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THE SUBVERSIVE DISCOURSE OF THE WIFE OF BATH: PHALLOCENTRIC DISCOURSE AND THE IMPRISONMENT OF CRITICISM

BY BARRIE RUTH STRAUS

Few readers remain complacent about Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and no one would dispute her controversiality. For E. T. Donaldson, for example, the Wife is a figure to laugh *with*: "always competitive," she rivals Falstaff as "the greatest comic character in English literature."¹ By contrast, for D. W. Robertson, Jr., the Wife is, at best, a figure to laugh *at*, whose morals and rhetoric are to be assiduously deplored.² Yet the Wife has not only stirred controversy. She has provoked a virulence and an extremity of critical reaction that are remarkable. She has been labelled a "murderer," a "deviate," and a psychological "case."³ Her critics have not only been polarized, but have occasionally lost the measured tone of professional response. Donald Sands, for example, inveighs against her as "laughable . . . queer" and finally "absurd" in a way he compares to Charles Manson. Calling her "visually 'funny,' like the former Congresswoman from New York," he diagnoses her as a dangerous sociopath and an alcoholic.⁴ Beryl Rowland dismisses the Wife as a rank deviate, and decides that, since she is "promiscuous" like a prostitute, she must share the reputed fate of most nymphomaniacs—frigidity.⁵

The extremity of these readings is symptomatic of an intensity of response that the Wife constantly evokes. In this essay, I intend to show that this hostility—and even the confusions evident in the work of more sympathetic readers—is a consequence of the way her speech articulates the phallocentric conditions of the discourse within which she and her readership are constituted, and provides a critique of these patriarchal foundations of language. Her talk is a subtle yet profound commentary on issues of knowledge and power and their grounding in sexuality. These, of course, are issues that any readership might well find unsettling, especially given the manner in which the Wife broaches them. I will first show how the Wife's subversion of the discourses of "experience" and "authority" becomes enclosed within masculine discourse in her *Prologue*, and how such enclosure is subverted by the exposure and

implicit questioning of the categorical distinctions on which it depends. Then I will show how her subversion of the structure of enclosure is replicated in the structure of secrets and “truth” in her *Tale* to reveal the “fiction” or fabrication that the Wife weaves and shows is woven (as she is) into phallocentrism.⁶

Critics have become increasingly aware of the problematics and complexities of what I will call the “female voice.” I am concerned with two issues here. One is the term “voice,” which I use as a construction of language and textuality rather than the vehicle of preexisting characters and poets whose combined traits constrain textual meaning. The assumption is that “the poem is conspicuously textual and the voices of the text create the characters.”⁷ The second concern is the way we label the gender of that voice. At issue is what is variously referred to as the voice of “woman” or “the feminine” (that is, not “masculine”) as distinct from actual women in phallocentric discourse. The growing tendency has been to use the terms “feminine” and “masculine” to convey the socially constructed patterns of sexuality and behavior inscribed by cultural ideology, and to “reserve ‘female’ and ‘male’ for the purely biological aspects of sexual difference.” “Feminine” is associated with “nurture” and “female” with “nature.”⁸ Although I respect this attempt to present the self-interest of phallocentric terms, I use the term “female voice” here to indicate that it does not go far enough, for it fails to take into account the way the nature/nurture distinction itself encodes cultural ideology. The few undeniable facts of difference—the presence of a vagina and ovaries, or breasts, for example—are also not givens with inherent meaning, but effects or interpretations of a system of sociopolitical values that designates one term “natural” and another “unnatural.”⁹ My concern is in part to show the way the Wife articulates and provides a critique of the construction of woman or the feminine in phallocentric discourse. In a discussion of feminine discourse in Chaucer, Lee Patterson accepts the distinction between “feminine” as socially constructed and “female” as “neutral,” but he shows the complexities of gender labels. He points out that “the voice of the poet is inescapably aligned with that of women: his rhetoric is, to an important degree, always feminine.”¹⁰ The complexities between the signature of the author and gender make it difficult to ascertain what a female voice might actually be—a point that my analysis of the Wife’s discourse will ultimately help to demonstrate.¹¹

I. DISCOURSES OF EXPERIENCE AND AUTHORITY

That the Wife speaks at all has of course been noted as Chaucer's remarkable insertion of a female voice—something rarely heard not only in *The Canterbury Tales* and medieval literature, but in the literary canon.¹² But from the opening lines of her *Prologue*, the Wife does not simply speak; she insists on asserting her right to speak: "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / To speke . . ." (1–3).¹³ The Wife later issues a disclaimer that may be read as an invitation not to take her seriously:

I praye to al this compaignye,
If that I speke after my fantasye,
As taketh not agrief of that I seye;
For myn entente is nat but for to pleye.

(189–92)

This disclaimer could be read as the Wife's acknowledgment of "woman's place"—traditionally restricted to privacy, domesticity and silence; if woman does enter the serious world of public, masculine discourse, her talk can be trivial at best. Under the guise of knowing her place, however, the Wife proceeds to transgress it. Entitling herself to speak, she refuses to be constrained as to what she will address. Indeed, she will speak about the entire issue of who may speak and who may not, and on what authority. And in the process, the Wife will show the problem of women's place in phallocentric discourse.¹⁴

Traditionally, the question of the Wife's authority (the basis of her knowledge, or her claim to know) is often discussed in terms of the dichotomy between authority and experience.¹⁵ We have become, however, increasingly aware of the complex relationship between experience and authority, of the way the two terms have been mutually implicated in the history of philosophy and knowledge.¹⁶ Critics alert to the complex ways authority and experience interact in the Wife's *Prologue* and *Tale* will often note, for example, that the Wife paradoxically defends experience by using authority, or will assert that, rather than denying authority "when authority is true," the Wife insists that "authority make itself accountable to the realities of experience."¹⁷ Such statements pit a natural world of experience against a world of constructed author-

itative discourse. Gabriel Josipovici reminds us of the futility of such simple oppositions, since neither experience nor authority “speaks to us directly,” but “both need interpreting.”¹⁸ But the Wife’s discourse goes beyond a mere matter of interpretation. By showing how both experience and authority are caught up in the problem of discourse, the Wife ultimately shows how we are dealing with a conflict between two kinds of discourse, that of experience and that of authority.¹⁹ While the Wife initially inverts the hierarchy by which authority conditions, constrains and categorizes the meanings of experience, she eventually deploys this apparent inversion towards a critique of the dichotomization and hierarchization of authority and experience that discourse itself creates.

The Wife initiates a dialogue with the established authorities of the Church and by extension the political and social order, even while admitting she does not have the backing of those authorities. Seeming to accept the official designations rather than presenting herself as without authority, she claims the authority of (and for) what official discourse labels practical experience, the experience she has endured in the private realm of marriage: “Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage” (1–3). Insistently presenting her credentials in authoritative terms, she supports her authority of experience with her empirical sample of five different husbands: “Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve” (6). And she claims the specific expertise “Of tribulacion in mariage, / Of which I am expert in al myn age” (173–74). In other words, against the discourse of serious, public masculine learning, of the knowledge that goes with writing and books, the Wife invokes her knowledge of her own experience of the private, female, domestic world, a knowledge not considered of the same order as authorized knowledge.²⁰ Moreover, against the tradition of silence, she insists on her right to speak publicly of this traditionally private world of women’s wisdom, the knowledge of women’s experience most frequently conveyed (from women to women in secret) through the spoken word.

