins to speak, and she raises issues that cannot be ignored. Alison is also more difficult, by far, to contend with because in many instances, she has a legitimate case for herself and perhaps for other women as well. She may live up to the literary idea of anti-feminism, but she exhibits many facets of a lively, yet troubled, human being.

While actual texts are important in discovering individual author's influences on Chaucer and the cultural traditions behind Alison's character, searching for Alison in texts may be more complicated than examining one or more of Chaucer's sources. For example, not all aspects of the learned tradition are in agreement with one another. Andrew Galloway compares popular marriage sermons to how Alison speaks and the way

she winds her words around the authority of the learned tradition. He argues that the late medieval marriage sermons and the social atmosphere in which such sermons were delivered add a dimension to Alison's opening narrative because Alison speaks against the selfish and gender-motivated reasons clerks use textual authority by using methods similar to the sermon genre (4). Alison's argument about her own married state may seem like it is a direct attack on authority, but it actually has the power of authoritative text behind its claims. Galloway elaborates on the legitimacy of marriage in the sermon tradition:

> An early-fourteenth-century German preacher, Peregrinus of Oppeln, begins with a commendation of marriage as a divinely instituted *ordo* superior to the other religious orders: unlike the Benedictines, the Cistercians, and the other religious *ordines*, "the order of marriage alone has been instituted by God; happy indeed are those who have such an abbot." The Wife makes no such claim directly about the sacral quality of marriage in relation to the "other" orders, but she refers to the divine authority of her "estaat" no fewer than seven times in the first 162 lines. (6-7) [14]

Not only does Alison speak like a preacher, she relates experiences that appear in marriage sermons. Alison's questionable early relationship with Jankyn is especially similar to one of Peregrinus' sermons. Galloway states,

> Peregrinus then turns to condemn those wives who "always do the contrary of what their husbands want…just as it happened to a certain man with a wife who when he passed through a meadow…" Peregrinus

> leaves the exemplum unfinished... but its point is obvious, and its appearance here remains the closest analogue I know to the Wife's description of flirting with Jankyn. (8)

Alison comes bravely close to admitting infidelity during her fourth marriage, but she stops short of saying enough for anyone to convict her. Chaucer may have derived some of her experiences from more popular written sources, which would make her character even more recognizable and humorous to his audiences.

Not only do some of her experiences with Jankyn appear to be derived from these sources, but some of her particularly "feminine characteristics" are possibly already present in the sermon tradition. For example, Galloway points out that sermons frequently discuss women in marriage as a good and bad influence which is similar to the contradictory manner in which Alison speaks about herself (8). She tells her audience that she uses her sharp tongue in the first three marriages to get what she wants, but her fourth husband poses a particular problem: "My fourthe housbonde was a revelour— / This is to seyn, he hadde a paramour— / An I was yong and ful of ragerye" (453-5). Her acts of nagging could be more than just the jealous ravings of a woman. Galloway states, "a wife's zealous argument is actually encouraged by Januensis's sermon. In a lengthy section under 'zelus tepidus' ('too little zeal in the face of sin'), Januensis declares that wives must never be silent or passive when confronted by their husbands' sins, no matter how many 'false reasons' husbands produce to assert their masculine superiority" (11).[15] It is possible that Alison not only feels neglected because of her fourth husband's lack of interest in her but she also feels responsible, to some degree, for his moral character. Galloway further contends that a wife's zealous argument is a recognized part of

authoritative tradition: "The passage in Januensis's sermon presents vigorous encouragement for the voices of women—if only in the private setting of a domestic argument—an encouragement that takes on a special life in the vehemently interactive spirit of late-medieval preaching" (12). Her talking is for a moral purpose; she is responsible for her fourth husband's spiritual rewards: "By God, in erthe I was his purgatorie, / For which I hope his soule be in glorie" (489-90). Larry D. Benson remarks, "The notion of marriage as earthly purgatory is common enough to make ascribing it to a certain source unlikely" (p. 869). Yet Benson, or one of the editors of *The Riverside Chaucer*, also notes a source where Christ states that marriage is a torment that purifies one (869). By telling her audience about her particular experience with her frustrating fourth husband, Alison alludes to an aspect of the textual tradition that defends the state of marriage. She suggests that her fourth husband may be in heaven because of her harshness to him: "But he was quit, by God and by Seint Joce! / I made hym of the same wode a croce; / Nat of my body, in no foul manere" (483-85). Even though this kind of authority places unfair expectations on women, it nonetheless acknowledges women's power in relationships and their moral responsibilities.

While this avenue to power is limited and serves to uphold the male importance in society, the sermon tradition in support of marriage to some extent counteracts the anti-marriage attitudes of the male celibate clergy. These sermons are also perpetuated by texts and the preachers who preach them give them authority. Alison therefore may be operating out a recognized aspect of the male literary tradition, somewhat in opposition to the positions of the learned clergy, in supporting her own marital situation. Her opposition to clerks may not be simply a woman's wish to defend her sexual license,

but instead may stem from a social tradition of men and women who listen to the sermons on the virtues and authority of the married state. If she is also reacting to her fifth husband as well as social convention, in effect she adopts the methods of preaching to combat his clerical-like authority over her and what that represents in the social system. If Alison listened to sermons from Jankyn or eleswhere, as we assume she would, then this may explain why she knows so much about authoritative language and how to use it. Chaucer may be borrowing from this tradition and even these very sermons for some of the aspects of Alison's character that earlier critics have believed make her unique.

Linking Alison's character and the portrayal of Alison's experience to one sermon or a group of sermons has its limitations. Still, because the sermon tradition can be linked to popular social trends the comparison can be helpful in determining the extent of her dissent. The textual traditions of clerks and the need for validating everyday experiences of the population do not necessarily coincide. While these sermons are a part of the male literary models that Alison believes are against women, they are also perhaps popular aspects of the authoritative tradition that validate everyday experience.

This paper does not address all the social trends in Medieval England at the time that Chaucer created Alison; however, her narrative strongly suggests that popular debates about traditional knowledge were pushing the limits of textual authority beyond its former boundaries. For example, critics such as Mark Amsler, Claire Cross, and Galloway link Alison's discourse to subversive counter-traditions such as Lollardy.[16] One of the most important claims of the Lollards is that marriage deserves an elevated status (Cross 364). Alison's claims may have been more familiar to her audience than

we initially give them credit for. Interpreting passages from texts in new and different ways rather than accepting their authoritative glossings may have been performed quite often. Even the preachers would have had conflicting ideas about how to interpret scripture.

As historical information becomes increasingly more important in uncovering social trends and motivations behind Chaucer's text, critics examine the power of the written word and how it relates more directly to women's roles in an increasingly literate society. Another trend worth noting is the increasing numbers of private readers, primarily upper-class women.[17] Women, if allowed to read on their own, could be seen as acting without proper authority. Private readings encourage personal interpretation. While the Wife of Bath is not a reader, she claims rights of interpretation that are individual. In effect, she tries to empower herself by her acts of interpreting. Alison expresses a need for knowledge of texts and we see her adapting textual traditions for her discourse.

