Wifely Counsel and Civic Leadership in *The Canterbury Tales*

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation identifies wifely counsel as a major theme in *The Canterbury Tales*. My analysis of *The Tale of Melibee*, *The Clerk's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* reveals a pattern of women instructing, transforming, and collaborating with their husbands to accomplish important work for both the household and the public sphere. Wife-counselors in the *Tales* do not merely provide advice; in moments that modern critics too often overlook, these women also supersede their husbands in leadership roles to mediate conflicts and dispense justice. By reading the tales in my study as narratives of wifely counsel, I show how greater critical attention to plots and characters illuminates underexplored arguments about gender, marriage, and women as political agents in the *Tales.*

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For LeAnne Anderson

In memory of

Debbie Rosebrock

INTRODUCTION

When the marquis of Saluzzo marries the poorest maid in the land, she rises from poverty to fill a void in political leadership, resolving disputes among her husband's subjects and restoring peace and justice to the region.

When a patriarch learns that home invaders have brutally attacked his wife and daughter, his wife coaches him through bouts of rage and despair and faces down her assailants to negotiate a truce.

When King Arthur's knight goes hawking and rapes a maiden who happens to cross his path, Queen Guinevere and women all over Britain mobilize to rehabilitate the criminal, forcing him to relinquish his sense of sexual and economic entitlement.

Each of these stories—*The Clerk's Tale*, *The Tale of Melibee*, and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, respectively—depicts flawed patriarchal leadership as a threat to public safety and wifely counsel as the remedy. The women in these tales not only expose their husbands to new ideas, train them to be more accountable, and model public-minded attitudes; in moments scholars often overlook, they also stand in for their husbands to resolve conflicts and mete out justice, emerging as stronger, more rational leaders. All three of these stories end with a husband acknowledging his wife's unparalleled virtue and wisdom; *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, along with *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, conclude with a husband explicitly conceding all authority and decision-making powers to his wife (*ClT* 1044-1057, *Mel* 1870-1873, *WBP* 813-822, *WBT* 1230-1238). Although wifely counsel is a common trope in medieval writing, its treatment in these texts is radically imaginative, variegated, and public-minded. In *The Canterbury Tales*, wifely counsel is not strictly a literary convention or a private domestic event. More often than not, it is a civic vocation, indispensable to public welfare.

The sheer frequency and variety of passages in the *Tales* that relate wifehood to counsel—even and perhaps especially in tales that flirt with antifeminism—demonstrate the topic's centrality to Chaucer's ideas about gender, ethics, and politics. Yet no critics have undertaken a systematic study of Chaucerian wifely counsel. To redress this gap in the scholarship, my dissertation investigates wifely counsel as a civic vocation in *The Canterbury Tales.* By drawing attention to Chaucer's interest in married women's contributions to their households as well as to public life, my research also forges a convergence between scholarship on political counsel in late medieval writing and research on gender and marriage in Chaucer.

Many scholars have undertaken relevant studies of counsel since 1993, when Geraldine Barnes called for greater attention to the role of counsel in Middle English literature. But the historicist bent of research on counsel literature tends to exclude or underestimate the political impact of “wommennes conseils,” which sometimes take place in informal settings (*NPT* 3256). Studies of the mirrors-for-princes genre, or philosophical advice literature for rulers, often focus narrowly on depictions of counsel in its most explicit, dialogic form (Scanlon, 1994; Brown, 2001; Rayner, 2008; Rigby, 2009). Peter Brown's overview of Chaucer and the mirrors-for-princes genre reflects a critical tendency to understand this topic through the lens of the Ricardian court, a circumscribed political model involving a male monarch and—occasionally—women as merciful intercessors on behalf of the downtrodden or persecuted (69-72). Although Brown acknowledges resonances of the mirrors-for-princes genre in a variety of Chaucerian texts, including some tales about women and marriage, he understands the genre as primarily a means of commenting on and critiquing "courtly, or at least aristocratic, settings" (72).[1]

Brown's reliance on Rigby's hypothesis that Chaucer was influenced by *De regimine principum*, a seminal medieval mirror for princes by Giles of Rome, creates the impression that Chaucer had a more traditional take on the genre than the *Tales* actually bear out.[2] The poet of *The Canterbury Tales* does not focus solely on a cycle of influence between the court, its direct influencers, and its subjects. His counsel tales embrace a variety of generic conventions to investigate political problems that extend far beyond the court and the aristocracy. The texts in my study take on broad social, ethical, and philosophical concerns and are especially invested in issues of gender, public safety, and public welfare. Chaucer's counsel tales ask radical questions about how the actions of men and women from a variety of backgrounds, operating in a wide range of social contexts, can either endanger or revitalize public life.

I propose approaching the *Tales* with a broad understanding of counsel as any rhetorical act or performance intended to advise, instruct, or educate another person. My study incorporates Barnes' notion of “the Wise Counsellor” as a conceptual category akin in scope to that of the “Fool-trickster.” Barnes argues that the counselor-figure is crucial to a wide array of genres, including “medieval epic, romance, and overtly didactic narrative,” and that counselors can play a number of different advisory roles in a number of formal and informal contexts: “the counsellor's office may be political, paedagogical [sic], or moral: to interpret or expatiate upon religious, judicial, and intellectual authority, to offer practical advice, to devise strategy, or to advise against unwise or ill-considered action” (ix). This expanded definition of counsel accommodates the considerable range of pedagogical work that wives accomplish in the *Tales* as well as suggests the need for scholars to look beyond court to find scenes of counsel in diverse settings.

