thus contrives a denouement full of drama, reversal, and recognition, in which she utters her own name in the moment of reconciliation with her father: "'I am youre doghter Custance,' quod she" (1107). Constance may be a tale told by men, but she seems to be given, by the Man of Law, a certain power of determining her own narrative kinesis.

But Constance's limited self-consciousness in fact serves patriarchy well (as do the romance hagiographies that provide the most immediate context for Constance's self-portrayal here).[57] The tale she tells in order to conceal her identity, after all, is that she "forgat hir mynde" (524). Dominant ideology (and its expressed system of laws) controls and manipulates the principle of similarity and difference, analogy and repetition; if Constance has access to these principles—is conscious that she is like others (saints, romance heroines, women)—that consciousness enables her only to suffer and to be constrained. Her self-perceived identity as saint enables her to do no more than endure injuries, as does her consciousness of her own womanhood ("I, wrecche womman, no fors though I spille! / Wommen are born to thraldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governance" [285–87]). And at the moment of her greatest self-consciousness, the moment in which she pronounces her own name, Constance plays a part in a larger system of patriarchal constraint that ends this romance narrative. Her happiness in reunion with her father—the "pitous joye" (1114), the "wepynge for tendrenesse in herte blithe" (1154)—is assimilated by the Man of Law into the pattern of joy after woe, woe after gladness that he identifies as the natural rhythm of earthly life.

It's an ending that appeals to the Host, who commends the tale at its conclusion as "a *thrifty* tale for the nones!" (1165; my emphasis). His enthusiastic response reinforces the smoothly running patriarchal system that trades women and tales, women as tales. Constance's minimal self-awareness allows her no more than passivity. But there's one woman on this pilgrimage who knows that she's merchandise and uses that knowledge of woman's commodification to her own advantage: "With daunger," she assures us, "oute we al oure chaffare" (3:521). She knows that "woman" has been written by clerks in their oratories. And she takes that "book of wikked wyves" and tosses it into the fire.

Chapter Four

"Glose/bele chose": The Wife of Bath and Her Glossators

The Man of Law has just concluded his tale of Constance, reuniting father and daughter in one big ideological embrace, and it has pleased that manliest of men, Harry Bailly. The Host's delight in this tale, expressed in the Epilogue of the *Man of Law's Tale*, comes as no surprise: as we've seen, the Man of Law's *vita* of Constance—like Chaucer's "Seintes Legende of Cupide" that the Man of Law mentions in his introduction—has represented its heroine as a will-less blank and has thus controlled the threat that an independent female "corage" would pose to patriarchy. Such control of the "sleightes and subtilitees" of women (as he will put it later, in response to the *Merchant's Tale* [4:2421]) is immensely appealing to the henpecked Harry; impressed by the Man of Law's performance, he stands up in his stirrups and calls out: "Goode men, herkeneth everych on!" He then asks another one of "ye lerned men in lore," the Parson, to tell a tale. But the prospect of a suffocating sermon, especially after the *Man* of Law's tale, is too much for the Wife of Bath. Out of this company of "goode men" the voice of the woman bursts: "Nay, by my fader soule, that schal he nat! . . . He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche." Instead, "My joly body schal a tale telle," a tale having nothing to do with "philosophie, / Ne phislyas, ne termes queinte of lawe."[1] The Wife opposes her tale to the "lerned men's" lore: it is her "joly body" against their oppressive teaching and glossing.

The Wife—a clothier, dealer in *textus*—continues in her Prologue to oppose herself to glosses. "Men may devyne and *glosen*, up and doun" (3:26; my emphasis) about how many men one may have in marriage, but the Wife knows that God bade us to increase and multiply: "That gentil *text* kan *I* wel understonde." In this endlink to the *Man of Law's Tale* and beginning of the Wife of Bath's Prologue, woman is associated with the body and the text—as in the Pauline exegetical assimilation of literality and carnality to femininity I discussed in the

Introduction—and is opposed to the gloss, written by men, learned, anti-pleasure, and anti-body.

Indeed, outfitted in her ostentatious garb—thick kerchiefs, fine stockings, new shoes, huge hat—and emphasizing that those "gaye scarlet gytes" are well used, the Wife of Bath herself is an embodiment of the letter of the text as Jerome has imaged it in his paradigm of proper reading: like the alien woman of Deuteronomy 21, she is a woman whose clothed appearance is centrally significant. But unlike that new bride, she retains her costume (which she intends, I argue, to be alluring, however overwhelming and repellent others might find it), revels in her seductive person and adornment: *her* hair isn't shaved, *her* nails aren't pared.[2] Unlike that silent bride—and unlike her virtually mute relations, the passive feminine bodies manipulated by the narrator of the *Legend of Good Women* and Constance in the *Man of Law's Tale*—the Wife speaks: whereas that alien captive is passed between men at war, her desire conforming to the desire of the men in possession of her, the Wife makes her autonomous desire the very motive and theme of her performance.[3] And if Jerome's paradigm—a forerunner of Lévi-Strauss's patriarchal paradigm, just as we have seen the *Man of Law's Tale* to be—runs on the assumption that all women are functionally interchangeable (an assumption on which Pandarus and Troilus operate as well), the Wife of Bath would seem to regard *men* as virtually interchangeable: "Yblessed be God that I have wedded fyve! / Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal," she declares (44–45), and elaborates:

