

Chaucer's Wife of Bath, Hoccleve's Arguing Women, and Lydgate's Hertford Wives: Lay Interpretation and the Figure of the Spinning Woman in Late Medieval England

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John Lydgate's *Mumming at Hertford* is a text usually treated as a merely humorous battle between the sexes staged for the entertainment of the boy-king Henry VI and his mother Katherine. The *Mumming*, however, is a more revealing text than it may first appear and its rebellious, vocal wives demonstrate a development in the symbolic history of the spinning woman figure that communicates much about the era in which Lydgate wrote, advised, and prospered. Swirling around Lydgate's particular embodiment of the spinning woman are a number of references which provide a compelling commentary on fifteenth-century religious and political issues. While the wives of the Hertford *Mumming* carry with them the conventional symbolic markers of the spinning woman, they also depart from those markers in powerful, meaningful ways that reflect the Church's, as well as the state's, growing desire to characterize and control lay religious practice. The spinning women of the *Mumming at Hertford* present a particular shaping of the figure that reveals and resonates with attempts to represent and, ultimately, to contain what came to be perceived as a threat to both Church and state: an overly zealous lay population intent on pursuing its own religious knowledge through independent (and therefore unmonitored) interpretive activities.

In order to elucidate Lydgate's particular shaping of the spinning woman figure, I begin this essay with a brief overview of the figure and its earlier symbolic associations, including its almost paradoxical link to the Virgin Mary and her role in the redemption of humanity. Another important example of the symbolic heritage of the figure is Chaucer's "cloth-makyng" Wife of Bath (I.447), whom the Hertford wives refer to

more than once.¹ As an artful interpreter of scripture and theology (as well as the marital hierarchy), the Wife of Bath emerges as an active participant in late fourteenth-century lay religious culture, a representative of an engaged, enthusiastic lay population eager to explore religious topics. By the early fifteenth century, however, political and clerical authorities began to identify certain types of lay religious practices as dangerous, treasonous, and potentially heterodox. Both the independent interpretive practice and the religiously engaged lay person whom Chaucer was freer in his lifetime to represent through his spinning woman become topics of controversy and, ultimately, condemnation. Manifested most fully for critics in the heresy of Lollardy, any form of unmonitored religious interpretation, no matter how orthodox, was cause for concern, as demonstrated by texts associated with the Oxford Translation Debate, as well as Arundel's Constitutions and Hoccleve's "Address to Sir John Oldcastle." These texts characterize and critique lay interpretive practices and partake of the political, religious, and symbolic currency upon which Lydgate could draw in order to create the rebelliously interpretive spinning women of the *Mumming at Hertford*. Rebellious interpreters as well as rebellious women, the Hertford wives provide a revealing development in the history of the spinning woman figure that speaks to issues of primary concern to early fifteenth-century political and religious culture in England. Like the Wife of Bath, the Hertford wives extend their spinning powers to constructing arguments and to helping their husbands "wynne heven";² but, unlike Alison, they do so in a post-Constitutions era that turns them into exemplars of interpretive rebellion whereby even their claim to an association with the holiest of weavers, the Virgin Mary, is portrayed as presumptuous, corrupt, and potentially dangerous. Thus, when Lydgate has his wives refer to Alison, he draws upon Chaucer's use of the spinning woman figure as a representation of a form of lay piety; yet engaging this symbolic meaning of the figure allows him to depict unmonitored religious interpretation as suspicious and dangerous. Presenting a multivalent portrait of the spinning woman that adopts its conventional symbolic meanings while simultaneously reshaping those meanings to fit religious and political issues of the day, the *Mumming at Hertford* likewise demonstrates how the figure itself came to inform a discourse of critique that was useful, but also unsettling, to both Church and state authorities.

1 Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, I.447. All references to *The Canterbury Tales* are to *The Riverside Chaucer*. Citations refer to fragment and line numbers and are hereafter provided parenthetically in the text above.

2 Lydgate, *Mumming at Hertford*, 170. All quotations from the *Mumming at Hertford* are taken from the text included in *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, 2:675-82, edited by MacCracken. Citations refer to line numbers and are hereafter provided parenthetically in the text above.

Chaucer's Beneficent Interpreter

Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt
She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt.

(*Canterbury Tales*, I.447-48)

And for oure partye þe worthy Wyff of Bathe
Cane shewe statutes moo þan six or seven,
Howe wyves make hir housbandes wyne heven,
Maugre þe feonde and al his vyolence.

(*Mumming at Hertford*, 168-71)

The figure of the spinning woman in the later Middle Ages could embody different and sometimes contradictory meanings, even as those contradictory meanings maintained a certain consistency.³ At times associated with female and, particularly, wifely rebellion, the spinning woman could symbolize a threat to the marital as well as other social and religious hierarchies. In the Towneley Noah play, for example, Uxor — as an apparent embodiment of Eve's disobedience — initially refuses to board the ark until she finishes her spinning.⁴ At other times, and in seeming contrast to its association with female rebellion, the figure could invoke the holiest of spinners, the Virgin Mary, whose incarnational work clothed Christ in his salvific humanity. Moreover, the notion of Christ's body as a physical garment, spun by Mary and then torn and rent by the tortures of the Passion and Crucifixion, provided a familiar, powerful devotional image in the late

3 In this essay I focus on analysing the figure of the spinning woman as a symbolic tool for writers interested in communicating certain ideas regarding certain laic desires and activities in the later Middle Ages. This is not to deny the reality of actual women spinning yarn for economic survival, and the activity of spinning certainly influenced the symbolic uses of the figure of the spinning woman. See Kowaleski and Bennett, "Crafts, Gilds, and Women"; Dale's essay on "The London Silkwomen," originally published in 1933, is reprinted at the end of Kowaleski and Bennett's article. A likely influence on the symbolic use of the spinning woman figure is the association of Beguine communities with spinning, cloth-making, and religious beliefs and activities that were considered heretical by more than a few Church and state authorities. This association suggests a connection between spinning women and independent, rebellious religious ideas which is reflected in the textual versions of the figure examined here. See, for example, Galloway, "Discreet and Devout Maidens"; Ennen, *The Medieval Woman*, 197-200; McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards*, 84-86; and Neel, "The Origins of the Beguines," 240-60.

4 See *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle*, edited by Cawley, p. 20, ll. 234-36. Hodges discusses Uxor as a spinning woman in "Noe's Wife."

medieval period.⁵ In the Prologue to “The Second Nun’s Tale,” for example, Mary is invoked as a “welle of mercy,” a “synful soules cure” within whose “cloistre blisful of [her] sydis” God the Father deigned Christ “in blood and flessch to clothe and wynde” (VIII.37, 42-43). In his “Life of Our Lady,” Lydgate also connects Mary’s sewing abilities with her bodily clothing of Christ: while sewing with female companions in the temple, Mary prophetically selects, without looking, the purple silk that betokens the garment of the divine king she will adorn in human flesh.⁶ Similarly, in the late medieval *Le Bien des Fames*, female cloth-making is associated with the Virgin Mary and is also lauded as indicative of women’s abilities to transform, for the better, men and the world.⁷ The womanly making and maintenance of cloth is likened to powerful transformative abilities in Books 3 and 4 of the Old Testament apocryphal *Esdras*:

O sirs, is not the king great, and men are many [...] who is it then that ruleth them, or hath the lordship over them? are they not women? Women have borne the king and all the people that bear rule by sea and land. Even of them came they: and they nourished them up [...]. These also make garments for men; these bring glory unto men; and without women cannot men be.⁸

Thus, while often indicative of social disorder, the spinning woman figure could also be invoked as a symbol of venerable industry, labouring to do good in this world — as in a much grander way did the mother of Christ — in order to allow others to reap the benefits of heaven.⁹

5 Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion*, 137-76. As portrayed in the late fourteenth-century *The Prickyng of Love*, Mary, in clothing the divine, enabled humanity’s salvation, but that salvation was not accomplished without significant trials and troubles for the body she clothed in physicality. Similarly, for the East Anglian Julian of Norwich, for example, Christ wears “Adams kyrtylle,” a “wyth kyrtyll” that “is his fleshe,” and his Passion is the tearing of that garment; see *A Book of Showings*, 2:535-36, 2:538, 2:541-42. Lydgate also uses the garmenting conceit in “The Fifteen Ooes [Woes] of Christ,” in *The Minor Poems*, 1:238-50, ll. 13, 54-56, and 107, and in “Cristes Passioun,” in *The Minor Poems*, 1:216-21, ll. 21-24.