Yet the way the Wife’s use of this knowledge goes beyond a mere assertion of its right to public enunciation creates an interesting twist. For as public proclamation the Wife’s speech ultimately implies that the pillars of male authority, the discourse of Church, government and the written word, depend precisely on sequestering women’s experience to the domain of private talk among

women. The structure of sequestration restricts woman by making her exclusion its innermost secret, as the masculine system defines itself in opposition to its own introjection of the woman into its innermost place.²¹ As the Wife makes public this requirement of phallogentric discourse she makes public what masculine discourse wants to keep private. Thus voicing women's experience in public not only implicitly challenges the legitimation of patriarchal authority and enunciation. It also subverts phallogentric discourse by exposing, questioning and reworking the boundaries of its terms.

II. THE ENCLOSURE OF FEMININE DISCOURSE BY MASCULINE DISCOURSE

We can see how the Wife subverts phallogentric discourse by exposing this structure of sequestration near the beginning of the autobiographical section of her *Prologue*. There the Wife's enclosure of her advice to other women (224–378) in addresses to men also reworks hierarchical dichotomizations of experience and authority, masculine and feminine, public and private. Proclaiming her intention to make women's experience public, she begins her advice by addressing her audience as if they were themselves a gathering of women whom she instructs how to speak: "Now herkneþ hou I baar me proprely, / Ye wise wyves, that kan understonde. / Thus shulde ye speke and bere hem wrong on honde" (224–26). But while the Wife begins her passage of advice by addressing women, she ends her advice to women by addressing men, still emphasizing how to handle men through speech: "Lordynges, right thus, as ye have understonde, / Baar I stifly myne olde housbondes on honde" (379–80).²² Moreover, beyond its immediate enclosure, the Wife's advice to women is enclosed by or nestled inside two other addresses to men. For the Wife begins the whole *Prologue* by addressing the male "lordynges": "For, lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age" (4), while the more specifically autobiographical story of her marriages is the Wife's response ("Now, sire, now wol I telle forth my tale" [193]) to the Pardoner's request to "teche us yonge men of youre praktike" (187).

The Wife can speak only in the presence of men in *The Canterbury Tales*, and that makes a difference. Her insertion of addresses to women inside addresses to men exposes the major requirement of phallogentrism—that masculine discourse enclose feminine discourse. For it implies that the Wife's overt address to women in her

passage of advice is a fiction or pretext belying the way woman and her discourse are already subsumed by masculine discourse. Such exposure subverts the main distinctions of phallogentric discourse, for what is revealed is not a stable frame of masculine discourse that contains the feminine. Rather, the Wife's parallel addresses reveal a fluid and reversible process of hierarchical dichotomies—masculine and feminine, public and private, authority and experience—bleeding over or folding into each other so that any attempt of one term to encompass the other will always fail.²³ Having undertaken to speak of serious matters, as if a man speaking to men, the Wife speaks as if to women, but still addresses men; thus she crosses the boundaries of public and private in multiple ways, and in a manner that indicts the very distinctions between authority and experience and between masculine and feminine discourse.

Advice from one woman to other women is traditionally “women's talk.” As such it is often associated with derogatory definitions of gossip: personal, trifling, groundless and even scandalous rumor associated with women as opposed to the more important and masculine public discourse. Derogatory assessments of women's talk are the definitions of male outsiders, however. Kept among women, this talk or gossip is simply closed, privileged, private communication that may function in part to provide mutual support.²⁴ The Wife seems to be passing on the wisdom of her experience so that other women can benefit from what she went through. Her insistence on addressing “wise wyves, that kan understonde” creates the pretext of a community of insiders whose experience will make them know what she had to endure from the speeches of men like her old husbands. But since the Wife's advice to women is framed by an address to men, she appears to disclose the secret of women's talk to men. Seeming to belie her position as woman, she claims to be one of the men by betraying women's secrets. But the Wife uses her advice to women less to betray the secrets of women than to reveal how the secrets of women more accurately constitute the secrets of men.

Moreover, while the Wife announces that she will disclose much, she actually discloses little of what women talk about when out of the hearing of men. And this too must be seen as evidence of the power of her discourse. It is a power that lies not so much in any specific content of information to which she has access as in her ability to use the idea of such privileged information to threaten the priorities of authority, and indeed play with, and so stimulate re-

evaluation of, the constitution of knowledge as the dichotomized hierarchy of authority and experience.

III. SECRETS OF THE WIFE'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

What is disclosed and what is not are best seen in the Wife's provocative and playful use of secrets in her pursuit of a critical discourse. The Wife's advice to women shows women telling women how to handle men through speech. Dramatically demonstrating how to chide, the Wife's addresses to the men ("Sire olde kaynard" [235], or "olde barel-ful of lyes" [302]), and her direct curses ("With wilde thonder-dynt and firy levene / Moote thy welked nekke be tobroke!" [276–77] or "O leewe sire shrewe, Jhesu shorte thy lyf!" [365]), clearly establish the men as outsiders. Reversing the traditional situation in which wives are the berated object of patriarchal discourse, the Wife now makes men the objects of verbal abuse.

The Wife does not, however, simply reverse traditional positions; she undermines them. Her reversal is a repetition that subverts by what it reveals about patriarchal discourse. The secret information the Wife reveals to those male outsiders shows women telling women how to act through speech, not merely by calling men names, but by turning men's very patterns of speech against them.²⁵ The Wife reverses the stereotype of the chiding wife by advising women simply to throw the patterns of male chiding and misogynist complaints back at their husbands: "What rowne ye with oure mayde? *Benedicite!* / . . . Withouten gilt, thou chidest as a feend / . . . Thus goth al to the devel, by thy tale" (241, 244, 262). Thus the Wife reveals that the "chidyng wives" men are advised to flee as natural disasters in misogynist complaints are actually the product of the rhetoric of chiding males. If the Wife were simply doing this as advice to women, she would merely be mimicking masculine speech.²⁶ But since this advice to women is actually given to men as their curse, the Wife is providing a commentary that shows the limits of masculine discourse. For the Wife's dramatic enactment of the way masculine curses get turned back on themselves blurs the boundaries between masculine and feminine discourse. It thus repeats the process of the frame of masculine discourse enfolding into women's talk and vice versa, enacted when the Wife's addresses cannot contain her advice to women.

The Wife's direct address to the "lordynges" at the end of that passage of advice insists that those men, placed as if eavesdropping

on the secrets of women's talk, pay attention to her lessons on the way women's talk keeps men in line: "Lordynges, right thus, as ye have understonde, / Baar I stifly myne olde housbondes on honde" (379–80). As she continues, pointedly merging verbal strategies with sexual secrets, she indicates the grounding of phallogocentric discourse in sexuality, connecting the secrets of handling men through speech and of handling men in bed: "Namely abedde hadden they meschaunce: / Ther wolde I chide, and do hem no pleasure" (407–8). Claiming to make the secret of women's private talk public, the Wife asserts that women's talk is just what men like her husbands might continue to fear. This proclamation—that there are secrets of the marriage bed (and phallogocentric sexuality) and that women will discuss them—plays with authoritative masculine knowledge by defining women's talk (defining it, that is, for men) as simply the doubling of male imagination and fears.

