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Reading & Teaching Chaucer: the "Good Wif"?

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An Honors Paper for the Department of English

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Introduction

READING & TEACHING CHAUCER

My project revolves around thirty lines of Geoffrey Chaucer's medieval, British work: *The Canterbury Tales. The Canterbury Tales* is about 31 pilgrims sitting in a pub, the Tabard Inn, in Southwark, London in the 1392. In "The General Prologue," the first section of *The Tales*, the Chaucer-narrator (who is himself a pilgrim) describes each of the pilgrims sitting the pub. He details what they are wearing, where they are from, and notable happenings in their lives. I am studying the description of the Wife of Bath (see appendix for full text and translation)—where Chaucer describes a decadent dresser, a flippant Christian, and a fearless adventurer who boasts tales from five different marriages. He paints this portrait in Middle English, with rhyming couplets and roughly ten syllables per each line. In addition to studying these lines critically, my project is an educational one; I aim to teach *The Tales* in the high school classroom, and I want to produce a useful orientation and introduction to teaching the complexities of the Wife of Bath at the secondary level.

As I began this project, I found myself wrestling with how to approach this text—do I read it for its technical literary value? Or for its window into medieval life? Or for its complex feminist dialogue? Or for its meta-commentary on story-telling? And how do I teach it without short-changing any of these pedagogical aims? In a text as complicated and masterful of *The Canterbury Tales*, one reading is not enough. So, I opt for two: a formalist reading and a feminist reading.

On their own, both of these methods are incomplete. A formalist reading fails to offer a window into medieval life and a high moral and personal stake to its students; it takes life—that

of the author, and the reader, now and then—out of the reading. However, close reading is centered around the text and in appreciating the text; it offers a joyful and gratifying technical reading experience. Through it, particularly in tackling a text in Middle English, teachers get to guide their students through the reading process as if students were learning how to read for the first time; through a formalist reading, students truly learn how to read and read closely. By contrast, a feminist reading—a lens that I chose because the Wife of Bath's tale grapples directly with themes of womanhood and marriage —offers students topical, ethical, and personal entry into a medieval text. Students imagine the life of the Wife of Bath and lives of medieval women and centuries of readers grappling with this text as it pertains to their lives. A good feminist reader takes what they have learned from the text and brings it directly into their own world. But, the personal is political. In focusing on theory and politics, we do not get to guide students as thoroughly through the nuts and bolts of the reading process—a feminist reading gone wrong loses the text and its history entirely, forgoing these for the theoretical, the political, and the personal. Both of these methods have major strengths and serious pitfalls—but they complement one another and stand stronger together.

Throughout this project, I outline the tenets of each of these approaches and their impact in the classroom. This is a two-chapter project, and both chapters include three sections: a methodology section, an application to the text, and a teaching coda. After introducing the method and its critical history in the first section, I practice that method in the second, and then explore how to teach it in a teaching coda. Both of my Teaching Codas rely on David Hawkins's 1967 conception of the "triangle" of learning: "I, Thou, and It" (49). He divides the classroom into three parts: "I"—the teacher, "thou"—the students, and "it"—the subject matter. The three are interdependent and relational; I use this framework to offer a conceptual orientation of what

this text and these methods look like in the classroom. In the following pages, I am going to introduce both of these chapters by outlining the tenets of each method, my practical approach, and how I hope to teach it.

First, the formalist methodology: central to the formalist approach is studying the text as it stands by itself, specifically not as "a window for looking at sociological themes or philosophic ideas" but instead as "a mural or wall painting, something with a palpability of its own which arrests the eye and merits study" (Rivken and Ryan 3). Instead of musing about sociology or philosophy as they relate to the description Wife of Bath, I study the poetic devices at play, charting rhythm, repetition, and consonance, while unpacking specific metaphors and uses of irony. Rather than seeking out more hidden meanings, pursuing a symptomatic approach, or reading into what is not explicit in the text, I will work to, as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus wrote "locate narrative structures and abstract patterns on the surface" (11). In addition to this attention to concrete poetic devices and patterns within the text, I also engage in manuscript study, learning about the physical processes that went into producing the words on the leaf and exploring manuscript variation.

In my formalist application, I picked four literary devices that are critical to this passage: narrative voice, rhyme, irony, and ekphrasis. I situate each of these devices in their literary history (thereby accessing the device's medieval context), before making an argument about its function in the text. I dissect Chaucer's narration, distinguishing between Chaucer, the Chaucer-pilgrim, and the Wife of Bath. I define the boundaries of narrative space and time and explore instances of self-conscious narration. Then, I move to rhyme. The rhyming couplets in "The General Prologue" offers the most palpable and visible indication that this poem is a poem; I study this rhyme scheme and deviations from it, exploring the more technical aspects of rhyme,

in addition to its meta-poetical function. I read irony as working to destabilize the "goodness" of the "The Good Wife of Bath"—teasing out what Chaucer means when he says "good" and various iterations of this question. Here, I use manuscript study to assess contemporary medieval readership's understanding of the Wife of Bath. And, lastly, I study ekphrasis—a literary description of a piece of art—as contributing to the piece's aesthetic value and literary symmetry. In this reading, this passage is a literary portrait; it is grounded in the visual and the beautiful, and it also offers medieval performers a pneumonic anchor through which they can memorize this text. This section is grounded in the text and in dissecting its meaning and its beauty.

For the formalist reading, I chose this text, or "it" from "I, Thou, It," for its aesthetic and literary value—when "I" teach this method, students defer to the text and its internal reasoning, refraining from reading into written or unwritten elements of it and using the text "as objects" (Best and Marcus 10). Central to this close reading approach is slow reading, technical vocabulary, and a commitment to reading the text's surface for answers, rather than delving deep into the unwritten; so, here, we read this text in the hopes of understanding its complexity and appreciating beauty. My job as teacher is to facilitate student understanding of the text—here I model and teach students to recite, describe, and paraphrase. When discussing how to teach this approach, Best and Marcus talk about "slow reading" (10) or "just reading" (13) as a really technical and detail-oriented method of reading. Best and Marcus observe that "most readers have trouble construing the sensuous form and literal sense of poetry, simply paraphrasing a text or understanding its verbal meaning is a demanding 'craft'" (10). Exercises that involve reciting, describing, and paraphrasing all allow educators to facilitate student "slow-read[ing]." The job of the student, or of "thou," is to read the text out loud, carefully and slowly, before approaching

the text with a pen in hand, in order to mark up the text as an active, slow reader. Then, students will paraphrase and describe the text, working to identify the devices at play, pinpointing exactly which techniques the author is using. Finally, students move towards interpretation, drawing connections and conclusions between various identified patterns and devices within the text, of course as scaffolded by the teacher in the classroom. Students walk away with a transferrable and applicable skill—close reading. A classroom engaging in close reading should be lively. Yes, an application of close reading requires hard work on the part of students and teachers alike, but the formalist ethos of aesthetic appreciation should foster convivial, joyful learning. With that said, I now move to my second chapter and consider the feminist methodology.

My feminist methodology section has two parts: first, an overview of the tenets of my feminist approach, and, second, a critical history of feminist scholarly engagement with my passage over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries. Before diving in, I want to underscore the importance of applying feminism to medieval texts. Geraldine Heng, in her book *The Invention of Race in the Middle Ages,* addresses the "accusations of presentism, anachronism, reification, and the like" (4) that she has encountered in applying race theory to the Middle Ages. Scholars have criticized and dismissed her work with the question: why apply modern and contemporary theory to a world that so long predates its conception? Her answer is poignant, and I take it as justification for applying modern feminist thinking to this medieval text. To write off race or gender with more general, medieval terms (i.e. "otherness" or "difference" (4)) is to excuse, maintain, and perpetuate an evil while forgoing all of the tools, concepts, and language scholars have spent centuries developing in order to fight said evil. To reject feminism is to reject its tools and to sustain misogyny and inequality; feminist theory, just like race and post colonialist theory, is vital to medieval scholarship. With that said, my critical history explores three distinct eras of

misogynist and feminist engagement with the description of the Wife of Bath: the pre-feminists, the reformers, and the critics. Before the twentieth century, there were very few women publishing in this academic field, so the first era that I will study will be largely the works of men writing about the Wife of Bath. I will trace and dissect centuries of pre-feminist engagement with the text, unpacking misogynist thinking, before moving to the first wave of feminist engagement. Here, in the 20th-century, I read the interpretations of the reformers. Jill Mann, Carolyn Dinshaw, and their contemporaries celebrate the Wife of Bath as a feminist voice in a text brimming with misogyny—they seek to reform the scholarship in content and form by grappling with issues of gender in a historically masculine world. While these thinkers are reformers, the ones who follow are more skeptical critics. Works like Carissa Harris's 2018 *Obscene Pedagogies* reject the Wife of Bath as a feminist icon disassociated from Chaucer's authorship, and, instead, read her as a product of Chaucer's misogyny. There is a clear historical progression, from early 20th-century masculine infatuation, to late 20th-century feminist reformation, and early 21st-century criticism.

My own feminist reading grappled with what has come to be known as "the unfortunate incident." In 1380, Cecily Chaumpaigne formally charged Chaucer with "raptus" (Morrison 69) or rape. For years, Chaucer scholars brushed off this "unfortunate incident." My reading of the Wife of Bath struggles with the space between the artist and his work: How do I honor the decades of feminist criticism while still questioning the source? And how do I reconcile a text's undeniable feminist nuance with its author's moral culpability? I answer these questions with an unconventional solution. I use the work of Julia Kristeva, Geraldine Heng, and Kathryn Kruger to establish the interpretation as equally valuable as its source, and, my interpretation, reads into an unsaid narrative about the Wife of Bath's status as a cloth-maker. The text that I chose to read

here is not the words on the page, but the textile within the text; the Wife of Bath has produced a material textile as a cloth-maker, decorated herself in clothing, and communicated to other women via this textile. I take the Wife of Bath's labor as unfairly depreciated and condescended, and her mode of expression—textile—as a nuanced professional, social, and aesthetic statement. I offer this reading of textile—where the Wife of Bath is the author—to counter my reading of the Chaucer's text. In reading Chaucer's verbal text, I take it as a perfect embodiment of Laura Mulvey's 1975 conception of the male gaze. I only read Chaucer's text as an act of literary paternalism, a male-authored stilling and silencing of his female subject / object. In this section, I compare Chaucer's verbal, visible, masculine text with a hidden, unspoken, feminine narrative of cloth making.

In teaching the Wife of Bath with a feminist approach, I plan to make Cecily Chaumpaigne central. In my classroom, the "I" positions this feminist question as an ethical one. Like any ethical question, it grapples with the relationship between the individual and the community, and it is a question that requires a dialogical, complicated, and multi-faceted answer. I chose "it," the text, not to praise it, nor to celebrate it, nor because I think it has any moral authority. I want students to look at this text and its narrative as a "non-ethical opening of a space in which an ethical decision can occur" (Culler 122). The student's job is not to uncover and adopt the text's moral system, but rather to develop and take ownership of their own ethical responsibility and authority. Their stance should have real-world, personal ramifications—and, within the classroom, students are responsible for owning their own moral authority while respecting that of their peers. The classroom operates as both a space for ethical reflection, via the text, and a microcosm of the world where they can embody their choice and values while still respecting that of others. This contemporary era of #MeToo presents all too many opportunities

to consider whether or not one can separate an author from his work, but, clearly, this ethical question has persisted since the medieval era. The question of the "unfortunate incident" presents an incredibly teachable case study; with centuries of distance and perspective, paired with the voices of feminist thinkers past and present, the medieval case of Cecily Chaumpaigne is a perfect one to consider for the case of this contemporary feminist ethical question. I wrap up my project with this teaching coda—an act of bringing Chaucer into the classroom and, via students, into their worlds.

In reading and teaching alike, this project has taught me that the formalist and feminist approaches are interdependent. While close reading in the classroom cultivates transferrable, humanist skills and a sheer appreciation of literary value, it fails to address the ethical and the personal. Feminist thinking raises the stakes and poses serious ethical questions, but runs the risk of straying too far from the text. A feminist formalist approach bolsters the feminist ethical mission with strong literary and textual supports. Students gain access to the world of the text and, through it, a renewed perspective on their own world—and, along with it, an urgent ethical responsibility. Bringing these two approaches together furthers stronger reading and teaching of this medieval text.

Chapter One

A FORMALIST APPROACH

Methodology: Close Reading the Wife of Bath

The method of close reading has its roots in the early twentieth-century formalist movement. Under the formalist umbrella are various subgroups and schools of thought—Russian formalism, American New Criticism, and so on—each pioneered by their own thinkers with their own ideologies. Despite these differences, a general ethos persisted: a strict adherence to genre, a commitment to studying the text as it exists on the page, and a careful attention to linguistic patterns (Rivkin and Ryan 3). This movement formed largely in reaction to its predecessors, who tended towards "historical scholarship that seemed more deeply interested in sociology and biography than in literature" (DuBois 4). According to the formalists "literature is not a window for looking at sociological themes or philosophic ideas or biographical information; rather, it is a mural or wall painting, something with a palpability of its own which arrests the eye and merits study" (Rivkin and Ryan 3). They do not consider the historical, social, and political factors that produced the text. They dismiss any influence—save, perhaps, its literary and aesthetic influence—that a text may have had on contemporary and posterior readers and writers. They reject both a biographical approach to authorship and considerations of reader response. Just as a scientist studies their subject in a lab under a microscope in order to identify and understand its properties, a formalist reader takes the text out of its natural environment and puts it under a literary microscope, of sorts, in order to anatomize and understand each of its parts. Paired with this scientific spirit is a deep appreciation for the aesthetic and material value of the text. A formalist pinpoints the text's symmetrical characteristics and identifies the qualities that

contribute to its overall beauty. Out of this movement, specifically out of American New Criticism, grew the method of close reading: a careful line of thinking and critical literary tool that allows readers to read slowly, notice patterns, identify literary devices, and stay tethered to the written word.

I chose to adapt and apply this formalist method for two reasons. First, the close reading is an incredible teaching tool, so it is critical to my pedagogical approach of *The Canterbury Tales*. A close reader does not need a PhD, nor need they muscle through hours of theory before engaging with a text. I want to learn how to teach a close reading, so, first, I need to be a student of the method. I am not opting for strict formalism—I'll turn to Christopher Cannon as my guide for a specifically medievalist, historically-informed approach to close reading (see subsequent pages for more details)—because the formalist close reading approach does not transfer neatly to medieval texts. But I set out to learn how to apply an adapted version of their method to medieval texts. The second reason I opted for a close reading is its complementary relationship with the feminist method. When the close reading stands on its own, its Formalist dismissal of historical, social, and political factors is both overly simplistic and "politically quietist" (Best and Marcus 16). It depoliticizes literature. The formalists produced their method in the early 20th-century, and for the rest of the century and the 21st-century as well, thinkers have relied on and applied their method to support their non-formalist research. In contributing to this tradition, I chose close reading because it will provide a foundation for my feminist reading, the second part of this project. I use their nonpolitical means —the tool of close reading—to my ultimate political, ethical, and feminist ends. With that said, I will now flesh out the tenets of my adapted close reading methodology and its application to a medieval text.