> I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun,
> But evere folwede myn appetit,
> Al were he short, or long, or blak, or whit;
> I took no kep, so that he liked me,
> How poore he was, ne eek of what degree.
> (622–26)

The Wife of Bath, in fact, articulates, makes visible, exactly what that patriarchal hermeneutic necessarily excludes, necessarily keeps invisible. She represents what the ideology of that model—an ideology incarnated, as we've seen, by the Man of Law—can't say, can't acknowledge, or acknowledges only by devalorizing and stigmatizing as Other: she represents independent feminine will and desire, the literal body of the text that itself has signifying value and leads to the spirit without its necessarily being devalued or destroyed in the process.[4] The woman traded must be silent; the Wife talks. The

woman's desire must be merely mimetic; the Wife chronicles her own busy "purveiance / Of mariage" (570–71). The gloss undertakes to speak (for) the text; the Wife maintains that the literal text—her body—can speak for itself. If the Man of Law must energetically suppress the feminine, the Wife vociferously speaks as that Other created and excluded by patriarchal ideology, and in this way she reveals the very workings of this ideology. Most penetratingly, as her *Tale* suggests in its narrative focus on a rapist, if the patriarchal economy of the trade of women proceeds without woman's necessary acquiescence, it is always potentially performing a rape. (The rape is, in fact, Chaucer's own innovation to the traditional stories that inform this tale, a deliberate alteration that argues for its significance in the whole of the Wife's performance.)[5]

We might say, then, that the Wife is everything the Man of Law can't say, everything Criseyde, everything Philomela might have said, given the chance. She makes audible precisely what patriarchal discourse would keep silent, reveals the exclusion and devalorization that patriarchal discourse performs. Speaking as the excluded Other, she explicitly and affirmatively assumes the place that patriarchal discourse accords the feminine. Far from being trapped within the "prison house" of antifeminist discourse, the Wife of Bath, I argue, "convert[s] a form of subordination into an affirmation," to adapt Luce Irigaray's words here; she *mimics* the operations of patriarchal discourse. As Irigaray has characterized it, such mimesis functions to reveal those operations, to begin to make a place for the feminine:

> There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one "path," the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. . . . To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the "perceptible," of "matter"—to "ideas," in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language.[6]

Irigaray's own project of mimesis is immense—it intends the thwarting of all patriarchal discourse—and I cannot engage here the complex context in which she develops the idea. Such a concept of mimesis is

in itself, however, very powerful: it seems to me strikingly useful to the analysis of the Wife of Bath's performance, a performance that is at once enormously affirmative and adversative. But the Wife is also crucially unlike the woman Irigaray describes here; she "plays with mimesis," mimics patriarchal discourse ("Myn entente nys but for to pleye," she maintains [192]), not in order to "thwart" it altogether, to subvert it entirely, but to *reform* it, to keep it in place while making it accommodate feminine desire. What the Wife imagines in her Prologue and *Tale* is a way in which such patriarchal hermeneutics as imagined by Jerome, Macrobius, and Richard of Bury can be deployed to the satisfaction of everyone under patriarchy, according a place of active signification to both masculine and feminine: clerk and wife, gloss and text, spirit and letter, "matter" and "ideas" (Irigaray mentions the Aristotelian terms I've discussed in my Introduction). What would be necessary to the satisfying formulation of sexualized hermeneutics is, in fact, inherent in that Hieronymian image itself, an understanding of the feminine not as only the distracting veil but the fecund body, not as merely something to be turned away from, gotten rid of, passed through, but as something that is, in itself, at once a locus of pleasure *and* a locus of valuable signification. The Wife thus articulates the happy possibility of reforming the patriarchal and fundamentally misogynistic hermeneutic based on the economy of possession, of traffic in texts-as-women, to make it accommodate the feminine—woman's independent will and the signifying value of the letter.

The Wife of Bath, in fact, would seem to be Chaucer's favorite character, and the reasons for this become clearer and clearer. As Robert A. Pratt has put it in his analysis of Chaucer's evolving idea of the Wife, from her early characterization as teller of the *Shipman's Tale* to her fully fleshed-out form as we know it now,

> She appears to have interested Chaucer more, to have stimulated his imagination and creative power more fully and over a longer period, than any other of his characters.[7]

She pops up again and again: apparently irrepressible, she bursts out of even the confines of her "fictive universe," the *Canterbury Tales*—where she provokes the excited interjections of Pardoner and Friar and is deferred to as a certain kind of authority by both Clerk and Merchant—to be cited in Chaucer's own voice in "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton."[8] The Wife is a source of delight for this male author precisely because through her he is able to reform and still to participate in patriarchal discourse; he recuperates the feminine *within* the solid structure of that discourse.