Claiming to betray the secrets of women, the Wife acts as if one of the boys. But while the Wife's advice to women focuses on telling women how to talk to men, her addresses to the male pilgrims framing that advice demonstrate how a woman can control men by talking to men about men. Under the double envelope of her address to the Pardoner and the address to the male pilgrims ending her advice to women, the Wife fulfills her promise to the Pardoner to "teche us yonge men of youre praktike" (187) by describing her bedroom techniques:

I wolde no lenger in the bed abyde,
If that I felte his arm over my syde,
Til he had maad his raunson unto me;
Thanne wolde I suffre hym do his nycetee.

(409–12)

But she emphasizes her ultimate point when she interrupts this lesson to insist that the men pay attention to the way her speech is directed to them ("And therfore every man this tale I telle" [413]), before she continues by asserting that her speech and techniques simply mirror the sexuality and morality of proverbial patriarchal wisdom: "Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle; / With empty hand men may none haukes lure" (414–15).

Traditional criticism has emphasized the commercialization of sexuality in these passages. Deploring the Wife's "schizophrenic compulsion . . . to bring the repulsive quarrels of the bedroom into

the fresh air of Watling Street," Rowland implies that the problem lies in the Wife's talking about these matters indiscreetly, distastefully making private matters public. Other critics, blaming the system rather than the Wife, focus on the way her discourse, by reversing traditional sexual roles, simply exposes the relationship between patriarchal sexuality and economics.²⁷ But the Wife provides a far more subversive critique than a mere reversal and exposure of the commerciality of sexual roles. For her articulation of language and sexuality as means of exploitation and revenge does more than show that the regulation of phallogentric discourse is grounded in a sexual economy based on deficit and domination (the unequal distribution of power to masculine holders of the phallus and powerlessness to feminine lack, the "empty hand" in the Wife's proverb). It subverts the very system of circulation, debt, deficit, exchange and profit that is the basis of phallogentric commercialism and discourse encapsulated in the term "the marriage debt." As perpetuated by the authorized discourse of the Church fathers regulating the political sexual economy, this term creates marriage through a permanent succession of temporary exchanges. The husband is required to make a bodily payment to his wife for the mutual profit of release from the sin of fornication. This loan of the husband's phallus is a loan of a body part that can be added on to the female's body to rectify her lack of a phallus. In short the loan turns the wife temporarily into a man, and consequently subverts her desire. The Wife's articulation of phallogentric desire undermines this system by showing that the economy of deficit, lack and domination is created by and reflects the grounding of discourse in phallogentric sexuality; for she reveals that that sexuality simply doubles masculine imagination and desire. When the Wife invokes "raunson," the stipulated price for release of a body, in an attempt to gain control by reversing the terms of the marriage debt, she claims her right, as creditor, to set her own terms for the payment of this debt by withholding her body, the site of payment and profit, until she receives what she wants. When she thereby points out a desire for a mutual exchange instead of the husband's payment of the marriage debt, which represents masculine desire and prerogative, she reveals the way masculine desire can not fulfill her desire.

Because the Church's payment is "hys nycetee" and not her own, the Wife labels masculine desire "foolishness" that she will "suf-

fre” or allow only when it seems to involve some genuine exchange. But she has just revealed how the male cannot enter into any genuine exchange with a woman. Moreover, the bankruptcy of this economic system is made manifest through discourse. The Wife, continuing her lesson on the grounding of discourse in sexuality, articulates the nature of phallogentric desire as she claims to the “lordynges” that her chiding can be blamed on the men’s inability to give her sexual pleasure (her version of the proper payment of the marriage debt):

For wynnyng wolde I al his lust endure,
And make me a feyned appetit;
And yet in bacon hadde I nevere delit;
That made me that evere I wolde hem chide.

(416–19)²⁸

The point here is not simply the power of women’s words to threaten by doubling men’s imagination and fears about their sexual vulnerabilities and failures.²⁹ Much more crucial is the way phallogentric sexuality involves nothing more than masculine desire doubling itself, a process that excludes woman’s pleasure. Thus the Wife claims that she will put up with masculine desire (“al his lust endure”) and create, make up, or reflect that desire (“And make me a feyned appetit”), which is different from her own: “And yet in bacon hadde I nevere delit.” But her claim is made on the condition that she receive a profit (“For wynnyng wolde I”), which a system based on the exclusion of female desire ensures that she, as woman, can never receive.

When the Wife talks to the male pilgrims as if one of the men, and claims to disclose the nature of her sexual relationships with her old husbands, we see her making a “feyned appetit”; that is, she appears to display male pleasure and desire. But since, excluded as woman, she can not and may not feel that desire, she actually shows how woman’s role is to be man’s other, to mirror masculine appetite and desire. In talking to the Pardoner about her sexual activities with her three old husbands, the Wife shares the secret of her husbands’ impotence, their inability to keep the marriage debt: “Unnethe myghte they the statut holde / In which that they were bounden unto me” (198–99). She intensifies her point when she makes the Pardoner laugh with her at her husbands’ sexual failings:

Ye woot wel what I meene of this, pardee!
As help me God, I laughe whan I thynke

How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke!
And, by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor.

(200–203)

But the Wife's exchange with the Pardoner is much more than a joke at her husbands' expense. Under the guise of sharing with men the secret of the feigned appetite as one of women's ways of handling men, the Wife articulates the homoerotic nature of phallogentric sexuality: that it is masculine desire seeking only itself. When she makes the Pardoner her accomplice in betraying her husbands' secrets, she in effect puts the Pardoner in bed with her and her husbands. By sharing her husbands' sexual activities with a man, while speaking as if a man, the Wife participates in a homosexual exchange with the Pardoner. In this way, the Wife does more than play with the Pardoner's cloaking of his homosexual desire ("I was aboute to wedde a wyf; allas! / What sholde I bye it on my flessch so deere? / Yet hadde I levere wedde no wyf to-yeere!" [166–68]). She reveals that the Pardoner, rather than being atypical, exemplifies phallogentric sexuality.³⁰

At the heart of phallic power is the fear of the loss of that power, of the castration, or lack, that the secrets of woman threaten and represent. The Wife demonstrates that men's fear of castrative loss has caused them to project such a lack onto women, to imagine and define woman as lack. But the Wife's articulation of the feigned appetite shows how a system of discourse that imagines women as lack, constructing women as trying to be men and having to feign, creates a circular process which by necessity can only reveal the feigned appetite as the way man defines woman as lack. In brief, her discourse displays both man's definition of woman as lack and the way that definition is a consequence of male fear of loss. The Wife then laughs with the Pardoner at the system by which women, as lack and mirror, not only see men's anxiety about lack, their impotence, but see as well that their very defense (projecting lack on women) ensures that men's fear of lack will be revealed. The humor and the horror of the relationship between the Wife and the Pardoner in this sexual exchange is created by the threat and the promise of exposing this masculine system.