Precise description, thorough identification, and linear interpretation of literary patterns and devices are all central to my close reading approach. First, I will read the text slowly, with a pencil in hand, noting my reactions as a reader. I will underline surprising words, pay attention to small details and to overarching sentiments. I will read the text out loud many times—partaking in the oral tradition surrounding medieval literature. My close reading methodology revolves around a process Viktor Shlovksy calls defamiliarization. As Tolstoy said, I aim to "describ[e] an object as if [I] were seeing it for the first time" (qtd. in Shlovsky 16). This process involves lingering on the poem's "phonetic and lexical structure" and its "distribution of words" in order to produce a "slowness of perception" (Shlovksy 19). Through paraphrasing and describing, I will defamiliarize myself with the passage in order to better see what is happening within it. Instead of seeking out hidden meanings or pursuing a symptomatic approach, I will just notice what is on the page. Instead of "translat[ing] the text into a theoretical or historical metalanguage," I will engage in meta-poetics, identifying "what the text says about itself" (Best and Marcus 11). I have chosen four devices, inspired by Helen Vendler's "Describing Poems": narrative voice, rhyme, ekphrasis, and irony. I will define and contextualize each device, then defamiliarize and analyze it within the passage. As I will discuss further, I will work to explain these literary devices as they existed in their time, rather than applying a modern framework and terminology to a medieval text.

While modern methodology of close reading lends itself to reading medieval texts in some ways, I want to flesh out a couple of the challenges about applying this modern methodology to a medieval text. First I will consider, most broadly, the significance of the passage of time. Simply put, *The Canterbury Tales* is an old book. First chronicled in manuscript form in 1392, ample time has elapsed since its initial production, enabling literary structures and

fads to change entirely, rendering many (to most) of Chaucer's contemporary cultural references obsolete, and affording plenty of time for weathering forces to age, destroy, and lose original manuscripts. In that thread, Canon cites a "general absence of explanatory context" (178) as being typical of many medieval texts; many manuscripts that are physically "mutable, camouflaged and chameleon-like" (Symes 8) might remain hidden in attics or church basements for years, only to be discovered by an unsuspecting resident centuries after its production. Some historicism is impossible to achieve—due to the insurmountable temporal and logistical obstacles posed by the study of a medieval text. However, in reading a medieval text, some historicism is also necessary. Without it, I would not understand the cultural and geographical significance of the eight places Chaucer references in the thirty lines describing the Wife of Bath, nor would I be able to explain the cultural and religious significance of her church "offering" (450) and "cloth-making" (447) pursuits. Despite the formalist reluctance to engage in historicism, I will engage in some historicism in order to understand the cultural and historical references, in addition to the medieval form and literary traditions. I have adapted this modern methodology, incorporating an "à la carte" historicist approach in order to suit the modern methodology for this medieval text.

The modern reader of a medieval text is charged with the task of deciphering a now obsolete language in, often, unfamiliar forms. My reading a text in another language necessitates some outside source work—specifically, my use of the Middle English Dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary. I will learn from and include what Stein describes as "techniques of close and extremely attentive reading that historically were elaborated to come to grips with complex, evocative, and highly self-conscious linguistic procedures" (35). Some understanding of the political and social implications of Middle English is necessary to reading a Middle

English text; this research will not dominate, but, instead, support my understanding of the text. In addition to these linguistic components, I need to study *The Canterbury Tales* as a text informed by literary forms and traditions of its era. However, because many Middle English writers often had "few (or no) vernacular models to rely upon, their productions are often *formally unique*" (178 Cannon). Some scholars respond to this formal uniqueness with an urge to categorize and define a work's piece using modern methodology and a modern lens. Rather than forcing anachronistic taxonomy on a medieval text, I will acknowledge that "not only did authors move between and mix genres, they also very often had flexible or imprecise understandings of what and how particular genres were constituted" (Hiatt 278). I hope to close-read this text paying special attention to the language, literary tradition, and genre as they informed this text in its medieval context.

And, lastly, I want to include a couple of notes on the role of manuscript study in my close reading. With the help of the Grua O'Connell Research Award, I was able to travel to The British Library where I got to study the Harley MS 7333 (Chaucer), the Egerton MS 2726 (Chaucer), and Lansdowne MS 851 (Chaucer) manuscripts. This field research supplements my online archival research. Best and Marcus cite the importance of surface reading as studying "surface as materiality" (9). The "literary surfaces of books themselves" (Best and Marcus 9) will be critical to my close reading—I will compare variations between manuscripts and study different visual representations of the Wife of Bath in order to learn more about contemporary reactions to *The Tales*. I aim to study manuscripts not as an ends within itself, but as a means of better understanding my excerpt of *The Tales*. As Jessica Brantley wrote, the text and its corresponding image are deeply intertwined: "But even when text and image are ostensibly antagonistic, the two modes of representation depend closely upon each other for their sense of

themselves: literary texts are defined by their sophisticated uses of 'imagery', and semioticians 'read' images as closely as they read words" (315). Delving into pictorial representations of the Wife of Bath through manuscript study will help me to better understand Chaucer's textual description of her; a foray into the Art History side of manuscript study will enhance my thinking about imagery throughout this text. This study of the visual representations of the text and the manuscript's materiality will be a critical part of this reading, it will support my close reading, rather than driving it.

This formalist movement is helpful here in that it produced close reading methodology: a methodology that will be instrumental in my developing a reading of these thirty lines in their technical devices and literary patterns. After my practical application, I will move to my Teaching Coda, where I will consider the role of close reading in the classroom. All of this thinking and research will serve as both a foundation and a support for my feminist reading, where I will consider themes of gender and sexuality critical to this passage and the criticism that responded to it. This methodology will later allow me to better engage in secondary sources and gender theory surrounding this passage; in this chapter, I build a foundation from which I can later address the politics of gender in literature.

Practical: The Tools of the Text

Four main literary devices stood out in my close reading of the text: narrative voice, rhyme, irony, and ekphrasis. This passage is nestled in "The General Prologue" of *The Canterbury Tales* next to descriptions of the other pilgrims and before details of the Chaucer-pilgrim's proposed project. Issues of narrative voice and space are pertinent to the Chaucer-

pilgrim's meta-poetical declaration of his intentions in recording this storytelling competition. I first will untangle narrative voices in the text, considering the narrative space that the Chaucer-pilgrim and Chaucer the author occupy. Then, I will move to discuss the neat rhyming form most of *The Tales* take, paying special attention the linguistic historical moment and the evolution of Middle English. Next, I will study irony in the passage, dissecting the space between what is said, what is meant, and what is understood. Lastly, I will explore the ekphrastic and visual elements of the passage, reading this description as a literary portrait of the Wife of Bath. I will define and contextualize each device, before analyzing and interpreting its work in the passage at hand.

On Narrative Voice

Medieval conceptions of narration distinguished between "natural" and "artificial" order of events (Edwards 270). Poets would consciously open their narratives at the beginning, middle, or end of their stories, often with a "sententia," a pithy declaration of a truth, or an "exemplum," a historical anecdote attributed to a specific author (Edwards 270). The act of writing fluctuated between translation and invention; poets would translate sources, classical or other, and deviate from them in moments of invention. Chaucer's innovative brilliance in *The Tales*, Edwards points out, was in making "his own characters authoritative sources" (Edwards 273). Chaucer wrote while reading his predecessors; he, just like his contemporaries, silently nods at Boccaccio and Petrarch as he riffs off of their formal and narrative material, but he goes further. In "The General Prologue," when he promises to "repeat as closely as ever he knows how / Every single world" (732-733), he cites his characters as sources for the stories he is about to tell, multiplying

and complicating the layers of translation, adaptation, and creation already inherent in most medieval texts. Piero Boitani says that Chaucer works in three forms: "dream poems, collections, and romances" (qtd. in Edwards 270). *The Canterbury Tales* takes the form of collection, one specifically framed by the Chaucer-pilgrim's proposed storytelling competition and paced sequentially by the pilgrim's agreed upon storytelling order. In considering narration, Jonathan Culler asks: "who speaks?" and "who sees?" (89). In the narrative framework of *The Tales*, the Chaucer-pilgrim is the answer to both of those questions. In the prologue, the Chaucer-pilgrim speaks as himself, while in *The Tales* he records the voices of others, claiming to report their tales accurately, as he sees them and as he hears them. Edwards describes a "literary dialectic between mimetic representation and the narrator's self-presentation and performance" (Edwards 270) in "The General Prologue." In the description of the Wife of Bath, the Chaucer-pilgrim claims to be executing this very kind of "mimetic representation," but filters his representation through an interpretative and critical metaphorical sieve through which he presents and performs his self.

Following in the formalist tradition, I am going to explore the role of narration in the description of the Wife of Bath. This passage is rife with narrative tensions present throughout "The General Prologue," tensions that leave the reader navigating the space between the Wife of Bath and the Chaucer-pilgrim's description of her, as well as negotiating narrative time and space, maneuvering in and out of the Tabard Inn on this first eve of the pilgrimage. In the following examination of narration in this passage, there are two specific tensions I am going to explore. First, I identify instances of self-conscious narration—uses of personal pronouns and self-referential editorializing. In these moments, the reader is particularly aware of this "metaphorical sieve" through which we are receiving the happenings of the Tabard Inn. Second,

I will study the boundaries of the Chaucer-pilgrim's knowledge, specifically exploring his claim of "fly on the wall" reporting and recording narration. Both the Chaucer-pilgrim's self-conscious narration and breaches of knowledge boundaries establish a critical interpretive narrative lens contingent upon knowledge of local gossip.

While the Chaucer-pilgrim uses personal pronouns minimally, the few times that he does he puts forth a cavalier, condescending, and critical narrative presence. The only time the Chaucer-pilgrim formally and explicitly uses the first person in this passage is on the subject of the Wife of Bath's infamous kerchiefs: "I dare swear they weighed ten pound" (454). He does so ten lines into the passage, lingering and embedding quite the hefty buffer before making his presence known—interestingly, this passage mirrors the text as a whole in this regard. Edwards cites *The Tales* as "the longest delay for the narrator's entrance in the Chaucer canon" (274). The Chaucer-pilgrim claims his work is mimesis. He introduces himself as an unbiased, thorough, and accurate reporter, so he is in no rush to make himself and his metaphorical narrative sieve known. Though his explicit first person uses are delayed and infrequent and his implicit narrative judgment is hidden (I explore this in the following pages), his metaphorical sieve ends up being palpable and pointed. For instance, just the "I dare swear" (454) adds to the lore of the Wife of Bath, evoking imagery of gossiping men and women, after church, tittering at the size of her hat; it immediately suggests that there is something gossip-worthy about the Wife of Bath and pushes the reader to see her, in terms of how Chaucer and the Chaucer-pilgrim and the folks of Bath see her, building the chatter and rumor around her. Suggested here is a tone specifically invoked by the use of the first person—a tone that suggests the Chaucer-pilgrim would be the first, and certainly not the last, to say, "You would not *believe* the size of her hat." This first person pithy

locution—however delayed in the passage and despite his claims at objectivity—establishes the narrative lens as a critical, gossiping one.

The Chaucer-pilgrim's voice resurfaces eight lines later, but this time in an instance of self-conscious editorializing about narrative choices that exacerbates the already prattling and critical narration. While discussing the Wife of Bath's romantic history, he first says that she's been a "worthy woman all her life" (459). He then continues to note that she had a grand total of five husbands at the church door—not including her other "company in youth" (461). The self-conscious narration comes in when he says: "But there is no need to speak of that right now" (462). This insertion contributes to the lore of the Wife of Bath as well—adding an element of mystery to her story. Interestingly, in the Norton Edition, there are two dashes in the section, the only dashes in the whole passage that add an edge and raunchiness to the tone, practically inserting a wink after each jest. While this punctuation was added at the discretion of editor Larry Benson, it speaks to her readership's involvement in this jest; in fact, this implicit first person, without the use of "I," almost serves the purpose of a "royal we" bringing the reader in as an insider alongside fellow gossipers about the Wife of Bath's romantic past. This verbalization of his narratorial decision makes the Chaucer-pilgrim's narrative processes transparent—inviting the reader into the processes as a peer critic, suggesting alternate narratives about the Wife of Bath's history, and highlighting the Chaucer-pilgrim's narrative power.

While the Chaucer-pilgrim is certainly not an omniscient narrator, his claim at simply "fly on the wall" reporting is entirely implausible giving his extra temporal and spatial knowledge. The Chaucer-pilgrim claims to have met his fellow pilgrims at the Tabard Inn that night, and he claims to simply be observing them and recording their appearance, actions, and words. However, the Chaucer-pilgrim quickly shares details about the Wife of Bath's behavior in

church—about her offerings habits, her tendencies towards rage, and her regular fashion choices. These details are not that of an omniscient narrator—they do not delve into her inner psyche nor do they share information about her private life—but they do divulge the details about her physical appearance and weekly routines about which only her fellow churchgoers would know. These details are tethered to a time and space outside of that that the Chaucer-pilgrim claims to occupy. Similarly, her biographical history—the details about her pilgrimages, her marriages, and her knowledge of the "remedies of love" (475) all break the temporal boundaries that the Chaucer-pilgrim sets. While the Chaucer-pilgrim does not claim access to the psyche of the Wife of Bath, nor does he share intimate details of her life, he breaks temporal and spatial boundaries to share what would be common knowledge about her in any small, gossiping town. Just as the "I dare swear" (454) and "there is no need to speak of that right now" (462) add elements of lore to the Wife of Bath, this limited narration confirm the precondition of local gossip in the Chaucer-pilgrim's portrayal of the Wife of Bath and establish a critical lens of narration.

Despite his claims at unbiased reporter, his explicit and implicit interpretive, narrative voice surfaces palpably through various subtle turns of phrases. His narrative presence is both tangible and biting. Why pretend to be unbiased and then promptly drop that guise? And why craft fictional sources only to criticize them? Present here is a meta-commentary on the relationship between authors and their sources; writers are simultaneously inspired by, indebted to, and critical of their predecessors. In a traditional author-source relationship, Chaucer emulates and adapts the work of his predecessors—of Boccaccio, Petrarch, Ovid, and Dante—taking inspiration, acknowledging debt, and offering criticism. But, in an unconventional act of meta-poetic commentary, he goes further than simply translating and adapting, by inventing his own fictional sources (a literary flex) that he is able to criticize much more freely. Both

mirroring and operating within the traditional author-source relationship—in a sort of Russian dolls scenario—he distinguishes himself from his sources and his contemporaries. He therefore attributes some of his creative inspiration to those he succeeded, but, the rest of it, he humbly attributes to the creative genius who conjured up the lifelike character whose particulars his narrator records.

On Rhyme

Rhyme's origins are much disputed (PEPP, "Rhyme"). Some scholars argue that it first originated in China and then spread, via Mongol hordes or Persian mystery cults. Others say it has multiple origin points, developing independently in China, Iran, and parts of Europe in the first century BCE. Rhyme, by definition, is the likeness of syllables at the end of lines, specifically syllables with different initial consonants and identical stress vowels. So, regardless of its Chinese or Iranian roots, rhyme could not have taken roots in the English language until English speakers began emphasizing syllables in a systematic way; rhyme and accent are closely interrelated. The majority of Chaucer's rhymes in *The Canterbury Tales* are monosyllabic; the transition from Old English to Middle English populated the English language with monosyllabic words, so, rhyming with multiple syllables often necessitated borrowing words from Roman languages (Ibid). According to Michio Masui, all of these linguistic forces—the variation in pronunciations that came with the evolution of accent, the influx of words from Romance languages, and what he calls the "comparative looseness or freedom of syntax" (3) in the English language—offered Chaucer a linguistic playground of which he took full advantage.

In the following pages, I will first consider rhyme in conjunction with my earlier discussion on narrative voice, studying it as an intertextually-situated, diegetic device. With that established, I will consider the role of the most apparent and pervasive use of rhyme—monosyllabic couplets. Then, with the help of Michio Masui's extensive research, I will contextualize and analyze each deviation from the monosyllabic couplet structure in the text. These instances of deviation include mosaic rhyme, segmentation, internal rhyme, and "riming-tags." I will delve into each of these terms in the pages that follow. Throughout this study, I bear in mind that rhyme is an auditory effect and that, in accordance with the medieval practice, these verses were written to be memorized and recited for an audience (Masui 10).

