constraints under which masquerading operates are similar to those under which Dorigen and the falcon quote courtship's discourse against the grain, attempting to resist its gendered configurations. Their implications countermanded, their assertions ostensibly but playful, masquerading and mimicry nonetheless provide female characters with a language in which to reconsider their place in courtship and the identity courtship assigns them in romance.

Gender and Social Hierarchy

Gender difference is persistently hierarchical. We have seen that in romance masculinity is the "fully human" experience that femininity helps to define, that Emelye is both her lovers' exalted object of devotion and Theseus's object of exchange, and that the Squire's Tale imagines women to be more true and gentle than men by reversing the topos that they are less so. The Franklin suggests reciprocity in Dorigen and Arveragus's marriage by imagining it to combine two relations of unequal power:

Heere may men seen an humble, wys accord,
Thus hath she take hir servant and hir lord—
Servant in love, and lord in marriage.
Thanne was he bothe in lordship and servage.
Servage? Nay, but in lordship above,
Sith he hath bothe his lady and his love.... (V 791-96)

The chiasmus knitting together lordship and servitude through these lines may strive toward an idea of equivalence between Dorigen and Arveragus, but that idea, if it is even latent, finds expression only by juxtaposing two conditions in which male and female have reversed hierarchical relations. Here as elsewhere in romance, gender is a system of difference that entails inequivalence.

This chapter looks at how gender inequity can intersect with, repeat, and clarify inequities of social rank and authority that might seem independent of gender. The social hierarchy, as conceived in estates literature, frames and motivates tale-telling from the General Prologue onward. Certain ideological contiguities between estates literature and romance invite in this chapter more consideration than in other chapters of Chaucer's diversely positioned narrators in relation to their tales. The Franklin's rela-
ventionally high but precarious standing, for example, aligns him more fully with Dorigen than with the male characters in his tale. But in focusing on how Chaucer’s narrators figure in his redeployments of romance, I am not proposing that Chaucer creates a fictional subjectivity for every narrator. When the Squire and the Franklin cry, “lo, my tale is this” and “my tale shul ye heere,” the emphasis should, I believe, fall on the noun “tale” rather than the pronoun “my” (V 8, 728). The tale may be framed and focused by the pilgrim’s traits, but need not explicate those traits. In contrast, the “roadside drama” approach, so influentially developed in G. L. Kittredge’s Chaucer and His Poetry, can fall into a curious circularity by which the tale reveals the teller’s personality, and all apparent faults of the tale become consequences of the teller’s inadequacy, carefully managed by the poet who is exempt in his genius from any comment but praise. Instead of the pilgrim telling the tale, the tale tells the pilgrim. In its extreme forms this critical approach owes more to Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” than to Chaucer’s literary practice. Of course the Wife of Bath’s Prologue invents a complexly motivated voice for the tale that follows, but most of the pilgrims provide only a few contextualizing signals that prepare for the tales assigned to them. Among the most important of these signals concern genre, gender, and estate.

The Knight, Squire, and Franklin are derived in part from the romance genre that informs their tales; their ranks have a place in romance’s repertoire of characters as well as in estate literature’s catalog of social possibilities. These pilgrims authorize a masculine perspective characteristic of romance, yet I argue that the Franklin’s perspective comes to match Dorigen’s in a number of ways because his social rank is analogous to her gendered status. In contrast to Knight, Squire, and Franklin, the Wife of Bath and Chaucer’s persona Geffrey speak romance from social positions that are outside its generic repertoire. Alison’s womanhood and Geffrey’s curiously aberrant gender contribute to establishing that these narrators are outsiders to romance. Alison’s festive resistance to her subordinate status as a woman confronts romance with antifeminist satire and strives to imagine a social authority for women that neither genre sanctions.

A brief overview of the literature of social estates and its place in romance can introduce these cases. Estates literature encompasses a recurring nexus of ideas about social difference to be found in sermons, verse satires and complaints, books of conduct and moral instruction, and capacious fictions such as the Romance of the Rose, Piers Plowman, and John Gower’s longer works. These ideas develop a few complementary ways of imagining social difference (Duby, Three Orders; Dumézil, Le Goff, Civilization; Mann, Estates Satire; Mohl). The oldest is the topos that God has ordained complementary ways of life, usually three, the estates or orders of those who pray, those who fight, and those who work. The ordines have interdependent functions: no one order could do without the others; each one’s function sustains the other two. Although the orders need not be conceived hierarchically, Octavia Niccoli has shown that the concrete presentations of the three orders impose a hierarchy even when asserting its absence, through the order of presentation, rhetorical explanations of each order’s importance, and iconographic representations. An instance similar to those she cites is Aelfric’s description of three orders he assigns the Latin names laboratores, bellatores, and oratores: “The laborer works for our subsistence, the worldly warrior must fight against our foes, and the servant of God must pray continually for us and fight spiritually against the invisible foes” (pt. 3 [vol. 2], 122-23). The description asserts the cleric’s superiority through his climactic position in the period and his eschatological versus merely mortal battles; the synecdochic “subsistence” (bigleof) rationalizes the laborer’s heavy contribution to the comfort of superior strata by disguising it as mere sustenance.2 The metaphor of the body that comes to supplement estates descriptions, for example in John of Salisbury’s

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1 Kittredge’s “rule of judgment” that “Chaucer always knew what he was about” [151, his italics] has been taken to mean that Chaucer’s narrators did not. Lawton, 106-9, proposes that the rise of dramatic criticism in the twentieth century is responsible for the lowered reputation of the Squire’s Tale, due to the facility with which the tale’s difficulties could be referred to an inadequate teller.

2 Aelfric makes overt the superiority of those who pray in continuing, “Greater therefore is now the struggle of the monks against the invisible devils that lay snares around us, than may be that of the worldly men that struggle against fleshly foes” [Skeat’s translation, 123].
Policraticus, similarly conveys both the interdependence of all estates and the superiority of such parts as head and arms over belly and feet.\footnote{E.g., the admixture of interdependence and subordination in “The feet are the name of those who exercise the humbler duties, by whose service all the members of the republic may walk along the earth. . . . [The feet] are to concentrate on the public utility in all matters. For inferiors must serve superiors, who on the other hand ought to provide all necessary protection to their inferiors” (IX 217-18). More often Chaucer uses the theoretical model of three interdependent orders, whereas the specific practices the Parson avoids and the majority of pilgrims indulge refer to the tradition of critical and satirical commentary on degrees.}

From the twelfth century the trifunctional model of estates expanded to accommodate an overtly hierarchical idea of earthly distinctions in rank and profession called conditio or status, in Middle English degree and estañt.\footnote{Estañt designates both tripartite orders and smaller degrees of social difference in Middle English. For example, “A Schort Reule of Lif” attributed to Wyclif addresses the “pre statis,” priests, lords, and laborers (204-8) compare Chaucer’s Manciple’s Tale: “But that the gentile, in estaat above, / She shal be cleped his” (XI 240-41). More often Chaucer uses estan and degree synonymously to designate a range of relative positions: “If a man of hyer estan or degree, or more mightly than thou, do thee any seer or grevance, suffy hyn” (Melibee, VII 1488). Paul Strohm integrates historical and literary issues of rank in Social Chaucer, esp. 84-109.}

The degrees subdivide the trifunctional model into narrower positions of responsibility. The shift from three broad theoretical divisions to many specific, recognizable positions such as archbishop, bishop, monk, friar, and priest invites satirical commentary on the failures and shortcomings peculiar to each worldly office. Chaucer’s idealizing portraits of the Knight, Parson, and Plowman take conviction from the theoretical model of three interdependent orders, whereas the specific practices the Parson avoids and the majority of pilgrims indulge refer to the tradition of critical and satirical commentary on degrees.

A third ground for social distinction in estates literature is gentle versus churlish behavior. The topos that nobility must be deserved through virtue and that nobles who act villainously should be cast out of their estate complements satiric criticism of failure to fulfill the duties that define estates and degrees.\footnote{See especially Friedman, Brewer, “Class Distinction”; Mohl, 81, 88, 119, 292-307. Brewer notes that the gentle/churl distinction may have originated in differing rights under law, but he notes that it “tends to become moral” (297). This was original.} This was originally a clerical topos designed to check the second estate’s power by holding it to standards concerning which the Church might claim special authority. During Chaucer’s lifetime the topos began to appear frequently in courtly literature, as increasing social mobility and dispersion of power from feudal hierarchies into mercantile and professional circles were challenging the gentry’s traditional dominance. In this situation the concept of moral gentilnesse offered the second estate a new ground on which to base its claims to superiority when its more fundamental economic and political superiority were being eroded.\footnote{6 Mohl, 85, 88, 93, 99-105, 115-35, Yale, 14-23; Chaucer, Minor Poems, 67-68, in Variorum Edition (comments on “Gentilcesse”).} The standard of moral gentilnesse, then, might seem to undermine distinction by birth, but in effect it tends to reinforce that distinction. Those who are superior by birth should behave superlatively. A few authors including John Lydgate argue that gentle behavior could elevate a common man in God’s eyes “Onto thestat off vertuous noblesse,” but usually the exhortation to gentle behavior is directed to those already gentle by birth, who should strive to deserve their privileged position.\footnote{7 Lydgate’s Fall of Princes, pt. 1, bk. 2, 1. 363; cf. Friedman, 234; “villany, gentility [gentilezza, gentilnesse], and nobility denoted ambiguously birth, class, and membership in an estate on one hand, and personal viciousness or virtue on the other, an ambiguity which promoted a bias inherent in medieval society.”} The exhortation to gentle behavior thus responds to both the moralizing trajectory of estates satire and the older definition of each order according to its function.