As the textual basis for Alison's personality, actions, and rhetoric are revealed, it becomes clear that, as an author, Chaucer creates the female image from the male textual tradition. If this is so, then why does Alison seem so full of life and modern to us? Perhaps as a modern audience we miss the nuances that a medieval audience would inherently know. Chaucer's intent in creating such a character and placing her in the social context of *The Canterbury Tales* reveals how intricate the subject of meaning is in Chaucer. The relationship of Alison's character to textual authority is a network of complex links that provide insight into cultural ideas about women while at the same time commenting on the authority itself. By placing Alison in *The Canterbury Tales*,

Chaucer adds a depth to the problem of textual authority that makes Alison more than just a typical character.

The Problem with Textual Authority

Even though Alison's character is largely based on the male literary tradition it attempts to refute, we can see that she serves another purpose as well. Her role in *The Canterbury Tales* is more complicated than simply to show us how every anti-feminist treatise is correct or incorrect, as the case may be. The presence of a character who, in arguing ineffectually against the system, shows that she is victimized by it, becomes a powerful statement against an authority that invalidates such an individual character. As she attempts to refute the arguments against women, she reveals an important perception about the authoritative language that she uses. Because Alison uses examples from texts for her purposes, she demonstrates that the creation and glossing of texts is political as well as gender-motivated.

Even if Alison cannot argue effectively against authority in order to change the standard opinions of the male clerics about what kind of woman she is, the very act of her defense shows how the learned discourse itself is problematic. Van comments on how Alison reveals the inconsistency of her attackers:

> if women are really so unimportant, why the anxiety about their behavior? If they are not worthy to interpret a text, why the obsession with them in stories? The wife knows that a need to identify and name the female presence has long traded masks with a sensual need to expose that presence, and that the eyes on her look with both uncertainty and desire. Her coarse response is to show herself, by way of defying but also by way of exposing her would-be exposers. (181-82)

Alison's ability to use language to her advantage, and the response she gets from the other pilgrims, like the Pardoner and the Clerk for instance, demonstrates a fear of the "feminine other" by the male clergy, and perhaps by other men as well. Seeking to control women by making them moral models or wicked sinners, the church patriarchy and those in control reveal insecurities about women and, ultimately, about themselves.

Alison is not learned like Jankyn, yet she is aware of how texts can be manipulated for a personal or political motive. Glossing texts is a common practice for those who claim authority for interpretation. She comments on interpretation of authoritative language in texts by men specifically and states that she can gloss just as well as anyone:

> Men may devyne and glosen, up and doun,
>
> But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye,
>
> God bad us for to wexe and multiplye;
>
> That gentil text kan I wel understonde. (26-29)

She understands authority as something interpreted and passed down. She respects what the *gentil text* itself says, but she suspects anything she is told to believe. On a surface level, this passage reveals her awareness of the contradictory nature of Biblical language. She has been told that it is a sin to be married, yet by God's authority she is allowed to enjoy the fruits of her wifehood. Because clerks viewed the woman as a threat, they undermined the real woman by portraying ideal women or wicked women in texts. The creation of social types is a means of controlling what cannot be understood. Hanna contends that literature was the means by which control over women was maintained: "Loss of physical sexual power creates the need for literary power; the bulk of male

corporality driving women down is replaced by the bulk of the book" (32). The power of the written word serves to ensure authoritative domination of women by making them one-sided in character and thus, easy to define as good or evil. In her *Prologue*, Alison demonstrates her acute awareness of male literary control and seeks to turn it around by attacking authority.

There are instances where even as she uses authoritative language, Alison shows the contradictory nature of such language. In the beginning of her prologue, she questions the definition of bigamy by pointing out the situation of Biblical greats, all of them men. Solomon had a license for sexuality that is denied to most women, and even men for that matter:

> Lo, heere the wise kyng, daun Salomon;
>
> I trowe he hadde wyves mo than oon.
>
> As wolde God it leveful were unto me
>
> To be refresshed half so ofte as he! (35-38)

She says God has allowed this kind of sexuality in the past and she thinks it would be fun if it could apply to her as well. Her Biblical criticism is not without humor and she reiterates, "Yblessed be God that I have wedded fyve/…/Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shall" (44-45).[18] Her personal experience colors her analogy but, again, she leaves it and goes on to include Lamech in her next example, which she sets up as a parallel to the Solomon example:

> What rekketh me, thogh folk seye vileynye
>
> Of shrewed Lameth and his bigamye?
>
> I woot wel Abraham was an hooly man,

And Jacob eek, as ferforth as I kan;

And ech of hem hadde wyves mo than two. (53-57)

Lamech, is the first bigamist, but Alison places him in the same category as the Hebrew patriarchs. While these are probably not the best arguments in her favor for having many husbands, the two examples expose inconsistencies in Biblical text. What makes one man a great church patriarch and another a bigamist? The underlying question that motivates such citations is: what makes one woman, married or otherwise, any better than any other?

The contradictory nature of Biblical language is not a very difficult thing to reveal, however. If Alison is aware of such language from listening to it, she obviously can pinpoint its faults, much as any other person of her time could probably have done. Her problem with authoritative language goes deeper than a demonstration of how a few passages from the Bible do not mesh with each other in meaning. Alison is aware that Biblical interpretation is a much more complex system of glossings and layered use of authoritative sources. By demonstrating the contradictory nature of Biblical interpretations, she begins to reveal how these texts are used and why they are used. Hence, the authority of the written word is declared to be not absolute. Authority has many sources, and those sources are not always in agreement with each other or orthodox thought. Not only do popular traditions sometimes contradict authority, but the authorities themselves have manipulated texts for self-serving purposes.

Alison's words would possibly have been familiar to her audience, especially the learned members of her audience, because they have echoes of church controversy behind them.[19] Those who perpetuated the ideals of the learned tradition had not always

adhered to one way of thinking or expression of those thoughts. Importantly, however, those who disagreed drastically were dealt with harshly. While her arguments may seem heretical and, therefore, easy to refute, Alison, whether she is *fully* aware of it or not, points to a problem with glossed texts:

> Though the precise terms of the Jovinian-Jerome controversy may have been concealed from her, its essence lies at the root of her troubled defense of sexuality—or more exactly, female sexuality. If the mere fact of her endowment by Nature with a desire for wedlock must tell against her, then she is subject to an injustice that rankles. (Wurtele 210)

The injustice she feels comes across much like an heretical argument. For example, as we have already seen, Alison uses arguments that echo Jovinian. Jerome mentions that Jovinian makes married people equal to virgins; the saint reacts to the injustice of such assertions by refuting them as heretical (211). Alison does not go as far as Jovinian; however, she sees that texts can be manipulated to serve a specific purpose. She is aware of St. Jerome and Jovinian, and therefore she is able, at least in part, to imitate Jerome's argumentative language.