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[1] In *Geoffrey Chacuer* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2011), Brown opens his discussion by citing Rigby's work on Chaucer and Giles of Rome (69).

[2] Sarah Rees Jones argues that *De regimine principum* reflects conventional gender binaries (246). Jones, "Public and Private Space and Gender in Medieval Europe," *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, eds. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

The Canterbury Tales certainly grapple with stereotypical complaints about wives and wifely counsel. An explicit argument for wifely counsel in *The Merchant's Tale*—“Do alwey so as wommen wol thee rede” (1361)—emerges in a deeply ironic light, and *The Nun's Priest's Tale* blames a narrative of mock-epic catastrophe on the protagonist's choice to “[take] his conseil of his wyf, with sorwe” (3252-3255). As a purveyor of evil counsel, the sultaness in *The Man of Law's Tale* necessarily complicates any discussion on Chaucer's interest in the counsel of married or widowed women. But all three of these tales take pains to undercut their own misogynistic implications.[3] They also announce the counsel of women and wives as a major theme, and the first two of them remind us explicitly that this theme is a nexus of intertextual debate, both within and beyond the *Tales* (*MerchT* 1685-1687, *NPT* 3256-3262).

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[3] On January's culpability in *The Merchant's Tale*, see Wentersdorf (“Imagery, Structure, and Theme in Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale*,” *Geoffrey Chaucer’s* The Canterbury Tales: *A Casebook*, ed. Lee Patterson [New York: Oxford University Press, 2007], 115-136) 132 and *MerchT* 1700-1711 in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D.

Although Chaucer's female counselors often work outside of institutional structures, their counsel tends to be formally complex and philosophically rigorous. Even wife-counselors who operate mainly inside their homes invoke sophisticated legal, contractual, and scholarly rhetoric. Compare, for example, the courtier Justinus in *The Merchant's Tale*, who “wolde noon aucoritee allegge” because “he wolde his longe tale abregge” (1657-1658), to Prudence, whose uncompromising citationality pervades the most of *The Tale of Melibee*, or to the Wife of Bath, whose irreverent but thoughtful remarks on issues of intellectual authority come up in nearly every scholarly discussion of her prologue. The women's counsel is not necessarily better or worse than that of Justinus, but it is more self-conscious, ambitious, and bibliographically rich.

Moreover, all of the wife-counselors in my study accomplish considerable work in the public sphere in addition to their households. Together, *The Tale of Melibee*, *The Clerk's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue,* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* deconstruct a gender binary that Sarah Rees Jones identifies as a hallmark of the mirrors-for-princes genre and that seems to have misdirected scholarly attention from the topic of wifely

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Benson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). Regarding *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, Diamond (“Chaucer’s Women and Women’s Chaucer,” *The Authority of Experience* [Amherst: The University of Massachussetts Press, 1977] argues that “the poem is about, in one aspect, the workings of the male ego and its need for feminine approval” (68). As for the sultaness, the Man of Law says little to nothing about her marriage, and her role in the text is more motherly than wifely. Schibanoff argues that the poem distinguishes her from most wives in the *Tales* by emphasizing her “desire for conventionally male power” (“World’s Apart,” *Chaucer’s Cultural Geography*, ed. Kathryn L. Lynch [New York: Routledge, 2002] 265). The Man of Law also stresses her cultural otherness, so that, in the context of the *Tales*, the sultaness represents the exception rather than the rule of female leadership.

counsel: that is, a normative understanding of women as more or less “anchored to the home” and of men as “those who traveled abroad” to “produce more sophisticated types of wealth” (246). The bachelors and husbands in these texts may have a penchant for mobility or travel, but their independent excursions from the household are rarely economically productive, and they often result in corruption or neglect. Far from being “anchored to the home,” the women in Chaucer’s tales of wifely counsel tend to navigate public life more successfully and ethically than their husbands do.

Archival research confirms a strong historical basis for reading wife-counselors as vital contributors to civic discourse. Ramsey’s groundbreaking 2012 article, “The Voices of Counsel: Women and Civic Rhetoric in the Middle Ages,” argues that medievalists have too long overlooked “the idea of civic discourse […] outside of classical rhetorical contexts” and have too hastily assumed that “civic discourse […] silenced and marginalized women” (472). His analysis of women's rhetoric in epistolary sources reveals a “socially constructed set of expectations for women’s participation in government at the highest levels” in late medieval Europe (474). But Ramsey’s work, with its focus on letter-writing, pertains mainly to historical, literate noblewomen. By contrast, Chaucer’s fictional representations of wifely counsel span a virtually comprehensive socioeconomic spectrum—from Griselda, “povrest of hem alle,” to Queen Guinevere herself (*ClT* 205). *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* are especially interested in how issues of social class can shape women's counsel and affect the way it is received.