6 Lydgate, “Life of Our Lady,” in *The Minor Poems*, 1:301-305.

7 *Le Bien des Fames*, ll. 11-14 and 80-96.

8 Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, 31. A similar version of the story exists in Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities* from the first century; see *Josephus vi, Jewish Antiquities, Books IX-XI*, 337. Marbod of Rennes (c. 1035-1123) similarly praises women as mothers, nourishers, clothiers, and spinners or weavers in *Liber decem capitulorum*. The applicable passages are quoted in Blamires, *The Case for Women*, 229-30, from the translation by C. W. Marx (Rome: Herder, 1984). Blamires also examines *Le Bien des Fames*, the *Esdras* text, and the *Jewish Antiquities*.

9 Biscoglio provides a useful overview of the spinning woman figure in the Middle Ages in “Unspun Heroes.”

At first glance, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, whose cloth-making abilities "passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt," appears to embody the rebellious, disobedient, and disorderly characterization of the spinning woman. Yet while Alison is a cloth-maker, she does not, for example, wield a distaff or directly use her spinning as a form of wifely disobedience or, conversely, as a representation of good deeds. Rather, it is Alison's independently minded interpretations of theological texts and doctrines that are central to her apparent embodiment of female rebellion, and to Chaucer's use of the spinning woman figure.

In a crucial passage from her Prologue that directly links her attire to her interpretive proclivities, Alison communicates Chaucer's particular use of the spinning woman: her desire and ability to choose, create, and control her own clothing are emblematic of her desire and ability to choose, create, and control her own interpretations of texts:

Thou seyst also, that if we make us gay
With clothyng, and with precious array,
That it is peril of oure chastitee;
And yet — with sorwe! — thou most enforce thee,
And seye thise wordes in the Apostles name:
"In habit maad with chastitee and shame
Ye wommen shul apparaille yow," quod he,
"And noght in tressed heer and gay perree,
As perles, ne with gold, ne clothes riche."
After thy text, ne after thy rubriche,
I wol nat wirche as muchel as a gnat."

(III.337-47)

Alison's desire to wear "riche" clothes stands as an alternative interpretation to the "rubriche" that men have appended to the "text." Asserting, in essence, that she will create her own "rubriche" — both as a garment and as an interpretation — Alison serves to associate independent and potentially rebellious interpretation with the spinning woman figure. Moreover, it cannot be an accident that, when her fourth husband is away — and when Alison thus "hadde the bettre leyser for to pleye" (III.551) — she describes herself as going about in public in red clothing, referencing the red ink in which rubrics in texts were written.¹⁰ Her frequent wearing of red clothing — she claims

10 Therefore I made my visitaciouns
To vigilies and to processiouns,
To prechyng eek, and to thise pilgrimages,
To pleyes of myracles, and to mariages,
And wered upon my gaye scarlet gytes. (III.555-59)

that she “used” her colourful garments so “weel” that neither worms, moths, nor mites could harm them (III.560-62) — displays her alternative interpretation of wifely behaviour as a physical and intellectual activity, thus potentially disruptive at more than one level.¹¹

Chaucer’s spinning and weaving woman is, thus, an energetic interpreter who feels free to explore theological texts and intuit their meanings, even if they appear to conflict with what male authorities have asserted. Indeed, Alison’s brazen challenge to scriptural, clerical, and husbandly authority seems to align her more fully with the disobedience of Eve and Uxor than with the redemptive work of Mary. As she reinterprets texts and doctrine, she appears to do so in order to assert her dominance in a patriarchal world. Her claim, for example, that she would have a husband who “shal be bothe my dettour and my thral, / And have his tribulacion withal / Upon his flessch, whil that I am his wyf” (III.155-57) seems a particularly emphatic example of her desire to reinterpret the male-female hierarchy to her own advantage or, perhaps, more specifically, to restate the marriage debt as something owed to her but not to her husband. Yet even here Alison is careful to support her argument with a reference to scripture, as she does throughout her Prologue.

Upon closer examination, however, rather than wholly confirming the traditionally negative characteristics and potential dangers associated with a spinning woman, Alison’s assertions, along with her interpretive proclivities, also evince some of the fundamentally positive elements of the figure. When the Pardoner interrupts Alison’s “dettour and [...] thral” speech, tells her that she is “a noble prechour in this cas,” and then questions his own apparent intent to marry because, thanks to Alison, he now knows marriage would mean he would “bye it on [his] flessch so deere,” he reveals that Alison does not lightly, nor even perhaps wholly selfishly, assert herself as a wifely scourge (III.165, 167). Rather, what she thinks of as her free and open admission is based on her own interpretation of scripture, upon what she believes “the Apostel tolde” her (III.160). More than a mere scold, Alison here appears to have intuited and partaken of a more positive characterization of the spinning woman — one whose deeds in this world help others achieve heavenly grace. Describing her treatment of her fourth husband as a kind of holy invective, Alison declares, “By God, in erthe I was his purgatorie, / For which I hope his soule be in glorie” (III.489-90) —

11 See, for example, the opening lines of her Prologue. Examining Alison’s clothing, Hodges discusses the association of “elaborate headdresses and a quarrelsome nature” with a wife who proudly challenges her husband; see Hodges, “The Wife of Bath’s Costumes,” 361-62.

a statement which is echoed by the Hertford wives in their invocation of Chaucer's spinning woman. Shedding light on Alison's earlier interpretation of her wifely duties as a scourge of male flesh — a possible echo of Christ's own bodily sufferings — this statement, even if offered in an ironic tone, asserts an authoritative reasoning for her (mal)treatment of her husband. Even if she is unconcerned whether her spouse reaches heaven, she knows well enough as a savvy and creative interpreter to legitimize her behaviour as religious duty. She interprets and then acts, yet both of these activities, while resulting in a destabilizing of the marital hierarchy, are set alongside essentially orthodox goals: to help her husbands win heaven by providing them an earthly, and wifely, purgatory. Indeed, Mary herself, as the spinner and provider of Christ's earthly body (and thus an important player in his fleshly sufferings), was also invoked in the late Middle Ages as a type of holy scourge, providing a provocative model for both Alison's interpretation of scripture and her attendant treatment of her husbands.¹²