Concern with secrets, far from being restricted to the Wife of Bath's *Prologue*, that pre-text or margin lying outside her *Tale*, is reflected in that tale and the rest of *The Canterbury Tales* as well. In fact, revelation of sexual secrets becomes a matter of life and

death in the tale the Wife tells. As we have seen, the dichotomization of phallogentric discourse posits a clear and hierarchichal distinction between what is kept private (women's secret talk) and what is made known (public, masculine knowledge). But the Wife's public proclamation of secret knowledge subverts that distinction by showing its limitations. In telling us her tale, the Wife articulates the relationship between sexuality, secrets and knowledge, categories that phallogentric discourse maintains as if discrete. The Wife's preliminary inversion of hierarchical categories provides a critical commentary on the relationships among sexuality, secret knowledge and phallic truth. In her depiction of the knight's quest, which begins and ends with women's bodies, the Wife plays on the possibilities of knowing woman within phallogentric discourse. The knight's quest is initiated by his attempt to know a woman, and by implication possess her sexual secrets, from the inside, by the violent carnal penetration of rape. But that the young woman is simply the means of the knight's instrumental knowledge not of woman but of his own desire for self-gratification is made clear by the nature of the knight's quest: to find out what women want. The knight's quest ends when the knight has to be instructed inside his marriage bed because he refuses to pay his marriage debt or know woman through the carnal penetration that his rash promise to the crone and marriage to his wife doubly oblige him to perform. The Wife's inversion of the roles of the young maiden and the knight does more than make the knight know through experience how it feels to need to say "Taak al my good, and lat my body go" (1061) in an attempt to ward off loss of power over one's own body. For the inversion of their positions points out the similarity between carnal knowledge inside and outside the law in patriarchal discourse. In fact, the knight's wresting the maidenhead of the young woman he rapes "maugree" her will is a paradigm for all patriarchal or phallic knowledge. This knowledge, consisting of penetrating bodies, and violently imposing one will on another, is a matter of mastery and control, the domination of one element of the hierarchy over the other. The Wife's discourse reveals that this situation is in fact the truth of phallogentric discourse.

IV. TRUTH AND TEXTUALITY

In order to consider the truth of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, which involves the truth of woman as man's other in patriarchal discourse, and of woman speaking as if a man, we must look at

the masculine discourse of *The Canterbury Tales* that enfolds it. We shall see what speaking as a man involves in the *Tales* by examining the authorial voice and the authority of the text, an authority that is constantly slipping away. For while the truth of patriarchy rests on its claim to absolute authority, the narrative structure of the *Tales*, especially the way the univocal authority and truth of Chaucer as author-pilgrim-narrator is deflected through the multivoiced narrators that represent his author-ity and that he represents, creates a process which constantly undermines the idea of an absolute authority and univocal truth.³¹ Especially important is the way male narrators' repeated disclaimers of responsibility for what they tell suggests a complex and problematic notion of truth. For what the Wife says when speaking as if a man is further complicated by the way these disclaimers indicate that while the male narrators (and the patriarchal discourse they represent) claim to speak from absolute authority and truth, in fact their speaking rests on an authority and truth continuously disclaimed and displaced. In short, the truth of the male narrators, those re-presentations of the authority that establishes woman as man's other, is also the truth of an other. We are most familiar with this process in Chaucer the author-pilgrim-narrator's famous disclaimer towards the end of the *General Prologue* framing all the *Tales*:

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
 He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
 Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
 Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
 Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
 Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.

(731–36)

The narrator appeals to the truth of verisimilitude, to an outside, objective reality that he must recreate by echoing his characters' words as closely as possible. But as Josipovici points out, the narrator's naive faith in the facts as synonymous with the truth "reminds us that all facts have to be interpreted, that since not all 'the facts' can get into a book . . . a choice will have to be made."³² The narrator's deferral to objectivity belies the way a choice is made about what language he will use. Although the narrator denies his own responsibility and asserts the power of an authority that lies elsewhere, at the same time he reminds us of storytelling as invention by more than his insistence on facts. For the narrator's careful

delineation of the storyteller's responsibility to re-cite the facts inserts fiction within those facts. As he tries to define the difference between telling the facts and creating a fiction, his insistence that he must repeat every word ("everich a word") as closely as he can ("as ny as evere he kan"), "or ellis" be telling a tale that is "un-trewe," admits that this separation between fact and fiction is not possible to maintain. He can repeat only as closely as possible, rather than "exactly": retelling can never be exact repetition, but can only re-present something close to what was said. With this phrase, then, he opens up a moment of difference, and points to the necessity for "feyning" and making up the difference involved in all telling (truth and untruth).³³ Speaking as a man, the male narrator enacts the same process of slippage whereby lack is projected on woman that we saw in the Wife's articulation of the feigned appetite when she was speaking as if a man. Thus the lack that is frequently read as woman's voice in phallogentric discourse is here seen more accurately as the feigning within patriarchal discourse.

The process of deflection of responsibility to some external truth and reality becomes further enfolded when the narrator immediately turns that reality to which he had just appealed into textuality, by invoking two written authorities, Christ and Plato:

Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ,
And wel ye woot no vileynye is it.
Eek Plato seith, whoso that kan hym rede,
The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede.

(739–42)³⁴

An even more complex enfolding recurs in the double disclaimer in the *Prologue* to *The Miller's Tale*. There the Miller's disclaimer of responsibility for choosing his rough words asks us to blame them not on the storyteller's responsibility for close repetition but rather on his intoxicated state, a state of mind he knows because he *hears* it, and one that often leads to disclosures of a different kind of truth than we might ordinarily speak:

But first I make a protestacioun
That I am dronke, I knowe it by my soun;
And therfore if that I mysspeke or seye,
Wyte it the ale of Southwerk, I you preye.

(3137–40)

But the Miller's claim that the ale inside him is to blame is further

complicated by Chaucer the author-pilgrim-narrator's immediate interruption to reiterate his disclaimer of *his* authority and selection of words by repeating his appeal to the authority of the external reality he has previously textualized:

And therefore every gentil wight I preye,
For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
Or elles falsen som of my mateere.

(3171–75)

Most important, the author-pilgrim-narrator immediately retextualizes that reality again by reminding us of the need to react to the tales in the spirit of play: “Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame; / And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game” (3185–86). According to these claims, the sounds we hear are the sounds the Miller hears (perhaps an interesting inversion of the early sense of “to feyne” as “to hum or sing so softly that the words are unhearable”), which are Chaucer the author-pilgrim-narrator's drunkenness.³⁵ In their disclaimers the male narrators have made verisimilitude a fiction, a drunkenness and a game, but under the guise of telling the truth.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, then, is nested inside a series of male narrators' disclaimers within disclaimers that, by moving us into the field of textuality, reveal the complex relationship between truth and intertextuality in the tales. The Wife doubles these men's disclaimers in her *Prologue* in a way that subverts the canonized opposition between truth and fiction maintained by masculine discourse, a discourse that also defines woman. Before beginning to teach the young men about her experience in marriage, the Wife addresses her own disclaimer to the Pardoner. But unlike the men who disclaim responsibility by deferring to external reality or ale, the Wife takes responsibility by deferring to “fantasye” and “pleye,” which she claims as her own:

“Gladly,” quod she, “sith it may yow like;
But that I praye to al this compaignye,
If that I speke after my fantasye,
As taketh not agrief of that I seye;
For myn entente is nat but for to pleye.”

(188–92)

The Wife characteristically inverts the structure of the men's dis-

claimers. The men begin by proclaiming that they are merely speaking the truth about the world as it actually is. But their discourse then proceeds to demonstrate indirectly how this world is in truth fictive. The Wife, however, by immediately announcing the fictive nature of her world, reveals what the men would conceal. Moreover, she goes beyond the mere inversion of masculine categories by moving her disclaimer in a different direction. She claims to be telling her own tale, experience and truth, not another's (a claim which she of course never fulfills), and she relates her truth to her own "fantasye," pleasure, play and imaginings, the ultimate impact of which threatens to silence masculine discourse.