By revealing personal motivations behind texts, Alison attacks those motivations. She reacts to male control of women in their texts by attempting to "defame" men in textual terms. Moreover, Alison imagines a feminine authority, also textual, equivalent to the anti-feminist male textual authority:

> By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,
> As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
> They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse

Than al the mark of Adam may redresse. (693-96)

The key word here is "if." The texts that Alison envisions are non-existent; she does not know of any book or treatise that does what she would like it to—pay back the clerks who are responsible for women's problems. Unfortunately, Alison's anti-male statement reveals her thirst for power through revenge. Such statements paint her in a negative light because she becomes the product of the anti-feminist male treatises that she hates. Still this reaction, while revealing her quest for control, can be examined for its reasons. When Alison says, "Therfore no womman of no clerk is preysed" (706), her audience is let in on a fundamental problem with the authority of texts. Her wish for revenge is a result of her struggle for validity. In her search for reasons behind textual manipulation, Alison blames textual control of women on sexually frustrated old clerks. She states:

Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho,

Thanne sit he doun, and writ in his dotage

That wommen can nat kepe hir mariage! (708-10)

Whether she is accurate in her assumption or not, she demonstrates an awareness of why texts are created and perpetuated. Because men control the attitudes about women and suppress their authority, she must struggle to voice an authority of her own.

Alison attacks directly the idea of male texts and the manipulation of the opinions of women; she comments on female sacred text by not saying anything about it. Alison's validation of her very existence cannot extend to the sacred life of women because her own life does not parallel the virgin ideal or the chaste widow and this presents a problem when she searches for a valid authority. Thus, Alison never appeals to the Virgin Mary as an authority for women, even though the Virgin is ever-present in

Alison's statements. Alison's obsession with virginity and the idea of its perfection stresses how she has no acceptable moral standard to refer to on her own behalf because the sacred life negates the value in Alison's married status. Alison does not use the holy female as an authority or an example because she is aware that women saints, and their images of perfection, are created and perpetuated by men and the textual tradition that she opposes. She mentions them once in the *Prologue*:

> For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
> That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
> But if it be of hooly seintes lyves,
> Ne of noon oother womman never the mo. (688-91)

According to Alison, the only good women mentioned by clerks are women saints. There is no in-between as far as Alison has ever been taught. She does not and cannot appeal to a feminine authority because she believes the image of the perfect female is a fiction created by clerks. For Alison, sacred feminine authority is not always a uniquely "feminine" experience, but it is one in which a woman is still subject to unreasonable demands. It is interesting to note that Alison mentions one clerical woman in her list of what makes up Jankyn's book, "Helowys, / That was abbesse nat fer fro Parys" (677-8). This woman appears as part of a list of male authorities on religion and love such as St. Jerome and Ovid. Her name in the list suggests Alison's awareness that women such as Heloise are creations of a male texts. Alison does not dispute her actual existence, and probably does not even question it as historical fact, but she categorizes Heloise as a part of an oppressive system. Heloise's placement in this list also implies that the *example of Heloise* has probably been used against her at one point. Heloise is not a woman Alison

would consider an authority because, by denying her sexual nature and the needs which come naturally, she suppressed experience and emotion. Alison may not despise her, but she is probably aware that she is a creation of male literacy and its tradition. Heloise made herself into the creation of clerks, so much so, that she also became a perpetuator of the literary mode that sought to suppress female sexuality (Hanna 33-34). Alison is suspicious of a feminine literary model, like Heloise, who perpetuates male authority.

Peggy Knapp describes the problem Alison has when she attempts to clear herself in relation to authority: "the text of Alisoun's prologue is shot through with inescapable markers to a code that would condemn her, that would turn her intended apologia into an unintended confession" (120). While Alison is aware that men create an ideal image of women, she endangers herself by falling into the trap that is laid for her. She recalls for her audience how she has lied to men, deceived men, tricked men, and taken pleasure in her sexual exploits over them, how she has gained mastery over them in marriage. By announcing that she is against men who seek to control and label her, she becomes like the image of Eve who is responsible for the woes of men. Knapp elaborates on this point: "More damaging than her particular offenses, though, is her explanation of them, her desire to be right about the theology while remaining unwilling to repent and give up her vices" (120). Alison is defined by a *concept* of what woman is. Eve is a product of male textual glossings similar to the image of the virgin ideal, and just as Mary's image is inconsistent with reality, Eve's image is also difficult to reconcile to the idea of a real woman.

Alison exploits the negative image of Eve as an example to exemplify her gender-motivated opposition to male textual authority. She uses the example of Eve in a way

that suggests glossing for a personal and gender-motivated purpose. In this instance, her textual knowledge is based on an experience in which the learned tradition has been used as a controlling force against her. She tells her audience about Eve in the context of recalling all the wicked women that she lists from Jankyn's book:

> Of Eva first, that for hir wikkednesse,
> Was al mankynde broght to wrecchednesse,
> For which that Jhesu Crist hymself was slayn,
> That boghte us with his herte blood agayn. (715-18)

Jankyn read to her about Eve first. Therefore, Eve becomes the model by which she has been judged. Even though Alison cites the Eve example in a way that appears to prove that all women, including herself, are inferior (because she is a woman and woman was the loss of all mankind), the all-encompassing idea of Eve is not as simple as her statement. Leicester discusses how *exempla* are sometimes open to alternate meanings than what they are supposed to teach.[20] He cites the Eve passage as particularly interesting for Alison's discourse:

> Even without invoking notions like *felix culpa* it is possible to feel that the final couplet of this passage does not exhaust the meaning of Eve; the central couplet, especially "That boghte us with his herte blood agayn," presses a set of consequences of Eve's action that makes the simple antifeminist moral seem more negative and less complex than the universal history to which it supposedly refers... Though Mary is not explicitly mentioned here or among the daughters of Eve whose stories follow, her absence... is conspicuous. (118)

In other words, when Alison uses Eve for her purposes in setting herself up in opposition to the male, she acts much like male authorities who quote texts as *exemplum* of a particular moral. The opposition to herself as woman against *al mankynde* helps her to attack the male system by exposing the way in which moral judgment is derived. Eve is a negative female force, she is the cause of the *wrecchednesse* of men, and by virtue of her being female she gives her sex a negative stigma.

Alison uses Eve as an extreme example to prove a point seemingly not in her own favor, but the "meaning of Eve," as Leceister calls it, is not exhausted. It is because of this inexhaustibility Alison brings to the forefront the inexact nature of words and their meanings. Examples from sacred texts that are used for selfish purposes present us with moral lessons that cannot be absolute because they expose the motives of the speaker. The truth can never be uncovered because language is based on subjective experience. For instance, Alison's words are like a lament: "Lo, heere expres of womman may ye fynde / That womman was the los of al mankynde" (719-20), but the problem of Eve's *wikkednesse* remains unresolved: if Adam and Eve had not experienced the separation from God, there would be no salvation of mankind, no Christ, no forgiveness of sin, most importantly, no human race. Therefore, blaming woman for the existence of the human race contradicts the reality of everyday experience. If Alison is like Eve, then the extreme view of her sexuality as only wicked cannot be ultimately proven with authoritative texts alone.