Despite her ostensible allegiance to the spinning woman as embodiment of female disobedience and social disorder, Chaucer's Alison seems to engage in a more beneficent use of her womanly powers. Rather than mere disruption and chaos, her interpretive ingenuity can be seen as helpful to humankind by recasting wifely dominance over men as a venerable activity. Chaucer in fact offers similar portraits of vocal, assertive, and interpreting wives in "The Second Nun's Tale" and "The Tale of Melibee." In her good works, teaching, and bold handling of her pagan husband whom she helps to purge of sins (VIII.181) and convert to Christianity, "bisye" Cecilia proudly proclaims her arguments for Christianity and its doctrines (VIII.195). Similarly, while her actions are rooted in moral philosophy instead of Christian spirituality as are Mary's, Dame Prudence (who cites some of the same authorities as the Wife of Bath) handles her husband's errant decisions with an extensive display of interpretation, assertions, and supporting sources. Offered ostensibly in the spirit of advice, Prudence's efforts actually have a fundamentally reformative effect upon Melibee, whose rash responses and decisions are in need of correction.¹³ Thus, as Chaucer's version of the spinning woman, the Wife of Bath embodies an ingenious combination of both negative and positive associations with the figure: her bullying ways,

12 The contemplative of *The Prickynge of Love*, for example, actively pursuing a kind of emasculating victimhood, eagerly requests that Mary, who is portrayed as a "hunter of soulis" and a "conquerour of mennys hertis" (191), treat him to Christ's wounds (25).

13 Wallace discusses the tradition of "wifely eloquence" and its practical moralizing effects upon miscreant husbands and also compares Prudence and the Wife of Bath in *Chaucerian Polity*, 221-26, 229-46.

Alison argues, are really a form of good works, a way to help improve her husbands so that they may achieve salvation.¹⁴

While Alison's Prologue reveals the ways in which she acts upon her energetic interpretations — physically, vocally, even violently — Chaucer returns again and again to the act of interpretation itself as Alison's distinguishing characteristic, a characteristic that likewise dominates in his portraits of Cecilia and Prudence. Alison's chief form of rebellion against Jankyn, her fifth husband (and a cleric), echoes the conflation of physical and interpretive acts demonstrated by her wearing of red, rubric-like clothes: her attack upon Jankyn's book of wicked wives is a literal as well as figural assertion of an alternative interpretation, her desire to assert an analysis of women and of marriage different from that which the book communicates. Thus, in Chaucer's use of the spinning woman figure, Alison's interpretive activities, perhaps even more than her physical actions, serve a strong corrective function.¹⁵

For Chaucer, then, a spinning woman meant an interpreting woman. Yet Alison's engagement with theological texts and issues (and many of her rebellious and disobedient actions, despite their potential benefit to her) may be seen as ultimately beneficial to her husbands. Alison's interpretive activities — portrayed as positive, necessary, even enjoyable — consequently seem to represent something other than a disobedient woman's attempt to reign supreme over her husband. Rita Copeland's description of the medieval laity as "a feminised entity" seems applicable here. The

14 Oberembt argues that Alison is essentially orthodox in her beliefs and assertions and that she is likewise a force of "correction"; see Oberembt, "Chaucer's Anti-Misogynist Wife," 292. Similarly, Shapiro's assertion that Alison "makes a vigorous intellectual effort to understand and to explain her life in terms of God's purpose as revealed through scripture" seems an apt description of the religious climate in which Chaucer was constructing *The Canterbury Tales*; Shapiro, "Dame Alice," 137. Dinshaw also re-examines some of these ideas, arguing, for example, that the Wife of Bath "mimics patriarchal discourse [...] not in order to 'thwart' it altogether, to subvert it entirely, but to *reform* it, to keep it in place while making it accommodate feminine desire"; Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 116 *et passim*.

15 This theme, of course, is taken up in her Tale as a miscreant knight must be corrected by women because of his misuse of a woman. The knight, a mis-interpreter of women, is exposed to the transformative power of a female perspective and lesson. In essence preaching to the knight, the loathly lady offers an interpretation different from the knight's, ultimately intended to serve a correcting function: "Thy gentillesse cometh fro God allone. / Thanne comth oure verray gentillesse of grace; / It was no thyngne biquethe us with oure place" (III.1162-64). While she ultimately re-transforms herself, the lady's primary function in the Tale is to trouble the knight, to teach him a lesson (III.1019, 1050), to make him a better interpreter of women and society, and to make him a better Christian — and, thus, like Alison's husbands, more worthy of being saved. The loathly lady thus functions as an extension of Alison as a spinner of alternative interpretations that ultimately serve a corrective, redemptive function.

“defining characteristics” of the laity, Copeland asserts, in contrast to the clergy, “are reducible to the same terms that define women in relation to men: it is carnal and it is subordinate to a higher principle of rule. The laity in relation to clergy occupies the same structural position in discourse as women in relation to men.”¹⁶ In fact, when at the end of Alison's Tale, the Friar finds it necessary to respond, he offers a critique of Alison's interpretive inclinations that could apply as much to a layman as to a laywoman:

“Dame,” quod he, “God yeve yow right good lyf!
 Ye han heer touched, also moot I thee,
 In scole-matere greet difficultee.
 Ye han seyde muche thyng right wel, I seye;
 But, dame, heere as we ryde by the weye,
 Us nedeth nat to speken but of game,
 And lete auctoritees, on Goddes name,
 To prechyng and to scoles of clergie.
 But if it lyke to this compaignye,
 I wol yow of a somonour telle a game.”
 (III.1270-79)

The Friar, it seems, is more concerned with Alison engaging in activities that ought to be left to “scoles of clergie” than he is in her potential threat to male authority. She seems instead to represent a potential threat to *clerical* authority. Rather than her gender, it is her interpretive stance and her willingness to offer opinions on theological texts and doctrines that trouble the Friar. Alison can thus be seen as a participant in and representative of lay theological activities that in the late fourteenth century were not by any means associated exclusively with women. Instead, Chaucer presents Alison as a type of the spinning woman whose ultimately redemptive powers of transformation and reform extend to theological interpretation. Moreover, he borrows from positive associations with the spinning woman figure in order to suggest that the laity's interest in theology may be seen as a laudable and valuable activity.

¹⁶ Copeland, “Why Women Can't Read,” 260. Similarly, Gillespie argues that “the laity, for all their pragmatic literacy . . . came to occupy a position in the educational hierarchy similar to that which had long been occupied by women religious”; Gillespie, “Lukyng in haly bukes,” 4.

Hoccleve's Disorderly Interpreters

Some wommen eeke, thogh hir wit be thynne,
 Wele argumentes make in holy writ!
 Lewde calates! *sittith down* and spynne,
 And kakele of sumwhat elles, for your wit
 Is al to feeble to despute of it!

(Hoccleve, "Address to Sir John Oldcastle")¹⁷

The "Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" presents a version of the spinning woman that speaks to a religious climate in which the search by an energetic lay population for its own religious truths and meanings was tolerated.¹⁸ As Chaucer's Friar indicates, there were certainly concerns about the theological activities in which the laity of the late fourteenth century were involved. At the same time, however, the Friar concedes that Alison "han seyde muche thyng right wel" and then offers, for his own part, to "telle a game" rather than continuing with further warnings about the dangers of lay attempts at interpretation and preaching (III.1273, 1279). Alison may be treading on ground traditionally reserved for the clergy, but her desire to explore and understand religious texts and meanings is not portrayed as inherently dangerous; in fact, Chaucer even seems to suggest that such a desire may be beneficial.¹⁹

17 Hoccleve, "Address to Sir John Oldcastle," ll. 145-49, in *Hoccleve's Works*, vol. 1, *The Minor Poems*, ed. Furnivall, 8-24; emphasis mine. All references to Hoccleve's work are to this edition; line references are hereafter provided parenthetically in the text above.