Studies by Pakkala-Weckström (2001, 2005), Schieberle (2009), and Vines (2011) acknowledge representations of women as skilled rhetoricians in the *Tales* and other literary texts of the era, but these studies do not thoroughly address marital status as a critical problem for Chaucer. The political access that marriage can provide is a recurring dilemma in the *Tales*, especially where wifely counsel is concerned: married women can parlay marital status into opportunities for civic participation and public service, but they can also find themselves trapped in unsatisfying or abusive situations. On the other hand, scholarship on marriage practices (Nelson, 2002; Hume, 2012; O'Byrne, 2012), masculinity and manhood (Beidler, 1998; Pugh, 2006; Crocker, 2007), sexuality (Miller, 2005; Cartlidge, 2006), and desire (Scala, 2009; Pitcher, 2012) in Chaucer's work tends to emphasize gender rivalries and differences, obscuring the *Tales*' interest in marriage as an arena for problem-solving.

My dissertation contends that Chaucer's tales of wifely counsel emphasize the ethical and civic accomplishments of characters who collaborate with, instruct, transform, and stand in for their husbands. Each chapter traces the conceptual relationship between gender, marital status, political access, and political efficacy in a *Canterbury* text, as well as the relationship between female "sovereynetee" or "governance" in marriage and female authority in more public contexts (*WBT* 1038, 1231). My analysis reveals a pattern of women in the *Tales* who use diverse forms of counsel to navigate the hazards of marriage, manipulate patriarchal resistance, and ultimately improve public welfare.

Chapter One, "The Counsel of Dame Prudence in *The Tale of Melibee,*" poses a new way to read this dense, philosophical tale, which has long confounded scholars as one of the most difficult texts in Chaucer's opus. In my reading, the tale is not merely a sober intertextual allegory about prudence but a story about a wife named Dame

Prudence. Concurrently, wifely counsel is not just a trope of advice literature but an engine of action in the tale. I argue for a pragmatic approach to reading *The Tale of Melibee* that emphasizes narrative events: Dame Prudence diffuses Melibee's anger, convinces him not to attack the men who assaulted her, and restores peace to both household and community. By starting with this tale, I establish Prudence as a paragon of traditional counsel and a staple of Chaucer's investigation. Later chapters frequently invoke *The Tale of Melibee* to show how other wives in the *Tales* variously incorporate, reject, and innovate upon the classical rhetorical techniques that make Prudence's counsel so effective.

Chapter Two, "Wonderful Counselor: Persuasive Strategies and Ethical Reform in *The Clerk's Tale*," interprets Chaucer's version of the Griselda story as a tale of wifely counsel under extreme duress. My analysis focuses on rarely discussed details in the text that bear out Griselda's ability to counsel and mediate, including a striking passage about her success as a political figure in Saluzzo (*ClT* 407-441; Heffernan 332). This passage serves both to establish Griselda as a skilled traditional counselor in her own right and to inflect the rest of her performance in the tale—namely, her obedience to Walter—with a valence of counsel. Though critics tend to associate Griselda primarily with obedience as such, the central theme of Petrarch's and Boccaccio's versions, Chaucer's interest in Griselda's service to the "commune profit" suggests that her strange professions of devotion are a rhetorical strategy to reform the marquis (431).

Although each counselor in my study uses performative strategies to model skills or virtues for her husband, Griselda's counsel to Walter is the most performative and the least explicit of all. Aside from her memorable plea and warning on behalf of

Walter's second wife—that he "ne prikke with no tormentynge / This tendre mayden, as ye han doon mo"—Griselda's main strategy for educating the marquis is her consistent fulfillment of their marriage contract (1037-1039). My reading of Griselda's performance responds to the longstanding controversy over her rhetorical role in the tale: I argue that Griselda does not exemplify an ethic of subservience for an audience of "noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence," but rather an ethic of accountability and contractual fidelity for irresponsible rulers like her husband (1183). I also trace Walter's trajectory over the course of the tale to reveal how he gradually acquires a greater sense of accountability to his household and his subjects as Griselda's performance unfolds. Although Griselda's strategies differ drastically from those of Prudence and the Wife of Bath, her husband's transformation demonstrates the iconoclastic power of her counsel and suggests that she may have more in common with the Wife of Bath than the Clerk's envoy implies (*ClT* 1170-1212).

Chapter Three, "'Muchel Care and Wo:' The Making of a Counselor in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*," examines the relationship between wifely counsel and marital antagonism in Chaucer's portrait of Alison of Bath. In marked contrast to *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee*, this text depicts marriages wherein *both* parties practice deceit, suspicion, exploitation, and belligerence. Moreover, Alison differs from other wife-counselors in her tendency to seek out conflict and create instability. But her prologue suggests that some kinds of marital strife can result in the "schooling" of both spouses, as well as in their increased mutual respect: "But atte laste, with muchel care and wo," she recalls, referring to her fifth marriage, "We fille accorded by us selven two" (*WBP* 812). My study illuminates Alison's transformation into a more effective and conscientious counselor over the course of her tumultuous “scoleiyng” by “fyve husbondes” (44f).