This is a male fantasy, of course. And when we consider that such desire for the reform—not the overturning—of patriarchy is represented as a woman's desire, it is even more apparent that this is a masculine dream. Granted that it is indeed such a fantasy, we might remark that it is not a bad one, after all; it is not exploitative of the feminine for purely masculine gratification. Through the Wife, Chaucer imagines the possibility of a masculine reading that is not antifeminist, that does acknowledge, in good faith, feminine desire; and further, he represents the struggle and violence to the feminine that accompany the articulation of this fantasy. Through the Wife, then, Chaucer recuperates the sexualized hermeneutic that he recognizes as both pervasive in the medieval literary imagination and manifestly flawed. He has shown its limits in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *Legend of Good Women*, and the *Man of Law's Tale*, has shown the toll thereby taken on the feminine; he continues, in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and *Tale*, to register the toll taken on the feminine corpus in even the imagining of patriarchy's reform. The Wife expresses a dream of masculine reading that is not antifeminist and a feminine relation to the condition of being read that is not antimasculinist—but she does so after having been bruised and battered, permanently injured by that clerk Jankyn, in their concussive renovation of patriarchal discourse.

1

Crucial to the smooth passage of the alien woman between men at war, as we've seen time and again, is the exclusion of her independent desire. Criseyde is rejected by immasculated readers of her because she seems to them to be gratifying her own fickle desire; the women of the *Legend of Good Women* are featureless, enervated creatures, kept that way by the misogynistic plan of the narrator, the God of Love, and Alceste; pale Constance is assigned value by the men who trade her, and her sexuality, even as passive and mimetic as it is, is still a discomfort and confusion to the Man of Law. He denies that the mothers-in-law, with their transgressive desires, are even females of the species. The Wife of Bath, on the Other hand, actively and vociferously seeks her own sexual satisfaction. She spends the first 162 lines of her Prologue energetically defending a theology that acknowledges sexual activity, even sexual desire: our "membres," she maintains, are not only for "purgacioun / Of uryne" and for the differentiation of the sexes; they are also for "ese"—"Of engendrure," she adds, after a significant pause (115–28). Her desire for the frequent use of her "instrument" motivates this opening exegetical discourse; and in the account of her five marriages that follows, she continues to explicate

her preferences and active choices. She wore out the first three old husbands "pitously a-nyght" (202), she tells us, though she makes it clear that "in bacon hadde I nevere delit" (418); she wanted to be the only source of "delit" for her adulterous fourth husband (482); and she loved her fifth the best not only because of his great legs but because "in oure bed he was so fressh and gay" (508).

The Wife's loud and happy occupation of a position that is denied by patriarchal ideology is witnessed in her full embrace of her own commodification. Lévi-Strauss attempts to cover up the implications of the commodification of women that is essential to his paradigm, as we've seen in the previous chapter; Hector in *Troilus and Criseyde* does something similar when he insists to the Trojan parliament that "We usen here no wommen for to selle" (4.182). But woman is indeed treated as a possession to be traded, "chaffare," merchandise —we think again of Criseyde as "moeble" (4.1380); of Constance, packed off as a load in a boat—and the Wife makes this explicit, assumes her position as female in the marketplace. She thus reveals the essential commodification of woman in patriarchy when she speaks the language of sexual economics.[9] Unlike Hector, the Wife clearly acknowledges that "*al* is for to selle" (414; my emphasis). She'll work the market, "make me a feyned appetit" when there's "wynnyng" to be had (416–17), withhold her sex when there's a "raunson" to be paid (409–12):

> With daunger oute we al oure chaffare;
> Greet prees at market maketh deere ware,
> And to greet cheep is holde at litel prys:
> This knoweth every womman that is wys.
> (521–24)

If Lévi-Strauss suggests that the law of supply and demand must regulate the masculine trade of women (scarcity of desirable women maintains the structure of exchange, as he points out in *Elementary Structures of Kinship*),[10] "wommen," the Wife contends, speaking as the excluded condition, have a "queynte fantasye" of their own: the "daungerous," withholding, scarce man generates their own desire.

Critics often argue that the Wife in her Prologue is but enacting an antifeminist stereotype of the greedy, insatiable, domineering wife —to put it in the terms of my analysis, critics argue that rather than embodying what patriarchal discourse *can't* say, she is enacting precisely what patriarchal discourse *does* say, and says endlessly (in the univocal chant of Theophrastus, Jerome, Walter Map, Andreas Capellanus, Jean de Meun, Matheolus, Gautier le Leu, Deschamps, and others such as are contained in Jankyn's book).[11] But this is another part of her process of mimicry: she not only uncovers what is hidden in the workings of patriarchal ideology but simultaneously appropriates the place of the Other that ideology openly creates; she assumes the place of the feminine (the stereotype) to which patriarchy explicitly relegates her. When the Wife rehearses to the pilgrim audience her diatribe against her three old husbands, she is repeating the very words antifeminist writers have given the out-of-control wife. Jerome, for example, quotes Theophrastus in *Adversus Jovinianum:*

> Then come curtain-lectures the live-long night: she complains that one lady goes out better dressed than she: that another is looked up to by all: "I am a poor despised nobody at the ladies' assemblies." "Why did you ogle that creature next door?" "Why were you talking to the maid?"[12]

The Wife of Bath harangues her husbands:

> Sire olde kaynard, is this thyn array?
> Why is my neighebores wyf so gay?
> She is honoured overal ther she gooth;
> I sitte at hoom; I have no thrifty clooth.
> What dostow at my neighebores hous?
> Is she so fair? Artow so amorous?
> What rowne ye with oure mayde? Benedicite!
> Sire olde lecchour, lat thy japes be!
> (235–42)

La Vieille, in the *Roman de la rose*, advises Bel Acueil on how a lover should play the game of love:

> He should swear that if he had wanted to allow his rose, which was in great demand, to be taken by another, he would have been weighed down with gold and jewels. But, he should go on, his pure heart was so loyal that no man would ever stretch out his hand for it except that man alone who was offering his hand at that moment.[13]

The Wife of Bath appeases her husbands just so:

> What eyleth yow to grucche thus and grone?
> Is it for ye wolde have my queynte allone?

Wy, taak it al! Lo, have it every deel!
Peter! I shrewe yow, but ye love it weel;
For if I wolde selle my *bele chose*,
I koude walke as fressh as is a rose;
But I wol kepe it for youre owene tooth.
(443–49)

Indeed, her words are the antifeminists' words; but she assertively, knowingly appropriates them and the position to which antifeminist writers have relegated wives ("sith a man is moore resonable / Than womman is, ye moste been suffrable [441–42]; "Deceite, wepyng, spynnyng God hath yive / To wommen kyndely" [401–2]), and she thus rehearses this discourse with a difference. She herself remains elsewhere, with a body, a will, a desire beyond that which she is accorded by patriarchal discourse—this is "the persistence of 'matter,'" as Irigaray puts it:

> If women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere:* another case of the persistence of "matter," but also of "sexual pleasure."[14]

It is the Wife of Bath as incarnation of the devalorized feminine letter in the discourse of patriarchal hermeneutics that interests me most in this consideration of the Wife and mimesis. The Wife has been dealt with by critics time and again as a more or less psychologically rounded character, expressing feminine desire and Chaucer's desire for feminine desire; but her centrality to Chaucer's poetics, it seems to me, is due less to her significance as dramatic invention than to her value as a representation of the letter, the body of the text. I read her Prologue and *Tale* as most significant in their allegorical representation of the act of reading. The Wife speaks as the literal text, insisting on the positive, significant value of the carnal letter as opposed to the spiritual gloss; moreover, in doing so she appropriates the methods of the masculine, clerkly *glossatores* themselves, thus exposing techniques that they would rather keep invisible. I want now to focus specifically on the relationship of the Wife, as literal text, to the gloss and clerkly glossators; for it is through her mimicking patriarchal hermeneutics—incarnating the excluded letter and repeating the masculine hermeneutic moves—that Chaucer suggests a revision of the paradigm of reading as a masculine activity that would acknowledge, even solicit, feminine desire. First, though, a glance at the bibliographical history of the scriptural gloss and its relationship to the biblical text is in order; glossing's totalizing function vis-à-vis the text will become apparent, and we shall be able to see the energetic proliferation of

glosses themselves—although they ostensibly undertake to limit proliferation—and the self-interest of clerkly glossators, which will in fact become the Wife of Bath's theme.[15]

"Gloss" comes from the Greek *glossa* ("tongue, language"). As Francis E. Gigot notes, in early usage, Greek grammarians used the term to refer to words of Greek texts that required some exposition; later, the term came to refer to the explanation itself. Early Christian writers, commenting on Scripture, adopted the word to refer to an explanation of obscure verbal usage in the text—of foreign, dialectal, and obsolete words in particular—as opposed to an explanation of theological or doctrinal difficulties. Such glosses would be single words, written interlinearly or in the margins of the manuscript. But the word *glossa* was soon used to indicate more elaborate expositions of Scripture: from individual words to explanatory sentences to running commentaries on entire books. These longer commentaries as well would be written interlinearly and in the margins. The twelfth-century *Glossa ordinaria* ("The Gloss") sought to compile all glosses on the Bible, which themselves often consisted of layers upon layers of glosses. There were, in addition, glosses of the *Glossa*. In fact, Robert of Melun, in the mid-twelfth century (the height of glossomania) complained that the masters were reading the text only because of the gloss.[16]

But glossing activity continued, apparently unabated: notes and commentaries—*sententiae, postillae, distinctiones*—were produced vigorously. Marginal and interlinear glosses of Scripture became so elaborate, crowding the text off the page, that Sixtus V determined in 1588, on publication of his authoritative version of the Vulgate, that there would be no glosses in future copies of it—no marginal annotations of variant readings. There are words in the text of scripture as we know it now that were originally marginal or interlinear glosses—brief comments or explanations of a word—but were subsequently inserted into the text itself by scribes or owners of manuscripts. The gloss crowds out the text, the gloss becomes the text. And the gloss preserves the text from oblivion: to take a secular example, the only reason Chaucer knew a fragment of book 6 of Cicero's *Republic* is that Macrobius wrote a commentary on it, about sixteen times the length of the Ciceronian piece itself. What is supplementary, what is marginal, becomes the very condition of the primary text's existence, and itself proliferates. We might observe, too, with Graham D. Caie, that the glosses on Chaucer's own text in the Ellesmere manuscript