18 This climate, conducive to active lay engagement with and interpreting of theological topics, can also be observed in such texts as *Pore Caitif* (c. 1380s), *The Holi Prophete David Seith* (1380s-1420s), and *The Prick of Conscience* (c. 1350). Excerpts from each, together with a useful discussion, can be found in Wogan-Browne et al., eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular*, 239-41, 149-56, 241-44.

19 Chaucer's Clerk depicts Griselda as an industrious spinner (IV.223). Once she becomes Walter's wife, she takes to spinning good deeds as a successful counsellor and adviser: "So wise and rype wordes hadde she, / And juggementz of so greet equitee, / That she from hevene sent was, as men wende, / Peple to save and every wrong t'amende" (IV.438-41). Griselda, it appears, can be seen as a spinning, interpreting woman whom Walter tries to control and silence: his decision to "test" her occurs almost immediately after this description of his wife as a successful adviser to the people who safeguards the "commune profit" (IV.431). Indeed, Walter's emphasis on clothing and re-clothing Griselda seem to speak to an attempt to take over any spinning — literal or figurative — in which she might engage. (Dinshaw offers an analysis of this emphasis on clothing in this tale — an emphasis that appears to be original with Chaucer in his adaptation of Petrarch's version of the Griselda story; see Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 132-55.) Specifically, Walter's references to Griselda's lowly status are often accompanied by references to the lowly garments she wore before he made her his wife. It is possible that such references might symbolize Church attempts to control lay interpretive practices — to keep the laity in their place

Yet, less than thirty years later, in sharp contrast to Chaucer's disruptive, but well-meaning, spinning woman and his positive portrait of lay interpretive energies, Hoccleve offers a wholly negative version of the spinning woman in order to curb and condemn such energies. Presumptuous women interpreters, Hoccleve asserts, are making arguments out of "holy writ" — spinning theological interpretations when they ought to be sitting down and spinning wool. Ostensibly a critique of Lollardy, the "Address to Sir John Oldcastle" (c. 1415) offers a version of a spinning woman as representative of the dangers of the heretical sect. Yet, as was true of other writers in his day, Hoccleve also communicates in his text a concern with other forms of lay interpretive practice, which, while not overtly heterodox, could be seen as threatening to Church and state authority. Hoccleve's spinning woman was thus associated with a wide range of lay religious practices that Hoccleve and others wished to portray as suspicious, dangerous, and disruptive. Rather than a representative of an engaged, energized laity whose interest in religious study demonstrates the health of the faith, Hoccleve's spinning woman indicates the possibility of religious and social disorder among the heretical and the orthodox alike. Chaucer's and Hoccleve's different versions of the spinning woman offer insight into a marked change in religious culture that occurred during the years up to and following the turn of the century. The two poets bring to the figure very different meanings which provide a foundation for understanding the shift from Ricardian to Lancastrian culture, and which also point to the symbolic basis on which Lydgate could build in creating his version of the spinning woman in his *Mumming at Hertford*.

As Nicholas Watson has argued, *The Canterbury Tales* "could not have been written in anything like its present form after 1409."²⁰ In his work on texts associated with the Oxford Translation Debate of approximately 1401 and Bishop Arundel's Constitutions of 1409, Watson shows the early decades of the fifteenth century in England to be characterized by active attempts on the part of the Church to monitor vernacular texts and

and thus maintain the boundary between clergy and laity to which Aston refers (in *Lollards and Reformers*, 131) and which Copeland sees (in "Why Women Can't Read," 260) as analogous to the hierarchy of male and female (see note 31 below and pages 176-77 above). Moreover, given the Clerk's strong critique of Walter's treatment of Griselda — along with his willingness to yield to the Host's authority and to tell his tale in a plain style (IV.22-24, 15-20) — the tale may be seen as a critique of attempts to curtail lay theological activities, with Walter as a symbol of the Church and Griselda a symbol of the laity. All of this, of course, needs further interpretation, especially in light of the references to the Wife of Bath and other, often contradictory, opinions expressed by the Clerk at the end of the tale. See also Wallace's discussion of "The Clerk's Tale" (with special reference to the influence of Petrarch, Boccaccio, and rhetorical associations with the female body) in *Chaucerian Polity*, 261-98.

20 Watson, "Censorship," 858. See also Hudson's article "The Debate on Bible Translation" on the same issues and texts.

translations. Allegedly undertaken as a campaign against the heresy of Lollardy, the Constitutions, Watson argues, were also intended as a mechanism for a censoring of the vernacular which was, in turn, effectively extended to include any sort of independent lay religious activity that might threaten clerical and royal authority.²¹ Implicit in Watson's analysis, moreover, is how this era of active control of vernacular and lay thought and discussion reveals the decades up to 1409 to have been an age of theological innovation, characterized by an array of religious texts written in the vernacular, and by a lay population eager to access, discuss, and interpret spiritual matters.

Indeed, as A. C. Spearing has suggested, one strong indication of this intellectually and religiously explorative climate, and of a general tolerance for that climate, is Chaucer's possible association with a group who viewed Wycliff's "critical and questioning stance" favourably without subscribing to his overtly heretical beliefs. For Spearing, moreover, there is a marked contrast between "Chaucer's intellectual curiosity" and his successors (including, of course, Lydgate) who seem to have "retreat[ed]" from that curiosity because of the "more restrictive and repressive intellectual climate" of the fifteenth century.²² A mechanism of that restrictive climate, Arundel's Constitutions contain a clear indictment of the theological enquiry and interpretive energy that are characteristic of the Wife of Bath. Article 8 asserts, "we do ordain and specially forbid, that any manner of person, of what state, degree, or condition soever he be, do allege or propone [*sic*] any conclusions or propositions in the catholic faith, or repugnant to good manners [...] *although they defend the same with ever such curious terms and words.*"²³ Even if, like Alison, individuals substantiate their interpretations, they are not allowed to come to any independent conclusions or even "to dispute openly or privily concerning the catholic faith or sacraments of the church" (Article 5). Chaucer's earlier version of the spinning woman figure, then, reveals a cultural acceptance of certain kinds of lay behaviour regarding religious texts and practices that later uses of the figure do not, and illuminates the type of theological enquiry and interpretive energies that the laity were allowed to engage in through the first decade of the fifteenth century.

In contrast, in the years leading up to and immediately following 1400, the intertwined powers of Church and state were interested in creating an environment less conducive to lay interpretive energies, launching a concerted attempt to control what Paul

21 The Constitutions went "far beyond [the] ostensible aim of destroying the Lollard heresy" in an attempt "to curtail all sorts of theological thinking and writing in the vernacular that did not belong within the pragmatic bounds set by earlier legislation like Pecham's Syllabus of 1281" (Watson, "Censorship," 826).

22 Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry*, 89-90.