In focusing on social functions and duties, estates literature may omit women altogether, append their positions to those of male estate members, or consider them separately as a fourth estate. The irregular treatment of women springs in part from their peculiar social definition: whereas men have assigned functions to perform, women’s duties derive from and relate to their sexuality. Women’s statuses are typically those of virgin, nun, whore, maiden, wife, mother, and widow, replacing masculine functions on the social scene with the management of sexual status [Batanay, Mohl, 20-24, 48-51; Mann, Estates Satire, 121-27, 203-6]. Classifying women according to their sexual relations (or abstention from relations) with men has on the one hand a component of gender equality: a woman’s status in this system is closer to that...
of her man than to that of women and men at other strata in the system [Dumont, Ortner]. At the same time, as the concept of a separate “fourth estate” indicates, women are alienated from the ideal of an interdependent society in that their sexuality tends to stand in for any socioeconomic function in defining them. For example, estates literature lists among women’s duties obedience, chastity, care for husbands, and spinning or cloth making, but textile work in this context is a gendered trait rather than a profession. Thus the Wife of Bath is said to make cloth in her General Prologue portrait, but in her tale she derives wealth from her husbands and refers to spinning as a talent native to her womanhood: “Deceite, wepyng, spynnyng God hath yive / To wommen kyndely, whyl that they may lyve” (III 401-2).8 Women’s inferior position, their definition in relation to men, and the satiric penchant of much estates literature make conjunctions between antifeminist satire and the concept of estates. Jehan le Févre’s Lamentations de Matheolus [bk. i, l. 276-89] discourse on the failings of the three estates as well as the woes of marriage, and many works on estates remobilize topoi from clerical antimatrimonial and antifeminist literature to specify the faults of wives, widows, and young women. The prominent place of misogyny in estates literature generates the already-compromised wifehood that Alison of Bath strives to justify in her prologue and tale.

Like the General Prologue, the tales affiliated with romance have interests in narrative and characterization that dissociate them from estates literature’s traffic in types and ideals. Yet romance does overlap with estates literature in the three perspectives on social order outlined above. First, romance shares the conception that social differences order the world hierarchically. The conception is evident both in works written for aristocratic patrons such as Jean Froissart’s Meliador and Adenet le Roi’s Cléomadès and in works that may have popular connections such as Havelok and Thomas Chestre’s Sir Launfal. Havelok gives social differences particularly close attention in plotting Havelok’s return to kingship as a journey through the statuses of thrall, hired laborer, merchant, and knight. Although the specificity and energetic with which Havelok depicts popular life confers importance on it, Havelok’s upward trajectory through social ranks demonstrates his superior merit and right to kingship. His elevation of helpful commoners to titled rank once he has regained the throne further endorses the social hierarchy in making advancement the reward for a chosen few [see my Insular Romance, 13-91]. For Northrop Frye, medieval romances are “kidnapped” reformation in that they deny the “revolutionary quality” inherent in romance’s folktale origins; true romances have a “proletarian element rejected by every cultural establishment” despite their “naive social snobbery” (163).9 Whatever the true form of romance across the centuries may be, the conviction in medieval romances that hierarchy is natural, indeed that it derives from divine order, cannot be dismissed as snobbery or as a superficial overlay on inherently egalitarian material. It reflects a pervasive social belief that high station tends to be consonant with merit and that gentle sensibilities and values are superior to common ones.10

Romance plots further concur with estates literature in demanding that men deserve their estate through behavior suitable to it. A familiar way of representing the double source of identity in lineal right and personal deserving is to obscure a young man’s lineage so that he is thrown back on his own capacities to demonstrate his birthright. Lancelot do Lac’s young protagonist, ignorant of his lineage and even of the concept of lineage, nonetheless recognizes his affinity with youths of his rank and seeks to excel in “gentilice” in order to be accorded the status in which gentle behavior is characteristic: “se li grant cuer faisoient les gentils homes, ge cuideroie encore estre des plus gentils” [if great hearts make men gentle, I believe that I will yet be one of the most gentle] [bk. i, l. 110-11; see Kennedy]. Joachim Bumke traces the vernacular German equivalents of Latin terms for rank (gradus, status, ordo, conditio) and concludes that romance uses those

8 Mann, Estates Satire, 121-32. Harry Bailey’s wife also makes spinning the mark of womanhood in taunting her husband, “I wol have thy knyf, / And thou shalt have my distaf and go spynne!” (VII 1906-7)
9 Medieval romance is not Frye’s focus of interest; he notes that it presents “different structural problems” from the versions with which he is concerned (4).
10 Dumont’s engaging introduction to Homo Hierarchicus, 1-20, illustrates that although at odds with modern Western views, the conviction that social hierarchy is both natural and valid persists today and can be an instructive contrast to egalitarian convictions.
terms to designate behavior suited to rank: “In courtly poetry, ritters normen is less a designation of class than a central concept of aristocratic ethics” (109; see 107–23). In these as in any number of cases, romances imagine a symbiosis between birth and deeds in which high social position both inspires and is predicated on superior behavior. The Wife of Bath’s and Franklin’s tales are consonant with romance, not revisionary and still less revolutionary, in asserting that gentillesse is a matter of virtuous conduct.

A third connection between estates literature and romance is that in both, sexuality is central to women’s social identity: their status derives both from the status of men with whom they are associated and from their gendered status of inferiority to men. As the objects of courtship, female characters are assigned very high value by the men around them, a value based more surely in their sexuality than in their bloodlines since their adult status will derive from their husbands’ rank. A Saracen, an orphan of uncertain parentage, an Amazon, or an enchantress can inspire love as well as a princess of unimpeachable pedigree, although typically it will turn out that a woman’s lineage validates her desirability. In the preceding chapter I have argued that romance comments more richly on femininity than simply by representing it as a projection of masculine desire, but from the perspective of social rank the place of woman is constrained and subordinate. In this respect romance draws on estates systems that, whether they define men’s rank in terms of function or more narrowly in occupational terms, conceive women’s sexuality both as an analogously defining category and as nonoccupational, nonfunctional, a matter of self-control rather than of constructive service to society. The conception has a modern equivalent in the split between marxisms and feminisms over whether work or sexuality is the fundamental category for social analysis.11 Variations on the marxist position that economic forces shape identity and class consciousness risk exiling the Wife of Bath, as a wife, to a radical self-involvement that ignores any class interest. Yet the Wife persistently speaks as one of a group of “wise wyves” with whom she has common cause against clerics and husbands. In both the Wife’s and the Franklin’s tales, sexuality and social roles come to comment on one another rather than remaining analogous but distinct expressions of status.

NARRATORS DRAWN FROM ROMANCE

One way Chaucer comments on genre is by attributing tales to pilgrims whose estate, degree, or profession figures importantly in the genre’s repertoire. In the case of Knight, Squire, and Franklin not only the functions each station can hold in romance but also the generational relations of the three tellers are of interest. As son and ideal son of the Knight and Franklin, the Squire embodies the importance of coming of age in romance, of courtship and marriage as movements from youth to maturity. From Charles Mela’s psychoanalytic position, “tout roman est un roman nuptial où prendre femme veut dire, tel est le ressort secret de la crise, succéder au père” (every romance is a story of marriage in which to take a woman means—and this is the secret wellspring of the climax—to supplant one’s father) (218). In thematic and rhetorical terms, Howard Bloch proposes that romance is “essentially about marriage and seems always to involve a conflict between a consensual attachment and a contractual bond, to problematize succession, and to combine structurally elements both of narrative progression and of lyric closure; and this from the very beginning” [Etymologies, 182]. From these perspectives we might consider the marriage agreement of Arveragus and Dorigen as an attempt to stabilize the competition in romance between the contractual bonds of marriage and the consensual bonds of courtship, Dorigen’s lyric complaints as expressions of resistance to narrative progression, and Aurelius’s declaration of love as a generational competition with Arveragus, his senior in marital status if not in years. Palamon and Arcite similarly contrast to Theseus in status and resist his order, or so it seems, in loving Emelye against all hope of contractual union with her. The genre’s narrative and lyric impulses align with maturity and youth respectively when Theseus plans an outcome declaring that “the beste game of alle

11 In MacKinnon’s well-known formulation, “sexuality is to feminism what work is to marxism: that which is most one’s own, yet most taken away. . . . As work is to marxism, sexuality to feminism is socially constructed yet constructing, universal as activity yet historically specific; jointly comprised of matter and mind”. Feminism . . . An Agenda for Theory,” 535–36. An excellent framing discussion of sexuality and social rank in literature is Kaplan, “Pandora’s Box.”
is Emelye's ignorance of Palamon and Arcite's private expressions of desire (I 1806). The Squire's romance, an up-to-date composite that by contrast relegates the Knight's epic resonances and the Franklin's ancient lay to an older generation, only predicts its courtships, projecting them forever into the future of the suspended tale. Whether or not the fragmentariness of the Squire's Tale figured in Chaucer's final plan, it is appropriate to the place of composite romance late in the genre's history as well as to the Squire's filial status. Late in the course of a genre, partial citations can evoke it innovatively: in Alastair Fowler's illustration, "There was a young lady of Crew / Whose limericks stopped at line two" (173). The initial display of adventure-provoking gifts together with the plot outline that ends the Squire's fragment refer effectively to a kind of romance that would, if fully evoked, overwhelm the other tales with its inordinate length.