> are written in as large and as careful a hand as the actual text, which is placed off-centre to make room for the glosses, each of which

begins with an illuminated capital in the same colours as those of the text itself. In a sense it is a misnomer to call them "marginalia" at all, and one might confidently assume that the Ellesmere scribe considered the glosses to be an important part of the work as a whole.[17]

At the same time—the twelfth century—that scriptural glossing is at its most fervent, and that Robert of Melun is complaining that the gloss is more important than the text, the word "gloss" acquires pejorative connotations. *Gloser* in French, "glosen" in English, meant "to explicate, interpret" but also "to give a false interpretation, flatter, deceive"—thus, as we say, "to gloss over." Amant, in the *Roman de la rose*, insists that Raison provide a courteous gloss for some nasty words that she uses. If she *must* talk about "testicles" ("coilles"), he maintains, she ought at least to disguise her subject with a gloss. And in the *Summoner's Tale* (following the Wife of Bath's and Friar's performances) the hypocritical and avaricious friar rejoices, "Glosynge is a glorious thyng, certeyn, / For lettre sleeth, so as we clerkes seyn" (3:1793–94). He can make the text of Holy Writ do whatever he wants via the gloss. I shall find it "in a maner glose," he states (1920), even though his meaning isn't in the letter. (And it is the very carnal fart of the enraged Thomas that puts an end to this phony spiritualizing glossing.)

This pejoration makes explicit, makes part of the very definition of the word, the self-interestedness that is always potential in the act of glossing. Glossing is a gesture of appropriation; the *glossa* undertakes to speak the text, to assert authority over it, to provide an interpretation, finally to limit or close it to the possibility of heterodox or unlimited significance. Attracted by the beauties and difficulties of the letter, the glossator opens, reveals and makes useful the text's hidden truth, recloaking the text with his own interpretation. Glossing thus registers the literal attractions of the text and the delight of understanding its spirit, but it can overwhelm the text as well. Robert of Melun complains of the aggression with which masters defended their glosses as having authority; he suggests that they were in fact ready to fight to a bloody finish for their glosses. And not only Robert charges glossators with doing violence to the literal text; Christine de Pizan's reference to an aphorism about glossing makes it clear that the view of its appropriative and totalizing nature was commonplace: in her letter to Pierre Col (about what she saw as antifeminism in the *Rose*) she remarks, "Surely, this is like the common proverb about the glosses of Orleans which destroyed the text."[18]

The Wife suggests that the appropriative nature of glossing has a particularly masculine valence. In her so-called *sermon joyeux*, the first 162 lines of her Prologue, the Wife as "noble prechour" (165) categorically opposes the text to the gloss. As I mentioned above, she has already countered the "glossing and teaching" of "lerned men" with her "joly body" in the Man of Law's Epilogue: glossing has a totalizing function much like that of masculine reading in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Legend*, working to turn away from the feminine body —woman and literal text. Glossing seeks to find one answer, impose one interpretation on the meaning of Christ's words to the Samaritan woman, for example:

> What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn;
> But that I axe, why that the fifthe man
> Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?
> How manye myghte she have in mariage?
> Yet herde I nevere tellen in myn age
> Upon this nombre diffinicioun.
> Men may devyne and glosen, up and doun . . .
> (20–26)

When she says "Men" in line 26, she undoubtedly means *men*. Glossing seeks to deny the functions of the body (115–24), and in particular to limit the Wife's uninhibited use of her "instrument." But the letter, she contends, authorizes her to use that "instrument / As frely as my Makere hath it sent" (149–50), even though clerks would insist that she keep her body chaste. The Wife's reliance on the letter, her heartily espousing the literal text in her justification of the fulfillment of feminine desire, is a commonplace among critics.[19] She points to a passage in Genesis when arguing against glosses on the wedding at Cana and on the Samaritan woman; she asserts that no biblical text mentions a specific number of marriages; she adduces scriptural precedents for multiple wives; appeals to the Pauline text that it is better to marry than to burn; reminds her audience that the apostle only counsels virginity and does not command it; refers to Christ's admonition that those who would live perfectly should sell all they have and give to the poor (and "that am nat I" [112]); repeats Paul's statement that the wife has power over her husband and that husbands should love their wives.

Of course, the Wife may oppose herself to them, but she is arguing here precisely like a glossator herself.[20] She poses *quaestiones*, like the twelfth- and thirteenth-century glossators. "If ther were no seed

ysowe, / Virginitee, thanne wherof sholde it growe?" (71–72); "Telle me also, to what conclusion / Were membres maad of generacion?" (115–16). She works through this question logically (prompting the Friar to label her narrative "scole-matere" [1272])—the "membres of generacion" were made not only for "purgation of urine" and "to know a female from a male"; they are also for the purpose of procreation:

> Why sholde men elles in hir bookes sette
> That man shal yelde to his wyf hire dette?
> Now wherwith sholde he make his paiement,
> If he ne used his sely instrument?
> (129–32)