23 The relevant Articles are quoted in Watson, "Censorship," 827-29, n. 14 and n. 15; emphasis mine.

Strohm calls “the field of imaginative possibility.”²⁴ Motivated in large part by a desire to legitimate his claim to the throne, Henry V (and, to a lesser extent, Henry IV), in alliance with the Church (which perceived an actively engaged laity as threatening to its own authority), singled out the Lollard threat as a necessary reason for restricting lay religious activity, thereby creating an environment in which any unauthorized religious activity could be perceived as heterodox.²⁵ What I have characterized as attempts to control lay interpretive practices Strohm identifies as a campaign, on the part of the monarchy and ecclesiastical authorities, against “unregimented and potentially transformative imaging or imagining of the social order by individual subjects.”²⁶ Specifically, the clergy and the monarchy alike found it advantageous to promote an atmosphere of suspicion regarding a wide variety of lay claims to learning, textual access, and scriptural understanding. The complementary interests of Church and state in controlling lay interpretive practice consequently find a useful symbol in the spinning woman as she serves to represent religious and social disorder. In a text associated with the Oxford Translation Debate, for example, the image of women presuming to be teachers, scholars, and instructors of men is used to indicate a disturbing trend in which any lay person might presume to teach rather than learn.²⁷ Later in the fifteenth century, the figure of the disruptive, interpreting woman as a particularly shocking example of dangerous lay practices associated with learning and religion appears in such texts as Friar Daw's reply to Jack Upland (c. 1420, roughly contemporary with the *Mumming at Hertford*) and in Reginald Pecock's *Repressor of Over Much Blaming of the Clergy* (c. 1445).²⁸

24 Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 2.

25 As Watson notes, the Constitutions, despite their apparent focus on routing out Lollardy, were “repeatedly used to identify lower-class owners and readers of non-Lollard works as heretics” (Watson, “Censorship,” 831). Thomson, like Strohm, identifies a joining of efforts on the part of the Church and state; see Thomson, *The Later Lollards*, 8.

26 Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 30.

27 Quoted in Watson, “Censorship,” 843, n. 59: “si scriptura sacra in lingwam uulgi esset translata, tunc enim quelibet uetula docendi officium vsurparet” (If sacred writings are translated into the vulgar tongue, then indeed any old woman [or whoever (*quelibet*)] may usurp the place of a teacher).

28 Cautioning Jack that “to dubby with scripture me pinkiþ grete folie,” Daw likewise asserts that rather than attempting to construct subtle arguments, Jack ought, in keeping with his station in life, to grease a sheep under its tail (*Jack Upland*, ed. Heyworth, ll. 210 and 278-80). Yet Daw's most shocking example of the threat that Jack and his sect pose to religious and social hierarchies through their presumptuous attempts at religious interpretation are those women who have been made “scolers” (scholars) and who are even allowed to say mass (ll. 101 and 863-71). Similarly, for Pecock, female interpreters — “namelich thilk wommen whiche maken him silf so wise bi the Bible [...] and avauten and profren hem silf whanne thei ben in her iolite [...] and dispute aʒens clerkis” — prove one of the most troubling examples of lay pretensions to scriptural understanding and self-directed religious learning (*Repressor*, 1:123).

Similarly, Margery Kempe, a type of spinning woman herself, certainly provides a chief illustration of a religious and political climate quite different from that of the late fourteenth century.²⁹ Echoing Hoccleve's sentiments regarding women who are misapplying their spinning skills to theological topics, Kempe is told that she ought to forsake the life she has chosen and "go spynne & carde as oþer women don."³⁰ Hoccleve's figure of the spinning woman, so different from Chaucer's, thus served as a warning not only against the dangers of lay interpretation and theological exploration, but also as a representation of the disruption of the social order that such "transformative [...] imagining" could cause: a woman standing up to expound scripture — or even preach.³¹

Lydgate's Manipulative Interpreters

And Colyn Cobeller [...],
His wyff haþe taught him to pleyne at þe staff.

Sheo qwytt him euer, þer was no thing to seeche,
Six for oon of worde and strookes eeche.

(*Mumming at Hertford*, 55, 58, 65-66)

Written and performed in the late 1420s, John Lydgate's *Mumming* (or *Disguising*) at *Hertford* demonstrates a particularly full engagement of the symbolic potential of the spinning woman figure. While Lydgate's rebellious, arguing wives are representatives of the dangers of unchecked laic energies, this warning is cloaked in a humorous guise that reflects the censoring climate created by Church and State that the young Henry VI inherited. While Lydgate stays close to his time period in presenting his rebellious wives as symbolic indicators of the dangers of unmonitored lay interpretation, he also adds a

29 Women comparable to the Hertford wives, while likely unable to read and write, would have been capable of the kind of literacy that could result from exposure to public readings of texts — and of texts increasingly available in the vernacular. See Aston, *Lollards*, 193-217, especially 195. See also Aston, "Popular Religious Movements"; Hudson, *Lollards and Their Books*; and Coleman, *Medieval Readers*. For a discussion of Margery Kempe's limited literacy, see Furrow, "Unscholarly Latinity" and "Latin and Affect."

30 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 129, ll. 35-36.

31 As described by Aston, "The devotional interests of lay people reaching towards books, disputing and sometimes rejecting the lessons of church images, undermined and eroded ancient clerical assumptions. The axiomatic superiority of the clerical to the lay estate that for centuries had been firmly bounded to the divide between *litteratus* and *lewed* was — indirectly if not directly — being tested"; Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*, 131.

further symbolic dimension to the figure. Rather than ignoring the figure's traditional association with the Virgin Mary and with spinning as potentially transformative and redemptive work, Lydgate resurrects this association, but he does so only to put it to rest. Indeed, the wives' claim to this association and their wifely rebellion are presented as an act of dangerously misguided, presumptuously female manipulation of texts, sources, and evidence that continues to threaten the nation.

Composed by Lydgate for performance during the Christmas celebrations at Hertford Castle in the late 1420s,³² the *Mumming at Hertford* resembles Lydgate's six other extant mummings in which only a few characters speak, while the others mime their parts. While Lydgate's other mummings focus chiefly on debating allegorical and moral themes, the Hertford *Mumming* is unique in its presentation of a marriage dispute between contemporaneous husbands and wives. Centred on a debate over who should have the "mastery" in marriage, the *Mumming* has been linked to the female-dominated court of the boy king Henry VI, for whom the play was likely performed. Given that in 1428 responsibility for Henry's care would be transferred to a royal contingent of men, Lydgate may have departed from the themes that characterize his other mummings in order to stage a debate between the sexes that could humorously refer to Queen Katherine and her court.³³ While this is a plausible connection, few studies of the Hertford *Mumming* have gone beyond this contextualizing or have limited themselves to brief remarks about the low humour of the rustic characters and their marriage squabbles.³⁴ In fact, Lydgate seems to have seized upon this particular moment in the king's transition from female-dominated boyhood to manhood to make a more serious point, and, appropriately, he turns to the figure of the spinning woman in order to do so.

Described by their husbands' spokesperson as physically abusive of their husbands, the Hertford wives may at first appear as mere comic harpies, temporarily outdoing their husbands as they brandish their distaffs. As the husbands' complaint reveals, each man, the profession he represents, and the tools associated with it are soundly trumped by the wives and their distaffs which are referred to at least seven times in the *Mumming*

32 For the dating of the *Mumming*, see Pearsall, *John Lydgate 1371-1449*, 28; Ebin, *John Lydgate*, 88; and Green, "Three Fifteenth-Century Notes," 14-16.

33 See, for example, Pearsall's comments on Katherine's "considerable power as the king's mother" (*John Lydgate 1371-1449*, 28), and Forbes, trans., *Lydgate's Disguising*, 46, 61, 69-70. See also Green, "Three Fifteenth-Century Notes," 15-16. For other sources concerning the context and dating of the Hertford *Mumming*, see note 32 above. See also Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, 187-90; Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 180, 190, 194-95; Schirmer, *John Lydgate*, 81-82, 115, 117-18, 130-38; and Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 169-71, for Lydgate's investment in promoting the legitimacy of the child-king's rule.