The question of whether Alison is actually a threat to the male textual system has caused much controversy among critics. She can viewed as a great literary joke. She can be laughed aside, ridiculed, or called inconsistent and therefore ineffectual. However,

because she can get away with making her brash statements, she actually can become the vehicle for bringing issues of textual control to the forefront. By ostentatiously confronting the issue textual authority versus one's own experience, she obliges her listeners to confront the issue, not only in her character, but also within themselves. And because she is a woman, she becomes the symbol of what a male-authored text does to create the "feminine other," sometimes unfairly. Because of her complex way of pleading with authorities for validity, she becomes a comment on traditional textual authority.

The questions of how to read Alison in relation to the male-centered sacred tradition reveal that a medieval text that is so heavily gender-inflected is not devoid of the post-modernism that takes apart a text for its underlying forces. In attempting to uncover the way in which Chaucer renders Alison feminine or not-feminine, and by attempting to see her in a semi-historical light, we see that textual revelation is an ongoing process of negotiation. Perhaps the key point to remember about the literary criticism surrounding *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* is that the various arguments are never really separate from the individual personalities who write about Chaucer. These individuals are also a product, to some degree, of their own textual traditions.

Towards a Conclusion:

Chaucer's *Entente* and the Gender Politics of Literary Criticism

> *As taketh not agrief of that I seye,*
>
> *For myn entente nys but for to pleye.* (191-2)

Entente is an extremely important word in *The Canterbury Tales* since Chaucer plays so much with words and their meanings. Chaucer's words are slippery and inexact. The reader must extract meaning by acts of criticism and interpretation. In Alison's own speech, she mentions the difference between what people mean and what they say. While we can read these lines as a statement Alison uses to appease her audience, we can also wonder if her voice here is not Chaucer's as well. Chaucer's *entente* is ambiguous with regards to a character like Alison because the ironic nature of his characters, especially his outspoken women, make their purpose in *The Canterbury Tales* elusive. What were his motives in creating a character who claims her right to the feminine experience while she rejects the very authority that created her? If Chaucer intended her to be the model of an independent woman in the rising middle class, then one can argue that he gives women voices. If, however, he intended Alison to be a social type, a representation of a woman who is the downfall of mankind, she could not very easily be the example of Ricardian England's foremost feminist voice. She would simply be a testament to why women cannot and should not interpret texts, a woman who could be judged inferior, and even laughed at, by existing authority. But what, then, does one make of Chaucer's use of Alison as an authority in *The Canterbury Tales* and in his other

works? Is it becoming to her? Alison, as a product of a male text, could indicate the perpetuation of women's inferior status in *The Canterbury Tales*.

The female in Alison's world is always shadowed by a textual authority that is male. Alison is controlled by texts; she is a creation of texts. Most importantly, she *is* a text. The fact that Chaucer gives her the authority of the written word in a way that calls into question the ability of those words to dictate experience is significant. Making statements about what Chaucer really intended to do is dangerous because Chaucer himself was aware that the relationship between authority and experience cannot always be accurately portrayed. While Chaucer may have based almost everything Alison says about her experiences on the authority of some text or other, the fact is that he also exposes the limitations of authority. Erzgraber, who discusses Chaucer's negotiation of experience and authority in Chaucer's works, states, "as Chaucer is equally conscious of the fact that he cannot trust the material upon which he bases his poetry as one trusts an absolute truth, he accepts all experience with doubt and treats all his authorities with critical caution" (76). When Chaucer questions the authority of the written word and the sacred tradition of the written word *in his own* texts, he makes the reader aware of the problems inherent in assigning to a woman like Alison a set of conventions that she must always fit into neatly.

Erzgraber and other critics frequently allude to a Chaucer who reaches beyond the stereotypical portrayal of women. For example, Erzgraber examines the increasing complexity of Criseyde's character as she makes a promise to Troilus, breaks it, and, in her remorse, realizes her weakness: "[a character] gains in complexity the greater its range of experience in life becomes. In the case of Criseyde, too, experience brings to

the fore new aspects of her character, making it impossible to dismiss her as simply a faithless lover" (78). Chaucer presents the reader with characters that cannot be put into categories easily, and Chaucer's women are especially difficult to categorize. Perhaps this is because he cannot understand the "feminine other," but perhaps it is also because he recognizes a common thread of humanity in all people which extends beyond the confines of gender politics. Lee also argues for Chaucer's recognition of women's place in relation to authoritative structures. Lee points out that even though Chaucer's women can be seen as typical protagonists for their respective genres, "it should be obvious that none of them suffers from either the thematic constriction that governs allegorical figures, or from a failure on the artist's part to endow them with that inner life which invites critical inquiry about what sort of persons they are" (2). Chaucer's women may be couched in the confines of textual convention, but his portrayal of them goes beyond simple rehashings of stereotype. By giving attention to women's experiences in his works, he gives them a certain amount of validity even if their positions are still inferior. Lee argues, for example, that Chaucer's Knight hints, in spite of himself, that Emelye is a real woman with real desires. These desires are expressed in the terms of authority and later changed by that authority to enhance her supportive relationship to the patriarchal society: "Emelye does not entirely escape the stereotype, which the Knight probably endorses, but signs of the emergence of a real woman are there in spite of him" (5). The fact that Emelye is "happily frustrated," as Lee puts it, is a foreshadowing of a voice like Alison's. Emeyle's experience as an independent woman is invalidated and negated in relation to authority, but through such a portrayal Emelye, like Alison, becomes a symbol of the treatment of the "feminine other" by male literacy.

If a woman has a voice in a male text, she ultimately would gain some status, but a text can also be a means to perpetuate the stereotype. Alison seems to be the epitome of everything an anti-feminist denounces in the woman, but she is not simply a nagging wife, and she is certainly not a typical loathly lady, even if she is derived from the antifeminist tradition manifested in scripture, treatises, sermons, etc. Her prologue may have undertones of a *fabliaux*, but she shatters any neat notions of a sex-driven woman who would tell bawdy tales by revealing the complexities of her human personality. *The Shipman's Tale*, with its portrayal of a wife who uses her sexual nature for money and power, was presumably meant for Alison. Such a tale would make Alison fit neatly into the stereotype by suggesting that she does not have any morals, that she uses sex to achieve wealth, and power, and status, like the woman in the tale. It would suggest that Alison is a woman somewhat akin to a prostitute. Nonetheless, whatever may have been his original intent, Chaucer eventually composed *The Wife of Bath's Tale* for his sole non-ecclesiastic female character. Alison's prologue may give the impression that she is in some ways like a prostitute, but her tale demonstrates how women like her are also victims of what existing authorities dictate about women, not only in church life, but in everyday life. Chaucer demonstrates that women's status is limited by the authority of the written word.