Chapter Four, “Curative Instabilities: Disport, Quest, and Multiplicity in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*,” explains how Alison’s tale elaborates on her prologue's theme of instability as an engine for positive change. My study identifies mobility and multiplicity as two sources of narrative and rhetorical instability in the tale and argues that Alison promotes these concepts as strategies for reform. I theorize the knight's act of rape at the beginning of the tale as a perversion of male “disport”—a driving problem in *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee*—and argue that Guinevere's riddle serves to transmute the knight's mobility from a criminal mode of disport into an edifying quest. I also contend with historicist criticism to argue that the queen is better understood as a counselor than as an intercessor. My section on multiplicity addresses the diverse perspectives the knight encounters on his quest and argues that even the antifeminist stereotypes are morally valuable, insofar as they add to his confusion and thus weaken his sense of authority.[4] I propose that the shape-shifting loathly lady's rhetorical techniques, in their sheer variety and ethical imperfections, speak to Alison's argument for the civic value of diverse, experimental forms of wifely counsel in literature and life.

My attention to positive depictions of wifely counsel amplifies some of the more radical arguments at play in the *Tales*. In aggregate, the texts in my study tend to undermine the credibility of patriarchal leadership in legal, ecclesiastical, and governmental structures; to credit female characters with superior competence and wisdom; and to promote marriage as politically advantageous for women and morally essential for men. By discerning these themes, I do not mean to negate the complications inherent in Chaucer's depictions of women. Rather, my aim is to show that Chaucer's interest in the political value of women's wisdom withstands the complexities of his investigation.

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[4] See Susan Phillips, *Transforming Talk* (University Park, Pennsyvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007): “[N]umerous pilgrims and their characters challenge the interpretation of various ‘acutoritees,’ pitting one against another, as Chaucer advocates multiplicity over singularity” (105-106).

On the most general level, I hope my dissertation will challenge a bias in contemporary Chaucer scholarship against reading the *Tales* for feminist political arguments. In his chronicle of contemporary Chaucer scholarship, Ethan Knapp traces this tendency to Elaine Tuttle Hansen's *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (1992) and concurs with her “acuity” in rejecting a “feminist Chaucer.” Knapp claims that Chaucer's “experiments with a feminized self-presentation are used to describe the vulnerabilities and marginilizations to which even men were vulnerable” (349-350). As Susan Carter notes in her discussion of the Wife of Bath texts, the stigma of associating Chaucer with feminism has also influenced Chaucer pedagogy: “It is a commonplace when teaching [these texts] to stress the anachronism of calling Chaucer a feminist” (329). But rejecting the *Tales*’ feminist resonances can lead to inaccurate reading, obscuring examples of women’s civic participation and leadership that are crucial to the narrative action and political themes in many of the *Tales.* In spotlighting the remarkable success of wife-counselors in *The Tale of Melibee, The Clerk's Tale, The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, I hope to show that even the more controversial of these characters embody subversive ideas about women's potential to improve public life.

CHAPTER ONE

The Counsel of Dame Prudence in *The Tale of Melibee*

Articles on *The Tale of Melibee* often open by acknowledging its unpopularity among modern readers, and many critics have expressed puzzlement as to why the tale exists at all (Collette, "Heeding the Counsel" 416).[5] Different versions of the same question surface again and again across decades of scholarship: "why did Chaucer pay *Le Livre de Melibee et de Dame Prudence* the honor of such a close, one might justifiably say slavish, translation?" (Owen 267-268); "was it also regarded as dry and unpalatable by its medieval listeners?" (Volk-Birke 229); and, to quote the title of Edward Foster's 2000 article, "Has anyone here read *Melibee*?" Even more favorable readings, such as Stephen Yeager's 2014 study of the tale's poetics, reflect the assumption that readers need a complex "interpretive program" in order to appreciate the text (307).[6]

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[5] For a typical opening paragraph on the unpopularity of *The Tale of Melibee*, see Sabine Volk-Birke's Chapter XI, "Preaching Disguised: The *Tale of Melibee*," in *Chaucer and Medieval Preaching* (Tübingen: Narr, 1991), 228.

[6] See Stephen Yaeger, "Chaucer's Prudent Poetics," *The Chaucer Review* 48.3 (2104) 8. Yaeger borrows the phrase "interpretive program" from Jon Whitman's book *Allegory* (Cambridge, Massachussetts: Harvard University Press, 1987). Patricia DeMarco's analysis of the the tale epitomizes a tendency among most twentieth-century critics to read the *Melibee* as a treatise on revenge, and mercy rather than as a tale. DeMarco explains the *Melibee* as primarily an ethical manifesto on "the illegitimacy of private violence wielded by the individual;" her particular intervention is to emphasize

Yet the *Melibee* succeeds immediately as an act of storytelling with a member of its inscribed audience. When the pilgrims' host, Harry Bailey, interrupts the "drasty speche" and "rym dogerel" of *Sir Thopas*, he insists that the Chaucer-pilgrim start over with an altogether different tale, "In which ther be som murthe or som doctryne" (923, 925, 933-935). The Chaucer-pilgrim responds with *The Tale of Melibee*, which indeed leaves the Host in mirthful spirits. After the tale*,* Harry launches into a comic, self-deprecating monologue about his hostile wife, Goodelief, whom he impersonates with relish, and remarks that he wishes she had the patience of "this Melibeus wyf Prudence" (1895, 1889-1923). Harry's high-spirited reaction to the tale undermines the longstanding modern assumption that readers need a complex interpretive system to engage with it.