Furthermore, by taking on the position of "liar" that masculine discourse traditionally assigns to woman the Wife shows how all play is sexually marked. In her advice to "wise wyves" on how to talk to men, the Wife claims not to be concerned with whether what is said is true. When the Wife does declare she is telling the truth her language allows that truth to be associated with the drunken imagination of the Miller: "As evere moote I drynken wyn or ale, / I shal seye sooth" (194-95); or with idiomatic expressions of oaths emphasizing her own sense of truth and morality, rather than that of others: "For, by my trouthe, I quitte hem word for word" (422); or with the questioning of Thomas the Doubter: "Now wol I seye yow sooth, by seint Thomas" (666). Unlike the men, the Wife happily proclaims she is a liar, a statement or stance in itself productive of a vertiginous indeterminacy that ultimately undoes the truth/fiction dichotomy. Affirming and reemphasizing this skill in her addresses to the "lordynges," she repeatedly boasts of her ability to create false accusations. Not content to point out,

Lordynges, right thus, as ye have understonde,
Baar I stifly myne olde housbondes on honde

.
And al was fals, but that I took witesse
On Janekyn, and on my nece also,

(379-80, 382-83)

she also stresses her need (like Scheherezade) to create fictions to save her life: "I koude pleyne, and yit was in the gilt, / Or elles often tyme hadde I been spilt" (387-88).³⁶ She insists that her false accusations were her best truth and defensive strategy: "I pleyned first, so was oure werre ystynt, / They were ful glade to excuse hem blyve / Of thyng of which they nevere agilte hir lyve" (390-92).

The Wife defines women's speech as what masculine discourse says it is: the opposite of truth. Accepting this definition, she pushes it to its limits, turning it against the standards of patriarchal knowledge. She makes a virtue of the knowledge she has received from men, that men as the promulgators of masculine discourse are the holders of facts, knowledge and truth, while women as holders of secrets, which are at best gossip, are liars who make things up. Thus she credits her superior expertise in fabrication to her sex: "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" (226–28). Affirming what clerical/masculine knowledge teaches, she again reminds the men that her skill in feigning is a special gift of what the Clerk calls "al hire secte" (*Clerk's Tale*, 1171): "For al swich wit is yeven us in oure byrthe; / Deceite, wepyng, spynnyng God hath yive / To wommen kyndely, whil that they may lyve" (400–402). The Wife presents herself as a woman skilled in spinning two kinds of yarn, a weaver of cloth and of fictions. Her favorite phrase "to bar on honde" becomes intimately connected with the creation of women's fictions, with women's necessary and special storytelling skill.³⁷

When the Wife describes her courtship of Jankyn, she again confesses she fabricated and attributes that skill to women's wisdom:

I bar hym on honde he hadde enchanted me,—
 My dame taughte me that soutiltee.
 And eek I seyde I mette of hym al nyght,

 And al was fals; I dremed of it right naught,
 But as I folwed ay my dames loore.

(575–77, 582–83)

What is important to the Wife is not masculine truth, but play and telling. Moreover, crucial to the Wife's telling is her claim that fabrication is a special female skill. Women's "soutiltee," the clever craft or secret knowledge of "dames loore" passed on from woman to woman, insists that telling about the textuality or fabrication of truth is more crucial than the reality or verisimilitude to which patriarchal discourse always defers and refers. The Wife seems to be supporting the hierarchical opposition of the absolute truth of masculine discourse and the falsity of women's speech by simply inverting their moral valency here. But by playing with the categories of truth and falsity, she also provides a ludic commentary on

the basis of phallogentric discourse. Showing how the truth of masculine discourse is a part of masculine imaginings, she reveals that the true/false distinction is never discrete, and clearly not the whole story. Subverting the priority of all logical categories, the Wife indicates that in fact the neatness of such distinctions may be based not only on logical order, but on delusion as well. The Wife textually plays in truth with the falsity of speech, and this falsity has real and telling effects. Obviously, such play effectively problematizes the definition of knowledge within patriarchal discourse.

V. DOUBLING AND TRUTH

The nature of phallogentric truth and knowledge is best seen at the end of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. There the young man—who literally begins as an “errant” knight, a rapist, and ends up a married man—casts up the curtain of his wife’s marriage bed and sees that his old and ugly wife has indeed become young and fair. The curtain, an age-old metaphor for what separates us from the truth, is the veil that must be pierced for the truth to be revealed. The fact that the curtain is raised on the wedding bed relates this unveiling of truth to the unveiling of sexual secrets that takes place through piercing the hymen on the traditional wedding night, that is, through carnal knowledge.³⁸ Indeed the knight’s final unveiling of the secret of “what women want” is his wife’s re-presentation of the secret she, as crone, had privately whispered into his ear earlier, a doubling necessitated by his earlier deafness or inability to hear. The secret, however, is never disclosed, because phallogentric discourse, based on doubling masculine desire, has no way of knowing the desire of women.

What kind of knowledge and truth is finally unveiled when the knight casts up the curtain and sees the wife who is young and fair? The knight’s initial quest purported to be a search to uncover or pierce through the veil of feminine desire. But the question “what do women want?” is set up to receive one answer, and thus framed to satisfy phallogentric masculine desire. For “what do women want?” assumes one universal desire for all women, a desire based on an absolute and certain phallogentric universal truth. The knight’s quest in bed is similarly, although more complexly, framed to favor masculine desire for the certitude and truth of phallogentric discourse. For the choice the knight’s wife asks him to make is set up in terms that can do nothing but fulfill the knight’s desire. This is not simply because of the way, as critics increasingly note, the

wife fixes the game by prefacing the alternatives she offers with her assurance that she will fulfill the knight's desire: "But nathelees, syn I knowe youre delit, / I shal fulfille youre worldly appetit" (1217–18).³⁹ For the very alternatives the wife presents also play to, with, up and up to phallogentric masculine desire. Within the masculine system, the wife can play either way.

What complicates the knight's choices, preventing any simple reversal of the phallogentric preference of masculine desire for youth and beauty over age and ugliness, is the issue of faithfulness, which, as we shall see, is an issue of truthfulness and accuracy. The wife does not offer a choice between a wife who is faithful and one who is not. Rather, she offers a choice between two kinds of faithfulness, one that plays to and the other that plays with the masculine desire that privileges the absolute and certain truth and publicly verifiable knowledge of phallogentric discourse. The knight is to choose between a wife who is ugly and old, but faithful or "trewe," and one who is young and fair, and who may be faithful or not—the wife doesn't say. For the point is that the knight cannot know the truth of the wife's faithfulness with certitude. Choosing a young and beautiful wife then involves not just taking a chance ("And take youre aventure") on her opportunity to wander and be unfaithful ("of the repair / That shal be to youre hous by cause of me, / Or in som oother place, may wel be" [1224–26]). Equally crucial, because of its dependence on someone's report and the nature of phallogentric desire, knowledge of her faithfulness would be not only a matter of possible public speculation about her gatherings and comings and goings, but impossible to ascertain with certitude. The wife's alternatives then reveal and play with a phallogentric masculine desire for a wife who is beautiful and young, and whose fidelity, or truth, is not wandering, uncertain, fictionalized and undecidable, but rather the single, decidable, absolutely anchored truth and knowledge of phallogentric discourse.⁴⁰