Alison's problem with textual authority also stems from the fact that she is subject to a secular tradition and to an economic view of marriage that automatically puts her in opposition to church teachings about sexuality. Chaucer comments on the institution of marriage for its economics, also suggesting that Alison's marriage may not have been of her own choosing. Alison tells her audience that she was married as a child:

"sith I twelve yeer was of age" (4). Continually, Alison makes it clear that economics and sex are linked: "And, by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor. / They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor" (203-4). Sheila Delany argues that because Alison was married at age twelve she would have had little or no choice over the "disposition of her body... not Alice but her parents or guardians would have invested this choice piece of sexual capital for the sake of social standing and a profitable settlement" (74). While Delany's criticism is based on an analysis of socio-economic trends, her arguments support the idea of male textual control because she shows how women are extremely limited in their choices. Delany comments further about how Chaucer comments on these social ills: "From the doctrinal point of view she is spiritually impoverished, and Chaucer's condemnation of her sexual economics represents in small his critique of the competitive, accumulative practices of the medieval bourgeoisie at large" (74).

Although *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* can be seen as a critique of the classes, Alison has a more complex purpose than simply to be Chaucer's critique of women's wiles or of middle-class values. The rapist knight of her tale may seem like an anomaly, but her tale is meant to instruct men about how women are treated by the existing system of authority. Alison's textual manipulation of the tale parallels the old woman's manipulative acts, which can be seen as an aspect of her character. Her fiction becomes the means to create a better world. Joan Ferrante comments that manipulation is a reflection of women's limited opportunities that surfaces in the literature because literature can be a way to control reality (213). Because of her need to control *her* reality, Alison comments on a male authority that seeks to disallow authority for the female. Her literary story, in which the female wields power, is an act of textual control.

Thus, her response to the textual source that she manipulates in her tale becomes a way of having control over her own experience. To reach others with her voice, she manipulates the audiences literary experience as well. Her tale is, in effect, an act of literary criticism—teaching the rapist knight about women becomes an important step to making her voice heard in her world of experience.

Even if Chaucer created Alison from texts, and even if one accepts that he regards her as inferior because she is a woman and from the middle class, her presence in *The Canterbury Tales* comments on the control a male system has over such a woman. Perhaps in the process of creating Alison, Chaucer became aware of an injustice. As he added complexity to her character, he gave her a depth that surpassed the social types inherent in pre-existing texts. Hence, her interesting contradictions become a vehicle for addressing the spiritual and moral dilemmas a woman such as Alison faced. Through Alison, Chaucer exposes the core of gender politics by commenting on the inconsistencies, and even cruelties, of gender-related texts on the subject of women. Her middle-class twist to a romance says more about the tensions between the sexes in medieval society than the Knight demonstrates in his poetic treatment of the male hierarchy in relation to the societal position of the female. By telling a story in which the independent woman must marry to support the chivalric system the Knight places the female figure into her accepted category. While Chaucer may have chosen to make Alison into a woman who can drive her argument home without a doubt, he shows that a woman is not incapable of understanding the effect the authority of texts have on her life.

Even though he adheres to "wife" as a type for Alison's character, there is evidence of Chaucer's awareness of how the anti-feminist tradition creates problems for

women in other tales as well. For example, *The Clerk's Tale* presents a narrator who refutes Alison's arguments by the subtleties of his narrative style and subject. His admirable objectivity and his seemingly honorable sympathy with women make him into a man who appears to subvert a speaker like Alison, but in reality he is also engaging in his own critical act and rhetorical performance. Hansen elaborates: "The happy ending for Griselda, together with the dignity she retains throughout her trials, is the masterstroke of the Clerk's strategy, making his bias and aggression more difficult to spot" ("The Powers of Silence," 245). In other words, the Clerk's motives, like Alison's, are politically charged; he reveals, like Alison, that he is not free of the gender politics that frame his narrative:

> Tellingly, however, and like many of his fellow pilgrims, the Clerk does not stop talking quite soon enough. Contradiction at the end of the tale is a clear signal that this teller is not in perfect control and not any more aesthetically or philosophically or morally removed from the "real" uses of literary text than other men whose anti-feminism often takes the subtle form of celebrating and hence prescribing ideal female behavior. (245)

The Clerk is just as much a subject of texts as Alison is, and while he refutes her lifestyle and personality, he too reveals his personal motives, what Hansen calls a release of "his repressed sexual aggression" (245). Therefore, the Clerk helps Alison's cause by revealing that textual authority *is* used to manipulate others, in this case, the views about women. Chaucer demonstrates that the authoritative locution of the Clerk is not without personal subjectivity, and one could argue that Chaucer's sympathy with Alison is heightened at this point.

If one defends Chaucer's vision of women, one can see in Chaucer's writings a treatment of women that, for his time, is extraordinary. However, there is another side of the coin. Questions about Chaucer and gender are easy to come up with, but difficult to answer. Is Chaucer's sympathy with the "feminine" an issue that can even be resolved? When Chaucer's sympathy with women is examined in detail, there are always unanswered questions. While some critics point out that Chaucer shows the woman as human, others argue in favor of his feminist tendencies only to a certain point. Lee Patterson makes a strong case that Chaucer does not attempt to explore the complex realities of marriage and Alison's position in her time: "Chaucer is choosing to depend on a timeless literary tradition rather than dealing with the historical specificity of his contemporary world" (136). Along these lines, Wurtele contends that the conditions of textual authority in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, while somewhat lost on Alison herself, would not have been lost on Chaucer: "the contexual situation thus provided a rich source of irony" (209). If this is true, Chaucer does not appear to give her any validity at all. Critics such as Hagen and Hansen do not see Alison as representing a strong independent female whose actions and voicing of those actions subvert male textual authority. Rather, she is a woman who upholds the hierarchy she claims to denounce. For example, Hagen discusses Chaucer's use of a language and narrative style that have traits of a uniquely feminine nature, but ultimately she states that Chaucer probably would not have been able to understand a woman, not being one himself: "Chaucer simply could not entertain any other consequence of the hermeneutics he was creating. He could imagine no other result for his experiment than for woman's will to be a man's will for woman, for apart from—and in relation to—man, there was no will for a secular

woman capable of authentication" (118). Hagen argues that Chaucer is a man who operates within stereotypes, a man who cannot see the positive implications of what Alison tries to do. According to Hagen, Alison is not to be taken seriously because she cannot control textual interpretation and, in fact, would not ultimately want to. Similarly, Hansen argues that Alison is actually silenced in relation to authority. Alison is powerless, self-destructive; her "discourse in the *Prologue* and *Tale* belies her apparent garrulity, autonomy, and dominance" (*Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 27). Hansen posits that textual authority is the framework and the means by which to validate the self, and because Alison does not adhere to that, she is judged as an incoherent female who does not understand the methods she attempts to use. This line of argument proposes that Alison's abundant words serve to reinforce her inadequacy by revealing those instances where she becomes trapped in her own logical loops.