Many such questions suggest themselves under the rubric of romance and social rank. My discussion here focuses on one aspect of the Franklin's Tale that is prior to the generational tensions surrounding courtship and that involves gender more immediately than do the linear relations of father and son. Critics have tended to base negative judgments of the Franklin's Tale in arguments that the Franklin is a social climber longing to prove that he is thoroughly gentle. Positive readings of the tale often claim that the Franklin's status is high and secure, so that he is a confident and trustworthy narrator. Resisting the dramatic tendency in both explanations, I claim that Chaucer characterizes the Franklin by the liminal status his primary designation describes—that of a rank not quite common but not securely gentle either. His insecure social rank (not a fictive personal insecurity) introduces and comes to resemble Dorigen's ambivalent social position. Dorigen may seem remote from her narrator in birth and gender, yet her precarious social standing is analogous to the Franklin's, and in consequence similar limitations and perspectives are attributed to the two characters. The resemblances between them allow Chaucer to relate estate to gender identity.

Designating the tale a Breton lay (V 709-10) forecasts its pre-Christian setting more surely than would the broader category of romance, but the Franklin's Tale and other fourteenth-century lays are not generically distinct from short romances. Reading the Franklin's Tale in relation to romance may ask two concessions from readers for whom the tale is an expression of the Franklin's personality. I find motivations in the genre for narrative phenomena that are often referred to the Franklin's competitiveness, envy, or ignorance; and I have aligned a pilgrim narrator with a character in his tale rather than finding them so different in fictional status as to be incomparable. Readers familiar with the critical tradition of a fully dramatized Franklin whose every word is in some sense his own can nonetheless recognize that Chaucer's poetic facility constructs both the narrator and his tale. Genre and estates ideology provide perspectives on the Franklin's Tale that differ from, and may supplement, the mimetic aspects of composition responsible for the fictive personhood of narrator and characters. No perspective is independent of others; if I consider here the former at the expense of the latter it is in part because a long history of dramatic criticism affords me the opportunity to depart from it.

The Franklin stands Janus-like on the threshold of gentility; "with double berd" (V 1252) he warms himself at the material fire of his prosperity but looks as well to an ideal of gentilitesse that ostensibly ignores wealth. He makes explicit a relation between his status and gentle behavior as he describes his son's disinclination to "lerne gentilitesse" (V 694) and tells a tale proposing that men of various degrees can deliberately imitate gentilitesse. The tale's inspiring passages on moral worthiness can be referred to the access

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On the Squire's Tale and composite romance see Goodman. Although patently "olde" in their origins, lays were probably not out of fashion in the later fourteenth century (Donovan, 174-71).
to courtly ideals that the degree of the Franklin confers, but also to that degree’s restricted claim to gentility, a claim based almost solely on behavior. Dorigen in turn expresses her limitations as she meditates that men of learning understand the universe as she cannot. Her helpless lament envisions no solution to the problem of the “grisly feendly rokkes blake,” whereas Aurelius suggests a solution to Apollo in his parallel lament (V 868, 1031-79). Dorigen’s passive vulnerability even to inanimate rocks—“Thise rokkes sleen myn herte for the feere”—expresses her femininity and qualifies the high standing she enjoys by birth (V 735, 893). Like the Franklin, she is doubly positioned, entitled by status but not fully enabled by it.

The precedence of womanhood over birth in defining Dorigen’s position accords with the divisions in estates literature that rank men by a hierarchy of functions but that omit women or classify them according to their relation to men: Jean de Conde’s “Estas dou monde,” for example, subdivides the trifunctional male orders into clergy, princes, knights, justices, squires, burgesses, and so on, adding women at the end. Women should not be flirtatious, adulterous, or fickle; they should be obedient, loving, and virtuous, for, writes Etienne de Fougeres, “bone fame est ornement / a son saignor” (a good wife is an adornment to her husband) [1161-62]. Dorigen is drawn from and credits these ideals of womanhood when she promises to be a humble and loyal wife, defers to the superior understanding of clerics, and allows others to determine her course of action. Critics may label her “child-like” in these regards, but more accurately, she is conventionally feminine in her conviction of dependence on and difference from men.

Dorigen’s status derives most directly from romance, which partakes of estates ideology by dramatizing differences in kind between nobility and commons and by figuring women in terms of their roles in masculine competitions and courtships. Chapter 1 argues that fine amor and romance paradigms configure male self-definition in part by constructing the feminine as a purely imaginous category, a terrain on which men rival one another. Palamon and Arcite are up to their ankles in blood before Emelye is made aware of her role. Theseus points out the egregious imbalance between the strength of the lovers’ rivalry and the merely potential bonds of love with Emelye, yet he recognizes their conduct to be typical of lovers [I 1785-1825]. Aurelius, as we have seen, compares himself persistently with Arveragus as he courts Dorigen. By the tale’s final scenes, Dorigen’s mediate function in the masculine competition is obvious. Freely sent to Aurelius and freely sent back again, she has become a commodity whose transfer is equivalent, for the clerk at least, to a financial sacrifice [V 1604-13]. On the other hand Aurelius feels pity for her, and Arveragus, though insistent that she do his will, “cherissheth hire as though she were a queene” on her return [V 1554]. The admixture of honor and disregard accorded to Dorigen finally makes her less a child or a commodity than the romance image of a courtly lady, paradoxically superior and subordinated.16

The Franklin’s situation is similarly paradoxical. Elsewhere I have argued at length that historical referents for Chaucer’s Franklin clarify that his social position is gentle but only marginally so, and that his claim to gentility can base itself only in his wealth and dignity.17 The Franklin has an equally modest claim to gentility through his literary lineage. Roy Pearcey has shown that “vavasours” in Old French romances are venerable gentlemen, settled and not militarily inclined. Their passivity distinguishes them from the knights and squires, bellatores in the old estates definition by military function, who make things happen in romance. Derek Brewer concludes that the Franklin has relatively high social and economic standing, but that he “can find no place in the functional triple system and is therefore lightly mocked or satirised” (“Class Distinction,” 303). Insular works list franklins and vavasours along with barons and squires, but satirical writing emphasizes the difference in function. In “Sir Pride the Emperor,” for example, bachelors waste their heritage on tournaments, squires aim to “contrefere les chevalers” [imitate knights] and make much of their “gentif saunk” [gentle blood], but vavasours “ke tenent houstel e meynne” [who keep households and retinues] have only their hospitality to corrupt [Reliquae antiquae, 164].

15 E.g., Dorigen shows a “child-like inability to cope with the black rocks” [Berger, 116]; her lament to Aurelius is “like nothing so much as the lament of a little girl who has just broken her doll” [Kaske, 62]; she is “childish and incapable” [Lauecke, 113].
The Franklin's literary heritage, like his historical affiliations, suggests that Chaucer's first audience would have perceived this pilgrim as worthy enough to be gentle, but not chivalric enough to be of the second estate in its deepest identity with military functions. Landholding and substantial householding distinguish gentility from bourgeoisie; within the ranks of the gentry, landholding gives the vavasour his only attribute of gentility as opposed to the coats of arms, knighthood, or ancestral title that other ranks enjoyed. This characteristic restriction of the claim to status is dramatized in a number of lays and fabliaux that place vavasours' property and family interests at odds with the adventurous depredations of knights-errant and squires (see Pearcy, 42–49). Like the skill at jousting and singing that identify the Squire as a squire, the Franklin's property and generous prosperity constitute his social identity.

The Franklin's attention to property and *gentillesse* have seen much study, and my purpose here is only to indicate how both concerns signal that his fictional status is gentle, but more peripheral than the gentility of squires, knights, and lords. The Franklin's argument that his son or his characters can "lerne gentillesse" (V 694) is a topos that aligns him with the gentry rather than locating him outside it. In historical terms, the topos is particularly appropriate to members of the lowest and most vulnerable category of gentry in a provincial society where, as Michael Bennett has shown, "the distinction between 'gentle' and 'common' was the crucial divide" (31). The Franklin's high but marginal station resembles that of Dorigen, whose gender severely qualifies her birth and whose engagement in a romantic plot confers privilege but finally subordinates her to the interactions of male characters. The Franklin's narration (that is, Chaucer's presentation of a franklin narrating) further develops the analogies between the two characters' positions.

In romance a vavasour's marginal position importantly defines him. The isolated, provincial, but hospitable households of gentle vavasours are often way stations for adventuring knights. The vavasour may provide information and counsel, sometimes his daughter and the visitor fall in love, or his young sons seek to accompany the knight-errant as he continues his adventures. Chaucer's Franklin's advanced age, his renown for hospitality "in his contree" (I 340), his hope that his son will increase in merit through contact with "any gentil wight" (V 693), and his tale's affiliations with romance all suggest that Chaucer seeks to align the Franklin with the vavasours of romance (see Pearcy, Brucker). By drawing narrators from the genres that define them, Chaucer makes his reassessments of those genres a dramatic process. Like the Wife of Bath berating antifeminist authors and the Squire forecasting adventures of noble youths, the Franklin speaks a literature by which he has been configured.