Although the questions that frame the knight's quests, like the disclaimers of the male narrators, seem to proclaim that he can discover a truth that is elsewhere (by asking women or the wife), the Wife's *Tale* shows how the truth that the knight reveals is not some external, universal truth about the nature of women, or even what women want. The wedding night exchange between the knight and his wife makes clear, albeit in a complex way, that the truth that the knight reveals when he lifts up the curtain of his marriage bed is a complex doubling of his masculine desire. As we

have seen, the knight's choices are made within the framework of the "no loss" situation of his wife's promise that she will fulfill his desire. And she fixes the choices so that either the masculine desire for beauty and youth, and perhaps his desire for truth (if he chooses a wife who is young and fair, and who may be faithful), or his desire for absolute phallogocentric truth (if his choice is a wife who is ugly and old, but faithful) would certainly be fulfilled. Since the knight has the possibility of having everything (youth, beauty, and truth) if he makes the first choice, what is at stake is his acceptance of the possibility of the uncertain and fictionalized truth that the wife attaches to the first choice by adding the possibility that the wife may not be true. Within this framework of the certainty of the fulfillment of his desire, the knight chooses to relinquish his choice (and "maistrie," as he assures his wife) by letting his wife decide: "I put me in youre wise governance; / Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance, / And moost honour to yow and me also" (1231–33). And what does the wife choose? To fulfill his desire as she had promised all along by giving him a wife who will be "bothe fair and good" (1241) and, as we shall see, "trewe" (1243). When the knight lifts up the curtain, then, the truth that he unveils is what he desires: he sees his desire. Thus the moment of the knight's unveiling of truth simply doubles that desire. This is the very nature of knowledge and truth in phallogocentric discourse: the verisimilitude of phallogocentric discourse reveals nothing but masculine desire.

As usual, however, in this complex discursive enfolding whereby the wife of the tale speaks within the *Tale of the Wife*, to somewhat dizzying effect, there is a still further twist to the truth of the knight's masculine desire. The wife's choice is a promise that she swears to the knight by her "trouthe": "For, by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe, / This is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good" (1240–41). Since the Wife seems to quickly interchange being "fair and good" with being "good and trewe" (1243) and "fair" (1245), her promise to be "bothe fair and good" seems to fulfill her alternative of being young, fair, and perhaps true. But we have just seen how the wife's "fair and good" wife is attached to the possibility of a goodness, faithfulness or truth that could wander and not be known for sure. This possibility of the errancy of truth re-cites the gap in phallogocentric truth introduced by the moment of difference opened up by the author-narrator-pilgrim's discussion of retelling a story; this is the textualized or fictive truth claimed by the Wife of Bath in her

Prologue, and revealed only to be concealed by the disclaimers of the masculine narrators. And indeed, this errant or fictive truth reemerges as the wife's promise to be faithful or "trewē" is couched in increasingly undecidable terms. Promise turns into prayer and wish to die insane: "I prey to God that I moote sterven wood" (1242). In wishing to die mad unless ("But") she is as "good and trewe, / As evere was wyf, syn that the world was newe" (1243–44), she places her promise to be true in a subjunctive (and therefore hypothetical) mode. What the wife finally promises then is to be as true as any wife ever may have been—or may not have been. With this we are back indeed to the catch in her initial option, and to the problems of re-presentation, of the hierarchical dichotomizations of phallogentric discourse that the Wife's discourse points out.

The celebrated irony of this passage is based on the way that we can not know for sure the truth of the wife's promise. Her promise is to be as true as phallogentric discourse about women and wives desires or will allow. The discourse that places woman on the side of wandering reason and truth, that is, of madness and lies, does not allow us to decide. But the Wife's tale does allow us to see that by making his wife make this final choice which admits the errancy of truth into phallogentric truth, the knight does indeed have all his desires fulfilled. For by admitting the errancy of truth through the detour of a woman, the knight is able to blame the introduction of the fabrication or fickleness of truth on woman. In this way the knight both has the phallogentric truth he desires and (like the male narrators) disclaims responsibility for its errancy. Furthermore, by getting woman to double his discourse and introduce and be responsible for the errancy of truth, the knight also hides from himself his desire to be the woman, that is, to be errant in truth, in order to blame her for that errancy.⁴¹ The truth in phallogentric discourse is nothing but a form of masculine desire, and the desire of the male for the female is nothing but the desire of the male for his own desire.

The Wife's *Prologue* and *Tale* then play with and subvert the clear and hierarchical distinction between phallogentric knowledge, which is assigned to public masculine discourse, and secrets, which are assigned to private and trivial women's talk or gossip. Her *Prologue* especially stresses the importance of proclaiming the existence of such secrets and of threatening to tell them at the expense of the public embarrassment of her husbands and all representatives of the patriarchal order. The power of the Wife's dis-

course lies not so much in the threat that she could reveal the private secrets of men as in the way she shows that the public knowledge and truth of phallogentric discourse is grounded on such private sexual secrets, particularly the secret of the masculine desire for itself.

In a curious passage the Wife, like her contemporary Margery Kempe, claims that she preferred to reveal her own secrets to other women rather than to that representative of patriarchy, the parish priest. Critics have tended to dismiss this passage as unimportant.⁴² But the relationship between the Wife and her “gossyb” shows how in phallogentric discourse the structure of women’s secrets, which are supposedly private, and the structure of truth, which is supposedly public, both require doubles. Dame Alys implies that a secret requires a double when she tells us that the “gossyb” to whom she confides her secrets shares her name:

God have hir soule! hir name was Alisoun.
She knew myn herte, and eek my privetee,
Bet than oure parisshe preest, so moot I thee!
To hire biwreyed I my conseil al.

(530–33)

Although phallogentric discourse posits a secret as something that is private, available only to those to whom it is told, the image of Alys speaking to Alisoun also shows us how in order to be a secret the secret must at least reveal itself as something that has been told to someone, even if only to oneself, or to another party in private. A secret is not a secret unless the “privetee” is public. But the image also suggests that for the woman the public is only herself. The secret circulates only from Alice to Alisoun, from woman to her double. Thus in phallogentric discourse both the secrets (of woman to herself) and the truth (of man to his own desire, or himself) require a double. Since truth in phallogentric discourse is only the mirroring or doubling of masculine desire, the secret of phallogentric truth is that it simply reveals masculine desire.