Before I dive into specific examples, some necessary preamble: in writing about rhyme, especially after discussing narrative voice, I deliberated on whether to refer to the rhymer as Chaucer or as the Chaucer-pilgrim. The difference is significant; if Chaucer is the rhymer, then the rhyme exists outside of the diegesis of the Tabard Inn, well out of the earshot of the tale-teller's fellow, fictional pub-mates. In this case, it exists for the ears' of audience members at a medieval recitation. However, if it is the Chaucer-pilgrim who rhymes, then each fictional character must rhyme in their world as well—presumably speaking differently than they normally would—altering the content of their speech. Supporting this notion, in his prologue, the Parson asserts that he will not "'rum, ram, ruf' letter by letter"(43) nor does he think "rhyme" (44) is any better. He then proceeds to tell his tale in prose, without either rhyme or alliteration. This leads me to believe that rhyme actually takes place within the story. The Chaucer-pilgrim's announcement of his intentions to "repeat as closely as ever he knows how / Every single word" (732-733) suggests that each pilgrim adopts speech patterns for the sake of their prologues and tales. The devout, diligent, and humble Parson adopts plain prose. The Prioress, with her elegant

French and refined manners, adopts the ornate rhyming form of terza rima. And, of course, the Wife of Bath performs a craftily-constructed, entertaining show with her easy-on-the-ears rhyming couplets. Each pilgrim performs their story, while the Chaucer-pilgrim performs his interpretation of their fictional stories in rhyming couplets—there is a story within a story and the rhyme reflects that. I read both his rhyming couplets and those he attributes to the fictional Wife of Bath's as a meta-poetic commentary on the role of poetry and storytelling. Stories are structurally cohesive, aesthetically beautiful representation of supposedly real-life events, and both *The Canterbury Tales* and the Wife of Bath's tale are a rhyming stories. I, therefore, read rhyme as operating within the diegesis of the story, so use "the Chaucer-pilgrim" to refer to the rhymer in my study of this passage.

With that said, let us dig into the details about these deviations. The Chaucer-pilgrim deviates from the pattern of monosyllabic couples three times in this passage. Two of these deviations take the form of "mosaic rhyme"; mosaic rhyme is the "piecing together" (PEPP, "mosaic rhyme") of shorter words in order to rhyme them with a multisyllabic word. In this passage, it contributes to the comedic lightness persistent throughout the passage. Below are both of the rhymes in Middle English, Modern English, and in transliteration. The syllables that correspond to the multi-syllabic end word are underlined, and the rhyming syllables are capitalized.

#1 She / Charity Lines 451-2	*Modern English* And if there did, certainly she was so angry That she was out of all charity.
	Middle English And if ther died, certeyn so wrooth was she That she was out of alle charitee
	Middle English Transliteration And eef there died, certane so wroth was SHAY That shay was oot of all charitAY
#2 Jerusalem / Streem Lines 463-464	*Modern English* And she had been three times at Jerusalem; She had passed many a foreign sea;
	Middle English And thries hadde she been at Jerusalem She hadde passed many a straunge strem
	Middle English Transliteration And threes had-duh shay bin at Jerusalem-MUH She had-duh pass-ed many a straunge-ah strem-MUH

When the Chaucer-pilgrim rhymes “she” (451) with “charity” (451) in the first rhyme, his rhyme transgresses various linguistic boundaries—rather than rhyming monosyllabic words that have different leading consonants, he presents the mismatched pair of a monosyllabic Germanic word and a tri-syllabic Old Northern French word. Words with French roots strike a higher, more sophisticated register than words with Germanic roots do; this mismatch produces a farcical, comedic effect. An audience member listening to a recitation of these verses would naturally expect to hear another short, monosyllabic word following the word “she.” The disruption of this well-established pattern, with a commentary on the Wife of Bath’s charity, no less, might

surprise the reader and, perhaps, earn a chuckle. In the second rhyme, the Chaucer-pilgrim rhymes the quadri-syllabic "Jerusalem" with the monosyllabic "stream." Here, alliteration sets the rhyme off-kilter; in saying "str-aunge str-eem," the Chaucer-pilgrim pairs two consecutive identical initial consonants with different vowel sounds. While associated with "stream," "strange" doesn't rhyme at all with "Jerusalem." Unlike the first mosaic rhyme, this pair leads with the multi-syllabic word, leaving the listener curious about how the Chaucer-pilgrim will complete the rest of line. This auditory rhyming game is a technical, poetic flex fostering both a jesting relationship between reader and audience while demonstrating Chaucer's capacity to manipulate Middle English into structurally complicated and aesthetically valuable rhymes.

I spoke earlier about how Chaucer's manipulation of voice establishes a critical narrative lens. I think that these rhyming patterns actually contribute to that effect as well; rhyme builds and develops tone. Here, it heightens an already critical tone. Rhyme alters tone by segmenting each line rhythmically and structurally into "equal or perceived equal units" (PEPP, "rhyme"). Rhyme is actually one of few indicators to the listener that a line has ended. It is a verbal indication of what might otherwise just be the visual configuration of the words on the page. It serves as an audible signpost for audience members. When the Chaucer-pilgrim lists all of the places that the Wife of Bath has travelled— "She has been to Rome, and to Boulogne, / To the shrine of St. James in Galicia, and to Cologne" (465-466). What, without rhyme, would have been a list with four equal parts, has been sectioned off into a list of two and two. There's Rome and Boulogne, and then there's the Galicia and Cologne—the Chaucer-pilgrim connects Boulogne and Cologne via a witty, tri-syllabic rhyme. This introduction of a pause halfway through the list reduces "and Boulogne" and "to Cologne" to curtailed asides, while elongating "She has been to Rome" and "To the shrine of St. James in Galicia," lending a singsong, almost

tedious tone. In other words, the Chaucer-pilgrim emphasizes Jerusalem with the mosaic rhyme, and then segments what would otherwise be an equal four-part list; his rhyming patterns manipulate and demarcate the list of places the Wife of Bath has travelled, coloring this list with a suggestive or mocking tone about the nature of her religious pilgrimages. Furthermore, these pilgrimage sites were considered some of the "most energetic of medieval pilgrims" (Lee 136). In this historical context, this "arduous" and "hazardous" itinerary indicates "initiative," "self-reliance," and "intriguing independence" on the Wife of Bath's part (Lee 136). The rhythmic and tonal effects of this rhyming segmentaton, paired with the historical and cultural context, casts aspersions on the Wife of Bath's piety by producing a mocking, plodding tone.

So far, I have only talked about rhymes that take place at the end of each line. Now, I am going to discuss rhymes that happen in the middle of the line; these are called internal rhymes. Interestingly, the internal rhymes in this passage always involved the use of pronoun "she." I argue, that the passage's incessant repetition of and rhyming deviation with the word "she" evokes questions about the personhood of the Wife of Bath. The aforementioned "she" / "charity" rhyme is further complicated by an instance of internal, identical rhyme: "And if there did, certainly so angry was she / that she was out of all charity" (451-452). The repeated "she" works to emphasize the "she" / "charity" rhyme. Interestingly, just a couple of lines down there is a similar instance of internal rhyme: "She knew much about wandering by the way / She had teeth widely set apart, truly to say" (467-468). Here, there is a "she," "way," "she," and "say" rhyme. The overt instances of internal rhyme all involve the word "she." The pronoun "she" does refer to the Wife of Bath, so it makes sense that it is used often. And, according to Masui, this choice is certainly not unusual for Chaucer; in terms of pronouns, he doesn't often rhyme with "they, we, ye, it," but he often rhymes with "he, she, I" (45). Masui notes that it is relatively easy

to rhyme with these pronouns (46). However, this pair of "ay" rhymes is the only repeated rhyme in this passage. None of the other pairings rhyme with one another. And ending on a pronoun necessitates an "inverted word order" (Masui, 46); and this is true for the line "certain so wrathful was she" (451), which positions this pronoun in what Masui calls an "emphatic position." The Chaucer-pilgrim reshuffles the whole sentence structure in order to make this rhyme. This characteristic and functional rhyme choice lends itself to internal rhyme—further segmenting these phrases—and emphasizes the end-line pronoun both through rhyme and position. Furthermore, the repetition of "she" resonates with the use of irony (see later) throughout the passage; in using a sign ("she"), rather than the Wife of Bath, so often the listener begins to wonder who this character is. Perhaps "she," a sweeping pronoun, serves as a stand-in for an everyday woman or, alternatively, "she" might refer to the multiple selves within the Wife of Bath, painting her as an internally warring or contradictory character. This use of internal rhyme structurally supports the work of irony and of portraiture, both of which offer dual or multiple readings of the Wife of Bath, capturing her multi-faceted self.

I am going to consider one last rhyming pattern that I noticed. Masui wrote about another literary device that I found to be pervasive throughout this passage—"riming tags"—that he describes as "asservations and swearings and other emotional utterances" (10). Rhyming tags both build a convivial ambiance during a recitation and indicate a boisterous, story-telling culture within the story. While these rhyming tags are ubiquitous in *The Canterbury Tales*, Masui claims that they often go unexplained by scholars. He proposes a "social function" (10), reminding us that Chaucer's work was "first and foremost meant to be read aloud before an audience" (10). These rhyming tags are colloquialisms that all audience members would easily understand—these verses lend themselves to multiple tiers and layers of listener understanding. By putting

these tags at the end of a line, there is built in space for a breath on the reader's behalf and a response of the audience's part. Ending so many lines with an accessible idiom, and building in a subsequent pause, cultivates relationships between any audience member and the text. The purpose that these tags play in a formal reading of this text, outside of the text, directly mirrors the purpose that they play within the text. Themes of lively storytelling and, equally lively, audience engagement are implicit in the text—*The Canterbury Tales* is a series of boisterous and engaging tales told in a pub setting, both inviting and evoking reader response within the story. The "asservations and swearings" remind the reader that this story is, indeed, being narrated in a pub and that the other pilgrims are listening and responding. The functional and meta poetical work of the "riming tags" reflect, convey, and build storyteller-audience relationships, both inside and outside of *The Canterbury Tales.*

Before concluding this section, I want to return to the meta-poetical function of rhyme. In engaging with this passage in any capacity—either as an audience member in a medieval storytelling forum or as a contemporary reader—rhyme is immediately apparent. Even a young child who could not understand any of the individual words in *The Tales* could appreciate or notice the auditory effect of rhyme and differentiate it from normal speech. Yes, rhyme is a vestige from an oral storytelling culture and, yes, it serves as a functional memorization tool. But, rhyme is also what makes this poem a poem. Each of these variations changes what kind of poem it is and altars what it will sound like read out loud, but the mere existence of rhyme as a playful beautification of normal speech makes this an apparent poem. I mentioned earlier that this exists within the story; the Parson chooses prose, the Prioress terza rima, and the Wife of Bath couplets. Each character performatively and consciously alters their speech. But, it is Chaucer the author who creates these characters, puts words to page, makes them rhyme, and

calls them a poem. And for Chaucer, with his jesting and incorporation of French words, rhyme is a linguistic game and challenge. And poetry is the embellishment of normal speech, an adornment—one more crude than sentimental—of commonplace life.

On Irony

Irony's predecessor "eironeia" was understood to mean "lying" in its Ancient Greek theatrical context (Colebrook 1). Since then, in the transition from "eironeia" to "irony" to all the philosophical and rhetorical iterations that followed, irony is broadly understood as saying one thing and meaning another or leading an audience to understand another. Irony can be just a "localized figure of speech" or a literary trope that is just a "substitution of a word for its opposite" ("irony," PEPP). With irony—perhaps signaled by a raised eyebrow or a drawn out word—a complimentary "you are funny" could, fairly safely, be understood as "you are not funny. That was a bad joke." Alternatively, Socrates' ironic commitment is a philosophical one of "know[ing] that one does not know." He lives his life "aware of the impossibility of coinciding completely with everyday language." Irony both relies on and undermines shared understanding about the definition of a word. So here, it is also a destabilizing political and philosophical force. Aristotle argues that a good, responsible citizen should not use irony, because it is "socially irresponsible in its undermining of shared political conventions" (Ibid). Irony's dependency on "shared political conventions" makes identifying and reading irony in medieval literature a challenge; the contemporary reader operates under different conventions than the medieval one did. However, Chaucer uses irony often. There are rhetorical, tropic instances of irony that have philosophical implications in the description of "a good wife." The

fundamental irony the Chaucer-pilgrim presents is in the first line: Is she bad or is she good? Or, more specifically, when he says that she is good, does he mean that she is bad?

This next section is devoted to considering this question and its implications. I will study three interconnected instances of irony in this passage. I will first look for an intertextual definition of the Chaucer-pilgrim's "good." Specifically, I am going to explore the Chaucer-pilgrim's use of "good" in "The General Prologue" in order to define "good" in his linguistic system. Then, I am going to attempt to define "good" as it was used in medieval England, in the hopes of understanding how a contemporary reader might understand "a good wife." Here, I will do some manuscript work, studying various epithets scribes assigned to The Wife of Bath. Then, I will move to the second instance of irony and study the Wife of Bath's cloth-making skills. Here, I rely on some historical sources to understand the cultural, geographical, and economic nuances of cloth making in order to understand this irony. Finally, I will explore whether or not she is a "worthy woman" (459). This instance of irony uses ambiguity to extend the question about her good wife-ness to her romantic and sexual status. This question of "is she a bad wife or is she good one?" extends to the domestic, professional, and romantic spheres. This rhetorical question has enormous philosophical implications.

First, what does the Chaucer-pilgrim usually mean when he says "good"? I turn to this question because thinkers have long disavowed Plato's conception of "universal meaning," so, rather than searching for good's universal definition, I hope to tease out what "good" means in the Chaucer-pilgrim's specific system of language. He uses the word "good" almost twenty times in the prologue. In his linguistic system, the word "good" is indicative of both small judgments of something's worth as well as weighty assessments of moral character. Sometimes, he uses it for simple, hasty judgments; the knight's "horses were good" (74) and the Monk was in "good

condition" (200). These descriptors are almost cursory and businesslike. However, the Chaucer-pilgrim also uses "good" in more consequential, weighty instances—the Shipman's a "good fellow" (395), the Parson is a "good man" (477) of religion, and the Plowman is a "good worker" (531). The Parson and the Plowman are both good pilgrims; the Parson is virtuous and hardworking and on the pilgrimage to help others find salvation, and the Plowman, actually the Parson's brother, leads a good Christian life as well. The Shipman, however, is both a thief and a murderer; "good fellow" has "connotations of rascality" (Benson 815). When the Chaucer-pilgrim says the Shipman is good, he seems to mean bad. Implicit throughout the prologue, even when the Chaucer-pilgrim does not specifically use the word "good," is the moralizing categorization of each pilgrim. As with the case of the Shipman, a "good" pilgrim is not necessarily a virtuous one, but the use of the word "good" certainly alludes to this central question about the integrity and virtue of each pilgrim. The frequency of use, the established tradition of judgment, and the tendency towards ironic uses of "good," all warrant reading the word "good" as a weighty, and potentially ironic assessment on the worth of the Wife of Bath.