Her argumentation in these early lines of her Prologue repeats the points of the heretical Jovinian, as has often been observed, in Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, but it as well mimes Jerome's own pseudological moves in that treatise. If the Wife of Bath's reasoning is slippery, prompting critics to castigate her, it is because Jerome's itself is: commenting on Saint Paul's statement that it is good for a man to be unmarried, for example, Jerome contends, "If it is good for a man to be so, then it is bad for a man not to be so."[21] And if the Wife amputates biblical passages to fit her scheme (forgetting, for example, the second half of Paul's exhortation when she blithely declares: "I have the power durynge al my lyf / Upon his propre body, and noght he. / Right thus the Apostel tolde it unto me" [158–60]), she is but mimicking the methods of those late glossators whom Henri de Lubac describes as "pulverizing" the text (suppressing parts of passages, distorting and rearranging texts) to fit their schemes.[22] In this active mimicking, the Wife reveals most powerfully that these glossators' concerns are indeed carnal: she has made her own self-interest explicit, and her act of appropriating their methods for openly carnal purposes indicts their motivations as similarly carnal. She indeed affirms this outright a little later:

> The clerk, whan he is oold, and may noght do
> Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho,
> Thanne sit he doun, and writ in his dotage
> That wommen kan nat kepe hir mariage!
> (707–10)

It is the bad-faith glosses written by men in order to limit and control the feminine body that the Wife exposes, rips up, and has burned.

But, curiously, it is the openly pejorated, carnal, ostentatiously masculine glossing by the clerk Jankyn that the Wife—the body of the text—finds so appealing, so effective, so irresistible:

> . . . in oure bed he was so fressh and gay,
> And therwithal so wel koude he me glose,
> Whan that he wolde han my *bele chose;*
> That thogh he hadde me bete on every bon,
> He koude wynne agayn my love anon.
> (508–12)

Flattery and blandishments cajole the Wife into bed so that Jankyn may take his pleasure of her *"bele chose"* (a foreign term in need of exposition; see also her *"quoniam"* [608]). Glossing here is unmistakably carnal, a masculine act performed on the feminine body, and it leads to pleasure for both husband and wife, both clerk and text. This glossing wipes out the Wife's immediate pain in her bones—inflicted by Jankyn, we must remember—and it does so because it satisfies the Wife's own desires even as it seeks to fulfill his. The Wife is left, of course, with bruises on her body: as she explains her love of Jankyn, she remarks,

> And yet was he to me the mooste shrewe;
> That feele I on my ribbes al by rewe,
> And evere shal unto myn endyng day.
> (505–7)

But of all her men he is her favorite nonetheless, precisely because he—unlike Jerome's warrior—acknowledges and knows how to arouse feminine desire: "I trowe I loved hym best, for that he / Was of his love daungerous to me" (513–14).

The Wife thus describes a marriage relationship—and, allegorically, a relationship between text and glossator—that would acknowledge the desires of both sides and would yield satisfaction to both. The conclusion of her Prologue strongly suggests that what she wants is reciprocity, despite her talk of "maistrie"; she most wants mutual recognition and satisfaction of desires. Once Jankyn apologizes to her and burns the book that has caused her so much "wo" and "pyne" (787), she becomes kind and true to him. She gains the "soveraynetee" but doesn't want to exercise it, as Donald Howard has suggested; she seeks rather to be "acorded by us selven two" (812).[23] Whether she actually has attained such complete mutuality is, despite her positive assertion of the fact, made doubtful by the language in which she

expresses it: it is the language of fairy tale, rendered ironic by what has gone before (after the exposition of tricks and lies wives use, how "trewe" is "any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde"? [824]). But in the Wife's dreams, at least—in the male author's dreams that she dreams—there is full understanding between husband and wife, between clerk and text. Having married a clerk, having married him "for love" (526), she is a literal text that *wants* to disclose its hidden meaning, its truth. Her fairy-tale conclusion hints at a hermeneutic that respects the integrity and value of the literal text—Jankyn burns the book of glosses, they never have any further "debaat"—*and* that will arrive pleasurably at the spirit, the "truth" ("I was to hym . . . kynde / . . . And also trewe" [823–25]). This is a dream of a resolutely masculine reading of the feminine text—a dream of a man's reading *as* a man—that does not sacrifice the feminine in getting to the spirit but sees, in fact, that the text, stripped, reclothed, glossed, is still and ever feminine.

2

The Wife of Bath's Prologue thus renovates the patriarchal hermeneutic to accommodate the feminine, and her *Tale* continues to reveal and recover those things necessarily excluded by patriarchal discourse. She begins by immediately and forthrightly deploying the romance genre, a form relegated to women (as is clear from book 2 of *Troilus and Criseyde*, when Criseyde, reading a "romaunce," is cut off in her narration by Pandarus' allusion to Statius' "bookes twelve"), against the world of masculine authority represented by the Friar.[24] Friars gloss, as the Summoner makes clear in his tale, and the Wife uses the feminine romance against precisely such glossators—"hooly freres"—revealing, in fact, their engagement in carnal pursuits in the bushes.