The *Melibee*'s medieval and early modern reception mirrored Harry's enthusiasm. Glenn Burger notes that *The Tale of Melibee* was "one of the most frequently anthologized of the *Canterbury Tales* during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries." He argues that the text attracted a robust and diverse readership because of its rhetorical "fluidity and openness," which allowed for "a wider variety of lay readers' personal intervention in the story." Burger glosses the "story" of the tale as an "agential plot," in which one character becomes a more self-aware "agent," actor, or decision-

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the tale's reliance on "Romanist legal thinking" ("Violence, Law, and Ciceronian Ethics in Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*, *SAC* 30 [2008], 169). Ultimately, DeMarco's article is less invested in narrative than in the particular ethical standards that Prudence elaborates; her interpretation is fairly typical in casting Prudence's sources as the text's central source of meaning. David Aers' argument that the tale encapsulates Chaucer's views on Christianity is in some ways opposite to DeMarco's argument about secularism, but Aers imparts exactly the same privilege to source texts over narrative ("Whose Virtues?," *Medieval Literature and Historical Inquiry* [Rochester, New York: D.S. Brewer, 2000], 70).

maker through another character's counsel.[7] Although the *Melibee*'s compilation of quotations and proverbs reiterating “traditional clerical authority” certainly appealed to its earliest readers, the story’s historical popularity among ideologically diverse audiences suggests that the tale derives more of its rhetorical power from the events that it narrates than from an enduring core of theological, philosophical, or metaliterary meaning (Burger 164-165). A surface reading of *The Tale of Melibee* can help us recover the narrative that resonated with its contemporary audience.

Harry's reaction to the tale suggests a way to refine Burger's reading of the “agential plot:” the Host's main takeaway is an admiration for “this Melibeus wyf Prudence” as a model of wifely cooperation (1896). Harry’s focus on Prudence suggests that the tale's narrative is not so much about Melibee's “becoming an agent,” as Scanlon argues, as it is about Prudence *making* him one (210). Whereas critics often read Prudence as an androgynous allegory, “female more by an accident of Latin grammar than because of her intrinsic nature” (Diamond 66), Harry understands her in human terms, imagining her as a replacement for his own wife. It is not the content of

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[7] See Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: 2007 [reprint]). Carolynn Van Dyke also builds on Scanlon's work and reads the tale as a story about counsel (*Chaucer’s Agents* [Madison, New Jersey: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005], 256). David Wallace (*Chaucerian Polity* [Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997]), Glenn Burger (*Chaucer’s Queer Nation* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003]), and Holly Crocker (*Chaucer’s Visions of Manhood* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007]) have undertaken reconsiderations of *The Tale of Melibee* that address the importance of the domestic life in the narrative, but their areas of interest differ from my own. Crocker reads the conversation with Melibee as a debate about “the quality of women’s counsel” but tends to see Prudence as representing a kind of abstract feminine agency rather than an embodied character (40-41).

Prudence's counsel but her patient performance as a counselor that he extrapolates from the tale in relation to lived experience.

Taking a cue from Harry's understanding of Prudence, I suggest reading *The Tale of Melibee* as Chaucer's most self-conscious and thoroughly elaborated depiction of wifely counsel. Wifely counsel is the most frequent and structurally fundamental event in the tale: after home invaders attack Dame Prudence and their daughter, Sophie, while Melibee is away, Prudence counsels her husband not to retaliate, counsels her attackers to arrange a truce, and finally counsels her husband to make a public statement of forgiveness. This literal reading of events not only recuperates an engaging way into the text but also reveals underexplored themes related to gender, marriage, and politics in the tale. As a narrative of wifely counsel, *The Tale of Melibee* casts the domestic sphere as an intellectual and political forum, and wifely counsel as an engine of civic reform.[8]

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[8] The few critics who take a more plot-centric approach to reading the *Melibee* have touched on the importance of marriage and domestic life in shaping the story. Somewhat in passing, Burger glosses "Melibee's marriage to Prudence […] as a private, interactive dialogue crucial to identity formation" (166). In a more thorough investigation of marriage in the text, Wallace reads the tale as a story about "a household dominated by a powerful, irascible, and violent male" (212). Both of these literalist readings hint at the thematic centrality of household life, but neither fully acknowledges Prudence's dominant role as a counselor-figure. Daniel Rubey surmises that "a large part of the appeal of this tale for contemporary audiences must have derived from the spectacle of a wife teaching her husband and modifying his behavior" ("The Five Wounds of Melibee's Daughter," *Masculinities in Chaucer*, ed. Peter G. Beidler [Cambridge, United Kingdom: D. S. Brewer, 1998], 257-172) (158). But the operative concept in this reading is "spectacle:" Rubey understands Prudence's "feminine" performance as external to the prevailing civic order and claims that it merely reinforces a masculine biblical ethics of mercy in a feudal context. In his focus on Christianity as an antidote to feudal vigilantism and on Melibee's "new masculinity" (165), Rubey pays little attention to Prudence's wifehood after his passing speculation about the tale's medieval reception.