It is significant to the Franklin's narrative project that vavasours do not themselves provide the action in romance. Like beloved ladies, hospitable vavasours can urge, counsel, shelter, and comfort a striving knight, but they are essentially the witnesses and beneficiaries of heroic action rather than actors themselves. Even as providers of sons who follow the protagonist or daughters who love him, vavasours are associated with the domestic and familial, as women are, rather than with action and adventure. The genre's concerns reach beyond chivalry, but there is a structural tendency in these heavily eventful works to center attention on the characters who perform actions good or bad, and to treat peripheral characters as a kind of retinue that takes its meaning from the central figures. Complementing this structure are the class and gender hierarchies discussed above, which place a franklin and a noble lady in decidedly less powerful positions than the knights whose exploits dominate the genre.

Chaucer exacerbates romance's structural and ideological subordination of the Franklin and Dorigen by showing both characters attempting to revise their status. The Franklin tries to define

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18 Robert Mannyng of Brunne calls the daughters of squires and franklins "gentil damysels" in contrast to "ober maidens comen of brallcs" (vol. i, ll. 6545, 6549); cf. "Li rey, le prince, e le courtier, / Cunt, barun, e vavasur / Ayment cuntes, et fables" (Piramus, Vie Setti Edmund, 49–52). "Ses barons fist man-der, vavasors e terriers, / E les lonteins marchis e riches soudiers" (Thomas of Kent, *Alexander*, 537–38). For further examples see my "Franklin as Dorigen."

19 Charnes, 303, proposes that the Franklin narrates Dorigen's waiting rather than Arveragus's adventures because "her rootedness becomes somehow linked with [the Franklin's] own—they have in common an occupation of domestic space that enables the Franklin to view things from her position."
romance action rather than resting on its periphery; Dorigen seeks to understand her situation and to determine her own actions. Both characters are unable to manipulate the courtly traditions they confront and must consequently acquiesce to situations they sought to elude.

The Franklin begins his “gentil” story with a miniature plot that situates him firmly in the genre of romance (V 729-60). These first lines introduce an active chivalric lover who wins a lady of high station and great beauty, a setting in the past of Celtic and Arthurian tales, a plot that rises through adversities to happiness, and a narration that is rhetorically sophisticated. Dorigen is part of this familiar literary world: her emotional authority is the occasion for “many a greet emprise” until she is “wonne” by Arveragus and married to him (V 732-33).

At this point the Breton material evades the Franklin’s appropriation. His long commentary on the agreement between Dorigen and Arveragus reinterprets the courtly relations typical of romance, not in supplementing love with marriage (a development in the plot) but in commenting that the plot shows a union of mutual freedom illustrating how “freendes everych oother moot obeye” (V 762). The tale’s events contradict the Franklin’s assertion. This union does not eliminate the problem of “maistrie” by having each spouse obey the other in all things. Rather, Dorigen obeys Arveragus as if his will were unalterable necessity: she complains to God about the rocks rather than to Arveragus for going away, and she follows her husband’s judgment in surrendering to Aurelius even though her exempla compare the surrender to rape and murder. Dorigen addresses her wishes to an uncomprehending Aurelius and an impassive clerical tradition, but never to Arveragus. In forecasting the mutuality of this marriage, has the Franklin misconstrued the conventions of romance, taking literally Arveragus’s promise to follow Dorigen’s will rather than reading it as a courtly topos for Arveragus’s desire to improve himself? Or is the Franklin attempting to revise the Breton lay he has “in remembraunce” (V 714), projecting a bold departure from courtly relations but returning to them in execution? An enormous difference separates the assertion that “Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye” (V 764) and Arveragus’s threat to kill his wife if she ever reveals that she followed his order to submit to Aurelius. However we gloss that difference, and many glosses more desperate than compelling are on record, it demonstrates that the Franklin’s interpretive comment on the love of Dorigen and Arveragus is not consonant with the plot of his Breton lay.

After marriage as before, Dorigen continues to occupy a role typical of courtship in that Arveragus continues to perfect himself in labors of arms, presumably looking to Dorigen as his source of inspiration but not requiring her presence or counsel to succeed. Certainly she is loved and honored, but more as a reflection of her lovers’ ideals than as the agent of her own “libertee” (compare the narrator’s assertion that “Wommen of kynde desiren libertee,” V 768). The beautiful imagery of Aurelius’s prayer to Phoebus Apollo both mythologizes and makes natural this kind of gender relation: the masculine sun guides the feminine moon, whose “desir / Is to be quyked and lighted of youre fir, / For which she folweth yow ful bisily” (V 1049-51). In this universe one might even propose that Dorigen’s terror of the rocks expresses her awareness of the artful objectification that threatens to petrify her completely, like a Galatea in reverse. When her first Pygmalion leaves her for “a yeer or tweyne” on the shelf, the extended figure of stone carving expresses her friends’ efforts to revive her from fixed desperation (V 809, 829-36). In the preceding chapter I have argued that the task of removing the rocks that Dorigen invents for Aurelius is an attempt to speak against his courtship by exaggerating beyond measure the role of the demanding lady and discrediting it with explicit instructions to cease and desist. When Aurelius instead fulfills her demand, again Dorigen “astoned stood; / In al hir face nas a drope of blood” (V 1339-40; see Hansen, 278-80; Shoaf, “Chaucer and Medusa”). The terms of courtly interactions constantly threaten to objectify her, despite her efforts to shape her identity.

My point is not simply that Dorigen’s role is constrained by her femininity, but that the plot contradicts the Franklin’s assertion that he can represent a courtly relation in which men and women enjoy the same “libertee.” It is as if the Franklin begins with a desire to reinterpret or alter romance, yet soon submits to the passive role designated for him in the genre. Similarly, Dorigen’s words “in pley” (V 988) attempt to parody the role of haughty lady with Aurelius, revealing that role to be no more than a sham con-
struction from which she herself is alienated. Dorigen chooses to distance herself from convention, but Aurelius reads her mimicry unreflectively, as the kind of “emprise” by which Arveragus won her, reconstructing her words according to his own desires. Dorigen cannot determine how she is perceived, nor can the Franklin revise her role. Both vavasour and lady can inhabit romance but do not control its paradigms and plots.

In addition, Dorigen and her narrator seem not to foresee events and take a passive stance toward their unfolding. Dorigen expresses ignorance of God’s ways when Arveragus departs, and does not choose a course of action when Aurelius declares, “I have do so as ye comanded me. . . . Dooth as yow list; have youre bistehe in mynde” (V 1333, 1336). Even her promise to love Aurelius if he will remove the rocks along Brittany’s coast is predicated on her belief in the unalterability of natural phenomena and the intransigence of events. Aghast when Aurelius declares his success, she cries, “wende I nevere by possibilitee / That swich a monstre or merveille myghte be!” (V 1343-44). After this revelation that human agency can produce change, Dorigen nonetheless begins her lament with an image more fatalistic than Fortune’s conventional blindfold or ever-turning wheel: “on thee, Fortune, I pleyne, / That unwar wrapped hast me in thy cheyne” (V 1355-56). Fortune is malevolently aware and Dorigen more nearly blind than she, the “cheyne” makes axiomatic Dorigen’s helplessness, not Fortune’s unpredictability.

The Franklin’s narrative procedure is analogous to Dorigen’s sense of surprise at what happens to her. Despite having the Breton lay “in remembraunce” (V 714), the Franklin tells his tale as if events arrived unannounced to disturb the patterns his narration seems to be projecting. His ideal of mutuality does not predict Dorigen’s effective lack of initiative; his account of harmonious union does not adumbrate Arveragus’s long absence; Aurelius’s manipulative behavior toward Dorigen cannot presage his gracious surrender to the ideal of gentillesse. Dorigen prepares for death but does not die, then anticipates dishonor but does not suffer it. Such experiences could well reinforce her conviction that events are unpredictable and beyond her understanding. Everything about the narration echoes her belief; as Jill Mann argues, the tale begins as if it were just concluding, with marriage, and “has to force its way onward through a whole series of blockages” until the happy ending demonstrates “the freedom of events to develop in ways other than we imagine; human beings are as powerless to forecast their development as they are to control it” ("Now Read On," 62). Such is the implication of the disparities between what seems to be predicted by the narration and what actually happens, but other characters do not find themselves so swept along in the flow of events as are Dorigen and the narrator. Arveragus’s courtship and knight-errantry, Aurelius’s employment of the Clerk of Orleans, and the clerk’s feats of magic are willed actions that produce at least immediately the results their perpetrators desired. Dorigen and the Franklin observe in wonder the very unpredictability of aventure that urges the tale’s men to action.

In her long meditation on suicide Dorigen does make effective use of her characteristic passivity. The comic elements in this speech (the errors, the busy multiplication of less and less appropriate exempla that buy time and postpone action) indicate that Dorigen does not want to kill herself. As in her courtly mimicry to Aurelius, her attention to “mo than a thousand stories” (V 1412) of suicidal wives emphasizes that her gender is defined in texts that precede her own. Her summary of Jerome’s exempla is notoriously weak, and critics have attributed its “utter dreariness” and its “perfunctory and careless” structure to Chaucer’s negligence or the Franklin’s ignorance of clerical writing (Dempster, “Chaucer at Work” and “A Further Note”; Lee). Dorigen’s predicament makes more immediate sense of the passage’s dreariness: like Judith Fetterley’s “immasculated” reader who has learned to identify with the system of values that disenfranchises her, Dorigen acknowledges and repeats Jerome’s text, yet she begins to become Fetterley’s “resisting” reader as the speech’s rote quality and disproportionate length imply her refusal of the clerical version of her identity and duty. She resists only passively, by reciting the models long enough to elude their instruction to kill herself, but the double process of assent and postponement makes a small place for self-assertion under the sign of acquiescence. That she preserves herself precisely in order to submit to Arveragus’s command reaffirms her functional dependence.