Digression, dilation, delay of closure are features of this narrative form, as we've suggested in relation to Criseyde, and are in marked contrast to masculine totalizing. The Wife indeed digresses, and she does so into a classical text. Her Ovidian digression, which Lee Patterson has brilliantly analyzed, mimicks such misogynistic use of the classical text as is made by the narrator of the *Legend of Good Women;* she alters the pagan text for an ostensibly antifeminist purpose: women, her fable says, can't keep secrets. But, as Patterson suggests, the Wife's use of the pagan text ends up problematizing most deeply not women's irrepressible speaking but men's listening. Midas, after all, has ass's ears; the Wife challenges male readers to resist the "immediate self-gratifications of antifeminism" in order to

gain "self-knowledge."[25] The Wife manipulates the classical letter, the body, but does so to suggest something about just such a misogynistic strategy: it deprives not only the female of her significance but the male of self-understanding.

The particular narrative the Wife sets out to tell, the tale of the knight and loathly lady, makes visible and explicitly seeks to adjust the crucial structural workings of the patriarchal exchange of women. As in the Prologue, the Wife here does not seek to overthrow patriarchal power structures; the tale begins with a rape, always potential in the exchange structure that doesn't acknowledge feminine desire, and makes its central narrative problematic the correction of the rapist. The rapist, and the patriarchal power structure of possession that he enacts, must learn "what thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (905)—must acknowledge the integrity of the feminine body and act in reference to feminine desire. That much of the energy of the first part of the narrative is devoted to enumerating the many things that women desire—"Somme seyde . . . Somme seyde . . . Somme seyde . . . Somme . . . somme . . ." (925–27)—attests to the notion that it's more important to acknowledge *that* women desire than to specify *what* it is that pleases them most. After the knight's year-long quest, the court is packed with women—"Ful many a noble wyf, and many a mayde, / And many a wydwe" (1026–27)—waiting to hear him declare, "with manly voys" (1036), what they presumably already know—waiting, that is, for the moment in which feminine desire will be acknowledged, publicly, by a man.

It is again, as in the Prologue, the Wife's allegorical working-out of the relationship between glossator and text that interests me here. As we've seen in "Adam Scriveyn," "rape" connotes not only sexual but textual violation; in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Legend of Philomela*, rape—the violation of the feminine—is the way misogynistic literary history is inaugurated and proceeds. In the rape and subsequent education of the rapist, the Wife of Bath works out the ideal of a hermeneutic that submits to the letter of the text and that will, as a consequence, arrive at its beautiful truth.

An act of violence is perpetrated by "a lusty bacheler" (883) on the corpus of a woman at the outset of the *Tale*. Riding out, a knight sees a "mayde" walking along, "Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed, / By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed" (887–88). The knight has stripped her of her protective garments and takes "hire maydenhed," the truth secreted within. He makes a whore out of her, as Macrobius would say, by exposing and soiling the pure body, a body he does not understand as anything but naked flesh. He is a brash reader, an in-

truder, tearing the garments, gaping at truths, violating and manhandling secrets more properly left veiled—because incomprehensible—to him.

This patently self-interested and abusive glossator's punishment is to discover "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (905). How *should* he treat the body of the text? Must all glossing be violent, an unwelcome deformation of the letter? Is the alluring letter itself to be enjoyed? What is the relationship between the seductive outer garments and the wisdom underneath? Are both to be respected, are both properly sites of pleasure? The knight's quest does not, in fact, seem to promise a positive answer to questions of pleasure. For on his last day, when he approaches the dance of the four-and-twenty ladies in the forest, they vanish; and of the seductions of the letter the untutored knight, in his wantonness, is left with an ugly hag, pure wisdom with no bodily attractions to lure him toward her: "Agayn the knyght this olde wyf gan ryse" (1000), not vice versa. The old hag is the opposite of the troublesomely alluring text that torments Jerome in letter 22, to Eustochium. She is not just a text that is pure wisdom, pure spirit, with no appeal to wantonness (a *Parson's Tale*, for example); she's a literally repulsive text whose appalling letter challenges the reader to endure for the sake of its perfect spirit.

The knight is not up to the challenge of this text, even after his year-long tutelage in feminine desire. Like many men, as Patterson observes in reference to the Midas exemplum, he has to be taught, it seems, yet again: on the night of their mirthless wedding, the loathly bride lectures her groom on the advantages of her lowly birth, poverty, old age, and ugliness, quoting texts of Cicero, Juvenal, Seneca, Dante (in an act, it seems, of exemplary glossing of herself). But when at last the chastened knight acknowledges her wisdom ("I put me in youre wise governance" [1231]) and her desire—and even suggests in a crucial reversal that *his* desire will conform to *hers* ("Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance / And moost honour to yow and me also . . . / For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me" [1232–35])—she invites him to unveil her: "Cast up the curtyn, looke how that it is" (1249). The text's truth is revealed when *she* wants it to be. Here is an ideal vision of perfect reading, the ideal relation between text and glossator: the veil is respectfully, even joyfully lifted by the reader at the text's invitation, and there is full disclosure of the *nuda veritas*.

What is revealed is precisely the beautiful truth Macrobius and Richard of Bury talk about: the hidden body of woman, wise and fecund. Here is Jerome's alien woman, now arrayed for the bridal: this is, of course, the wedding night of the knight and lady.