Curiously, neither of these examples sheds light on how and why Chaucer created Alison. When one discusses a text like *The Canterbury Tales* it is virtually impossible for one not to bring gender-related issues into the mix, and with a text like *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* it is impossible not to examine the relationship of gender to such works. The questioning of gender issues in Chaucer's text can be extended one step further beyond questions about his feminism or anti-feminism. How gender influences our reading of texts appears not only in Alison's locution, but also in the literary criticism that surrounds her. Is Chaucer made into a man with far-reaching and visionary feminist sympathies by those who want to give his authority validity in an age of feminism and political correctness? And what about critics who claim Chaucer does not have much sympathy toward women at all? Such questions force us to examine the processes of

interpretation. For example, Hansen's criticism is controversial because she challenges the acceptance of the literary tradition as is stands and gives voice to those concerns that many marginalized readers have when looking at a work of the canon. She also demonstrates an awareness of how gendered language influences our readings of literature.

In Chaucer's text, Alison questions perspective when she asks, "Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?" (692). The clerks may be able to quote authoritative texts in order to influence someone's view of the world and view of their own experiences, but there will always be cases where such acts serve to invalidate experience and suppress. If no one can say for certain who painted the lion, then the authority of those in power is shaky. New perspectives are threatening, because they raise new questions and interpretations about the authority of language and from where that authority comes.

Alison makes us aware of how language shapes experiences; interaction with texts is an act of critical interpretation based on one's experience. If we step back and look at the contexts in which literary works are created, we can go beyond Chaucer's work and examine our own language and the processes and forces by which we produce meaning from the written word. In *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and in the written criticism, language is often contingent upon gender-related issues. For example, the literary criticism about *The Wife of Bath's Tale* often contains language that carries gender-specific connotations, some of which can be construed as negative for either sex. Critics vary on the issues surrounding the feminine treatment in Chaucer and argue heatedly about Chaucer's women. For instance, Hagen examines this issue by demonstrating the language used and questioning the values assessed in John Alford's

study of the Wife of Bath and the Clerk. She comments on the ways critics judge Alison by pointing out a problem inherent in proving Alison's logic is flawed: " the argument is circular because the values of the prevailing authority are used to judge the Wife at fault for being in opposition to those values. Alisoun herself becomes lost in a loop of self-validating assumptions that men have presented as aesthetic criteria" (112). Hagen points to the problems critics have when examining gender differences, especially in a text like *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*; however, even the style of her own questioning, which denounces a male-dominated system, is motivated by gender. Hagen denounces Chaucer's authority in creating a woman because he cannot understand the other sex, and she is continually critical of Alison's selfish use of language from authoritative texts to support her sexual and marital exploits; yet she also boldly asserts that Alison's differences should be an equally valid way to express the self. This kind of contradiction in the criticism about a woman like Alison reveals the personal motives and unresolved questions of the critic.

While literary criticism is meant to reveal the work it discusses, much like Alison's discourse it reveals the forces behind the creation of literary works in general. In the case of the Wife of Bath, a text can be gender-motivated and gender-inflected. For example, Power, as I noted above, discusses the medieval church and its views of women: "Janus-faced, it looked at women out of every sermon and treatise, yet never knew which face to turn on her..." (14). Power sets up an opposition between the church and women with her language, not far from the opposition that probably existed in the Middle Ages. However, even in her statement that the church viewed women with antagonism, her language conveys an attitude, a kind of mild indignation about how

women were viewed. "Janus-faced" implies deception and unresolved contradiction, which no doubt existed, but also paints the patriarchal structure in an extremely negative light. It defends the feminine *harshly* against the masculine church that sought to suppress it. Power, as writer and critic, is a product of textual history, a history of women's validation in modern times. Therefore her words have political intentions that are inherently gender-related, and like Alison she speaks against the negative effects of an oppressive authority.

These kinds of gender-inflected statements surface in other criticism as well. Hansen examines these problems in detail by pointing out the way the feminine is sometimes discussed in relation to the masculine *in* Chaucer's text as well as in the criticism *surrounding* Chaucer's text. She cites examples from critics such as Patterson and Donaldson, both male, who judge Alison's female identity with assumptions based on a male-oriented critical authority. Hansen believes that Patterson poses a particular problem:

> Repeatedly, he presupposes that both "the medieval poetic consciousness" and the modern critical consciousness are male or masculine, that a transhistorical notion of male heterosexuality is essential to the task of reading (women), and that reading women is a constitutive activity... for authors and audiences alike. For example, Patterson speaks of the Wife's rhetorical come-on in her Prologue and notes that "*for the male audience* feminine speaking *is never* wholly divested of the titillating ambivalence of eroticism..." (*Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 44-5)

She emphasizes what she considers to be Patterson's gender-biased language in italics to make her point clear. Hansen denounces Patterson's statement—the acts of criticism, including the *reading of women*, are validated by a male-dominated critical system—because it places the female reader in an awkward and marginalized position. According to Hansen, this kind of reading is a problem for women readers and critics because it assumes that any women writing or speaking for a male audience will never be able to separate herself from her sexuality. Ironically, some feminist critics, like Hagen and Hansen, often seek to separate themselves from traditional male-dominated criticism in order to have voices of their own. It is no wonder that critics who struggle for an authoritative voice against such a system find that validating their arguments is problematic. This was true in the past, and feminist criticism has yet to fully escape the implications of a male-dominated system of language and criticism. Questions of contexts forces us to examine our language in order to understand responses and challenges to authoritative texts.

As I wrote about Alison's character and the statement Chaucer makes with her, I became aware that the language I use is particularly slanted to defend the feminine, while not denouncing anything non-feminine. Because of an awareness of how critics view texts in relation to gender, I also found that *my* interaction with this text became highly personal. By examining the gender-related language of this text in light of a male-dominated literary tradition, I became aware of my own use of authoritative language to assert my opinion on the subject with some validity. For example, I used the language of authority to support my arguments, to clarify my points. Like Alison's language, my language mimicked authoritative language. Using criticism became my own act of

glossing texts, much as Alison uses authorities to color her text. In addition, I used "Alison," instead of the "Wife of Bath," because it elevated her to a status of a real person, not just a literary character or a social type defined and existing because of the male patriarchal structure and the authority of *Chaucer's* text. Thus *my* motives became somewhat gender-motivated beyond just a passing personal interest; I discovered, as I wrote, that I also responded to Chaucer's works with gender-specific motives in mind. I became aware that I was beginning to examine Chaucer's authority as a male poet speaking with a woman's voice. I began to look at his right to such an authority by examining the literary creation of Alison's words and her situation. I demonstrated that he sometimes lacks insight when he writes from an anti-feminist viewpoint, but I also showed that he deserved credit for the creation of such an extraordinary character.