With that said, I now turn to my estimation of the medieval reader's understanding of "good." Critical to reading this as an instance of irony is the space between the Chaucer-pilgrim's definition of the word and the contemporary reader's understanding of it. I source my estimation of the medieval understanding of the "good wife" from the Middle English Dictionary and scribal interpretations apparent in manuscripts. The MED defines the pairing of "good" and "wife" as meaning anything from "a good woman, a virtuous wife," to "the mistress of a household; a female citizen" ("god wif, phr. & n." *MED*). Perhaps the Wife of Bath is being introduced as a moral upstanding woman or, maybe, she is a woman who is virtuous, loyal, and steadfast with regards to her husband. She is specifically presented as wife "defined by her

relationships—past, present, or future—to men" (Lee 137). Alternatively, she is a domestic force who dutifully maintains a home in Bath; she might just be a good, female citizen of England. Equally rife with contradictions and potential for interpretations are the manuscript titular embellishments. Below are four manuscript renderings of these passages:

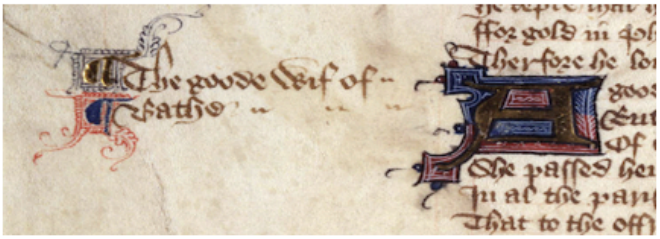

Fig. 1:
"The goode Wife of Bathe"; *Ellesmere (f.5v);* Huntington Library Digital Archives.

Fig 2:
"Wif of Bathe"; *Harley MS 1758* (f.5v); The British Library Digital Archives.

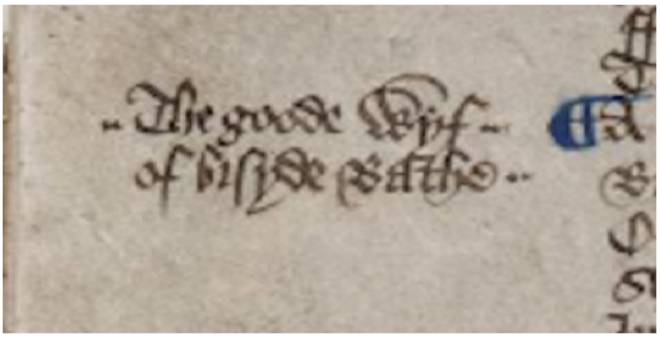

Fig 3: "The goode Wife of bisyde Bathe"; *Hengwrt (Peniarth MS 392D) (f.6v);* The National Library of Wales Digital Archives.

Fig 4: "[ ]"; *Harley MS 7334 (f.7v);* British Library Digital Archives.

The Ellesmere (Fig. 1) scribe distills her title to "The Good Wife of Bath" and etches it into the margins. The Harley MS 1758 (Fig. 2) scribe opts for "Wif of Bathe," while the Hengwrt (Fig. 3) draws "The Goode Wife of Bisyde Bathe" and the Harley MS 7334 (Fig. 4) just decorates the "A." These four entirely different distillation of the first line of the description of the Wife of Bath carry weighty implications; the inclusion of "goode" might serve to emphasize her categorization as one of the good pilgrims, but it also might work to further emphasize an ironic reading, suggesting that this ironic claim of the Wife of Bath's virtuousness is so crucial to the

narrative that it warrants a spot in her title. According to Benson, “bisyde Bathe” actually could refer to any suburb outside of Bath or to the “parish of St. Michael’s” that is just outside “the north gate of the walls of Bath” (818). This ambiguity about her geographical roots further destabilizes the epithet of “The Wife of Bath” that appears deceptively reliable in its standardization. Perhaps the Harleian method of leaving out an epithet entirely is the only way to contain and preserve Chaucer’s the textual ambiguity.

Just two lines down, the irony continues. Here, the question of “good wifehood” dilates, now including the Wife of Bath’s cloth-making skills. The Chaucer-pilgrim notes that “She had such a skill in cloth-making / She surpassed them of Ypres and of Ghent” (447-8). This instance of irony is predicated on a shared cultural and historical understanding. During the Late Middle Ages, the export of wool was critical to the English economy (Patterson 134). A lot of this wool was sent to places like Ypres and Ghent so that it could be turned into cloth—so the Chaucer-pilgrim is saying that the Wife of Bath is even better than these renowned cloth-makers. Whether or not this is what he means or what his reader understands, however, is up for debate. Some scholars insist that she is just a “mere weaver” while others suggest that she is a professional “cloth-maker” (Patterson 134). If she is just a weaver, then these lines are but an “empty boast” (Patterson 134); when the Chaucer-pilgrim says she is skillful, he means that she is not. However, if she is a “cloth-maker” then she is an independent businesswoman, making financial gains in a male dominated field that relied heavily on free female labor (Lee 5). But, the reader never learns about the Wife of Bath’s profession (Patterson 135). This ambiguity about her profession produces an irony: does he mean she is actually skilled at cloth making or not? If she is just a weaver, then he means she is not. The ambiguity and irony make it so that multiple readings exist side by side, markedly unresolved. This cloth duplicity persists each time the

Chaucer-pilgrim mentions cloth (her "kerchiefs" (453) or her famous overskirt or "foot-mantel" (470)), but it also contributes to the philosophical debate about and judgment of her good wifehood. This irony creates space for her to be anything from a feminine ideal to a domestic failure to a savvy, independent deviant—all elements of her personhood that factor into "good wifehood" status.

I want to wrap up by considering one last instance of irony that pertains to her position as a sexual and romantic being—specifically as a *wife*. Before describing the Wife of Bath's five previous husbands, the Chaucer-pilgrim says, "she was a worthy woman all her life" (459). This word presents ambiguity: what makes her worthy? Of whom is she worthy? According to the MED, "worthy" could be financial—she's likely financially well off, either due to her cloth making of the deaths of her husbands. Or it could reference social status or religious devotion. Or perhaps it has some implications of her merit as a sexual or romantic partner. Each of these readings produces a different form of irony. He could be saying wealthy and meaning poor. He could be saying well respected and meaning scorned. He could be saying romantically sought after—after all, five men have married her—and actually meaning spurned—because those five husbands are, after all, no longer married to her. Once more, the combination of ambiguity and irony embed the Wife of Bath with multitudes. The complexity and abundance of interpretations of "worthy" are inextricable: the many Wife of Bath's exist side by side. Her status as a "good wife" is complicated in itself, but its parts, her cloth-making skills and romantic prowess, multiply these complications. Irony presents an inevitably multi-faceted and contradictory Wife of Bath. The question "is she good or bad?"—in her parts or in her whole—cannot be answered.

On Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis, most narrowly defined, is a detailed, literary description of a piece of visual art. In its broadest sense, literary ekphrasis is any vivid, sensory description of another artistic medium. This device spans genre and time, first developing in Greek romance and later used in the Petrarchan lyric and blazon (PEPP "Ekphrasis"). Ekphrasis is "lodged at[…]nexus" between "visual and verbal representation" (Johnston et al. 1) uniting two powerful artistic forces to produce an aesthetically valuable description. The description of the Wife of Bath does not adhere to ekphrasis's narrowest definition. The Chaucer-pilgrim does not specifically describe a visual representation of the Wife of Bath nor do I read the Wife of Bath as a real-life woman whom Chaucer regards as a piece of art—there is no historical evidence that the Wife of Bath was a real woman. However, it does combine visual and verbal forces to produce, what I argue, is a literary portrait. In "The General Prologue," the Chaucer-pilgrim describes the "the rank, the dress, the number" (716) of each pilgrim in Southwark. He swears to report, "how we conducted ourselves that same night" (722), telling "you their words and their behavior"(728) regardless of how vulgar they might be. He presents and proclaims an act of literary portraiture—of observing "real" people and recording their characteristics. I first explore literary function of this passage's ekphrasis and then the cultural significance of medieval portraiture in order to understand both the literary and historical significance of describing this passage as a literary portrait.

Before diving in to this instance of ekphrasis, I consider: what does ekphrasis do? The formalists say that ekphrasis works to freeze a moment, creating a snapshot in time. Formalist scholar Cleanth Brooks writes "the general and the universal are not seized upon by abstraction, but got at through the concrete and the particular" (Brooks 22). "The concrete and the

particular"—or the specific details of a snapshot—shed light on the universal. A series of valuable particulars work together to achieve "unity" (Brooks 22) or "sense of roundedness" (Krieger 88). According to Murray Krieger, this "roundedness" circularizes a literary progression of time that is usually linear, borrowing a quality of "stillness" from visual and spatial arts; a painting depicts a physical space, frozen in time. In Brooks's "The Well-Wrought Urn" he proposes a helpful example. He compiles several uses of urn-related imagery and metaphors. John Keats's poem is about an urn and takes the shape of an urn, and in doing so, he likens the urn and the poem; both contain and memorialize the life of a dead individual (Krieger 92). Here, ekphrasis raises an object "beyond the linear chronology of life's transience" (Krieger 92-93), in short, freezing time and achieving "roundedness." In Chaucer's description of the Wife of Bath, he similarly blends verbal and visual particulars to freeze his subject in a screenshot, lending a spatial stillness to this temporal narrative. This blending of verbal and visual boundaries—this instance of ekphrasis—contributes to the piece's aesthetic value, literary unity, and textual roundedness.

Rather than describing the Wife of Bath in abstracts—as generally wearing a hat, a skirt, and shoes—the Chaucer-pilgrim describes her in a series of temporally-specific particulars, situating this portrait chronologically; it is an ekphrastic screenshot. The Chaucer-pilgrim starts with her head and then slowly scans downward, picking out details and decorating them: first, the "kerchiefs" (453), fine in texture and heavy in weight, then, the stockings, a "scarlet red" (456), and, eventually, her feet, clad with "sharp spurs" (473). All of these details provide the "particulars," but I want to examine a rhyming couplet that freezes this portrait in time. He writes "Very closely laced, and shoes very supple and new. / Bold was her face, and fair, and red of hue" (457-458). "Supple and new" both have material, transitory implications; presumably she

had bought them in days prior and, in days following, would wear them down. However, he has captured them in this specific moment. Similarly, the red hue is temporally-specific—perhaps she put rouge on that morning or her face naturally flushed due to the "emotional or physical causes" ("red, n." *MED* Id) or her color is be attributed to the medieval medical theory of humorism. Regardless of whether she is angry or passionate, well-coiffed or ill, the Chaucer-pilgrim chooses details that are situationally and temporally specific to represent the general state of the Wife of Bath. The chronological location of this portrait achieves the literary ends of any ekphrastic work; it freezes and records what would be an ephemeral, fleeting moment in the fictional Wife of Bath's life, using these particulars to grasp at a universal.

Yes, this description achieves the literary function of ekphrasis, but it also plays into the medieval tradition of portraiture. Art Historian Stephen Perkinson, in his article "Rethinking the Origins of Portraiture," chronicles scholarly debate over the function of medieval portraiture. Scholars traditionally saw the practice of portraiture as being a "quintessentially modern" expression of "individuality, selfhood, and identity" (135); he argues, however, that medieval portraiture can similarly "articulate complex and highly specific forms of individual identity (135). Figures that may present as nonveristic caricature actually carry with them a complicated set of "cultural codes and society preoccupations" (135). Perhaps manipulating heraldic codes, various representational conventions, or commonly understood physiognomic systems, seemingly simplistic portraits can actually be enormously, complexly expressive. Some French medieval artists understood images as being important mnemonic tools; in many respects, they saw them as being similar to memory itself" (Perkinson 135). Portraits and manuscript drawings function similarly. In an act of memory, the contemporary medieval scribe memorializes a fictional character; a drawing is an external manifestation of the internal imaginative and

mnemonic processes taking place in a reader's mind. In their reliance on social codes and representational expression, these operate as portraits of fictional characters while also functioning as a visual reader response; these drawings are acts of both representation and interpretation. With that said, I turn to the Ellesmere manuscript—one of the earliest surviving manuscripts of *The Tales*—and its representation of the Wife of Bath. I study it as both an expression of the individuality of the Wife of Bath through medieval portraiture codes and as a functional mnemonic device.

I study this literary and visual screenshot of the Wife of Bath through medieval physiognomic codes. Medieval physiognomic practices long associated physical traits with personality characteristics. *The Riverside Chaucer* cites the medieval physiognomic system as attributing the Wife of Bath's gap tooth to "an envious, irreverent, luxurious, bold, faithless, and suspicious nature" (818). Similarly, the Wife of Bath's red face signals "immodesty, loquaciousness, and drunkenness" (819). According to Perkinson, however, medieval thinkers like Roger Bacon (ca. 1214-1294) did not just attribute physical features with personality traits (as is the practice of physiognomists), but attributed to "elements of motion, such as gestures and gait" (137) to "the fundamental characteristics of an individual's soul" (137). These temporally situated traits capture movement in a screenshot, and the Ellesmere drawing similarly reflects this movement.

Fig 5:
Ellesmere; Huntington Library Digital Archives.

Depicted here are her weighty "kerchief" and her red tunic and the "pacing horse" (469) upon which she sat. This is a singular artist's interpretation—he chose to depict these traits rather than her red tights and "buckler or shield" (471). He also chose to render the horse's hooves in motion, on cocked in the air, and the Wife of Bath's eyes are averted, looking towards wherever she is going—unlike reliable, stationary images of feminine domesticity, this drawing presents a forward-looking, flighty, female wanderer. Rather than drawing a still, straight on, posed figure, he draws her whip poised in the air, at an angle, as if about to strike; her gait and posture positions her as a domineering, exacting force. While the literary portrait borrows spatial stillness from the artistic tradition, the visual rendering borrows temporal movement from the literary one to visually represent her innate physical characteristics and cultivated mannerisms, both of which are indicative of her personality. This drawing's movement is a product of both the temporally specific ekphrastic literature and the importance of gestures, gait, and motion in medieval physiognomic systems.

Perkinson's description of medieval portraits as being "mnemonic tools" and "similar to memory itself" (135) is particularly poignant here. In this medieval literary world, poems were memorized and recited before an audience. This portrait—visual and verbal—helped medieval

reciters memorize long poems. While rhyme works as a signpost to both the narrator and the audience, segmenting lines in terms of content and signaling pauses for the narrator, these instances of ekphrasis offer a mnemonic device to performers and a visual anchor for audience members. In terms of narration, the poems main points "could be 'placed' in imagination in a particular part of a mental image" (PEPP, "Ekphrasis"). The sensory descriptions offer "psychological and neurological mechanisms" (PEPP, "Ekphrasis") that aid in memorization. These beautiful, visual images can also serve a purpose similar to that of the rhyming tags or rhyme, in general—they are comprehensible and enjoyable for all listeners. John M. Bower pushes back against the assumption that "a medieval writer's first audiences can be presumed to understand his texts figural meanings" (Johnston et al., 11). Ekphrasis is an expression of an "increasingly anxious desire to allow literary images to speak for themselves" (Johnston et al., 11). Sensory, imagist passages offer concrete, graspable anchors for performers and listeners alike, both aiding in the memorization process and in providing entry points for listeners engaging with literal, rather than figurative, thinking. Ekphrasis freezes a moment in time and provides aesthetic value, but just like medieval portraits, operates as a manifestation of and a tool for memorization.

Teaching Coda: A Formalist Classroom

In the previous pages, I have defined, executed, and contextualized a close reading of medieval literature. In the following pages, I hope to offer a helpful conceptual orientation to close reading in the classroom. This portion of my project considers theoretical questions that are critical to teaching a close reading of Chaucer in the classroom—it is by no means an all-

encompassing survey nor is it a practical guide to teaching *The Canterbury Tales*. Instead, it is a theoretical exploration of some important elements of a pedagogical application of the close reading tool. I consider potential obstacles, particular strengths and weakness, and realistic learning goals for students.