In the following chapter, I show how Prudence exploits the relative privacy and longevity of married life to effect an ethical transformation in her husband and ultimately her community. In Section One, I draw attention to overlooked narrative and descriptive details that bring wifely counsel to life in the tale. I also tease out the tale's arguments for paying attention to these details and for the importance of specificity in counsel. In Section Two, I examine the tale's depiction of domestic life as a venue for counsel. My analysis reveals that Prudence's marriage to Melibee creates an ideal environment for cautious and thorough critical thinking. In a briefly concluding section, I touch on the tale's ending, in which Prudence proves her merits as a counselor in the public sphere.

I. Particularities:

Specificity and detail in storytelling and counsel

My reading of *The Tale of Melibee* as a story of wifely counsel begins with the observation that the text contains more specifics—concrete, incidental narrative and descriptive details—than critics tend to acknowledge. For many modern scholars, the tale's "allegorical structure" evokes "a universalizing medieval Christian time and space" that entails "a transcendental mode of signification" and trumps "extraneous" particularities (Burger 173). I would argue, however, that the text moves *away from* "a transcendental mode," as it is more obviously about the *process* by which Prudence and Melibee apply transcendental wisdom than it is about the ideals they may personify or the wisdom they draw on. Narrative details in *The Tale of Melibee* are minimalistic but hyper-focused and purposeful, marshaled to depict the primary dramatic action of a wife transforming her husband through counsel.

The beginning of the tale contains a high concentration of details that should prepare us to read it as a literal narrative of domestic and public events. Although modern readers have found it difficult to reconcile *The Tale of Melibee* with the rest of the *Tales*, its opening passage immediately places the *Melibee* in conversation with vivid, plot-driven *Canterbury* texts. In the first line, the Chaucer-pilgrim describes a home invasion that occurs after Melibee leaves his house “for his desport” and goes “into the feeldes hym to pleye” (968). This line divulges a character detail that connects Melibee with a major theme in *The Canterbury Tales* and especially with men in other tales of wifely counsel. As I will further explain in later chapters, Melibee's “desport” exemplifies a pattern of behavior that *The Clerk's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and other *Canterbury* texts attribute to young men in need of counsel. In *The Tale of Melibee*, a patriarch's disport exposes his family to danger, giving way to a violent incident that sets the counsel narrative in motion.

Chaucer underscores the importance of this moment by inventing a setting for Melibee's disport. “The feeldes” do not appear in Chaucer's French source, Renaud de Louens' *Le Livre de Melibée et de Dame Prudence*, or in Renaud's Latin source, Albertano of Brescia's *Liber consolationis et consilii*. Chaucer’s insertion of “feeldes” serves partly to highlight the ironic tension between Melibee’s pursuit of leisure and the attack his family suffers. It also links *The Tale of Melibee* to the tale that immediately precedes it, *Sir Thopas*, which contains the same image in lines 909-915.[9] More generally, the image of the fields aligns *The Tale of Melibee* with most of the other *Canterbury* tales, which consistently begin with details about geographic setting. Chaucer's brief nod to a physical environment thus invites us to read the *Melibee* as an imaginary tale and not merely a treatise on the topic of "private violence" versus institutional justice (DeMarco 169).

The account of the crime that occurs during Melibee's absence is especially loaded with detail. The Chaucer-pilgrim specifies that Melibee leaves for the fields with the doors to his home shut tightly, that the invaders are not strangers but enemies of Melibee, and that they use ladders to climb inside the windows. Once inside the home, the invaders assault Prudence and Sophie, wounding Sophie in her feet, hands, ears, nose, and mouth, and leaving mother and child for dead (969). Upon returning home and discovering his wounded wife and daughter, Melibee begins "to wepe and crye," "lyk a mad man rentynge his clothes" (973). His reaction to the attack—weeping, tearing his garments—is markedly visceral. Despite their brevity, the episodes of the invasion and Melibee's return are rendered in specific terms, and the people they depict are embodied. The tale's opening not only establishes social and familial relationships between the key figures in the narrative but endows them with physicality and existential vulnerability.

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[9] Benson cites Scattergood's suggestion in *Chaucer and the French War* (*Court and Poet*, ARCA 5, ed. Glyn S. Burgess [Liverpool, United Kingdom: Francis Cairns, 1981]) that the repeated image of the fields "establishes continuity between" the *Melibee* and *Sir Thopas* (Benson 924). See J. Burke Severs' edition of Reynaud de Louens' *Le Livre de Melibee et de Dame Prudence* in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (eds. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941], 560-614) and Diane Bornstein's article "Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* as an Example of the *Style Clergial* (*The Chaucer Review* 12.4 [Spring 1978]), which lists phrases in Chaucer "that add details to the narrative or alter meaning" of the French (241). For Renaud's Latin source, see Alberano of Brescia's *Liber consoltionis et consilii* (ed. Sundby, Chaucer Society, 2nd Series, Vol. 8 [London: Triibner, 1873]). Askins' "The Tale of Melibee" in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales* (Vol. 1), Chaucer Studies, eds. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Woodbridge, United Kingdom: D. S. Brewer, 2002), contains the French along with English translated from the Latin and Askins' contextual notes (321-407).