The Franklin sets himself analogously against the genre of romance in celebrating a love not “constreyned by maistrye” (V 764), but the plot’s discontinuity with this model signals that
indeed “thise olde gentil Britouns” (V 709) have established the tale which the Franklin remembers and repeats. His stance is predominantly one of veneration for the authority of the genre. Thus it is appropriate that Arveragus, knight-errant and victorious suitor in the mold of romance, should draw Dorigen and the narrator from passivity into action. No character or event receives the narrator’s editorial endorsement between the moment of pledged love-in-marriage initiated by Arveragus and the penultimate moment of Dorigen’s obedient return to the garden. Having lauded Arveragus’s apparent surrender of maistrie in the former instance, the Franklin protests in the latter not Arveragus’s mastery but the imagined objections of listeners to it (V 1493–98). Dorigen and the Franklin alike are drawn to the command; Arveragus overcomes her indecisiveness and the narrator’s irresolution together. So closely does the Franklin’s “She may have better fortune than yow semeth” (V 1497) echo Arveragus’s reassuring “It may be wel, paraventure, yet to day” (V 1473) that it seems the narrator is taking confidence in the plot from his protagonist rather than foreknowing it.

The precariousness of the Franklin’s status, dramatized in his narration and echoed in Dorigen’s role, comments on romance’s literary authority and on the power of its hierarchies to disenfranchise by measures of gender and class. Insofar as the Franklin’s and Dorigen’s double surrender to Arveragus’s command leads to a happy resolution, both characters are benefiting from the control that romance’s hierarchies exert over them. But to the extent that their acquiescence takes place despite their efforts at revision and innovation, the tale dramatizes how estate and gender constrain identity as well as informing it.

The differences between Dorigen and the Franklin in fictional status (narrator versus narrated), in gender, and in social position entail that their incapacities be differently configured. The Franklin’s insistence that “I ne kan no termes of astrologye” (V 1266) opposes astrological magic on Christian grounds: “hooly chirches feith in oure bileve / Ne suffreth noon illusioun us to greve” (V 1133–34). As a modern Christian he is ignorant of the magic that is thereby identified with his Breton tale rather than his revisionary efforts. Dorigen’s parallel ignorance of magic springs from a lack of experience and learning that are importantly feminine, licensing Aurelius’s pity on her: “hir trouthe she swoor thurgh innocence, / She neuer erst hadde herde speke of apparence” (V 1601–2). In this case and in general, the Franklin’s inability to revise his tale aligns him with Dorigen but does not make him feminine. Rather, this and other alignments between the two characters indicate that estate and gender are interrelated social hierarchies, that they can be expressed in terms of one another, and that they mutually construct social identities.

OUTSIDERS TO ROMANCE

Two narrators, Geffrey and the Wife of Bath, have a more tenuous claim to romance than the Franklin. It is not simply that they are without the marks of gentility and relative dignity in rank that associate Knight, Squire, and Franklin with characters in their tales. Geffrey’s and Alison’s claims to romance are more problematic than their social standing alone would suggest. Had Geffrey recited an exemplar of tail-rhyme romance rather than a debased version, had he recited less disingenuously, had he retold rather than recited, he would have established some claim to his material. His dazed ignorance, the foil for Chaucer’s complex self-presentation, gives Sir Thopas the sense of narratorial catastrophe that is part of its pleasure. The Wife of Bath, too, seems unauthorized to tell her tale: its affiliations to romances and Breton lays shift away from her prologue’s generic bases in estates satire, biblical exegesis, and antimatrimonial tracts—a clerical mixture from which Alison draws life and departs like the Eve of amphibians leaving the sea while carrying its salt in her veins. It would seem beyond this creature’s ken to speak of ladies’ educative mercy, of quests and fairy knowledge. Only the Wife’s idealizing nostalgia for her happily-ever-after with Jankyn anticipates the generic character of her tale.

Geffrey’s and Alison’s status as outsiders to romance can be explained, then, in literary and social terms, but these terms are
implicated in and expressed through their gender. Here I will focus on Alison’s case rather than Geffrey’s, for his raises issues of authorial identity that reach beyond the framework of this study. In passing I would note that the precise status of tail-rhyme romance in the late-fourteenth-century context is not really relevant to Geffrey’s failure to establish a right to his own tale. Whether tail-rhyme romances and the cited Guy of Warwick, Bevis of Hamtoun, and so on are properly to be associated with debased minstrel performance or [as seems more likely] with the lower strata of the barony,21 Geffrey’s narratorial status is inferior to that of the genre in that he delivers a burlesque of it without seeming to be aware that he is doing so. His low version of potentially more elevated material comments on the place of English influence throughout Chaucer’s works.22 At the same time, pilgrim Geffrey’s rote recital of “a rym I lerned longe agoon” together with his deafness to its “drasty rymyng” assign his narration a status inferior to that of tail-rhyme romance (VII 709, 930). Geffrey’s masculinity is involved in his narratorial inferiority to romance. Memorization and repetition of a single text has just characterized the persistently “litel” boy of the Prioress’s Tale who would neglect his schoolwork to learn Alma redemptoris mater “al by rote” (VII 503, 509, 516, 587, 667, 522). Geffrey’s rote performance signals an analogously childish lack of authority over his text. But Geffrey’s incongruous childishness is distinct from the innocent simplicity of the Prioress’s martyr. In the course of exploring how Geffrey and Thopas refer to Chaucer’s authorial identity, Lee Patterson notes that Geffrey and Thopas are sexualized “children with a difference” due to the “powerfully erotic valence” of “elvyssh” figures and the perpetual “prik-yng” that is the physical manifestation of Thopas’s love-longing (“What Man Artow?” 132). The incongruous conjunction of

immaturity and sexuality in Geffrey underlines his anomalous status in relation to other pilgrims and to the genre of romance.

Well may the Host inquire “What man artow?” of this pilgrim without portrait or assigned social function (VII 695). Yet the Host’s ensuing analysis takes “man” not in a directly social but rather in a sexualized sense by commenting on Geffrey’s body and potential attractiveness to women:

He in the waast is shape as wel as I;
This were a popet in an arm t’embrace
For any womman smal and fair of face.
He semeth elvyssh by his contenace,
For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce. (VII 700-704)

Given that the Host is a “large man” (I 753), these lines seem to project a small-scale roundness to which a woman fond of dolls might respond.23 The adjective “smal” is central to the passage, radiating its modification in three potential directions, that of the “womman” and of the “face” that may be hers or her poppet’s. The Ellesmere manuscript places the virgule after “womman smal,” suggesting the first alternative; Hengwrt divides the line after “womman” such that her small face may suit her to Geffrey’s small stature or his small face may echo his diminutive body (fol. 213V and p. 849).24 Appropriate to both Geffrey’s “popet” body and his “elvyssh” countenance, “smal” links the childish connotation of dolls to the woman’s embrace and the sexually charged nature of elves. The Host compounds this half-formed sexuality with a trace of feminine reticence: like Rosemounde who will “do no daliaunce” to her lover, Geffrey refuses his “daliaunce” to everyone—to the pilgrims, it seems, as well as to “any womman” who might attempt an embrace.25 Here the unquestioned masculinity ascribed to the Host in the General Prologue (“ol manhod hym lakkede right naught” [I 756]) reasserts

21 Barron, 48-62, surveys questions of audience; more focused studies are Fewster, 104-28; Hudson, Peersall, “Middle English Romance and Its Audiences”; Taylor.
22 Chaucer’s stylistic and thematic indebtedness to Middle English romance is the subject of many excellent studies including Brewer, “Relationship”; Burrow, Ricardian Poetry, 12-23, and Essays on Medieval Literature, 60-78; Everett; Crosby. Two critics who argue for a lesser influence from English writing are Salter; Spearing, Medieval to Renaissance.

24 Lee Patterson argues that the “face” is the poppet’s rather than the woman’s: “What Man Artow?” 1291.35.
25 “To Rosemounde,” Riverside Chaucer, 649. Daliaunce, although it can refer broadly to socializing, often characterizes sexually charged interactions [e.g., Canterbury Tales, I 211, IV 365, VI 66; Romanaunt of the Rose, I 3850].
itself in ragging Geffrey's manhood. Geffrey's quiet isolation contrasts with the Host's convivial leadership, his undefined estate with the Host's capacity to lodge and manage all estates, yet the Host's answer to "What man artow?" deflects those social differences into a comment on masculinity. Indeterminate social status finds its expression in ambivalent gender status.