34 See, for example, Forbes, trans., *Lydgate's Disguising*, 67-68.

(52, 59, 78, 83, 120, 231, 232). Sounding rather stupefied, the husbands' spokesperson declares, for example, that even the "bochier stoute and bolde / Pat killed haþe bulles and boores olde, / [...] for al his broode knyff" cannot withstand "his sturdy wyff" and "In no mater holde chaumpartye" with her (91-95). Yet in rebelling against the patriarchal control of a man over his wife and family, the Hertford women issue a challenge that is interpretive as well as physical, textual as well as corporeal, and thus potentially more symbolically meaningful than the temporary (and therefore merely humorous) suspension of the traditional domestic power arrangement. In teaching Colyn Cobeller "to pleyne at þe staff," for example, his wife Cecely "qwytt him euer [...] / Six for oon of worde and strookes eeche," while the wives together are described as menacing their husbands "wit tong or staff" and with "Wordes, strookes vnhappe, and harde grace" (58, 65-66, 78, 81). In fact, the ostensibly light-hearted struggle between the sexes that is the focus of the *Mumming* resonates with references to and examples of rebellious women, distaffs, cloth, clothing and, intriguingly, textual and doctrinal reinterpretation as the wives spin a claim to dominance over their husbands. As Natalie Zemon Davis has argued,

At the end of the Middle Ages and in early modern Europe, the relation of the wife — of the potentially disorderly woman — to her husband was especially useful for expressing the relation of all subordinates to their superiors. [...] In the little world of the family, with its conspicuous tension between intimacy and power, the larger matters of political and social order could find ready symbolization.³⁵

Offering more than a merely comic reference in his *Mumming*, Lydgate uses the figure of the spinning woman to offer a more serious cultural commentary — one that ultimately links the predominance of women in the royal court to the socially destabilizing influence of those members of the laity who too freely engage in seeking out their own religious truths, no matter how orthodox their fundamental beliefs.

As a result, when Lydgate has the Hertford wives cite the Wife of Bath as setting a precedent for their actions (III.168-71), he may well be referring the king and the audience to a time when such women were tolerated to the nation's peril — a time when the laity engaged in theological enquiry and religious interpretation that threatened Church and nation. And, in order to emphasize his point that Henry VI must remain steadfast in his guardianship of the faith and the stamping out of any potential heresy, Lydgate presents the Hertford wives as an example of what the nation could revert to without Henry's careful stewardship. Echoing Alison of Bath's assertion that wives ought to be their husbands' earthly purgatory and thus aid their entry into heaven (III.489-90), the

³⁵ Davis, "Women on Top," 127.

Hertford wives claim Alison as an authority who “Cane shewe statutes moo þan six or seven, / Howe wyves make hir housbandes wynne heven,” and then proceed, like Alison, to advance an argument based upon a reinterpretation of domestic hierarchy and religious doctrine (*Mumming*, 169-70). Thus their spokesperson's opening reference to Chaucer's spinning Wife, who famously claimed her own experience as a sound basis for her reinterpretation of theology (and of marriage), is particularly apt. In citing the Wife of Bath, moreover, they claim both the upper hand in marriage and the right to their own interpretation of that institution and of the texts, authorities, and traditions associated with it.³⁶ Claiming this right of interpretation, the wives become provocative symbols of a potential interpretive challenge to other social hierarchies governed by established meanings of texts and sources, faith and doctrine.

While the Wife of Bath's interpretive ingenuity, her spinning ways, and the association of her actions with the beneficent, redemptive work of the Virgin Mary could perhaps be indulged, tolerated, even embraced in the late 1390s, the Hertford wives' restaging of her assertions and arguments in Lydgate's era is presented as dangerous and destabilizing. The distaff and the spinning of thread and cloth are linked in the *Mumming* to a rebellious exercising of interpretive desires and holy prerogative which, while echoing the Wife of Bath's arguments and partaking of traditional associations with the female act of spinning, comes across as strangely presumptuous, though potentially convincing.

As versions of spinning women, the Hertford wives claim that their control of their husbands' clothing — including sewing and laundering — fundamentally negates their husbands' desire to govern them:

Pey [our husbands] weene of vs to haue ay þe maystrye;
 Ellas! þeos fooles, let hem aunswere here-to;
 Whoo cane hem wasshe, who can hem wring alsoo?
 Wryng hem, yee, wryng, so als God vs speed,
 Til þat some tyme we make hir nases bleed,
 And sowe hir cloopes whane þey beoþe to-rent,
 And clowte hir bakkes til somme of vs beo shent;
 Loo, yit þeos fooles, God gyf hem sory chaunce,
 Wolde sette hir wyves vnder gouernaunce,

36 Additional references in the Hertford *Mumming* to the Wife of Bath include a subtle invocation of the Wife's assertion that “it is an impossible / That any clerk wol speke good of wyves, / But if it be of hooly seintes lyves” (III.688-90) and an echo of the Wife's famous question “Who peyntede the leon” (III.692; *Mumming*, 151-52).

Make vs to hem for to lowte lowe;
 We knowe to weel þe bent of Iackys bowe.
 Al þat we clayme, we clayme it but of right.

(*Mumming at Hertford*, 188-99)

Operating from within the conceit of the garmenting of their husbands, the Hertford wives describe themselves, like Mary and the Wife of Bath, as necessary enablers of earthly tribulations for their husbands: “Whoo cane hem wasshe, who can hem wring alsoo? / Wryng hem, yee, wryng [...] / Til þat some tyme we make hir nases bleed” (190-92). Indeed, even the husbands’ spokesperson seems to bear witness to Mary’s association with this textile-based process of suffering and redemption; before expressing the hope that husbands who meekly and patiently endure “wyfly purgatorye” (87) will be rewarded in heaven, he asserts that Mary herself — here referred to as “Mabylye” — could “bere [...] witesse” (80) to the wives’ treatment of their husbands: “Wordes, strookes vnhappe, and harde grace / With sharp[e] nayles kracching in þe face” (81-82).³⁷ Offering a reference to the worldly pains Christ endured in order to ensure humanity’s salvation, as well as to the washing away of sin by the blood of the lamb, the good “wryng[ing]” that the wives give to their husbands’ clothes amplifies the earlier claim that, as corroborated by the Wife of Bath’s “statutes,” the trouble they give helps their husbands “wynne [...] heven” (90).³⁸

The Hertford wives, then, in detailing their own making and maintenance of clothing, seem to wish to invoke this characterization of Mary as a spinning woman and the special transformative powers of women as clothiers of men, in order to support their claims to the upper hand in their marriages. Claiming an age-old precedent, a “maystyre by prescripcyoun, / Be long tytle of successyoun, / Frome wyff to wyff” (203-204), the Hertford wives perhaps attempt to add the Virgin Mary to that succession of wives. These associations with the Virgin as a spinning woman who is the source of both suffering and redemption, clothier of both Christ’s suffering and his transformative humanity, assign significant spiritual authority to both distaffs and wives. At the same time, the wives’ argument suggests that the distaff also serves, as previously demonstrated in other instances, to indicate a particularly rebellious exercising of interpretive desires. The wives infuse their distaffs and other wifely tools and duties, their spinning of thread

37 Similarly, the “skumour” (104) that the butcher’s wife wields against her husband can be seen as a wifely tool of purification — used to remove impurities from husbands as well as soups. For “Mabylye” as an alternative name for the Virgin Mary, see Forbes, trans., *Lydgate’s Disguising*, 13.