In order to do so, I am applying David Hawkins' 1967 pedagogical framework: "I, Thou, and It" (49), a model that I will apply in my feminist teaching coda as well. Hawkins imagines three interdependent, relational parts of the classroom—"I," the educator, "Thou," the students, and "It," the text. In response to scholars who advocated for "two-way communication, warm and loving" (48) between students and educators, Hawkins cites Immanuel Kant's statement "love is not enough." He advocates for more than just love, but mutual respect; he considers students not purely as recipients of love or of knowledge but as "actual and potential artisans of their own learnings and doings," and, "thus uniquely contributing, in turn, to the learnings and doings of others" (48). I adopt his framework because his classroom has three, equally important relational parts, all of which have a serious responsibility to one another. I use this structure to describe the roles of each of these parts as they pertain to a classroom executing a formalist close reading of a medieval text at the Secondary level.

First, why "it"? Why close-read a short passage of *The Canterbury Tales?* First and foremost, I choose "it"—*The Canterbury Tales*—for its aesthetic and literary value. Geoffrey Chaucer's skillful and complicated construction of the Chaucer-pilgrim's narrative voice and the complexity of voice and character of each pilgrim that follows all make this text worth studying. His manipulation of rhyme—of Roman-sourced words, of English words with French and Germanic roots, and of various rhyme structures—for each pilgrim's tale is masterful, as are his vivid ekphrastic descriptions and use of irony. This text has long been revered as a masterpiece,

and as readers choosing to dive deep into one text, the formalist educator gravitates towards long celebrated, aesthetically valuable, and literarily complex texts. In her essay, "Teaching Chaucer in Middle English: The Joy of Philology," Jane Chance discusses the potential and need for joyful reading of medieval texts. Joy and appreciation is central to the formalist approach; just as readers gain joy from delving into such a revered text, the very act of close reading, while one of heavy mental lifting, presents a provocative challenge that produces joy upon completion, or, in especially successful uses, joy throughout (Chance 57). I chose this particular text and method in an act of continued appreciation of its literary value and in pursuit of joyful reading.

However, "it" is not the text in its entirety, but instead, an excerpt on which we focus closely. The formalist tradition reads literature for unity and cohesion; in delving into a piece of a text, a close reader gains appreciation for the value and cohesion of the whole. While writing about ekphrasis, I cited Cleanth Brooks' notion of "unity" (Brooks 22). A text with "unity" presents a series of pieces—all of which have the same aesthetic symmetry and full "roundedness" (Krieger 88) as the whole. Educator Gary Baughn believes that, "[w]ith a masterpiece like *The Canterbury Tales,* our students are better served when we take it apart and let them play with the pieces" (60). Every original manuscript orders *The Tales* differently—each tale is not narratively independent on one another. There is not a standardized selection of *The Tales* in textbooks (Braswell 25); the text itself is not even finished—Chaucer died while writing it. However, as formalist readers, we subscribe to Lee Patterson's philosophy that, despite its unfinished state, it "is nonetheless structurally whole, and to understand it as anything less is profoundly to misrepresent the work and impoverish criticism" (Meyer-Lee 66). Each tale stands on its own, and each passage and rhyming couplet does as well. Gaining an appreciation for and an understanding of a part is akin to and necessary for gaining an appreciation of and

understanding of the whole. In learning the practice of close reading, students gain the skills necessary to get to know one particular passage, and, subsequently, gain a line of questioning and sense of admiration applicable to a whole piece. The formalist reader deep dives into and celebrates a part, as a way of diving into and celebrating the whole.

The last reason I choose to close-read this text is because of the oral recitation tradition surrounding the text and the internal, folkloric storytelling ethic within the text. *The Canterbury Tales* was written to be memorized and recited, as was the practice in medieval England. Literary devices like rhyme and irony (via tonal expression) played into both the processes of memorization for recitation and engagement of a medieval audience, and textual tics like rhyming tags prepare for audience response. *The Tales* was written to be read out loud and responded to; the collaborative close reading adheres to and honors this tradition. In terms of the internal reasoning of the text, Baughn notes that "[n]ot only are the stories important, but the storyteller's motive and the audience's reaction to the story also matter" (Baughn 62). The pilgrims are positioned in a pub together—they are brought together by external forces and are performing for one another. The presence of the other pilgrims is implicit in each tale, fostering a tradition of reader response and storytelling from within the text that is mirrored in the classroom. A formalist close reading for *The Tales* is apropos; engagement with a piece gives students both an appreciation for and the tools to access the whole via a collaborative oral process that honors both the intertextual and extratextual tradition of *The Canterbury Tales.*

The educator's role is two part: first, the educator functions as a knowledge-giver in the classroom, modeling skills and conveying information necessary for students to understand a medieval text. In a process of gradual release, once the educators cultivate their students' skills and knowledge bases, they begin to take the back seat and function as a facilitator in the co-

construction of analysis, interpretation, and appreciation of the text. In this formalist classroom, students and educators alike are deferential to the text—the goal is not to read for an agenda, but to read closely and almost impartially, in the hopes of unlocking the beauty and meaning in the text's content and form.

In the early stages of engagement with the text, the educator must provide students with the literary and linguistic skills needed to read Middle English fluently and the historical context necessary to understand make a foray into the text's medieval world. First, tackling Middle English: Peter Beidler cites three main obstacles that educators face (33). Students generally do not know about (1) the phonetic alphabet, (2) the Great Vowel Shift, or (3) structural poetic devices. Beidler teaches his students the International Phonetic Alphabet and has his students translate Middle English into the IPA. This requires thorough, technical teaching: *Modern readers read "knight" as "nite," while medieval readers read "kaneecht" and here is what those words look line in IPA.* This teaching requires both collaborative oral practice and independent written work—students need to see it done, do it together, and then do it by themselves. Yes, the educator takes a more didactic role here than later in the course, but, as Beidler says: "if students are to learn to read Chaucer's verse as it sounded in fourteenth-century London, they need to be active doers, not just receivers" (32). The students must actively (and, hopefully, enthusiastically) participate in their education. Once students can pronounce and write consonants, the educator can move to the Great Vowel Shift; this requires a similar range of independent and collaborative, oral and written practice. It also offers a brief window into the medieval world and the linguistic study that followed—explaining to students that scholars thought Chaucer was a bad rhymer for years, until they reconstructed and dissected the Great Vowel Shift, accounting for the inconsistences in a modern pronunciation of his rhymes (Beidler

35). Finally, the educator can discuss medieval forms, modeling scansion and annotation processes while briefly introducing students to concepts of rhyme and meter. All of these different facets of medieval poetry are interwoven in the actual text—students need to be familiar with all three concepts in order to read fluently. Practices of transliteration, translation, and recitation are all critical to this portion of learning, along with instruction about the Middle English Dictionary and appropriate research practices. Emphasizing to students that this is a process of learning a new language can be a helpful way to tap into prior knowledge and experience of language-learning; learning this language, just like all languages, is a gradual, cumulative process that requires front-loaded technical work and a willingness (and ideally, eagerness) to engage and results in gaining access to a whole other cultural, historical, and literary world.

The second facet of this knowledge-giving phase involves conveying the complexity and materiality of the text's medieval world. One great way to do this is through manuscript study (Crawford 132). Showing pictures of manuscripts, presenting students with manuscript discrepancies, and explaining the process of parchment making, scribal writing, and manuscript illumination are all great ways to convey to students the complexities and tedium of the medieval book-producing process. Similarly, choosing and, then, diving into a specific, relevant historical component of the medieval world can help students understand the space between their world and the world about which they are learning. For instance, Professor Alexander Kaufman identified the importance of work in the lives of his students at his large university, so he focused on professions and labor in "The General Prologue" (72). Each student researched independently in order to learn and write about the profession of one of the pilgrims. Kaufman's assignment was based off of Jill Mann's reading of the prologue:

> "The Prologue proves to be a poem about work. The society it evokes is not a collection of individuals or types with an eternal universal significance, but particularly a society in which work as a social experience conditions personality and the standpoint from which an individual views the world" (qtd. in Kaufman 75)

Just like I wrote about in my methodology section, adopting an "à la carte" historicist approach to a close reading can help students find one entry point into the medieval world and better understand the text they are reading. This historicist thinking contributes to, rather than eclipses, the linguistic and formal focus of the close reading.

Once educators have established this foundation, they can move to the role of facilitator. Here, I turn to John Dewey to outline a co-constructivist approach to reading the text. I do not adopt Dewey's philosophy throughout—while students certainly must take an active role in the linguistic and historical learning of the beginning of the class, their personal responsibilities and mutual dependence deepen and dilate in this second phase of learning. In order to facilitate and cultivate this culture of responsibility, the educator must frame interpretation as a process of collaborative unlocking rather than unveiling. In a close reading gone wrong, the educator asks a series of questions, fishing for answers, and then "reveal[s]" (Brewer 636) the "true meaning of the text" (qtd. in Brewer 636) to students. A successful close reading lesson provides students the skills to read and notice on their own, rather than privileging the educator's reading (Fisher and Frey 277). John Dewey, in *The Child and the Curriculum,* argues, "subject-matter never can be got into the child from without. Learning is active. It involves reaching out of the mind" (9). In

an act of co-construction, the close reading begins with observation and translation. The educator prompts and then steps back, guiding students and probing students, but never unveiling "the answer" or suggesting that there is one answer. Students begin by reading the text out loud—using their newly acquired Middle English skills—then they describe it and paraphrase it (Vendler 134). Both of these initial tasks have low-floor, high-ceiling entry points. All students can contribute, and some will be able to engage in, higher-level thinking within the assignment. Far from framing the educator's answer as the right one—the oratory and descriptive contributions of students are crucial to the initial steps of a close reading. This higher-level process of noticing formal patterns is a communal, democratic process, yes, guided by the educator in the classroom, but specifically executed by the students.

This constructivist approach does not just require the educator to step back, but it requires the students to step up—and now I turn to the role of "thou." Throughout the educator's knowledge-giving section, each student is responsible for transcribing dutifully, memorizing heartily, and exploring curiously. They are responsible for their own learning, and, tangentially through contributing to classroom culture, for the learning of others. Once they have developed their skills and knowledge base, their role shifts and they become directly and seriously responsible to one another. Here, I use the Vygotskian Zone of Proximal Development. Karim Shabani summarizes Lev Vygotsky's theory: "any higher mental function necessarily goes through an external social stage in its development before becoming an internal, truly mental function" (237). The "external social stage" is this verbal process of communal close readings—far from waiting for the educator to reveal "the answer," students are directly implicated. They need to rely on one another in order to engage in close reading, and, eventually, to develop their own "internal, truly mental function." In approaching a close reading, students rely on one

another's observations and interpretations heavily. Without one another's contributions, students cannot unlock the meaning of the text. Students become responsible citizens of this learning community, sharing the duty of the active, social, and democratic co-construction of knowledge.

Before wrapping up, I want to further explore this concept of democratic learning that I have mentioned a couple of times. American schools have long sought to prepare their students to be conscientious and responsible citizens in a democratic society (Kober 7). Some critics write off close reading as quietest and negligent; scholars say it "divorces reading the word from reading the world" (paraphrased in Brewer 636) and is a "decontextualized, depersonalized reading" (636). While close reading does not model or encourage a specific brand of political engagement, I see the process of close reading as fundamentally democratic and, in this formalist classroom, students practice mutual respect and responsibility to one another; this process and this classroom contributes to American schools' mission of preparing its students to be responsible citizens. The process of close reading is democratic in that each student's input is valuable and required. Close reading begins with each student making an observation about the text. Again, I chose this method partially because it is such a good teaching tool; it does not require a PhD nor does it require extensive theory. Of course, the educator must have extensive literary and pedagogical expertise, but students approach the text through a low-entry point—it begins with just an observation. Unlike other methods that assume and rely on intensive experience with reading critically and grappling with theory, this method allows educators to truly teach students how to read, requiring them to break down every step of reading—observe, transliterate, paraphrase, notice, and interpret. Yes, this process lends itself to democratic learning, but in an ideal classroom it does even more. In establishing mutual respect and dependency in learning, students inherit a duty to be a responsible citizen in this democratic

community. Here, they find an opportunity to practice skills in a microcosm of the world their school is preparing them to enter.

The educator and the students participate cooperatively in a process of unlocking and appreciating beauty and meaning in the masterpiece of *The Canterbury Tales.* The tool of close reading, when wielded with text-specific and student specific modifications, offers students a democratic, collaborative, and joy-based reading technique. By learning Middle English, studying the materiality of manuscripts, and exploring relevant historical questions, students get a window into the medieval British world. This process hones an applicable, transferrable, humanist skill that readers can take to any text they approach—it builds reading habits and fosters a joy of reading. And it cultivates responsible citizens in a democratic society. While students to practice democratic engagement in the formalist chapter, they do not grapple with political or ethical questions explicitly like they do in the feminist classroom. In culminating this chapter, I reiterate that this adapted formalist close reading is an incredibly valuable teaching tool, but it cannot stand alone. I now turn to its political, ethical counterpart: the feminist reading.

Chapter Two

A FEMINIST APPROACH

Methodology: Voices Across Time

Throughout this section, I am going to return to lines 445-473—the description the Wife of Bath in "The General Prologue—but this time with a feminist approach. A feminist lens feels fitting; Chaucer's Wife of Bath herself explicitly raises questions of gender, sexuality, and power. This short passage alone introduces questions about good wifehood, female entrepreneurship, and medieval fashion trends. The answers to those questions, of course, depend entirely on which critics are answering them and where and when said critics gain access to the pen. While formalist questions and answers are all grounded, first and foremost, in the text, feminist questions and answers are grounded in what 20th-century feminists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call "experience" and "metaphor." Experience—the environment in and constraints under which an author works—impacts interpretation of metaphor; Gilbert and Gubert argue that experience "generates metaphor and the metaphor creates experience" (xii-xiii). A thorough feminist reading leaves the text and enters "experience"—of writer and reader alike—in order to interpret metaphor.

Geraldine Heng, in her book *The Invention of Race in the Middle Ages,* address the "accusations of presentism, anachronism, reification, and the like" (4) that she has encountered in applying race theory to the Middle Ages. She often encounters the question: why study race in a world that predates its conception? The feminist equivalent might come in the form of: Chaucer was not thinking about that as he was writing it, was he? Or, more simply, feminism did not exist back then, so why study it? Heng's response to her race question applies to gender as

well. First, not using feminist theory would be "to sustain the reproduction of a certain kind of past, while keeping the door shut to tools, analyses, and resources that can name that past differently" (4), and, second, refusing to consider feminist themes in a medieval context minimizes the "impacts and consequences of certain laws, acts, practices, and institutions in the medieval period" (4), making it impossible for the contemporary reader to identify their iterations in the contemporary world. Yes, the Wife of Bath poses questions about gender, so considering them is crucial, but not considering them—and not using modern tools to consider them—is an act of disregard and neglect of centuries of issues surrounding gender.

With that said, I will begin this section with a critical, literary history of scholarly engagement with The General Prologue's description of the Wife of Bath in the 20th and 21st-centuries. I offer an exploration of critical engagement with this text over time. In an effort to identify trends, I have classified critical responses to the Wife of Bath into three eras: early to mid-20th-century pre-feminist infatuation, late-20th-century feminist celebration, and early-21st-century critique. I first study male scholars writing about the Wife of Bath, before studying the first feminist scholarship and the most recent, contemporary, feminist and gender studies exploration. I begin my feminist critical history of scholarly engagement with male thinkers—thinkers writing before the field of feminist theory existed—because I am subscribing to the "premise that literary history consists of strong action and inevitable reaction" (Gilbert & Gubar xii-xiii). These initial male scholars were the strong action to which the first feminist scholars reacted, whose action, in turn, launched a whole new critical reaction in the 21st-century. Understanding the interconnectivity of these scholars, each situated in their own political, historical, and social contexts, is critical to this study. While I make no pretense to offer a

comprehensive critical history, I aim to acknowledge experience and metaphor alike, along with the relationships between scholars, their predecessors, and their successors.