Estate and gender interpenetrate also in the Wife of Bath's prologue and tale, which confront the limitations placed on feminine power in estates literature and romance. Alison's performance is an instance of the mimicry treated in chapter 2, a strategic repetition of sanctioned positions on gender from the crucially different position of a feminine voice.26 When she accuses her old husbands,

Thow seyst that dropping houses, and eek smoke,  
And chidyng wyves maken men to flee  
Out of hir owene houses, a, benedicitee!  
What eyleth swich an old man for to chide? (Ill 278-81)

she cites the stereotype within her performance of it, establishing a link but also a distinction between the proverbial "chidyng wyves" and her own chiding objection to the proverb. Charging her helpless old husbands with the chiding she voices herself restresses that she is impersonating a masculine discourse, dislocating it and voicing it from elsewhere. Such mimicry also operates at the level of genre on which I will concentrate. Alison sets romance against satire for its contrasting estimation of women, but the juxtaposition ultimately reveals a consonance between the two generic visions of women's right to authority. That revelation leads to a sharpened sense of women's subordination in the gender hierarchy, but also to gestures of insubordination in which Alison models alternatives to her own conclusions.

26 See chapter 2 under "Quoting against the Grain," and Dinshaw's discussion, 113-31, of the Wife of Bath's relation to clerical antifeminism in terms of Irigaray's concept of mimicry. Dinshaw's conclusion is that Chaucer "recuperates the feminine within the solid structure of that [patriarchal] discourse" 116, her italics. An earlier version of my discussion of the Wife of Bath and social rank was published as "Alison's Incapacity."

Alison argues that her attempts to wield sovereignty are justified by the benefits she wins from it and the peace and happiness that yielding to it will bring to men. Yet her vaunted abilities as a "wys wyf" (Ill 231) are precisely those the estates satirists condemn, and her happy endings look illusory insofar as they draw on romance. The inadequacies of her defense of women's sovereignty inhere in the problematics of each term. "Women" signals, in both estates literature and romance, statuses that are incompatible with authority. "Sovereignty" as the Wife uses it designates authority, that is, a socially conceded right to exercise influence and control the actions of others. But her own case as well as its cultural context attests that women can achieve only a contested and vulnerable power over men, an effective influence that is not hierarchically sanctioned [see Lamphere]. What Alison designates as "sovereignty" vacillates, in part because her opposition to established "auctoritée" (Ill 1) can express itself only in exercising feminine powers that do not enjoy cultural authority.

Romance and estates literature imagine women's capacity for power differently in some respects. In romance, the demanding standards of beloved ladies, after inspiring men to improve, are complemented by the ultimate compliance that brings courtship to fruition. Resourcefulness, sharp wit, and magical power tend to be relegated to minor female figures such as Thessala of Chrétien de Troyes's Cligés and Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and her many other manifestations. The admirable women of romance wield their emotional sovereignty in ways beneficial to men and pleasurable to audiences, deferring stasis for a time but finally yielding in harmonious accord with male desire. Antifeminist satire in contrast is nonnarrative, organized by an authoritative voice that rigidifies and fragments femininity into a set of discrete negative exempla on the nagging, mercenary dependence, and overbearing sexuality that characterize wives:

And if that she be foul, thou seist that she  
Coveiteth every man that she may se. . . .  
Thou liknest [wommenes love] also to wilde fyr;  
The moore it brenneth, the moore it hath desir  
To consume every thyng that brent wole be.
"Bet is," quod he, "thyn habitacioun
Be with a leon or a foul dragoun,
Than with a womman usynge for to chyde."

[III 565-66, 373-75, 775-77]

Estates literature beyond antifeminist satire, as outlined in this chapter's introduction, delineates women in general (and wives in particular) according to their sexuality, their bodily relation or absence of relation to men. The Wife of Bath's Prologue exemplifies the estates conception in substituting for the cloth-making trade of her portrait a "sexual economics" by which she extracts wealth from her husbands in exchange for domestic peace.

Romance poets and satirists agree in conceding women a potential for excellence in domesticity and love, but satirists make the failure of that potential a chief argument for avoiding women: contrary to what the suitor expects, a woman will not delight him. Moreover, the qualities that in romance contribute to women's emotional excellence define their unworthiness in satire. Their greater fragility manifests itself in weeping and clinging, their capacity for love leads to torments of jealousy and sexual conflict, and their irrationality tyrannizes men like a child's or a badly trained animal's: "For as an hors I koude byte and whyne. / I koude pleyne, and yit was in the gilt, / Or elles ofte tymes hadde I been spilt" [III 386-88]. Satirists thus argue that women's emotive power is harmful, aggressive, and falsely exercised instead of imagining with the romances that women may enjoy an emotive authority that derives from their feminine virtues. More fundamentally, both literary forms engage the issue of woman's power through her sexuality rather than through socioeconomic measures of achievement and skill. In so doing they identify sexuality as the basic component of women's social identity and eroticize dominance and submission as a dynamic inherent in relations between men and women.

In her prologue the Wife of Bath addresses the issues of gender and power as they are formulated in antifeminist satire. Her own origin in the very texts she disputes forces her to shadowbox with herself, receiving almost as many blows as she delivers. However cleverly Alison attempts to parry satiric convictions—by celebrating the less-than-perfect life rather than accepting admonishments to perfection, by claiming that the rational male should yield reasonably to the less rational female—still the notion that women's claims to authority over men are unjustified is inextricably woven into the generic fabric of her prologue. Alison's shift to romance is thus a strategic one, challenging antifeminist versions of the issue by confronting them with a genre that celebrates women's emotive power instead of undermining it. Romance is the "profeminist" literature, it would appear, that can combat the negative formulations of Matheolus and Walter Map.

Initially romance does provide Alison with an argument to use against the satirists. In that her tale lacks chivalric adventures and features a crucially knowledgeable and capable female character, it is not a standard romance. But it answers to the phrase Chaucer uses, according to Donald Howard, to designate his romances, "storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse" [I 3179; Howard, 52-53 n]. True to the genre are the setting in "th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour" [III 857] and the educative process by which women direct men's emotional and ethical development. Arthur's justice is tempered through the queen's mercy as is Theseus's through the "verray wommanhede" of weeping ladies who plead for Palamon and Arcite [I 1748-61]. The queen and the old hag, as in romances generally, have special insight in matters of love and morality that leads the knight to change for the better and to achieve happiness in love.

Alison manipulates her romance with an eye to antifeminist assertions, using her new genre to attract validity to the version of women's sovereignty condemned by antifeminist writers. For

27 Notes in the Riverside Chaucer document debts to works of Theophrastus, Jean de Meun, Matheolus, Jerome, and other writers which can be termed "clerical" in that they are important to the medieval antimatrimonial tradition, but that tradition is part of a wider literary antifeminism: see Bloch, Medieval Misogyny, Patterson, Chaucer, 236-31.

28 See Delany. Alison's conflation of sex and gain in her marriages is significant to her identity, it is also important that, in the dynamic of those marriages, Alison does not herself produce the wealth she deploys. Wealth is something inert that she wins from men by subterfuge and force, not something she generates by cloth making.

29 Not only male writers pervasively assert that women's sexuality defines their situation and that men should be sovereign over women: for examples from Heloise, Margery Kempe, and Christine de Pisan see my "Alison's Incapacity," 22.
women's sovereignty is not identical in romance and in satire. Wives of satire seize tangible economic and physical power by force and subterfuge: "I have the power dureyne al my lyf / Upon his propre body, and noht he"; "Atte ende I hadde the bettre in ech degree / By sleighte, or force, or by som maner thyng" (III 158-59, 404-5). Ladies of romance wield emotional authority over men who submit to them by reason of their excellence: Dorigen, Laudine, and Emelye do not solicit power over men; instead their suitors declare that their overwhelming merit places them in authority over their suitors' courtships and very lives. The Wife's tale, in referring to romance conventions, implies an equivalence between the unjustified tyranny of satire's wives and the meritorious supremacy of romance heroines. Yet there is no Dorigen or Emelye in her story. The hag is aggressive, manipulative, and sexually demanding in the best satiric vein, but her high and magical attributes—as queen of fairies, if we may identify her with the elf-queen of the tale's introduction (III 860), as goal of a quest for life, as moral guide, and finally as love object—obscure her antifeminist connections and work to validate her active exercise of power.

Even as romance dignifies the claim to women's sovereignty in this tale, frequent antifeminist touches vitiate the romantic elevation Alison seems to desire. The answers proposed to the queen's question "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" catalog feminine weaknesses, from "Somme seyde wommen loven best richesse" to "we kan no conseil hyde" (III 905, 925, 980). The animal metaphors for women (limed like birds, kicking like galled horses, booming like bitterns) also answer to the satiric conviction that women are profoundly irrational, sensual creatures.

Within the Wife's framing problematic of women's sovereignty, her juxtapositions of satire and romance amount to more than simple citation. They reveal the incongruity of the two generic visions and their shared inadequacy to her argument. The knight's trial culminates this process. Several shifts that may have seemed involuntary, from queenly authority to proverbial foibles, from fairy illusion to all-too-solid flesh, are here recuperated in a full return to romantic sensibility. The hierarchical display of the queen's assembly of judgment evokes fictional love courts, with the "queene hirself sittynge as a justise" [III 1028], and the answer she and her ladies accept from the knight seems to tally with courtly conventions about women's authority in matters of the heart. Yet the hag anticipates that the ladies will not gladly admit the knight's answer; even "the proudeste" will simply not "dar seye nay" [III 1017-19]. Echoing her suspicion, the knight insists: "This is your mooste desir, thogh ye me kille" [III 1041]. The implication of resistance marks a disparity between satiric sovereignty, actively claimed and energetically wielded, and the passive, apparently unwilled sovereignty of women in romance. To force the queen's ladies into accepting that "Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee" [III 1038] is to conflate the romance vision that has sanctioned women's unwilled authority with Alison's fiercer vision that woman consciously seek and enjoy it.