The image of Dame Alys telling her secrets to Alisoun, however, questions what is actually known and revealed in phallogentric discourse, where the assumption is that secrets are either revealed or concealed. By playing with these categories, the Wife’s discourse shows how secrets can be both revealed and concealed.⁴³ The knight’s raising the curtain is the image of the doubling of the secret that reveals (truth) in order to conceal (truth as the doubling of

masculine desire). The image of Alice telling Alice doubles that of the knight raising the curtain. The secret is only its own secret. For when the woman doubles, she is the double of the masculine desire, which is itself the secret doubling of itself. And as phallogentric discourse maintains, the secret of women doubles the woman because the woman is the secret her/itself. The knight in fact learned nothing about women (that is the secret). The speech of one exceptional woman, a hag who can turn herself into a young woman, echoes the discourse on power or “maistrie” that is the only thing phallogentric discourse, based on power (for those who have the phallus) and powerlessness (for those who do not), can hear. And Alice talking to Alice again reveals only that about women which masculine discourse promulgates and will hear, that is, the secret which is never revealed or heard. She shows how for phallogentric discourse knowledge, secrets and truth all double the imagination and desire of masculine discourse. This is the subversion that the Wife enacts. Her *Prologue* and *Tale* reveal that the structure of secrets and the structure of truth in phallogentric discourse might be the same. But they also disclose that as masculine discourse tries to push woman into the realm of the double—the excluded, private, secret—man only sees the doubling of his desire, or himself. The Wife’s discourse shows how although the woman is excluded through this doubling, she is “there” and necessary, both to show what woman is in phallogentric discourse and to enact its subversion.

VI. THE IMPRISONMENT OF CRITICISM

What does this mean for criticism? At the end of the Wife’s *Prologue*, after the physical fight in which the Wife’s refusal to hear her husband’s phallogentric harangue right (that is, as he would wish) leads to his blow that deafens her ear, the two come to an uneasy bargain. In her typical initial inversion of the hierarchy, the Wife gets control of that important instrument for phallogentric discourse, Jankyn’s tongue. But as usual her inversion also playfully subverts. The wife whose refusal to be silenced silences her husband is a significant image. For what is so shockingly disconcerting for professional critics is the way the Wife’s exposition and critique of patriarchal knowledge and truth indicts professional criticism by demonstrating its basis in the sexual categorizations of phallogentric discourse. Phallogentric discourse can not account for woman except as lack—depicting her here, for example, as impaired by

deafness and a chronic inability to tell the truth. By appearing to accept this definition of woman as deficient, the Wife of Bath pushes phallogocentric discourse to its limits, and so threatens to silence criticism. The mandate of professional criticism would seem to be to take on the role of the knights who need to master, control and penetrate. But the Wife's acceptance of woman as liar frustrates such procedures. All that can be said about lies is that they are lies, the difference of truth.

The Wife is the uncontrollable voice that eludes interpretative truth. The ultimate secret she reveals is that all who think they can control, penetrate and master such texts as she represents are deluded. All that critics as critics can do is create interpretations that double their own desire. But those critics who cannot hear the Wife's voice and accept that position must, like Chaucer's narrators, protect their authority (and desire) by pretending that their interpretations extend to the truth that is "out there," the truth without lies. The mirror of desire is the mirror of reality. The Wife's discourse threatens the loss of our professional tool, and this jeopardizes the life of literary criticism. For this reason she has been condemned and labelled criminal and mad, "prostitute," "sociopath," "murderer"—and "liar."

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NOTES

¹ E. T. Donaldson, ed., *Chaucer's Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975), 1075.

² D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), 317–31.

³ For the Wife of Bath as murderer see Beryl Rowland, "On the Timely Death of the Wife of Bath's Fourth Husband," *Archiv für das Studium der Neuern Sprachen* 209 (1973): 273–82; Dolores Palomo, "The Fate of the Wife of Bath's 'Bad Husbands,'" *The Chaucer Review* 9 (1975): 303–19; Donald B. Sands, "The Non-Comic, Non-Tragic Wife: Chaucer's Dame Alys as Sociopath," *The Chaucer Review* 12 (1978): 179; and Mary Hamel, "The Wife of Bath and a Contemporary Murder," *The Chaucer Review* 14 (1979): 132–39. For the Wife as deviate and psychological case, see Rowland, "Chaucer's Dame Alys: Critics in Blunderland?" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 2 (1972): 381–95, and Sands, 171–82.

⁴ Sands, 179.

⁵ Rowland, "Chaucer's Dame Alys," 385.

⁶ The quotation marks around "experience," "authority," "truth" and "fiction" are used initially to establish the provisional nature of those terms, and should be understood throughout the text; the same principle governs the use of "feminine," "masculine," "woman," and "female" in the following paragraph.

⁷ H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., *PMLA* 95 (1980): 160 (abstract for his "The Art of Impersonation: A General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*," 213–24).

⁸ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 65.

⁹ See the excellent discussion of this position in Elizabeth A. Meese, *Crossing the Double-Cross* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1986), 75–80.

¹⁰ Lee Patterson, "'For the Wyves love of Bathe': Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the *Roman de la Rose* and the *Canterbury Tales*," *Speculum* 58 (1983): 658–59. As the title indicates the focus of this excellent discussion differs from mine in its concern to work out the relationship between "feminine discourse" and Chaucer's poetic development. I would like to thank Professor Patterson for his careful reading and encouragement of this article. For further complexities of the problem of the "female voice," see the question of the signature in Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Glyph* 1 (1977): 172–97, and "Limited Inc abc . . .," *Glyph* 2 (1977): 162–254; and Peggy Kamuf, "Writing Like A Woman," in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker and Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980), 284–99.

¹¹ The awkwardness of my double use of "discourse" to denote both an overarching phallogocentric discourse and the Wife's own discursive practices emphasizes the very problem with which I am concerned: how to describe the possibilities (or impossibilities) of critique of the very discourse that structures our thinking and speaking. Because of the ways in which phallogocentrism structures our thinking there appears to be a contradiction here: the Wife is seen as being either within phallogocentric discourse or outside it, having a discourse of her own. The Wife, however, cannot step outside a discourse within which she is constituted; she cannot produce an alternative, counter or nonphallic discourse of her own. I use "her discourse" instead to describe a momentum within phallogocentric discourse that rather than conservatively and acritically replicating phallogocentrism intimates its subversion.

My emphasis on the Wife's discourse is also an emphasis on the way the Wife arises only from her discourse. Substitutions of "the Wife" for "her discourse," made from time to time to alleviate awkwardness, are limited in order to prevent the danger of instantiating the Wife as a character rather than a creation of discourse. For excellent discussions of the problem of critique and contradiction, see Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), 79ff.; Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986), 187–213; and Robert de Beaugrande, "In Search of Feminist Discourse: The 'Difficult' Case of Luce Irigaray," *College English* 50 (1988): 264.

¹² I also use the term "female voice" to point to my lack of concern in this essay with the issues of the Wife's "feminism" or Chaucer's. This is the focus of H. Marshall Leicester's "Of a fire in the dark; Public and private feminism in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*," *Women's Studies* 11 (1984): 157–78, which is also interested in the Wife's discourse as critique. Like Patterson, Leicester is concerned with the complex nature of the relationship between the voice of the Wife of Bath and Chaucer. He describes "The Wife of Bath" as a "construction made from the language of the tale," which is "a male poet's impersonation of a female speaker," and notes that there seems to be "some relation for Chaucer between taking a position on women—about who they are, what they want, and how they should proceed—and taking a woman's position" (159).

¹³ All references to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are to line numbers in F. N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

¹⁴ See the interesting discussion of this point, but in terms of Lacanian theory and the theory of romance, in Louise O. Fradenburg, "The Wife of Bath's Passing Fancy," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 8 (1986): 31–58.

¹⁵ For a convenient and interesting summary and discussion of the historical complexities of this topic in general, see Robert B. Burlin, *Chaucerian Fiction* (Prince-

ton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), 3–24. For a specific application to the Wife of Bath, see Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976), 135–58. Both reply to the attack on the Wife's authority and tradition in D. W. Robertson, Jr. (note 2), 317–31.