First, what I call the early to mid-20th-century "infatuation" era: I noticed a trend in the scholarship from 1900-1980. The varied, largely historicist approaches to the Wife of Bath—whether they dealt with her "wandering by the way" (467) (Coffman 48), the fashionable status of her "kerchiefs" (453) (Wretlind 382), or the nature of her five marriages (Kirby 325)—all begin with a character sketch of the Wife of Bath. Rather than simply summarizing or quoting the Chaucer-narrator's description of her physical appearance, each scholar instead produced their own gendered, sexualized portrait of the Wife. These portraits are all erotically grounded in her physical traits, working together across time and space to construct the mythology of the character of the Wife of Bath. These sexualized portraits are not simply an expression of desire, but, instead, they render her with an amalgam of disgust, desire, and awe. While scholars all express a blend of these three reactions, I will go through each reaction one by one, in order to best understand them individually. In the following pages, I will dissect and explore these reactions, arguing that expressions of disgust are fearful, positioning the Wife as a threat, while those of desire reduce her to a silent, sexualized, math-authored object, and those of awe endow Chaucer with infallible authorial power.

When scholars express disgust, they express a fear of the Wife of Bath as a corrupting force to other woman, a threatening force of feminine literary and oratory power, and a culprit responsible for fallen men. Throughout the 20th-century, scholars expressed various brands of disgust. In 1950, Eugene Slaughter declares "[s]he is everything a man should avoid" (Slaughter 533) before wondering what would compel this Clerk of Oxford to enter into a shameful marriage with a "proud, envious, irascible, chiding, over-ardent, and incontinent wife" (530).

How did she "woo" (530) this man, seducing him into accepting the status of "irregularity in marrying a widow" (530), which would exclude him from the clerical orders for life? He marvels at the Wife of Bath's mysterious and evil hidden powers; he warns other men not to fall prey to her "witchcraft." Just nine years later, Kittredge describes a different kind of fear: that she "aimed to establish a new and dangerous sect, whose principle was that the wife should rule the husband" (Kittredge 193). He positions her as a "heresiarch, or at best a schismatic" (Kittredge 193). Similarly, in 1967, Robert Jordan attributes the Wife of Bath's lustiness to what St. Jerome would diagnose as a "germ of her womanish disease" or "the disease of concupiscence" (Jordan 217). Jordan and Kittredge's comments establish her "womanish disease" as potentially contagious; they fear that she will contaminate or convert the women they know to her ways. The Wife of Bath's citation and manipulation of biblical verses in her tale are particularly threatening to scholars like Jordan and Kittredge—they worry that she will teach others to use their literary and oratory tools against them. I take these expressions of disgust as rooted in fear; these scholars read the Wife and her tale as a potential threat to a social order they hope to protect.

Intertwined with these expressions of disgust are heavily sexualized expressions of desire—these scholars write about the Wife of Bath as an alluring sexual force and a fantastical, exceptional woman. Their comments construct an uber-woman mythology around her; while it may appear that they are praising and applauding her as a literary subject, they are actually reducing her—through praise—to a silent, sexualized, object. In 1922, Walter Clyde Curry writes:

> "she is so vividly feminine and human, so coarse and shameless in her disclosures of the marital relations with five husbands, and yet so imaginative and delicate in her story-telling, that one is fascinated against his will and beset with an irresistible impulse to analyze her dual personality with the view of locating, if possible, definite causes for the coexistence of more incongruent elements than are ordinarily found in living human beings." (Curry 30)

Particularly in comparison to his contemporaries who position the Wife of Bath as a threat, Curry is practically delighted as he describes the Wife of Bath as simultaneously, *miraculously* "course and shameless" and "imaginative and delicate." In a similar vein, George Coffman describes her as "an efficient, domineering bourgeoisie with a major interest in love affairs" (Coffman 43). They describe her as going above and beyond in her feminine duties; she is just *not like the other women*—she is better. She earns this status by taking on traditionally male roles—agential desirer, independent breadwinner, and bold adventurer. In praising her for taking on masculine traits, they further privilege their masculine metric over a feminine one, underscoring the palpability of the lens through which they see her. Both of these scholars construct this mythology of uber-woman around her through praise. However, as I will further explore later with the work of critic Laura Mulvey in my practical section, they are contributing to a tradition of men praising, sexualizing, and, therefore, silencing their female subjects through an authorial "male gaze" (Mulvey 835). When Curry goes so far as to use the phrase "irresistible impulse" in his portrait of her immediately silences her by limiting her to his relational viewpoint of her. This silencing is particularly clear in these sexualized portraits—especially those grounded in her physical traits—but it is pervasive throughout much of this era's criticism. These expressions of

desire silence the Wife of Bath, reducing her—not despite, but through the praise—to the meaning these scholars construct around her.

The last reaction—that of awe—is direct praise for Chaucer's authorship. It puts Chaucer on a pedestal: with it, he is revered not just as a literary master, but as the man who, in his conjuring up of the Wife of Bath, has been endowed as holding some sort of wisdom about femininity. The praise of his authorship is abundant in this era. John Livingston Lowes quotes an anonymous source, attributing a "fidelity, a life-likeness, a vividness" (qtd. in Shumaker 77) to the Wife. Shumaker continues to describe the Wife of Bath's "energetic *realness*" (Shumaker 78) and cites "the most vivid and detailed piece of character-drawing that Chaucer ever did" (qtd. in Shumaker 78) as a response typical to the Wife of Bath. Jordan introduces her as a "concept of a woman" (208). In addition to praising his craftsmanship, with establishes him with literary mastery and authority, they praise his ability to specifically depict womanhood. He, with his "vividness" and "detail" has captured, explained, and unveiled the "concept of a woman"; he is not just celebrated for capturing one woman in this era, but for capturing an essence of womanhood. The tale itself claims to offer a truth about womanhood and these readers take that claim trustingly. It is this reception that renders this text—and Chaucer's pen—a powerful force and active player in feminist literary scholarship, even before the invention of the field.

Once more, I am relying on Gilbert and Gubar's premise that "strong action and inevitable reaction" (xii-xiii), so I move to the feminist scholars and study them as specifically reacting to the likes of Coffman, Kirby, Kittredge, Jordan, and Robertson. The work of these male scholars prompted Jill Mann, Carolyn Dinshaw, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, and their fellow scholars to embark on an application of feminist theory to the Wife of Bath. In writing the following paragraphs, I rely heavily on Jill Mann's critical history in her preface to the 2002

edition of *Feminizing Chaucer*, using her work as authoritative. She points to the end of the 1980s as launching the first feminist, medievalist thinking; rereading the Wife of Bath was a central force in that upsurge in the medievalist world.

Now, the period of late 20th-century feminist celebration: between 1989 and 1992, the first four book-length studies of gender in Chaucer were published in quick succession. These scholars, I argue, were feminist reformers, rather than revolutionaries. I am going to explore three main characteristics of their reform: (1) an application of the literary and critical tools of their predecessors to the female characters and feminist questions within medieval texts, (2) a search for a palatable truth about femininity within a text that they continue to revere as authoritative, and (3) an adherence to the gender binary. In other words, these scholars work to use the master's (both Chaucer's and early 20th-century critics) tools to dismantle his house.

These first feminist scholars responded directly to their preceding thinkers; in an effort to overcome the pre-feminist influence, these feminist scholars wrote using their antecedent's terms. Carolyn Dinshaw's reading in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* is emblematic of this trend. Dinshaw revisits the Wife of Bath's prologue and tale with feminist questions. She explores the association between body and text in her 1989 essay "'Glose/Belle chose': The Wife of Bath and Her Glossators." In her reading, she positions the Wife of Bath as a counter-glossator or scholar; she argues that the Wife of Bath fights the likes of Jankyn, her scholarly husband, at his own game: posing "*quastiones*" (123) just like medieval male scholars did. In the tale, the Wife quotes often, reclaiming texts traditionally used to marginalize or control women—preceding scholars often read the Wife's as misquoting or fumbling intellectually. Dinshaw, however, describes the Wife as attempting to "reform" not to "subvert" (116) the system of marriage and male scholarship alike. In her very portrait, the Wife of Bath still embodies Jerome's imagined

"paradigm of proper reading"—she is a woman "whose clothed appearance is centrally significant" (114). However, unlike Jerome's silent bride, she reads and speaks, advocating for her feminist cause with the tools historically used to silence women. Just as Dinshaw reads the Wife as a reformer, she and her fellow early feminist critics operate within the literary framework of their predecessors, rereading female characters and asking feminist questions in an effort to reform traditional scholarship.

In operating within their predecessor's framework, they maintain their predecessor's claim that this text holds a truth about femininity; rather than rejecting this claim entirely, these scholars search this medieval text for a truth about femininity to which they can subscribe. It was commonplace for the earliest feminist thinkers (such as the likes of Gubar and Gilbert) to read the Wife of Bath as a "protofeminist" (Beidler 271): a reading in which the Wife of Bath is a feminist begets a reading in which Chaucer himself is a feminist. Scholars read her as "one of the first truly liberated women in literature, a woman who boldly stands up for the individual, sexual, and marital rights of women in a society dominated by men and the interest of men" (Beidler 271-2). Hansen criticizes this practice in her 1996 essay "'Of his love daungerous to me': Liberation, Subversion, and Domestic Violence in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale." However, even if scholars were not claiming that the Wife of Bath was a proto-feminist, they still search for ways to celebrate her—like Dinshaw's reading of her as a reform-minded scholar. It was not until the 21st-century that clear and pointed criticism of the author and his work alike—and the author's criminal record—became commonplace. The sporadic distinction between the Wife of Bath and Chaucer is part of a larger trend of accepting that Chaucer—and the characters he created—holds truth about both the world they operate in and the one that future readers inherit.

As was characteristic of the first wave of feminism, these late 20th-century scholars upheld a traditional gender binary, often (subtly), assigning negative traits to femininity. Jill Mann cites traditional gender stereotyping" (xii) as pervasive in these first feminist criticism. Mann describes Hansen's use of the word "feminization" as an "entirely negative term." When she describes Troilus as "feminized" within the text she defines it as "subservient, weakened, infantilized, privatized, and emotional" (qtd. in Mann xii). Hansen subtly and overtly maintains the binary, privileging masculinity over femininity. Similarly, Mann describes Stephanie Dietrich and Maud Burnett McIrney's *Masculinities in Chaucer* (1998) as adopting, and therefore reinforcing, both conventional gender norms and negative conceptions of femininity, specifically. While not all of these feminist scholars uphold the gender binary—Dinshaw explicitly explains that she reads "masculine and feminine as roles, positions, functions that can be taken up, occupied, or performed by either sex, male or female" (9)—many do associate negative traits with femininity and positive ones with masculinity or fail to account for differences between sex and gender or the fluid nature of gender. This wave of feminist thinkers, with the exception of Dinshaw's 1995 wittily dubbed "Chaucer's Queer Touches / A Queer Touches Chaucer" along with her other seminal books, did little to consider queer identities—gender and sexuality alike—in these medieval texts. Empowering cisgender, often elite women comes with the exclusion and marginalization of queer individuals, in literary criticism and its world alike.

After these late 20th-century reform efforts, the 21st-century scholarship brought about an era of critique. I identify two trends: an upsurge of both queer theory and of pedagogical, activist-oriented applications. The 21st-century brought: Susan Schibanoff's 2006 *Chaucer's Queer Poetics: Rereading the Dream Trio,* Glenn Burger's 2003 *Chaucer's Queer Nation,* and

Carolyn Dinshaw's 2016 *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*. Along with this thinking, scholars took psychoanalytic approaches, considering "the mimetic nature of desire" (McTaggart, 44) or activist historicist approaches, considering "the ambiguities that characterize the medieval legal regulation of sexual violence" (Edwards 3). In a movement away from considering the rape in the tale as an "interpretative device," the 21st-century brought multiple articles on the didactic (Hall 59) and activist (Lipton 336) applications of the tale's rape. While both these queer projects and its activist and pedagogically oriented contemporaries are important, I am going to wait to explore the activist and pedagogical sources in my teaching coda. Here, I study queer theory as destabilizing conceptions of femininity.

For the purposes of this critical history, I study an upsurge in application of queer theory that pushed scholars to read the Wife of Bath's femininity as performative, rather than innate. While this is critical history of feminist and gendered engagement with the passage—not of queer theory application, I am going to consider Glenn Burger's reading of my passage of study. It is in a book dedicated to queer theory and queer rereading, however, this particular reading of my "General Prologue" is integral to the feminist one; it destabilizes gender entirely, reacting to theorists like Hansen, Gilbert, and Gubar. I point to this reading as characteristic of its time in that it both challenges binary systems and the traditional assumption of that the Wife of Bath presents an authentic femininity from which we can learn about women across time; this queer project, like its activist and pedagogically-oriented contemporaries, read Chaucer and pushed for Chaucer to be read for political, activist, and educational ends.

Burger addresses my passage of study directly in his essay titled "Modernity and Marriage in *The Canterbury Tales.*" Burger cites the Wife of Bath's declaration: "In wifehood I

will use my instrument / As freely as my Maker has it sent" (149-150). This sentiment—coming at the tail end of a speech on the biology of sexes—exemplifies what Burger refers to as the Wife's "biological determinism." She will use her biological sex organs, or her "instrument" in order to have sex and take on the inherited feminine responsibilities of her time. She finds "room to maneuver" (Burger 79), yes, but implicit in her understanding of these instruments is a predetermined song to play; her biology comes with a part to play—while it is a part that she can reject or maneuver within, it still exists regardless. Here is where the passage comes in. Burger points to the descriptions grounding in her physical and facial features (i.e. gap-toothed and red-faced) as anticipatory of "the Wife's equation of her amatory proclivities to biological determinism" (Burger 81). While "masculinist and feminist" approaches accept "the Wife's claim to being as a fact of nature," (Burger 82) he presses this claim. Burger describes this "bodily presence" as embracing the "delineation of 'natural' and universal gender roles" and, therefore all of the "social asymmetries" for which they are responsible (Burger 80). This very exposure emphasizes the "fluidity of such roles" (Burger 81). The emphasis on *body* that is critical throughout communicates and challenges "biological determinism," and both acknowledges binaries and characterizes her femininity as performative, destabilizing gender entirely. This text is actually a perfect one to use to study femininity, Burger argues, because she acknowledges the expectations her "instrument" expounds and openly performs accordingly; she is the ideal case study to explore performed femininity in a medieval world.