This assertion that women's power is always desired and always contested clarifies the insufficiency of Alison's two discourses for dramatizing a worthy sovereignty of secular women. Satire denies their worth. Romance seems a genre in which women's excellence confers authority, but the appearance proves false. The courted lady's temporary sovereignty is a function of the suitor's desire to build love into chivalric identity by demonstrating his capacity for adventure. Her mercy and compliance are the necessary closure to her ability to command devotion. That compliance and the tale's presentation from the knight's point of view, its evasion of punishment for the knight, and the queen's merely contingent authority (for which she "thanketh the kyng with al hir myght" [III 899]) offer a recognizably romantic fiction. The hag's power over her "walwing" knight is anomalous, more like the power of Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight than like that of a conventional beloved. But even the hag surrenders in the end. The joyful and thoroughly fanciful resolution that fulfills the knight's "worldly appetit" [III 1218] illus-

Despite the respects in which the Wife of Bath's Tale does not manage to transcend its discourses, I would propose that the Wife
jars them suggestively in two ways at least, first through organizing her tale around a crime of rape and second through dramatizing a certain mobility in genders that compromises the hierarchies her genres provide.

Rape is not absent from the history of romance, but it is hardly typical behavior for the genre’s protagonists. On the other hand, medieval and modern voices suggest that the rape and the forced marriage of the Wife of Bath’s Tale do not depart from romance convention so much as demystify it. In a historical study of marriage practices, Georges Duby concludes that the Old French poetry of adultery and love service is based on a “fundamentally misogynous” conception of woman as merely a means to male self-advancement: “Woman was an object and, as such, contemptible” [Medieval Marriage, 108]. Eugene Vance corroborates Duby’s historical analysis by connecting early lyrics of adultery to romances featuring demanding ladies. Throughout, love’s poetic expression is typically “le combat erotique,” an aesthetic of antithesis recognizing the violence that is veiled by the mystified perfection of fine amor [see also R. P. Green, “Familia Regis” and “Chaucer’s Victimized Women”]. Feminine voices of the period extend the argument to the historical scene: the wife of Geoffrey de la Tour Landry warns that men’s courtly importuning disguises their coerciveness [Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry, 246–28; Book of the Knight of the Tower, 163–64]. Christine de Pisan repeats the warning in her Epistre au dieu d’amours and with particular force in the letter she attributes to Sebille de Monthault: “loial, discrez, truthful, which they are not at all; rather it is common knowledge that they are false and that to deceive women they say what they neither think nor desire to do” [Oeuvres Poetiques, 30]. L. H. Loomis, 29–31, cites a similar episode from Sir Degare in her argument that Chaucer knew the Auchinleck MS. Degare’s father, a fairy knight, meets a maiden lost in a forest and rapes her: “to nobing ne coude do / But wep and criede and wolde fle / And he anon gan hire atholde, / And dide his wille, what he wolde: / He biam hire here maidenhol ...” [Middle English Metrical Romances, 207 [Sir Degare, 107–11]].

CHAPTER III

GENDER AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY

3:169, 2:1–27]. The Wife’s tale concurs that sexual relations are power relations, whether men or women are on top. The rape in the Wife’s tale is the limit case of differential power in sexual relations, and as such it speaks to the Wife’s ongoing concern with sovereignty.

In the Wife of Bath’s Prologue “sovereynetee” seems constantly to vacillate, but three major contradictions can be distinguished. Alison sometimes associates sovereignty with economic gain, “wynnyng” [III 416], yet she seems to win nothing from her fourth husband, gives up her gains to Jankyn, and makes the hag speak eloquently against the significance of wealth. At other points, coercion, including physical domination, renders Alison’s metaphor “myself have been the whippe” [III 175] very nearly literal, but she moves from coercion to submissions and accommodations with her fourth and fifth husbands as does the hag with her knight. Finally, her conception of sovereignty requires the trust or the high opinion of her husbands: “Thou shooldest seye, ‘Wyf, go wher thee liste ... / I knowe yow for a trewe wyf, dame Alys,’ ” she instructs her old husbands, and Jankyn fulfills her desire in acceding, “Myn owene trewe wyf, / Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf” [III 318–20, 819–20]. Nonetheless, the Wife cheerfully undermines her demand for trust and respect by asserting and demonstrating that women are untrustworthy: “half so boldely kan ther no man / Swere and lyen, as a womman kan” [III 227–28].

Why does Alison constantly alter and even cancel each of her versions of sovereignty? The solution is not that women’s desire for power is nothing but a desire for love. Love is a relatively simple matter for the Wife, something she often gets from men. In contrast, women’s sovereignty vacillates confusingly even in love’s presence: with the “daungerous” Jankyn and knight [III 514, 1090] it works to perpetuate love, as if it were grounded in merit, but in her four earlier marriages it tyrannizes or substitutes for love, as if it were mere self-interest. The Wife’s casual manipulation of her old husbands’ devotion—“They loved me so wel, by God above, / That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love” [III 207–8]—suggests that the question of power precedes and subsumes the question of men’s love: it is sovereignty that “worldly wommen loven best” [III 1033]. The object of this fundamental love is elu-
sive, and its elusiveness partly accounts for its desirability, in accordance with Alison's psychological principle "Forbede us thyng, and that desiren we" (III 519). Female sovereignty, in any form, is the most heretical of her desires, unsustained in any of the conventional discourses on which she draws. Looking beyond these discourses necessarily leaves the Wife inarticulate, even about the meaning of the sovereignty she imagines. She desires to validate the forbidden but can hardly formulate what it is.

The persistence with which the Wife of Bath considers sex in terms of sovereignty recalls Catharine MacKinnon's argument that "male and female are created through the eroticization of dominace and submission" ("Feminism . . . Toward a Feminist Jurisprudence," 635). In the Wife's prologue and tale, the experience of sexuality takes place always in the context of masculine social authority. The Wife's contested control over her husbands, the knight's rape, his later concession of sovereignty, and his wife's ensuing obedience are all predicated on masculine ascendancy within sexuality and reveal that ascendancy even as they attempt to critique it. Sexuality is so fully subsumed within power relations as to be unimaginable in isolation from them.

Much of the literature of courtship endorses this state of affairs, as we have seen, but in narrating a story of rape the Wife pushes the power differential to its extreme and resists it with the sanction of law. The "cours of lawe" (III 892) that condemns the knight's rape also validates his discovery that women desire sovereignty: most immediately in the knight's case, they desire not to be raped. At the same time, the limit case of rape invokes official support (quickly diffused from the crime itself into the issue as a whole) for the knight's discovery that women desire sovereignty in all sexual relations.

Bringing the "cours of lawe" to bear on a sexual encounter argues further that sexuality is not sealed off from public life, is not merely a component of private subjectivity that has no social implications. Noting the division in estates literature between men's social and women's sexual functions, Lee Patterson asks whether subjectivity is then feminine: "If women were denied social definition, did this not mean that the realm of the asocial—of the internal, the individual, the subjective—was peculiarly theirs?" (Chaucer, 282 [his italics]). The Wife of Bath is indeed amply endowed with an emotive and reflective selfhood, but I understand the project of her prologue and tale to be one of resisting distinctions between the sexual and the social, the private and the public. Rape, as one instance in which sexual behavior clearly has social meaning, is consonant with the Wife's persistent claims that her own identity is bound up with that of other wives and that wives are beleaguered by clerical culture's antifeminism. Elsewhere I have argued that because Alison sees women's illiteracy as part of their subordination and herself attacks Jankyn's work as if that could redress cultural oppressions, her prologue and tale constitute the most substantial comment in Chaucer's works on the Rising of 1381 and the conditions surrounding it ("Writing Lesson of 1381"). Here I would add that gender, apparently a feature of private and subjective identity, is a vehicle for attempting to imagine transformations in women's social position.

Romance is the appropriate form for confronting an unknowable desire. Its "strategy of delay" holds narrative "on the threshold before the promised end, still in the wilderness of wandering, 'error,' or 'trial'" (Parker, 4-5). The hag's physical metamorphosis is only the most dazzling of many mutations demonstrating that genders are not fixed phenomena but fluid media through which new potential can be realized. Gender lines shift throughout the Wife's tale. The barber in Midas's story becomes a wife, the ladies' court of judgment replaces Arthur's, and the hag comes to speak like a cleric while her husband submits with wifely meek-
ness to her “wise governance” (III 1231). These substitutions make women the active movers of plot, as they are not in most romances, where they may inspire chivalric activity but where that activity is itself the source of change. Gender displacements extend to the fairy realm, as the “elf-queene” and “hir joly compaignye” (III 860), who are all feminine when the knight encounters them (III 992), seem to metamorphose during Alison’s introduction from “joly” dancers to potent incubi threatening women in the Arthurian countryside. The knight-rapist and the king both move from having power to surrendering it, while women throughout the tale move themselves into male purviews. The tale’s exclusion of chivalric adventures reverses the prologue’s effacement of Alison’s cloth-making profession, emphasizing the dependence of men on women. Even the comic victory of friars over fairies in the tale’s first lines is vitiated when the fairy wife’s pillow lecture demonstrates her intimate knowledge of religious texts. Reassigning women to positions of authority traces the path of their transgression in the narrative itself. The power they exercise is not always benign or admirable, but the gender shifts themselves loosen the bond between maleness and authority that makes a worthy female sovereignty inconceivable.