¹⁶ For the mutual implication of "experience" and "authority" in medieval philosophy, especially the relationship between these terms and "reason" and "faith," see Burlin. For the problem of experience in contemporary semiotics and feminist critical theory, see Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984), 158–86; in contemporary philosophy and feminist critical theory, see Alice A. Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman in Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), 145–58.

¹⁷ See David (note 15), 136, and Mary Carruthers, "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions," *PMLA* 94 (1979): 209.

¹⁸ Gabriel Josipovici, *The World and the Book: A Study of Modern Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1971), 64.

¹⁹ The difficulty of avoiding the position that seems to pit authoritative discourse against an empirical reality can be seen in the way the opposition creeps even into the work of critics who pay valuable attention to discourse. For example, in "Of a fire in the dark" (note 12), Leicester describes the Wife's public polemic feminist stance as a propaganda against which is pitted a private "deeper and more existentially responsible feminism" (174) based on "a set of 'privy' and experimental concerns of her own" (165), which are repeatedly referred to "reality"; and Patterson (note 10) states that the Wife "brilliantly rearranges and deforms her authorities to enable them to disclose new areas of experience" (682). I am arguing that the Wife does not disclose experience in raw form, but rather something about the discourse of experience.

²⁰ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), esp. 60–62, for the idea that experience cannot simply be erased, but must be rewritten differently to provide a critique. See also Jardine (note 16), 118.

²¹ For an elaboration of the way women's exclusion is internal to phallogocentric discourse see Irigaray (note 11), 88–89.

²² David (note 15) says that here the Wife ignores the fact that the only other women in her audience are nuns (136–37).

²³ For a discussion of this process in general, see Jacques Derrida, "The Pargeron," trans. Craig Owens, *October* 9 (Summer 1979): 3–41.

²⁴ Recent trends towards positive definitions of gossip are exemplified by Sally Yerkovich, "Gossiping; Or, the Creation of Fictional Lives" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania 1976), and Patricia Meyer Spacks, "The Talent of Ready Utterance; Eighteenth Century Female Gossip," in Ian Duffy, *Women and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Lawrence Henry Gibson Inst., 1983), 1–14. See also Sissela Bok, *Secrets* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 89–99.

²⁵ For excellent representative discussions of this aspect of the Wife's rhetoric, see David (note 15), 137; Kenneth Oberembt, "Chaucer's Anti-Misogynist Wife of Bath," *The Chaucer Review* 10 (1976): 287–302; and Daniel M. Murtaugh, "Women and Geoffrey Chaucer," *ELH* 38 (1971): 476.

²⁶ For the idea that conscious mimicry subverts phallogocentric discourse see Irigaray (note 11), esp. 76.

²⁷ Rowland, "Chaucer's Dame Alys," 387. For excellent discussions of the relationship between patriarchal sexuality and economics in Chaucer's depiction of the Wife of Bath, see Sheila Delany, "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath and *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Minnesota Review* NS 5 (1975): 104–15; reprinted in her *Writing Woman* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 76–92; and Hope Phyllis Weissman, "Why Chaucer's Wife Is From Bath," *Chaucer Review* 15 (1980): 11–36.

These critiques of patriarchal ideology are concerned with the relationship between medieval literary and historical representations rather than the problem of understanding how phallogentric discourse is involved in the construction of these representations.

²⁸ Here I clearly agree with the definition of "bacon" as "old meat; and so here for old men" established by Robinson (note 13), 700, and retained by such subsequent editors as Donaldson (note 1), 164; A. C. Baugh, *Chaucer's Major Poetry* (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1963), 389; Robert A. Pratt, *Selections from the Tales of Canterbury* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), 200; and John H. Fisher, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), 114. For an opposing view, see Rowland, "Chaucer's Dame Alys," 392.

²⁹ For this point of view see Norman Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), 18.

³⁰ Here I clearly disagree with C. David Benson's suggestion that these lines are not to be read ironically ("Chaucer's Pardoner: His Sexuality and Modern Critics," *Mediaevalia* 8 [1982]: 345). While I strongly endorse Benson's caution against reading the Pardoner as "real" rather than fictive, his arguments for the Pardoner's sexual normalcy do not take the complexity of psychoanalytic knowledge of homosexuality or of speech act or discourse theory sufficiently into account. See also Donald Howard's stimulating account of the Pardoner in *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1976), 342–44. For an excellent discussion of the homosexual basis of phallogentric discourse see Irigaray (note 11), esp. 192–97.

³¹ Josipovici (note 18) provides some interesting insights on this structure, pointing out that the mere act of creating narrators who are so carefully dissociated from the author and the readers forces us to consider the subjectivity of the narrator's positions and our own (esp. 65, 66, 73, 80). But our positions differ when he describes this structure as referring to the absolute authority of the author:

Chaucer's strategy is quite simple: he isolates the narrator and, by making us laugh at him, makes sure that we recognize that he is a pure invention of the author's. Everything that this character then says will obviously be the result of an elaboration of this invention, and the more he insists on the truth of what he tells the more we will remember that the "truth" about the teller is that the author made him up.

(80–81)

³² Josipovici, 80.

³³ The notion of exactitude in repetition of course implies idealization. For the problem of idealization of the word and its relation to the network of difference, see Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in his *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), 129–60. See also his description of the "trace" in *Of Grammatology*, esp. 59–73, and of "iteration" in "Limited Inc abc . . .," esp. 179–90.

³⁴ For a fuller discussion of this passage, based on a referential and moral theory of language attributed to Chaucer's "own doubts and confusions about the complex relations between intent, word, and deed" rather than textuality, see P. B. Taylor, "Chaucer's 'Cosyn to the Dede,'" *Speculum* 57 (1982): 318ff.

³⁵ See Taylor, 325.

³⁶ For an excellent discussion of this aspect of the Wife, see Burlin (note 15), 217–27.

³⁷ For a discussion of this phrase, see Edgar H. Duncan, "'Bear on Hand' in 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue,'" *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 11 (1966): 19–34.

³⁸ Jacques Derrida has focused new attention on the word "hymen" and its rela-

tionship to veiling and truth. See his *Spurs*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), esp. 99ff.; "The Double Session," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), esp. 209–19; and the interview between Derrida and Christie V. McDonald, "Choreographies," *Diacritics* 12 (Summer 1982): 66–76.

³⁹ Hope Phyllis Weissman, for example, sees this gesture as a self-destructive act on the wife's part ("Antifeminism and Chaucer's Characterizations of Women," in *Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. George D. Economou [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975], 109–10).

⁴⁰ For the idea of "undecidability," see Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey (Stony Brook, N.Y.: Nicolas Hays, Ltd., 1978), 69–70; and *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), 42–43.

⁴¹ This doubling of course greatly complicates what critics usually refer to as the Wife's "transvestism." See for example Patterson (note 10), 682.

⁴² See for example Palomo (note 3), 313.

⁴³ I have benefitted greatly from the discussion of concurrent revelation and concealment in the approach to ideology and the implied critique of phallogocentric discourse entailed in the argument of Barnaby B. Barratt, "Psychoanalysis as Critique of Ideology," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 5 (1985): 437–69. I would like to thank Dr. Barratt for his careful reading and encouragement of my article.