The Chaucer-pilgrim's description of the attack and of Sophie's wounds is a narrative of graphic, literal violence. Yet, as Wallace notes, Prudence offers a built-in allegorical discussion of the home invasion that can overshadow the literal account. Later in the tale, well into the course of her counsel, Prudence tells Melibee to think of the three enemies who broke into his home as "the three enemys of mankynde—that is to seyn, the flessh, the feend, and the world," whom he has allowed to enter his being "by the wyndowes" of his five senses and to wound his soul in five places, just as his daughter was wounded in five places (1420-1426). But, as Wallace insists, "Prudence's allegorization is only of local and limited effect" (240).[10] Her allegory of "the flessh, the feend, and the world" serves the tale more as an event in itself—an act of counsel—than as a schematic explanation for other events. Prudence is not illuminating *the* transcendental meaning of her household trauma; rather, she is riffing on the details of this trauma to generate new meaning in the form of a teaching tool or mnemonic device. Her allegory provides Melibee with a new way of understanding the mental temptations he must contend with in his quest for a solution.

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[10] Wallace makes a similar point about Prudence's use of citations: "A citation of an *auctor* aims not to open the window onto universal truth, but rather to address the state of Melibee's emotions and to nudge them down the path toward 'a good conclusioun'" (233).

If the Chaucer-pilgrim's detailed crime narrative roots the rest of the tale in a concrete, high-stakes domestic and civic context, Prudence's interpretation of the details empowers her husband to think and act more responsibly within that context. The narrator of the tale supplies particularities—the facts about Melibee's enemies, the invasion, and his daughter's wounds—and Prudence devises a creative, in some ways esoteric, pedagogical use for them. Although her academic rhetoric and the formal trappings of allegory create an expectation for universal wisdom, Prudence's counsel is emphatically particular in its origins, its context, and its applications.

Like the details of the crime at the beginning of the tale, character names also serve to create a narrative specificity that is in marked tension with any universal wisdom the tale might seem to offer. Sophie's name is especially loaded. As Larry Benson and Diane Bornstein have observed, Melibee and Prudence's daughter is anonymous in Chaucer's Latin and French sources; the name "Sophie," like the image of the fields, is his own insertion (Benson 924, Bornstein 241). Although Sophie receives little stage time in the narrative, both the literal and the allegorical significations of her name are integral to the tale's argument for the importance of specificity in counsel.

On a literal level, Chaucer's use of the English diminutive "Sophie" rather than the fully Greek "Sophia" seems a deliberate nod to her specificity or personhood. The brevity of the child's appearance in the tale makes literal sense: there is no reason Sophie should be present for her parents' tense conversation on retribution and political strategy. But Chaucer's insistence on her personhood at the beginning of the tale plants that conversation firmly in a household context. Naming Sophie brings the wounded family in the tale to life. The image of a battered child haunts the rest of the text and heightens the concrete stakes of Prudence's counsel, which is in large part motivated by the imperative to preserve her family.

On the other hand, Sophie's name certainly has allegorical import. The literal attack on *Sophia* resonates symbolically with the detrimental effects of household trauma on Melibee's thinking and judgment. But the allegorical valence of "Sophie" also underscores the importance of Prudence's attention to particularity. If we understand the child as a personification of wisdom, her absence from the majority of this intellectual tale becomes conspicuous, provoking us to ask why wisdom should be so inoperative in a story about counsel. The contrast between Sophie's brief presence in the narrative and Prudence's near-total dominance of the text suggests that prudence—the practical ability to aggregate, evaluate, and apply wisdom in a particular context—is the *sine qua non* of post-traumatic problem-solving and peace-making. Sophie is a wounded ideal in the tale, impotent in her youth and innocence and incapacitated by senseless violence. Prudence, by contrast, is resilient, recovering from her wounds faster than her husband recovers from seeing them. The tale depicts her prudential counsel as imperfect or un-ideal, insofar as it contains contradictions and "a melange of sometimes incompatible voices" (Van Dyke 256). But in the aftermath of trauma and the violence it does to ideals, Prudence has the resourcefulness, agility, and experience to build a pragmatic response from the fragments of different authoritative traditions, tailored to the details of her family's circumstance.

Although not original to the Middle English, Melibee's name also speaks to his particularity as a character and his consequent need for particularized counsel. Of all the names in the tale, his is the most distinct and mysterious, and its moral ambiguity has major thematic implications. Unlike the Latin-derived “Prudence” and Greek-derived “Sophie,” “Melibeus” is a faux-Latin coinage. The name does not evoke an abstract concept or ethical ideal; rather, it combines a concrete noun (*mel*) and an action verb (*bibens*) to create a visual image: “a man that drynketh hony” (1410). Whereas wisdom and prudence each have immediately apparent, positive connotations, honey has a heritage of both extremely positive and extremely negative meanings across a wide range of literary traditions. As a result, Melibee's name lends itself to a variety of conflicting interpretations.