The transgressiveness of such gender shifts, particularly in the context of an unlicensed feminine desire for sovereignty, allies the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* to the carnivalesque, M. M. Bakhtin’s productive conception of a complex of ideas and practices that stage confrontations between popular and elite culture, between the indolent and the controlled body, pagan superstition and religious orthodoxy, and festival license and the rigors of law. Bakhtin argues that comic inversions of religious and regal authority (the crowned ass, the boy bishop, the mock priest) could amount to virtually philosophical reconsiderations of the sense of life in the late medieval and early modern period. Yet these inversions are insistently material, as most fully manifested in the carnival body’s outrageous appetites, bulk, and openness to the world. In contrast to the controlled, finished, polished individual that Bakhtin associates with both “classic aesthetics” and medieval “official” culture, the carnival body is “unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits,” not only to rebel against official constraints but also to represent a “collective ancestral body of all the people,” a cyclical body that ambivalently combines renewal and degradation (Rabelais, 19, 25, 26; see Stallybrass and White, 1-26). Bakhtin’s illustration of this body in figurines of “senile pregnant hags” who laughingly express both decay and fertility in “the epitome of incompleteness” particularly calls to mind the shapeshifters’ transitions between mocking age and sexually submissive youth (Rabelais, 25-26). In the preceding chapter I proposed that the shapeshifters of romance use their double form to resist grounding their identities in bodily appearance. Shape-shifting can also represent a subversive potential of the feminine in the social order.

Masquerade, in its traditional sense of dressing to disguise and parody, plays a central role in carnival behavior, and central to masquerade itself is transgression. Men dressed as women and women as men, seculars dressed as monks and nuns, children as adults, and humans as animals, all confound the distinctions on which organized social life proceeds. In late medieval romances

33 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and Dialogic Imagination*, argued that a rigid separation developed in the Middle Ages between the poles of popular and official culture, and that only in the Renaissance, that moment of rupture and new beginning, did the carnivalesque bring popular ideology into relation with the official to critique and reform it, reaching beyond mere holiday escape to an insurgent rethinking of social organization. Whether or not there was in fact a time in the Middle Ages when popular culture did not interact with and modify the official structures of

34 Medieval romance may seem an unlikely place to look for a carnivalesque sensibility, Insofar as it is primarily a court literature that works out ideals and formulates concerns peculiar to those who rule. But historical as well as literary studies qualify the sharp separations Bakhtin posited between learned and popular, orthodox and superstitious, and high and low culture generally in the medieval period. On the mixed audience for fabliaux see Nykrog, Muscatine, *Old French Fabliaux*. The social composition of the audience for late medieval romance is a particular concern in Bennett, Coleman, Knight, and my *Insular Romance*. The comingling of popular and learned material in the Melusine analogues is the subject of Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture*, 205-22 (“Melusina: Mother and Pioneer”).

35 On crossdressing in romance, not taken up by Chaucer, see Perret, *Le Roman de Silence* particularly focuses on disguise, gender, and social strictures in its plot of a girl raised as a boy in order to protect her family’s lineal rights.
the shapeshifters’ masquerade of loathsomeness typically imitates the carnival body itself, the sensual excess and outsize physique that counter decency and restraint. Dame Ragnell evokes strikingly that body’s excess, its emphasis on orifices and indulgence, and its incompleteness and openness to the world. Everything about her ugliness is oversized and voracious. Her bulging eyes and wide mouth, her snotty nose and cheeks wide as women’s hips, her barrel body and enormous breasts produce an inverted effect of extravagant ugliness; her protruding teeth and long nails make the spectacle of her gluttony “fulle foule and nott courteys” (602; see also 228–51). Ragnell’s gargantuan appetite extends to sex: “Though I be foule, yett am I gaye,” she warns as she demands Gawain in marriage (300). The grotesque Ragnell penetrates courtly space, upending its protocols by dressing more richly than Guinevere, riding a beautifully caparisoned horse (“Ytt was no reason ne ryght”) and holding a large public wedding rather than the small private one Guinevere suggests: “I wol be weddyd alle openly . . . And in the open halle wol I dyne” (251, 575, 579). Ragnell’s aggressive, voracious body might be understood to alienate any, disturbing qualities from the submissive, beautiful body that succeeds it, in a process that would finally authorize only the controlled courtly body. We have seen that such a reading would make shape-shifting sustain the stable equivalence of body and identity for women, but that the persistence of sexualized qualities in the ugly body resists its dismissal from the scene of femininity. Further resisting this dismissal are the grotesque body’s penetration into the courtly world, revealing the limits of the court’s control, and the invocation of a carnival sensibility in the very act of shifting the body from old to young, disgusting to pleasing, in that cyclical ambivalence which Bakhitin’s laughing pregnant hags also illustrate.

The Wife of Bath, who masquerades in the split body of her tale’s heroine, does not provide a description of the loathly body to match those of the tale’s analogues. The absence of a detailed monstrousness in the Wife of Bath’s Tale permits Alison’s own body to fill the space, identifying her age and deterioration, her sexual appetite and aggressiveness with those of the “olde wyf.” For Alison, like the shapeshifters of romance, is richly carnivalesque. Perhaps most telling is her persistent upending of her body to locate the essence of her attractiveness in “the beste quoniam myghte be,” her queynete, her bele chose, her “chambre of Venus” [III 332, 444, 447, 510, 608, 618]. Twice she associates the voracious mouth with sexual voracity, in her self-explanatory proverb “a likerous mouth maste han a likerous tayl” and in consoling her browbeaten husbands that “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” (III 466, 447–49). In the General Prologue her large hips, bold face, and gap teeth also recall the carnival body’s excess and openness, like the hag in the Marriage of Sir Gawaine “cladd in red scarlette” Alison wears red stockings and robes. Her tale’s prologue proposes inversions of power and reason in marriage that further invoke the reversals of festival and the Wife’s own assertion that “myn entente nys but for to pleye” (III 192). Matched to her body is the unruly logic Chaucer derives from the sermon joyeux, the parody form that Lee Patterson has shown to be so useful in illuminating the Wife’s manipulation of religious orthodoxy. Like the most orthodox preacher, the Wife takes a text—Paul’s warning about the tribulations of marriage—but “as we would expect from a sermon joyeux, she unlocks the letter to discover an irreducible carnality” (Chaucer, 313).

Alison’s unruly carnality both fills in the loathly lady’s undeveloped form and masquerades in her two extravagant bodies. The old wife’s impeccable invocation of texts on gentility, poverty, and age extends the masquerade by providing Alison with a feminine voice that can cite authorities without distortion. Borrowing credibility from the tale’s old wife as she borrows the capacity to shape-shift, Alison furthers her prologue’s attempt to claim authority over men. Her festive transgressions, bodily and marital as they are, resonate with the public and social commentary of carnival. Particularly in an era when, as Natalie Davis notes, rela-

36 See chapter 2, pp. 85–92. The masculine connotations of Melusine’s and Blonde Esmerees’s serpent bodies are implicit in the scenes of their revelation and might supplement the outrage to social categories of commingling animal with human forms [English Melusine, 205–97; French Melusine, 241–43; Lybeaus Descous, Cotton MS, II. 1884–2019; Le Bel Inconnu, II. 3127–3131].

37 The scarlet clothing is noted three times in the Marriage of Sir Gawayne, 237, 238, 239; Alison’s red clothing at I 456 and III 559.
tions between the sexes could readily stand for the relations of subject to lord, common to gentle, and Christian to Church, the “disorderly woman” of mummers, charivaris, and literature is a politically charged figure (124-52; see also Russo). Davis places the Wife of Bath among many literary and historical instances of unruly women who, depending on the context and case, may simply reassert prevailing social relations by temporarily suspending them while illustrating the feminine irrationality that justifies them, or who may additionally undermine the social order by acting in ways not consonant with it. “Play with the unruly woman,” she concludes, “is partly a chance for temporary release from the traditional and stable hierarchy, but it is also part of the conflict over efforts to change the basic distribution of power within society” (131). Whether Alison succeeds in mounting an effective argument for women’s sovereignty or only in dramatizing an outrageous challenge to women’s subordination, the public and festive register of her performance moves her sexuality onto the social scene and denies the estates distinction between worldly masculinity and domestic femininity.

Also suggestive for Chaucer’s work is Davis’s evidence that the “woman on top” in the early modern period could sanction social disobedience for men, who rioted dressed as women and took female pseudonyms such as “Mère Folle” and “Lady Skimmington” in uprisings against various government measures (147-50). Such historical disguises draw energy from the disruptive claims to authority of figures like Alison as well as taking shelter behind the identity of the less responsible and rational gender. As Chaucer’s own disguise, Alison talks back to important literary traditions to which the poet and she are both in a subordinate relation. Alison’s disruptions of romance are Chaucer’s as well, and more substantial by far than those attempted in the person of the decorous Franklin.

For my focus on the interplay of gender and social status, Chaucer’s crossdressing in Alison’s feminine rebelliousness is suggestive of the constraints hierarchy imposes on men, but more salient is the ultimate collapse of Alison’s specifically feminine effort. The festive sexuality that pervades her performance celebrates the transgressive potential of women’s sovereignty but also expresses sovereignty as seized power rather than sanctioned au-