This challenging of binary systems positions the Wife of Bath's femininity as entirely performative, forcing readers to resist that "irresistible impulse" (30) that Curry spoke about to read the Wife of Bath as a real person, rather than a product of Chaucer's fictive imagination. Burger points to the "unusual congruence" of "The General Prologue" description and the

Prologue and the Tale; even the "hardened postmodern reader" might find I hard to avoid responding to the Wife of Bath as if she were a "'real' person" (Burger 81). Burger argues that this reaction is a complete "red herring" (82) for readers. It pushes them to "accept the fictional as the real and ideology as nature" (82). Upon reading the Wife of Bath, a series of disparate spheres blur: "medieval / modern, past / present, male / female, masculine / feminine" (Burger 82). Here lies the "red herring"; she is not a real person, nor is she modern or alive, and, of course, nor is she authentically, despite reader's reactions that she is, in fact, a living, breathing woman, and categorically feminine. The Wife of Bath says that there are gender roles that come with biological sex, and furthermore, she presents as a very real woman, despite, of course, being a product of Chaucer's fictive imagination. Burger pushes the reader to read the Wife of Bath's presentation of femininity as a performance—specifically a performance entirely conscious of her biological expectations and male audience. In reading it as a performance and resisting her "realness," the Wife of Bath simultaneously destabilizes gender while offering a sensational performance of it. This queer reading destabilizes gender in its medieval and contemporary context alike, so—along with the explicitly activist and educational readings of its time—it continues the 20th-century movement to wield medieval texts as a means of achieving contemporary activist ends.

Building off of early 20th-century infatuation, late 20th-century celebration, and 21st-century critique, I am going to offer my own feminist reading of this text. My engagement is still tethered to the thirty-line description of the Wife of Bath, although, this study will also include some reference to the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, in addition to contemporary medieval depictions of gender, and, of course, a heavy reliance on earlier feminist scholarship. Fundamental to my feminist reading is the 1380 case of Cecily Chaumpaigne; 21-year-old

Champagne accused Chaucer of rape—charges that she was eventually pressured into dropping. I, like Clarissa Harris, think it is impossible to read a tale about rape and a character who is a rape victim, without considering the fact that the author has his own personal rape accusations against him. Throughout my feminist practical I grapple with the space between the artist and his work, rereading the Wife of Bath in light of her author's life. In an effort to take away some of the authority endowed in Chaucer, I study the source text on equal ground with its interpretations. In this practical section, I use the work of Julia Kristeva, Geraldine Heng, and Kathryn Kruger to read into the unsaid, underlying, feminist narratives within Chaucer's work; specifically, I study the Wife of Bath's professional, social, and aesthetic expression through her cloth-making business. I adopt an unconventional approach, reading into an unsaid, hidden, mystical feminist text to explore the Wife of Bath's cloth-making business and unspoken, textile communication with fellow women. Lastly, in the pedagogical teaching coda, I will consider the ethical responsibility to broach Chaucer's "unfortunate incident." I will raise and address critical questions about Chaucer and Cecily Chaumpaigne's roles in the modern classroom. This feminist methodology offers a modern lens through which I can interpret this medieval text.

Practical: Textile as Text

In episodic fits and spurts, this section has—seemingly uncontrollably—expanded and retracted, taking on various shapes, forms, and adaptations. Premises have proved spurious and evasive, first presenting as neat solutions before revealing themselves as reductive, faulty, or presumptuous ploys. After compiling the critical history in my methodology section and criticizing decades of feminist scholars for searching for some sort of hidden truth about

femininity within the text, in my first attempt, I proceeded to do the exact thing I criticized them for doing. I argued that each of the formalist elements I studied in my first chapter takes on a feminist function—and that Chaucer captures this complexity incidentally. He looks at the Wife of Bath and records what he sees, almost discursively capturing underlying themes of entrapment, warring selves, and performativity so critical to the feminist movement; he is a good writer and she is complex, so when he observed her he captured her complexity in his content and in his form. This argument has a gaping hole, the "red herring" (82) Burger wrote about; the Wife of Bath is not real. She is a product of Geoffrey Chaucer's fictive imagination, so, if we, feminist readers, find any hidden truths about femininity in the text than it seems we can only attribute them to the man Geoffrey Chaucer. And this man, lest we forget, gave Cecily Chaumpaigne reason to press the charge of "raptus" against him in 1380 (Morrison 69). So, I pivoted. Instead, following in Elaine Tuttle Hansen's tradition by reading the description of the Wife of Bath with "questions about male characters, masculine identity, and the issue of male authorial and critical presence" (56). I studied this ekphrastic instance as following in a long tradition of men depicting women through art; I used Laura Mulvey's concept of "the male gaze" (834) to argue that Chaucer stilled the Wife in an act of paternalistic, authorial silencing. Once, in a feminist paper, I refuse to see any feminist wisdom, my thinking truncated and fell flat; I dismissed all of the feminist scholars who have constructed feminist meaning through their criticism and I failed to address all of the nuanced feminist thought this is evident, I admit reluctantly, in the authoring of the Wife of Bath. How can I honor the decades of feminist engagement with the text, while still criticizing the source of their inspiration? And, furthermore, how do I reconcile this text's enormous complexity of feminist thought text with its author's moral culpability?

My answer to the first question involves what may seem to be a non sequitur, but bear with me. Benjamin Sommer, in his article "Revelation at Sinai in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish Theology" grapples with the relationship between secular, academic biblical criticism and rabbinic, Jewish, theological texts. He describes biblical criticism as "excavative" (422), a process of rejecting or revising the thinking of scholarly predecessors in a hierarchal academic pursuit of excellent, historically accurate interpretation. Rabbinic thought, in contrast, "in an unfashionably historicist manner," instead "allows one to hear forgotten voices of Jewish creativity" alongside familiar medieval commentators and classical midrashic (Hebrew word for commentary) texts. In this paradigm—contrary to popular modern conceptions of religious thinking—the source text and the commentators exist side by side, both carrying equal authority. And, contradictory interpretations exist and stand valid contemporaneously, rather than forcefully debunking the interpretations of their predecessors. Sommer makes the case for bringing this dialogical, non-hierarchal approach to secular academia. I adopt this anthological, dialogical approach to scholarship, honoring the feminist co-construction of meaning around this male-authored text as equally authoritative, credible, and impactful as its source text. Part of the feminist meaning around this text I, therefore, attribute to the ensuing feminist scholars who co-constructed meaning around it.

Sommer takes a theological and religious studies approach, but I turn to Geraldine Heng's "Feminine Knots and the Other" for a feminist, medieval version of this literary model. She describes "a dialogic and transferential relationship between readers and texts" where she takes a text as "a heuristic fiction"—as "many texts in the same body" from which the critic can choose their "programmatics of choice" (500) to analyze. In acknowledging the partiality and almost mystical nature of analysis—as it functions like the source text with an interweaving of

"unthought and unsaid"(501)—she takes the text and its interpretations as both enormously complex and equally filled with "knowing and not-knowing" (qtd. in Heng 500). This approach is useful for two reasons. First, like Sommer, she puts the text and its interpretations on an equal playing field—echoing the dialogical, non-hierarchical approach that Sommer proposes. And, second, in doing so she establishes both the text and its interpretations as subject to the author's partiality, but also, equally so, to the mysticism of the said and the unsaid. It is the job of various theorists to develop readings and interpretations of the "unsaid" narrative of which their partiality best allows them to see; feminist critics have spent centuries developing feminist interpretive narratives of texts written by men. So, once more, feminist scholars created the feminist meaning and narrative unsaid in a male-authored text, and I take these interpretations as equally important as their source-text.

I want to further explore what Heng calls the "said" and "unsaid" (500), using the language and thinking of 20th-century radical, counter-cultural French-Bulgarian thinker, Julia Kristeva to further answer the question: how do I reconcile the author's biographical immoral history with his text's feminist richness? In a semiotic reading, Kristeva proposes a "phenotext" and a "genotext" (Moi 13) to every written work. The phenotext—or the text that shows or is displayed—is a "structure" that "obeys rules of communication and presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee" (121). The words on the page, ordered according to grammatical principles and written by Chaucer for his audience constitute the phenotext. The genotype, on the other hand, she describes as a "process" that "moves through relative and transitory borders" constituting a path "that is not restricted to the poles of univocal information between two full fledged subjects' (121). While the phenotext is legible and transparent—she likens it to "algebra" (121)—the genotext is for more elusive and cryptic—she compares it to "topology" (121).

Topology is a branch of mathematics where two objects are considered equivalent if they can be formed into one another by motions of "bending, twisting, stretching, and shrinking" (Carlson); both the genotext and topology rely on the movement and ingenuity of the reader to forge a connection—just like in Sommer's model of interpretation of biblical texts. The genotext's structures are ephemeral and non-signifying—not expressed through simple marks on the page but through mystical, impulsive expression she calls "drive charges" (121). I aim to read into the "drive charges" pulsing underneath the phenotext, while crafting a narrative and interpretation of a genotext.

Kristeva proposes many different types of mystical genotexts. In order to support my own phenotext reading, I rely on Kathryn Kruger's feminist work about weaving and literature. Kruger's book, *Weaving the Word,* uses Kristeva's semiotic, psychoanalytic thinking to explore a blurred line between text and textile, proposing and advocating for an expansion of the definition of literature to include textile production. Kruger studies textile as the predecessor to the written text, and she chronicles women weavers who took their "domestic activity of making textiles into one of making texts by inscribing cloth with both personal and political messages" (13). Her work is both a feminist historical restoration project and a psychoanalytic one—she argues that the male author projects his desire and disgust for the female, "maternal body / textile" (Kruger 35) onto a female character who has a relation with the text / textile. I apply this thinking here, accepting a hidden, semiotic textile within this text. In the following pages, I first study the phenotext: Chaucer's expression of desire and disgust. I argue that Chaucer's male gaze sexualizes, stills, and silences the Wife of Bath, dismissing her labor and her style alike as frivolous, feminine endeavors. Then, I turn to the genotext, taking the Wife of Bath's mode of expression as neither textual nor verbal, but instead textile. I use the work of historians John Lee

and Eleanor Curs-Wilson to argue that the Wife of Bath was, in fact, a small business owner of a textile production company. With that established, I turn to the aesthetic and social expressive powers of her textiles, studying the Wife of Bath's personal style as not just part of a professional endeavor but an artistic pursuit and a means of communication of a female narrative across time and space.

First, the phenotext description: Chaucer's sexualizing description renders the Wife of Bath still and voiceless, while condescending her fashion choices as superficial, indulgent, and reprehensible. Chaucer is working in a tradition of men authoring (and praising) female characters. Contemporary American critic Laura Mulvey describes the "split between active / male and passive / female" (837); in rendering a female character, Chaucer acts as an observer who paints his "objectified other" while "watching, in an active controlling sense" (Mulvey 835). The male gaze fixates on his female subject and imposes upon her "the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (Mulvey 834). Critical to Mulvey's thinking is the idea that women operate as just a stand in "as signifier for male other" (834); particularly in this heavily male medieval literary context, Chaucer's male authorship constructs a superficial and indulgent female character. He describes a hat she wore—"I dare swear they weighed ten pounds" (454). As he catalogues each of her fashion choices, he trivializes and condescends her as a frivolous woman, superficially focused on her fashion choices and using the church as a sort of social runway, rather than modestly and piously demonstrating her commitment to her faith. The tone of "I dare swear," as I discussed in the first chapter, is gossipy and critical; in this male rendering of a female character, the Wife of Bath is still, silent, and lifeless through the depiction of her physical characteristics as Chaucer criticizes and condescends her fashion choices as self-indulgent and superficial.

Furthermore, Chaucer condescends and criticizes the Wife of Bath's cloth-making practices. In the phenotext, he writes that the Wife of Bath "had such a skill in cloth-making, / She surpassed them of Ypres and of Ghent" (447-8). Understanding this couplet requires some brief historical context: according to scholar Lee Patterson, wool was a critical export in the English economy, and a lot of this wool was sent to places like Ypres and Ghent so that it could be turned into cloth. Scholars have spent centuries debating the nature of the Wife of Bath's cloth-making; some say it was merely a hobby or a craft, others say she weaved to contribute to a domestic economy (Patterson 134), and others still argue that she was a small business owner (Lee 194). While the conjectures of these scholars operate independently from Chaucer's source-text description, I use their historical information and Chaucer's heavy use of irony throughout "The General Prologue" to categorize the phenotext reading as critical and condescending of the Wife of Bath's cloth-making pursuits. The phenotext stills, silences, and condescends the Wife of Bath, depicting and objectifying her as a fruitless cloth-maker and a frivolous dresser.

In the phenotext, Chaucer condescends the Wife of Bath's "hobby" of cloth making, but there is substantial historical evidence that suggests that the Wife was a fictional representation of many real life widowed and non-widowed female small business owners. Medievalist clothier expert John Lee and economic historian Eleanor Curs-Wilson study both the prevalence of medieval women who operated cloth-making businesses and the historic depreciation—both financial and social—of female labor in the private / domestic and public / trading economies. In 1478, John Horrold of Clare left his wife, Agnes, his "goods, looms and wool, both worked and unworked" (Lee 194). She joined in a tradition of cloth-making widows who became small-business owners upon the death of their husbands, operating as a "femme soles" (Lee 192) who

took on the responsibility of her own debts and business affairs. Even non-widows often took on marketing roles; some even took on manufacturing responsibilities.

This female labor was recorded because it took place in the public sphere, but female, domestic labor has historically gone unrecorded and uncompensated. Scholars Eleanora Crus Wilson, Mary Carruthers, and David Robertson describe the Wife as "west-country clothier" who was a "redoubtable goodwife living near Bath" (qtd. in Lee 195). Scholars who write off the Wife of Bath's cloth-making skill as a simply a hobby are contributing to sexist attitudes and systemic and historical dismissal of domestic, feminine labor. While phenotext condescends the Wife of Bath's work, the feminine genotext celebrates it. Pairing the genotext celebration with the historical context for the pressing social, familial, and professional structures, indicates that the Wife of Bath's mode of production has been unfairly trivialized and unrecognized.

Yes, the Wife of Bath's work as a cloth-maker and small business owner goes unrecognized, uncompensated, and condescended as a professional pursuit, but also, what Chaucer writes off as frivolous, is actually a powerful means of semiotic and artistic expression. Historically, men and women rely on personal fashion as a method of social communication and medium of artistic expression, however, when men do so they are celebrated and when women do so they are condescended. Virginia Woolf, in her 1938 essay book *Three Guineas*, writes about male military fashion:

> "Not only are whole bodies of men dressed alike summer and winter—a strange characteristic to a sex which changes its clothes according to the season, and for reasons of private taste and comfort—but every button, rosette and stripe seems to have some symbolical meaning. Some have the right to wear plain buttons only; others rosettes;

> some may wear a single stripe; others three, four, five or six. And each curl or stripe is sewn on at precisely the right distance apart; it may be one inch for one man, one inch and a quarter for another. Rules again regulate the gold wire on the shoulders, the braid on the trousers, the cockades on the hats--but no single pair of eyes can observe all these distinctions, let alone account for them accurately."

Woolf takes a tone historically used by men to describe women; her list is remarkably like Chaucer's cataloguing of the Wife of Bath's outfit—specific item of clothing ("her kerchiefs" (453)), symbolic detail with implications ("were very fine in texture" (453)), and comment about its extravagance ("I dare swear they weighed ten pounds" (454)). By subverting these tonal and structural elements, Woolf makes a couple of points. First, fashion—for people of all genders—offers a medium of symbolic, semiotic expression. Yes, the expressed function of fashion is often simply practical—to cover and protect a naked body—or simply frivolous—to "gratif[y] vanity, and creat[e] pleasure," and there are traditionally gender normative tendencies there, but it also serves as a silent means of social and professional expression, allowing individuals to both communicate to people both outside their sphere (in a different professional field, of a different class or gender) and within their sphere (in order to communicate value or rank in said sphere). In short, fashion matters for all people—as a mechanism through which to read others and a means of expression of self.