> And whan the knyght saugh verraily al this,
> That she so fair was, and so yong therto,
> For joye he hente hire in his armes two.
> His herte bathed in a bath of blisse.
> (1250–53)

This is the Wife's fantasy of the perfect marriage, not unlike her fairy-tale version of her marriage to the clerk; the knight and lady live "in parfit joye" for the rest of their lives. It is a representation, further, of a specifically gendered literary act that succeeds in respecting both reader and text—both the masculine reader and the feminine read. The hag has, after all, conformed herself—her whole body—to his desire: after she lectures him on her inner goodness, after she undoes all patriarchal ideas of lineage (she argues that true "gentillesse" comes from God alone), possession (she contends that poverty is a blessed state) and feminine beauty (she maintains that her "filthe and eelde" [1215] are safeguards of chastity), she concedes, "But nathelees, syn I knowe youre delit, / I shal fulfille youre worldly appetit" (1217–18). And ever after she conforms her desires to his: the last lines of the Wife's narrative avow that "she obeyed hym in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng" (1255–56). The patriarchal paradigm is still in place; the trade of the captive woman, the stripping and reclothing goes on, and, as before, the Wife exploits the commodification of woman's sex that is the basis of that paradigm. She concludes her performance with a strong wish for husbands who have money and who will use it; "And olde and angry nygardes of dispence, / God sende hem soone verray pestilence!" (1263–64). But, crucially, feminine signifying value, integrity, and desire have been recognized, have been acknowledged, and the Wife celebrates "Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde" (1259) in this last passage. Her final call for wifely governance and longevity functions, I think, *within* the renovated patriarchal scheme; her final repetition of the language of mastery reveals and indicts its power of exclusion. Men's desire is still in control, as her tale shows, but feminine desire must continue to be acknowledged.

Chaucer thus responds to the imperatives raised by his representation of masculine narrators' misogynistic literary acts in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *Legend of Good Women*, and the *Man of Law's Tale* by creating the Wife of Bath, who speaks as the excluded feminine. Her *Tale*'s final vision of the joyous and mutually satisfying unveiling of the feminine is, of course, deeply gratifying to the male reader and author—one who, as we have seen, has worried about the vulnera-

bility, even the potentially wayward afterlife of his little books (and one who, moreover, was apparently himself threatened with an accusation of rape). But Chaucer was not *only* fulfilling his masculine authorial dreams in creating the Wife. He has imagined patriarchy from the Other's point of view and has duly reckoned the costs of clerkly discourse in terms of the feminine body. The first thing we hear about the Wife is that she is permanently injured: "A good WIF was ther OF biside BATHE, / But she was somdel deef, and that was scathe" (1:445–46). The story of that injury perpetrated by a clerk motivates the narrative of the Prologue ("But now to purpos, why I tolde thee / That I was beten for a book, pardee!" [711–12]). She is deafened, and she will feel Jankyn's blows in her bones forevermore (505–7); clerks cause her emotional and physical "wo . . . and pyne" (787) for writing of women as they do.[26] That a woman would respond to patriarchal discourse in precisely these terms is dramatically affirmed by Christine de Pizan, who describes a scene that powerfully recalls the book-inspired violence of the Wife's Prologue. Christine's specific point here, one among many in her long letter to Pierre Col about the deleterious effects of the *Rose*, is that women suffer physically on account of clerkly antifeminist writing:

> Not long ago, I heard one of your familiar companions and colleagues, a man of authority, say that he knew a married man who believed in the *Roman de la Rose* as in the gospel. This was an extremely jealous man, who, whenever in the grip of passion, would go and find the book and read it to his wife; then he would become violent and strike her and say such horrible things as, "These are the kinds of tricks you pull on me. This good, wise man Master Jean de Meun knew well what women are capable of." And at every word he finds appropriate, he gives her a couple of kicks or slaps. Thus it seems clear to me that whatever other people think of this book, this poor woman pays too high a price for it.[27]

Chaucer revises and keeps the patriarchal ideology behind the image of the captive woman, but he recognizes that the achievement of respectful relationships of husband and wife, reader and text—the acknowledgement of the value of the feminine, both woman and letter—is accomplished at a dear cost and that it is still only a fantasy —the Wife's, in the fictionalized happily-ever-after of her Prologue and *Tale*, and his own fantasy, dreamed through her. In the real relations between husband and wife, clerk and text, as he makes clear, masculine glossing does not come without violence to the feminine

corpus. It remains for another clerk, the pilgrim traveling on the way to Canterbury and listening to the Wife of Bath, to elaborate on the lived bodily effects of literary acts—the bodily effects on women, and the bodily effects of making literary images at all. The affinity of *this* Oxford clerk, we find unexpectedly, is with the Wife of Bath, with Griselda in his tale, with the feminine. Chaucer has not done with the Wife of Bath and "al hire secte" by any means. In her Prologue and *Tale* he represents the woman as assertively mimicking masculine discourse; the *Clerk's Tale* turns out to be a reflection on what it means for a male author to be a female impersonator.

Chaucer's Sexual Poetics

Carolyn Dinshaw

Madison, WI
THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS
1989