38 Julian of Norwich also employs a cloth-cleaning metaphor for Christ’s cleansing gift to humanity enabled by the pains of the Passion and Crucifixion; *Book of Showings*, 2:542-43.

and making of cloth, with special powers in order to assert their position in marriage, yet they also demonstrate that those special powers extend to the spinning and dangerously artful rearranging of arguments that suggests more than a female challenge to male dominance.³⁹ As women who suggest alternative interpretations and have at their disposal a wide range of sources in order to assert the special meaning and power of their own spinning-related activities, the Hertford wives emerge as more than merely comic diversions. Lydgate employs his version of the spinning woman figure to send a far-reaching message about the dangers that still attend an unmonitored laity eager to seek out meanings on their own.

While other scholars have pointed to Lydgate's attempts to contain lay religious activities considered dangerous to Church and crown through his active subduing of strong figures of saintly women,⁴⁰ the Hertford *Mumming* thus demonstrates how Lydgate also employed a female figure that might be seen as antithetical to his passive holy women in order to issue a more direct warning about the dangers of a lay population too eagerly invested in pursuing its own religious truths. The spinning women of the Hertford *Mumming* offer a strong contrast to Lydgate's softened portraits of, for example, Saints Margaret and Petronilla — portraits roughly contemporary with the *Mumming* in which he (in a departure from his source, the *Legenda aurea*) essentially eliminates the saints' vocal, rebellious, and learned natures. But Lydgate's rebellious wives stand in useful opposition to his demure female saints in order to portray the disruptive results of unregulated lay learning and spirituality.⁴¹ Indeed, they have more in common with Cecilia in Chaucer's "Second Nun's Tale," whose assertiveness and vocal-ity similarly serve to indicate important differences between the religious and political

39 Indeed, Lydgate's own "Tretise for Lauandres" may likewise be seen to communicate a more subtle version of Hoccleve's exhortation that women ought to "sitt[e] down and spynne" and thus return to and maintain their proper place in society. Likewise selecting female clothing workers for special commentary, Lydgate insists that laundresses "sette [their] desyre" on "How to doo youre godely obseruance" and then proceeds to define that observance in details that are firmly bound by references to cloth, stains, and cleaning methods; Lydgate, *The Minor Poems*, 2:723, ll. 5-6.

40 Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, 120-33. Schirmer also notes Lydgate's revisions to the saints lives; see *John Lydgate*, 156-58.

41 In Lydgate's hands, Margaret and Petronilla are quiet, demure, and wary of the public spotlight — all things that the Hertford wives (as well as, importantly, Jacobus's versions of the saints) are not. See Lydgate, "The Legend of Seynt Margarete," in *The Minor Poems*, 1:173-92, and "The Legende of St. Petronilla," in *The Minor Poems*, 1:154-59. See also Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 368-70 and 315. Compare, as well, Lydgate's opinions of marriage and women expressed, for example, in such texts as "The Pain and Sorrow of Evil Marriage," in *The Minor Poems*, 2:456-60 and "Examples Against Women," in *The Minor Poems*, 2:442-45.

climates in which Chaucer and Lydgate wrote. The Hertford wives, therefore, can be seen as negative exemplars, portraying the very characteristics Lydgate sought to silence in his female saints while also demonstrating the disruptive effects of uncensored lay access to, and use of, texts and religious doctrine.⁴² Indeed, the presumptuous nature of the wives' assertions supports Lydgate's purposeful use of them as precautionary models of precisely the qualities he sought to suppress in his hagiographical writings. The figure of the spinning woman thus operates as a powerful touchstone for the threat of unchecked lay interpretation to social and religious hierarchies much larger than the marital order.

Interpretation and Emasculation

Let men be-ware þer-fore or þey beo bounde.

(*Mumming at Hertford*, 246)

Rather than a fleeting figure that merely gestures toward larger social dilemmas, then, the spinning woman's challenge to the domestic hierarchy adds a layer of gendered discourse to struggles over lay learning and piety in late medieval England. As discussed above, Lydgate was not alone in employing the spinning woman figure to suggest the dangers of unmonitored forms of interpretive practices. Hoccleve's "Address to Sir John Oldcastle" likewise contains the familiar figure of the spinning woman in its critique of Lollardy and other lay heretical practices. Yet extending the symbolic potential of the figure, Hoccleve also presents the act of interpretation itself — at least as practised by Lollards and their sympathizers — as an act of effeminate depletion. Addressing Oldcastle as "thow þat were a manly knyght," Hoccleve likewise includes pointed references to his subject's loss of masculinity caused by his heretical and, in particular, his interpretive activities (9, 105-106; 274-75; 504-508, emphasis mine). Reminiscent perhaps of the possible far-reaching societal ramifications of the type of unchecked lay interpretive practices epitomized in Lydgate's unruly wives, Hoccleve argues that exposure to false interpretations has sapped Oldcastle of his virility. Lamenting the emasculating impact of "sly coloured argumentes," Hoccleve insists that Oldcastle has lost "his good old knyght-hode" and that "lak of feith / hath qwenchid his manhode" (281, 285-87).⁴³ A model for

42 Strohm's assertion that Lydgate's texts often seem at odds with themselves seems applicable here: "Lydgate constantly veers toward the very things that cannot be said, and the very images that discredit or destabilize his enterprise"; Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 193.

43 Other scholars have also addressed Hoccleve's critique of Oldcastle's heretical activity articulated in terms of the strong suggestion that this activity has depleted his manhood and bereft him of his knightly status. See Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 184-85, and Barr, "Constructing Social Realities," 27-34. Henry V was, of course, reputed to be friendly with Oldcastle.

Shakespeare's Falstaff, whose very name suggests an association with distaffs and women and whom Shakespeare portrayed as in the company of or seeking the company of women, Oldcastle and his heretical activities provide an intriguing context for the symbolic development and employment of the spinning woman figure.⁴⁴ Indeed, the Oldcastle rebellion may represent a turning point in the symbolic meanings attached to the spinning woman figure whereby it could serve to represent heretical activities and social and religious disruption but also became a useful foundation for suggesting that independent lay interpretive practices could sap one's manhood.⁴⁵

Departing from the association of the figure of the spinning woman with womanly transformative and redemptive work, Hoccleve crafts, instead, the notion of spinning as a form of emasculating entrapment: Oldcastle is caught in a web of arguments as his own interpretive — and heretical — activities associate him with spinning women.⁴⁶ Although Hoccleve expands his gendered criticism of unchecked lay piety and interpretation beyond the figure of the spinning woman, he nevertheless relies upon that feminine figure as a foundation for his assertion that men who likewise spin and “medle” where they don't belong are subjecting themselves to an emasculating process that has both social and religious implications (“Address to Sir John Oldcastle,” 337, 350).

While Lydgate does not, as does Hoccleve, directly liken heresy to an emasculating process by which men have been caught in their own effeminate arguments, his spinning women do propose an audacious and self-serving argument which, while notably far-fetched and even outlandish in its logic, draws enough support from textual and doctrinal sources to communicate the dangers of a laity too eager to engage — and thus to entrap themselves and others — in their own interpretations of religious meanings and social hierarchies. Yet while Hoccleve must use the spinning woman figure in order to condemn heretical activities in retrospect, Lydgate's spinning women, although potentially emasculating, provide the new king of England with an opportunity to put things right, to undo the potential trap. Lydgate presents his spinning women, and the unruly

44 In her discussion of the iconography of the spinning woman, Biscoglio asserts a similar connection between distaff and Falstaff but does not refer to Oldcastle; see Biscoglio, “Unspun' Heroes,” 174-75.