Woolf wrote about this in the 20th-century, but I argue, with the research of Anne Hollander, that it holds in the 14th-century in the case of the Wife of Bath; the Wife of Bath, like many other medieval women, relies on her artistic expertise and material ambition to express her financial well-being, professional handicraft, and sexual sovereignty. Anne Hollander explores

medieval fashion, echoing Woolf's 20th-century sentiment. Male fashion changes with much less frequency; dialogue about fashion and gender has historically maintained that "civilized men naturally dress plainly, as if for unself-conscious action, but women dress fancifully for deliberate allure" (Hollander 28). But, Hollander's research suggests that, in practice, the opposite is true: "for centuries male potency was expressed in erotic and vividly imaginative clothing, and female charm was expressed in much simpler clothing that primarily emphasized modesty" (29). Hollander confirms Woolf's sentiments about the 20th-century to be true about the 14th; fashion functions as a professional, social, and aesthetic means of expression for all people, despite a widely held and deeply entrenched belief that symbolically important fashion is purely a feminized, aesthetic practice. For the Wife of Bath her dress—her famous kerchiefs, red stockings, and new shoes—is a mechanism of self-decoration and aesthetic, artistic expression. What Chaucer writes off as frivolity and extravagance, actually demonstrates the Wife's own financial well-being and aesthetic flair; with the profits from her cloth making business, she can afford to wear expensive clothing. She relies on her church as a social space to display her artistic pursuits and advertise her professional work. Furthermore, feminist theorist Renata Salecl and D.A. Miller study style—fashion and flair—as a source of and means to sexual sovereignty for women (80-81 Berlant); her mode of dressing allows her to develop and express sexual sovereignty. The Wife's material ambition and aesthetic self-decoration has serious symbolic, expressive powers.

Yes, the Wife of Bath is expressing herself to her fellow churchgoers, but she is also tapping into the wisdom of generations of weavers that preceded her—weaving stories and textiles alike—and contributing to a conversation with those who will follow her. The materiality of cloth production and expression establishes intergenerational and semiotic dialogue across

times, places, and cultures. When Chaucer describes the Wife at church, he writes: “In all the parish there was no wife / Who should go to the Offering before her; And if there did, certainly she was so angry / That she was out of all Charity” (449-452). This first comment situates the Wife of Bath in terms of other women—specifically putting her into competition with them and painting her as a jealous, catty, feminine force. When he goes on to describes her clothing, he implies that the other women are competing with her well; is her clothing more expensive than that of the other wives? Who has the most “charity” (452)? He describes their participation in a feminine jockeying competition about religiosity, fashion, and status, but what is happening in the phenotext is actually a complicated network of feminine, semiotic communication. The Wife’s gossip in her prologue is similarly condescended, when it, too, is a powerful mechanism of female connection. Just as Woolf and Hollander describe social connections within groups of women as being established and communicated through semiotic style symbols, this reference to feminine interconnectivity signals a web and method of communication that stretches for wider than just this particular textile in this church that day. The materiality of the production of text and textile alike both points to and cultivates a “large community of female authorship” (Kruger 12).

This genotext tells a powerful story of a hidden, textile, feminine network. With this unsaid textile narrative constructed, I want to return to the anthological, dialogical approach I spoke about earlier with Sommer and Heng’s thinking. This anthological, dialogical approach applies to textiles as well; hidden with textiles are a series of material signs and symbols interwoven in a process of female authoring and storytelling, giving birth and longevity to textile stories across time and space. The physical materiality lends itself to a renewal of sign at each wear; one woman might produce a dress, another might wear and another yet, each both relying

on and endowing it with a shared, co-constructed semiotic language. The Wife of Bath's fictional textiles tap into centuries of an established material and symbolic network of communication and sharing amongst women, both making use of and cultivating modes of professional, social, and aesthetic expression.

Teaching Coda: Ethical Reading in Non Ethical Spaces

I take the feminist question to be an ethical one. Like any ethical question, it concerns the individual's responsibility to one another and to their community; it is a question that requires a dialogical, complicated, and multi-faceted answer. So, my pedagogical approach to feminism and *The Canterbury Tales* builds off of a long tradition reading literature for moral guidance and practicable wisdom (Anger 71). Rather than teaching a specific feminist reading of the Wife of Bath and offering up a value system and moral paradigm for my students to accept or reject, I choose to use *The Tales* as what Jonathan Culler calls, a "non-ethical opening of a space in which ethical decision can occur" (Culler 122). Chaucer provides a "non-ethical opening" in which students can explore grey areas and, eventually, take an informed and ethical stance that they can practice in their lives. Creating a classroom that allows students to do this is no easy task. So, I am going to return to David Hawkins' "I, Thou, and It" ("I" is the teacher, "thou" the students, and "it" the subject matter) to explore some ideas that I think are really important to this approach. I am going to use the framework of "I, Thou, and It" to define each of these force's responsibilities in the classroom along with their relationships to one another in this ethical approach to feminist question.

First, the "it": if we are reading explore ethical questions, why choose *this* text? A text with a clear ethical agenda or an easily identifiable moral system or just any text not written by an accused rapist certainly seems like it would be a better fit. A didactic fable or just some philosophical prose both present ethical agendas and value systems. But, I turn to narrative, specifically, because its form embeds ethical content and ambiguity. According to Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge*, "Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth" (3). Narrative form, by nature, incorporates philosophical content. I take Nussbaum's claim that ethical and philosophical content is inseparable from literary form; she is part of the long tradition of reading literature for ethics. However, I deviate from her in approach. The reader's job is not to interpret the philosophical value system upheld in the narrative, but, instead, to use the narrative as a "non-ethical opening of a space" (Culler 122) to explore ethical questions. I use Culler's phrasing because the job of the reader is not to decipher and uphold the text's ethical message, but to explore the ethical gray area the text offers and take an independent ethical stance within it. From the ethics of authorship to Chaucer's own moral authority to the explicit and implicit ethical questions throughout the tale, this text—in its interwoven strands of feminism, misogyny, and religiosity—is the perfect narrative to consider ethically. Cecily Chaumpaigne's allegations, claims at proto-feminism, and accusations of misogyny are all part of the conversation.

Because *The Canterbury Tales* is part of the literary canon—it has been long read, studied, and revered—students can feel that "it" holds more power than "thou" does. It is crucial to distinguish clearly between aesthetic and literary value. There is a rich history of both implicit and explicit associations of aesthetic and ethical values—in Plato's "The Symposium" Diotima

"a woman wise in this [love] and in many other kinds of knowledge" (translated by Stevenson) defines Love as the "Love of the beautiful." She links love and knowledge, and she describes a sort of knowledge of love. This classical instance is part of long history of associating aesthetic value with ethical value; a beautiful woman has wisdom, a splendid painting has principles, a well-crafted text has a conscience. In this classroom, it is crucial to disassociate and distinguish between aesthetic and literary value. Literary mastery does not necessarily beget moral authority. This is where Culler is really important again; aesthetically valuable pieces have no intrinsic ethical wisdom, but, instead, offer aesthetically valuable, non ethical space within which students can make ethical decisions.

I find value in reading this canonized text, but not in reading it "canonically"—taking it reverently, conflating its aesthetic worth with its ethical worth, or, potentially, devaluing student opinion. In this feminist classroom, I aim for joyful and complicated thinking. I appreciate both the aesthetic and literary value of this text—particularly the secondary sources and copious amounts of scholarly attention it has received, because centuries and centuries of scholars from so many different cultures and communities and have staked their own ethical claims. They have done so much work, so we get to stand on their shoulders. The aesthetic value of this text begets joyful reading, while the text's narrative complexity—and the centuries of scholarly attention it has received—beget complicated thinking. But we also need to acknowledge and criticize the practice of canonization as part of the ethical conversation. In this classroom, we read this canonized text, but we do not read it canonically. *The Canterbury Tales'* narrative paints an ambiguous moral landscape—as readers, we get to appreciate its beauty, criticize its reception, and use the input of the scholars before us to establish our own ethical stances.

This brings us to the teacher's responsibilities. "I" am responsible for providing students with the tools they need to understand and interpret the text so they can establish ethical stances—I give them tools, not values. The first part of this job is to tap into student reactions by (1) facilitating, (2) narrating, and, (3) contextualizing student reading. First, facilitation: even though etymology, literary devices, and formal elements are not the primary focus of this feminist classroom, they are still an important part of this study. Students need to understand the Middle English in order to broach any ethical questions, and they need to consider how form relates and contributes to content. This teacher will spend less time on the process of reading than the formalist one, but tools central to the close reading—reciting, paraphrasing, and describing—all still have a place in the feminist classroom. Modeling and conveying these skills are central to the facilitation process. After facilitating student reaction, the teacher narrates student processes. When students react, by saying: "I don't like this character," the teacher narrates that they are making an impulse character judgment and imposing subjective moral scrutiny (Anger 77). When they laugh at something crude or bawdy, the teacher narrates their response to a deviation from cultural and social norms or an instance of medieval humor (Sidhu 81). This sort of narration leads to the third piece, contextualization: an ethical, student-driven approach does not abandon historicism, but it leverages student reactions in order to situate this text in its medieval context. Here, we explore cultural and historical differences between Chaucer's world and our own. "I" is responsible for situating this text in its medieval context, an effort that leads directly into the culturally, historically, and geographically dependent nature of moral systems.

The next piece of the teacher's job is what I call dilation. Dilation is a process of raising the stakes, of drawing a connection between literary minutia and large-scale ethical questions, or

what Suzy Anger calls "the Particular and the General." The particulars—of the specific details of any literary narrative—are directly related to the generals—or the big picture, philosophical ideas that span the text, its world, and our world. The particulars present an entry point; as Emma Lipton says, in reading the marriage tales students immediately "draw connections between Chaucer's poem and their own lives" (88). These particulars both have the capacity to dilate rapidly, inviting the students into a discussion about hierarchies within marriage. This is not like the Shakespeare and rap "bait and switch," where teachers offer one contemporary reference to students before getting to the heart of their content. But ethical—therefore personal and actionable—questions must persist throughout the class and stem from literary particulars. It is the teacher's job to dilate an issue of a literary particular to a profound general question. Students should feel that "there was a lot at stake in reading texts with ethical questions in mind" (Anger 76), because, how they read and understand the particulars determines the general, which then bleeds into, not just the classroom and the text, but their lives and the world around them. This practice is one of dilation, of raising the stakes, of switching from just reading the books to letting the books read "thou"; it is the bridging between Gilbert and Gubar's "metaphor" and "experience" (xii-xiii).

Now, the job of the students: within this text, there is a rich discussion of education and moral reform within the tale and the surrounding scholarly work alike—I want students to emulate this process in order to use literary processes to explore ethical questions. Embedded within the tale and the processes of scholarly criticism alike are representations of education and dialogue. The tales explicitly stage elements of literary education—a reprehensible knight seeks out knowledge and wisdom on the subject of his sin in order to right his wrongs. Jankyn and the Wife of Bath use scholarly and literary methods to advocate for a certain way of living. Themes

of education are central to the tale itself—Jankyn is a "virtual personification of formal instruction" (Parson 164), the Wife of Bath cites her various sources to make her case, and the knight in the tale is "educated" or "morally reformed" through his quest after his rape at the beginning of the tale. Similarly, scholars have, for centuries, identified, challenged, and reformed value systems within the tale. Just as I wrote about in my methodology section—the rich dialogical critical history is really an ethical conversation. Students are responsible for trying out the tools that the characters in the tale use and the critics that follow modeled in order to take their own ethical stances. The first job of the students is an intellectual, ethical exercise.

Once they have taken on these literary and ethical processes, they need accept their own ethical authority while accepting the authority of the students in the class around them. David Hansen developed and advocated for the theoretical, pedagogical approach of "Cosmopolitanism" where "people learn to balance reflective openness to the new with reflective loyalty to the known" (Hansen 2). When Christopher Emdin practiced this approach, his classroom and school functions like a mini city. Each student has their specific responsibility and is in charge of taking on "operational aspects of the school" in addition to their academic contributions—one sweeps, another cleans whiteboards, and so on (Emdin). This sharing of practices establishes each student as a stakeholder; they are responsible and, therefore, invested. Emdin talks about assigning students lunch duties and general upkeep responsibilities. I bring in this idea here, because this concept of communal, shared responsibilities is crucial to fostering a classroom where each student can have their own ethical authority—and disagree with one another—while still working together on a shared goal of upkeeping a cosmopolitan learning community. Here, students can learn to balance a commitment to "openness" with a "reflective loyalty" (Hansen 2), respecting the stances of others while developing their own. Classrooms and

schools are, of course, microcosms of the world that we all live in, so students need to be now, and be prepared to be later, conscientious citizens with defined, ethical stances and the capacity to speak to and respect those who do not share their stances. So, yes, students are responsible for reading Middle English and understanding Chaucer's ethical landscape. And, yes, students need to understand the capacity for educational, literary, and moral reform in Chaucer's fictive world and biographical one, too. But students are also chiefly responsible for accepting their own moral authority, while respecting the moral authority and ethical stances of their peers; students share a text and a classroom and need to build a sense of cosmopolitan cooperation and contribution in their shared space with their shared resources. All of this is geared towards preparing them to be better community members, family members, friends, and citizens once they leave the classroom.

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Appendix A

Larry Benson's "Interlinear Translations of Some of The Canterbury Tales"

445 **A good WIF was ther OF biside BATHE,**
There was a good WIFE OF beside BATH,
446 **But she was somdel deef, and that was scathe.**
But she was somewhat deaf, and that was a pity.
447 **Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt**
She had such a skill in cloth-making
448 **She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt.**
She surpassed them of Ypres and of Ghent.
449 **In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon**
In all the parish there was no wife
450 **That to the offrynge bifore hire sholde goon;**
Who should go to the Offering before her;
451 **And if ther dide, certeyn so wrooth was she**
And if there did, certainly she was so angry
452 **That she was out of alle charitee.**
That she was out of all charity (love for her neighbor).
453 **Hir coverchiefs ful fyne weren of ground;**
Her kerchiefs were very fine in texture;
454 **I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound**
I dare swear they weighed ten pound
455 **That on a Sonday weren upon hir heed.**
That on a Sunday were upon her head.
456 **Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed,**
Her stockings were of fine scarlet red,

457 **Ful streite yteyd, and shoes ful moyste and newe.**
Very closely laced, and shoes very supple and new.
458 **Boold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe.**
Bold was her face, and fair, and red of hue.
459 **She was a worthy womman al hir lyve:**
She was a worthy woman all her life:
460 **Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve,**
She had (married) five husbands at the church door,
461 **Withouten oother compaignye in youthe --**
Not counting other company in youth --
462 **But thereof nedeth nat to speke as nowthe.**
But there is no need to speak of that right now.
463 **And thries hadde she been at Jerusalem;**
And she had been three times at Jerusalem;
464 **She hadde passed many a straunge strem;**
She had passed many a foreign sea;
465 **At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne,**
She had been at Rome, and at Boulogne,
466 **In Galice at Seint-Jame, and at Coloigne.**
In Galicia at Saint-James (of Compostella), and at Cologne.
467 **She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye.**
She knew much about wandering by the way.
468 **Gat-tothed was she, soothly for to seye.**
She had teeth widely set apart, truly to say.
469 **Upon an amblere esily she sat,**
She sat easily upon a pacing horse,
470 **Ywympled wel, and on hir heed an hat**
Wearing a large wimple, and on her head a hat
471 **As brood as is a bokeler or a targe;**
As broad as a buckler or a shield;
472 **A foot-mantel aboute hir hipes large,**
An overskirt about her large hips,
473 **And on hir feet a paire of spores sharpe.**
And on her feet a pair of sharp spurs.
474 **In felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe.**
In fellowship she well knew how to laugh and chatter.
475 **Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce,**
She knew, as it happened, about remedies for love
476 **For she koude of that art the olde daunce.**
For she knew the old dance (tricks of the trade) of that art.