The dialogue among critics reveals a negotiation of complex gendered readings. The act of examining language affects reading of textual authority and how individual readers talk about and see themselves in relation to that authority. Inevitably, one's relationship to the literary tradition becomes highly personal. Alison herself raises these same questions in her discourse. The act of criticism, then, becomes much like Alison's acts of glossing; both acts reveal the in-absolute nature of the authoritative tradition from which individuals operate. Chaucer recognized the slipperiness of authority manifested in the written word. Without the authority of words he could not write, but with words he was able to question the very nature of words. Thus, his text invites us into performing our own critical acts and also to examine those acts for their motivations. This is one reason why our responses to his words have resonated through the ages and show no signs of waning today.

---

[1] I use the word "text" to refer to written works, usually related to the church patriarchy, such as treatises on marriage, virginity, etc. Sermons, written scripture, and various interpretations of these writings are also included. Often books were compilations which contained many excerpts from various authorities on the subject of love, women, marriage, etc. However, anti-feminist literature was not limited to church teachings and Biblical glossings. The secular literary tradition also had an impact on the attitudes of women during that time. For example the *fabliaux* portrayed women as negative figures. "Textual authority" is the force of superiority that this tradition carries with it. Generally, because women's education was more limited, women's access to sacred and secular texts was severely restricted or non-existent. Therefore, a woman' knowledge of this tradition would be limited, and thus her position in relation to the male learned tradition was automatically inferior.

[2] For specific information about the sources Alison uses see *The Riverside Chaucer* 865-872.

[3] While this section does not deal with the details of issues like rape, rape is a part of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and therefore I believe that it is worth noting some opinions of rape from the textual standpoint. Many of the church fathers believed that it was acceptable for a woman to consider suicide to preserve chastity, even though the specifics of these opinions vary. For example, Schulenburg points out that Ambrose believed a woman was allowed to commit suicide if her chastity was threatened. Augustine had a slightly different stance. He believed that it should not be allowable, but that women should have to bear such crimes with Christian patience. Furthermore, Pope

Leo I states in a letter that the loss of purity to the barbarians is okay as long as a woman feels shame and does not compare herself to unpolluted virgins. It was generally assumed that rape was the woman's fault, to some degree, and that she had to bear the guilt. For these details see Schulenburg 33-37.

[4] Critics, such as Amsler, Delany, Knapp, and Van among others, discuss marriage structure in relation to the economic and social forces apparent in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*. Alison's language often reflects a marriage system based on the perpetuation and the preservation of wealth. Although Alison can be criticised for her methods, her economically profitable marriages may be an avenue to power which is denied by the system.

[5] Jerome argues by asking questions, using Jovinian's arguments, then providing answers when he refutes Jovinian in *Adversus Jovinian*. Alison employs a similar method because of her use of questions. Wurtele 214-15 discusses her reaction to St. Paul's arguments in Jerome and Biedler 21-24 provides a summary of Jerome's *Adversus Jovinian*.

[6] In the first part of his article, Alford expounds on the historical rivalry between Rhetoric and Philosophy which goes back to the traditions of classical learning. Traditionally, the rhetorical values that Alison represents are considered immoral, without wisdom and inferior. I also encountered the idea of Alison as representation of rhetoric and the Clerk as representation of logic in Astell, chapter 5.

[7] Leicester agrees that what Alison says later colors the meaning of the things that come before. Furthermore, he analyzes her experience by noting where she turns

---

generalizations into a more personal experience. Her audience is not aware of specifics, yet the pronouns indicate that she is recalling memories. Leicster's argument is that she is applying self-interpretation as she goes, much as she would be interpreted by authority, and sometimes rejects these interpretations. As she speaks she reveals what she thinks even to herself and we see that she works it out as she goes. He sees this as evidence that Alison does not begin her talk with a specific set of arguments in mind, but that she unfolds her stories and their meanings as she talks, sometimes finding that she is disturbed even by her own inability to reconcile certain unexplained feelings to an acceptable view of these feelings (for example, the end of the fourth marriage and the beginning relationship with Jankyn).

[8] Hagen and Hanna agree to some extent that the way women speak and pass on knowledge is through a somewhat oral and private means because that is the avenue that is open to them. Hagen discusses narrative style in relation to the Wife of Bath while Hanna compares her *communal* knowledge to the *individual* male-authored text. Even Sleeth demonstrates how *dames loore* in *The Pardoner's Tale* and *The Manciple's Tale* is in some sense passed on by an oral transmission from one person or one generation to the next.

[9] Van 184 elaborates on how Alison is actually laughing at those who laugh and chuckle at her by daring them to make assumptions about her: "She has tried to reveal all, knowing that she will remain invisible to those of her critics who have already defined her."

[10] Hanna 31 stresses that "learning presents itself as a sanctioned artifact" of the book. However, he shows an example of authority that "rests on oral anecdote." He quotes Plutarch, Jerome, and Walter Map, using each author's version of the comparison of a woman with a tight shoe. He states "the truer author is Walter Map's Valerius. His 'Amice, cave' is the voice of speech and identifies, more precisely than Jerome, the source of the story." Hanna argues that while someone like Alison is awed by authority of the written word, ultimately this authority is based on experience put into writing.

[11] Leicester 82-83 points out that Alison's narrative gains focus after the Pardoner, interrupts her. She leaves her argument with a "large and vague" authority and moves on into a personal narrative. Furthermore, Leicester does not see the dialogue between Alison and the Pardoner as antagonistic even though there is irony in the Pardoner's response since he probably never intended to marry. Instead of using a "confrontational mode" she shifts her narrative style and "shows more sensitivity to the everyday social implications of her tirade and to the feelings of her audience." While Leicester sees this as evidence that Alison has no pre-planned argument, I argue that she has not forgotten to include her "arguments" with authority, but that they are not as explicit and more vague. Leicester says that she moves into a narrative of experience, but this experience is based on how authority views her.

[12] Wurtele 217-18 has other examples of how Theophrastus shows up in the Alison's arguments.

[13] Biedler 28 points out that the lines of *The Romance of the Rose* where the La Vieille speaks are 12740-14546.

[14] Galloway 8 points out that six sermons from Peregrinus' sermon cycle exist in extant English manuscripts.

[15] Galloway 9 provides evidence that Chaucer may have been familiar with the works of another popular set of sermons written by Jacopo da Varazze or "Januensis" in the text who was archbishop of Genoa: "By far the most popular and widely disseminated sermon cycle in late-medieval England is a single thirteenth-century collection featuring three sermons for the Cana text... At least twenty two collections of Januensis's dominical sermons are extant from late medieval England, a high number of copies for any late-medieval work... Such evidence suggests that both direct and indirect dissemination of Januensis's sermons would be likely to have reached Chaucer and the immediate audience he addressed."