45 Intriguingly, one of the largest contingents who joined in the rebellion were a group of weavers from Bristol, and, of course, the ever orthodox Margery Kempe was deemed dangerous enough to be labelled “Combomis [Oldcastle's] dowtyr” (*The Book of Margery Kempe*, 132, l. 13). Oldcastle appears to have owed much of his status (and his title Lord Cobham) to his advantageous marriage to the very wealthy Joan Cobham. One of his chief co-conspirators in the rebellion that bears his name was apparently the son of a weaver. See Waugh, “*Sir John Oldcastle*,” 641, n. 22.

46 For medieval examples of emasculation symbolized by men spinning or caught in the threads of a woman's spinning, see Biscoglio, “Unspun' Heroes,” 173-74.

world they endorse, so that the king may demonstrate a model of maturity and reasoned response that signals his transition from the company of female caretakers to male advisers. When, for example, the husbands' spokesperson warns Henry VI that "Conquest of wyves is ronne thorough þis lande, / Cleyming of right to haue þe hyegher hande" (143-44), the spokesperson suggests that the topical significance of the marriage debate may be intended to refer to other, wider social issues — an implication likewise supported by the wives' assertion that "pacyence / Parteneþe not to wyves *nowe adayes*" (172-73, emphasis mine).⁴⁷ Moreover, as at least three of Lydgate's poems written in honour of Henry's coronation contain instructional warnings to the monarch regarding the dangers of Lollardy and lay heresy in general and concerning the need to safeguard the Church,⁴⁸ Lydgate seems to have considered potentially heretical practices among the laity as particularly threatening to a very young king still surrounded by women.⁴⁹

With his *Mumming at Hertford*, then, Lydgate thus suggests to his king a way to shake off the influence of his mother and the female-dominated court in order to emerge as his own man, while simultaneously setting in motion actions and decisions that will likewise distance his nation from, and rid it of, the feminine chaos and disruption of Lollardy, heresy, and other forms of unmonitored interpretive practice. Demonstrating, perhaps, that he is resistant to the tangled webs of the wives' unruly and disruptive assertions, Henry, through his spokesperson, declares that he "Wil vnavysed gyve here no sentence, / With-oute counseyll" (218-19), perhaps indicating his willingness to listen to his male advisers as he moves away from his mother and female providers and thus rule wisely with no "hasty iugement" (222). Henry's deferral of a definitive sentence "Til þer beo made examynacyoun / Of oþer partye, and inquysicyoun" (225-26) and his decision to return to the matter in a year also suggest a tactful political manoeuvre, allowing the husbands time to prepare their own interpretive defence and foreshadowing his

47 Similarly, in Lydgate's "Bycorne and Chychevache," where, as in the Hertford *Mumming*, the overturning of domestic hierarchy may reflect upon larger social issues, Chychevache laments the current lack of patient and meek wives "lyche Gresylde"; "Bycorne and Chychevache," in *The Minor Poems*, 2:436-37, l. 87.

48 "Prayer for King, Queen, and People, 1429," in *The Minor Poems*, 1:212-16; "The Soteltes at the Coronation Banquet of Henry VI," in *The Minor Poems*, 2:623-24; "Ballade to King Henry VI upon His Coronation," in *The Minor Poems*, 2:624-30. Lydgate also takes up the topic of Lollardy in "The Legend of St. Austin at Compton," in *The Minor Poems*, 1:193-206.

49 For a discussion of Lydgate's literary involvement in the political issues surrounding the child-king Henry VI and his rights to the French throne, see Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, 186-90. Pearsall offers a similar discussion in *John Lydgate*, 169-71. See also Schirmer, *John Lydgate*, 116-19.

intent to handle other, larger challenges to the social and religious order in a similar fashion "of ful hyeghe prudence" (217). The spinning women of Hertford and the disruptive social and religious forces they represent seem here effectively managed by a king who declares that "Raysoun" will be "his guyde" (227).

The dangerous ability of the Hertford wives to claim interpretations that draw from contemporary doctrine and belief in order to challenge their husbands' dominance transforms what at first appears a mere marital squabble into a potent social commentary. And, importantly, Lydgate appears to have wanted that commentary to demonstrate not just the conflict but also its resolution, not just the threat to social stability and order but also the triumph of authority over that threat. Despite various forms of legislation intended to control an increasing desire among the laity to be more personally and directly involved in revealing religious and political meanings, the *Mumming at Hertford* suggests that the Church and state continued to respond to that desire by seeking out useful ways to portray and control this apparent threat to faith and society.

Yet the final lines of the Hertford *Mumming* suggest that the spinning woman may have signalled the very realities that Lydgate and others hoped that their use of the figure would effectively suppress. Rather than concluding with a silencing of the disruptive voices of Hertford's spinning women by the king's assertion that reason will be his guide, Lydgate instead has his king awaken those voices. Expressing compassion for the husbands' trials, Henry reanimates the Hertford wives as spinning women through two references to their distaffs (231-32). He then proceeds to assert that the strength of the wives' argument rests upon legal precedent, age-old tradition, statutes and chronicles, and other supporting information and evidence which the wives did not actually present (234-38). The result is an over-the-top description suggesting an intentional mockery of the wives' interpretive attempts, a mockery intended to put them in their place. Likewise, the last lines of the *Mumming* are perhaps meant as a further silencing mechanism. By asserting in a stock misogynist diatribe that every marriage is but a man trap and that all women are natural enslavers of men (245-52), Henry implies that reality, of course, is something quite different and, by extension, that what these spinning women symbolize is just something to laugh at — and laugh off, as well.

The familiar anti-woman sentiments, the invoking and, then, rejecting of the spinning woman and her entrapping ways, suggest, however, a certain insecurity about the effectiveness of a political stance that must turn in the end to comic overstatement, as well as an uncertainty about the ability of Lydgate's staging to manage the symbolic resonance of the spinning woman figure. As Maura Nolan has argued, the *Mumming*, "for all of its embrace of a 'world turned upside down' with 'conquest of wyves' [...] is

ultimately unable to sustain (or contain) the social critique such a vision invokes.”⁵⁰ While one might read the concluding lines of the Hertford *Mumming* as but an additional layer of comedy that dismisses Hertford’s presumptuous women and their interpretive pretensions or as an attempt to set an audience at ease regarding the nation’s boy-king, Lydgate’s particular incarnation of the spinning woman is not silenced, nor are the forces that she represents. The very anti-women sentiments that are intended to mock, dismiss, and silence the spinning women and the forces they are meant to symbolize instead leave the play, its audience, the king, and his realm suspended in a kind of anxious — and perhaps emasculating — disorder of their own making. In his attempt to ridicule the female-dominated world which he has just created and in which women develop effective arguments, Lydgate grants an unsettling authority to that world and to the world of lay interpretive power which it represents.

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50 Nolan, *John Lydgate*, 163. As Nolan also notes, “Like the comic form itself, the king is impotent in the face of history, powerless to reverse the ‘conquest of wyves,’ unable to produce ‘wele’ for his lieges”; Nolan, *John Lydgate*, 169. See also Strohm’s comment quoted in note 42 above.

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