[16] Finding textual evidence for Alison's belief in Lollard ideology is difficult. However, these critics either mention Lollardy as a possible influence on the thoughts of someone like Alison, or give details on how and why Alison's thoughts parallel this counter-tradition. For example, Amsler 73 points out that one of the "Lollard heresies" was that they sometimes encouraged and allowed women preachers in addition to reading and interpreting scripture. Galloway 25 examines Lollard preaching when he discusses the belief that no license was needed to preach, and often, along with other laity, Lollard preachers as well as others mocked the "professionally self-serving uses of preaching by the orthodox religious orders." The Lollards are not the only groups that wish to subvert traditional textual authority but are a part of a growing trend of using the sermon for purposes other than what was traditionally dictated. Cross discusses the activities of

---

women Lollards in an historical article. While the activities of Lollard women can only be guessed at, Cross 359, 360 and 364 argues that women may have found many Lollard teachings attractive, such as the equality of secular and sacred offices and the elevation of the married state to the point that even the sacred orders could marry. Furthermore, she contends that women may possibly have played an important role in spreading Lollard ideas.

17 Some critical work has been done on women's role in reading and disseminating text. For example Bell 167 and 177-79 examines upper-class lay women and their role in reading and teaching from text. She argues that not only are they ambassadors of culture through patronage of books, like books of hours, but they are also responsible for changing the iconography to portray more women reading and learning from texts. Women, however, by these actions are private readers and therefore, could pose a threat to traditional authority. Dickson 62 uses Bell's ideas as she links the lack of Alison's ability to argue for a "feminine community of readers an speakers" with the social trends of women's relationship to text. She links the decline in women's education of the later Middle Ages with the empowering imagery in books that women commissioned and owned. For example, in many books of hours Mary is depicted as reading and Dickson 65-67 asserts that this stems from the need to depict women reading.

18 In some MSS, there are lines between these two statements that provide more description about how and why Alison chose her five husbands:

> 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;

O fyve husbondes scoleiyng am I. (44a-44f)

Benson 865 discusses why these lines are labeled 44a-f. There is some controversy as to whether they were added later by Chaucer himself or an editor/scribe because of their absence in some of the best MSS. Beidler 45-46 also labels them this way in *The Wife of Bath* and points out that not only are they not in the Ellesmere or the Hengwrt MSS, but that they are also not in Walter Skeat's 1894 edition. It is questionable, therefore, just how much of her personal experience she inserts into this particular Biblical example. If she said these lines, they imply that she enjoyed the variety of sex partners. If she did not, her language is still humorous, but she moves back into her authoritative example sooner.

[19] I want to digress to mention a glossing of the Wife's text that is particularly interesting in relation to the private reader (male or female). In "the New Reader and Female Textuality" Susan Schibanoff discusses the details of different responses to Alison. One glossator in particular, the Egerton glossator, is outraged and seeks to point out Alison's immorality and vice. Obviously, some did see her as a threat and sought to suppress all her arguments with quotes from authoritative sources, the glossator being one himself. This signals the possibility that she would be taken seriously by some readers. The glossator, probably male, demonstrates that Alison in fact may have been considered an actual threat to the textual tradition.

---

[20] Leicester 117-18 outlines the dynamics of *exempla* and how they demonstrate the tension between authority and experience. In other words, the lives of the people used as the example prove that the moral stressed is true. Therefore, when someone's life experience is used as authority, it works in a way that actually can serve to elevate experience. Furthermore, an *excerpt* of a life may not encompass the *whole* life and therefore there often more that can be taken from an *exemplum* that complicates the proof of the moral. Hence, the proof text may not always prove the moral very neatly. Leicester sees this as a problem with regards to the Eve passage because the authority of Eve in this example is not fixed or absolute. There is more to it than the way Alison uses it.

Works Cited

Alford, John A. "The Wife of Bath Versus the Clerk of Oxford: What Their Rivalry Means." *Chaucer Review* 21 (1986): 108-32.

Amsler, Mark. "The Wife of Bath and Women's Power." *Assays* 4 (1987): 67-83.

Astell, Ann W. *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning*. London: Cornell UP, 1996.

Bell, Susan Groag. "Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture." In *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988. 149-87.

Benson, Larry D. gen. ed. *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Biedler, Peter, ed. *The Wife of Bath*. Boston: St. Martin's, 1996.

Cooper, Helen. *The Oxford Guides to Chaucer*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.

Cross, Claire. " 'Great Reasoners in Scripture': The Activities of Women Lollards 1380-1530." *Medieval Women*. Ed. Derek Baker. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978.

Delany, Sheila. "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*." In *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and all her sect*. Ed. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Dickson, Lynne. "Deflection in the Mirror: Feminine Discourse in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 15 (1993): 61-90.

Ferrante, Joan. "Public Postures and Private Manuevers: Roles Medieval Women Play." In *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988. 213-29.

Galloway, Andrew. "Marriage Sermons, Polemical Sermons, and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*: A Generic Excursus." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 14 (1992): 3-30.

Gellrich, Jesse M. *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.

Gold, Penny Schine. *The Lady and the Virgin Image, Attitude, and Experience in Twelfth-Century France*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985.

Hagen, Susan K. "The Wife of Bath: Chaucer's Incohate Experiment in Feminist Hermeneutics." In *Rebels and Rivals: The Contestive Spirit in* The Canterbury Tales. Ed. Susanna Greer Fein, David Raybin, and Peter C. Braeger. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991. 105-24.

Hanna, Ralph, III. "Jankyn's Book." *Pacific Coast Philology* 21 (1986): 30-36.

Hansen, Elaine Tuttle. *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992.

-----. "The Powers of Silence, the Case of the Clerk's Griselda." In *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988. 230-49.

Howard, Donald R. *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1976.

Jean de Meun and Guillaume de Lorris. *The Romance of the Rose*. 3rd ed. Trans. Charles Dahlberg. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995.

Knapp, Peggy. *Chaucer and the Social Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Lee, B. S. "Chaucer's Handling of a Medieval Feminist Hierarchy." *Unisa English Studies* (U of S. Africa) 24 (1986): 1-6.

Leicester, H. Marshall Jr. *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1990.

Patterson, Lee. " 'Experience woot well it is noght so': Marriage and the Pursuit of Happiness in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale." In *The Wife of Bath.* Ed. Peter Beidler. New York: St. Martin's, 1996.

Power, Eileen. *Medieval Women.* Ed. M. M. Postan. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 1975.

Schibanoff, Susan. "The New Reader and Female Textuality in Two Early Commentaries on Chaucer." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 10 (1988): 71-108.

Schulenburg, Jane Tibbetts. "The Heroics of Virginity: Brides of Christ and Sacrificial Mutilation." In *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives.* Ed. Mary Beth Rose. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986.

Sleeth, Charles R. " 'My Dames Loore' in *The Canterbury Tales." Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 89 (1988): 174-84.

Van, Thomas A. "False Text and Disappearing Women in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale." The Chaucer Review* 29 (1994): 179-93.

Wurtele, Douglas. "The Predicament of Chaucer's Wife of Bath: St. Jerome on Virginity." *Floriligium* 5 (1983): 208-36.