In her counsel, Prudence exploits the ambiguous moral status of honey to interpret Melibee's name as a critical diagnosis of his character: “Thou has ydronke so muchel hony of sweete temporeel richesses, and delices and honours of this world,” she tells him, “that thou art drunken and hast forgeten Jhesu Crist thy creator.” Prudence casts Ovid and Solomon as fellow counselors whose “wordes” on honey Melibee has ignored: “ne thou ne hast nat wel ytaken kep to the wordes of Ovide, that seith, / 'Under the hony of the goodes of the body is hyd the venym that sleeth the soule.' / And Salomon seith, 'If thou hast founden hony, ete of it that suffiseth, / for if thou ete of it out of mesure, thou shalt spewe’ and be nedy and povre” (1411-1416). In total, Prudence offers three authoritative readings of her husband's name, or three ways in which honey symbolizes the adverse effects of wealth: wealth can intoxicate the person who possesses it, it can mask his wickedness, and it can make him sick. The grotesque and foreboding images of drunkenness, oblivion, venom, slaying, vomiting, and poverty that Prudence culls from her source texts serve to humble Melibee, to remind him of his fallenness and humanity—“Thou has doon synne agayn oure Lord Crist”—to deconstruct his moral indignation, and consequently to undermine his sense of entitlement to retribution (1420-1427).

Prudence’s deceptively clear moral verdict on honey results from her own rhetorical choice to omit its more positive connotations. She expounds on Melibee's name in the same pragmatic way she conceptualizes Sophie's wounds and the household invasion: by abstracting a literal detail of the family's experience for pedagogical effect, with the aim of changing Melibee’s attitude. But given the many meanings of honey, there is no single, overriding explanation for Melibee's name. In *The Tale of Melibee* (and in Solomon) alone, honey appears to take on different connotations at different moments. When Melibee quotes Solomon to commend Prudence's defense of wifely counsel, he invokes both the sweetness and the healthful effects of honey: “I se wel that the word of Salomon is sooth. He seith that ‘wordes that been spoken discreetly by ordinaunce been honycombes, for they yeven swetnesse to the soule and hoolsomnesse to the body’” (1113). The variability of honey’s meanings and moral significance in the tale corresponds to Melibee’s moral inconsistencies and the malleability of his constitution. If moral inconsistency is a defining trait of Christian personhood, then Melibee’s name invites us to think about him as particularly human: susceptible to contingencies, dynamic, imperfect—yet, to an extent, perfectible, and thus ripe for transformation through counsel.

In addition to underscoring his malleability, the “honey” in Melibee's name also reinforces the crucial narrative detail of his “sweete temporeel richesses” (1411). Prudence explicitly addresses the issue of Melibee's wealth in her remarks on honey and suggests that money and power have compromised his moral faculties. But Melibee's socioeconomic status also has a more global effect on Prudence's counsel and the way we read it. Being “mighty and riche,” Melibee has trouble finding transparent, trustworthy counselors in the public sphere and as a result must rely almost exclusively on his wife's advice (967, 1366). The first time Prudence advises Melibee to consult a council of his peers, she recommends rounding up “trewe freendes alle” and “lynage whiche that been wise” (1002). But Melibee is unable to discern his true friends and inadvertently invites “neighebores ful of envye, his feyned freendes that semeden reconciled, and his flatereres.” Although each of these parties may have a different motivation for envying, flattering, or “feigning friendship” with Melibee, the common denominator in their reactions to his misfortune is an express interest in his wealth and connections: all of the untrustworthy counselors respond to his dilemma by “preisynge greetly Melibee of might, of power, of richesse, and of freendes, despisynge the power of his adversaries.” The tale's description of these counselors draws a correlation between social politics, poor counsel, and violence: whatever their reasons, the council members who are most alert to Melibee's money and power end up aggravating his distress and urging him to hastily make war on his enemies (1018-1020). Prudence's commitment to Melibee in marriage minimizes sociopolitical friction between them and conduces to more cooperative, transparent, and ethical counsel.

When Melibee returns from the assembly, Prudence addresses and corrects for its failures, largely by forcing him to think in more specific terms about his dilemma. Increasingly reliant on the wisdom of her customized counsel, Melibee asks Prudence to “condescende in especial” (1235) or “get down to particulars” (Benson 225) and evaluate the council he convened. One of her tasks is to deconstruct the reductive social hierarchy that Melibee's male counselors reinforced with their flattery. With their duplicitous praise of his wealth, these counselors sent Melibee a loud message that he ought to be esteemed and his enemies despised. In counseling him on the folly of vengeance-taking, Prudence corrects this paradigm by confronting her husband with the subtleties of his socioeconomic situation. She acknowledges his power and wealth but insists that he take the particulars of his social and financial position into greater account.

Gradually, Prudence builds a pragmatic argument against retributive violence from specific observations about Melibee's family structure and finances. She draws on her detailed knowledge of household politics to speculate about how the family’s enemies might incorporate specific information about Melibee into a military strategy. Observing, for example, that Melibee has few male relatives, Prudence warns that his enemies might wager they can kill him with impunity. Although Melibee is “myghty and riche,” he would be “but alone” and extremely vulnerable in his pursuit of vengeance: “for certes ye han no child but a doghter,/ ne ye han bretheren, ne cosyns germayns, ne noon oother for drede sholde stinte to plede with yow or to destroye youre persone.” The state of Melibee's finances would also make it easy for his enemies to bribe a killer from among his own household. Prudence reminds Melibee that his “richesses,” which “mooten been dispended in diverse parties,” would provide little incentive for a friend to resist betraying him: when “every wight hath his part,” she speculates, “they ne wollen taken but litel reward to venge thy deeth.” Melibee's foes are much better connected than he is. Three in number, they each have “manie children, bretheren, cosyns, and oother ny kyndrede.” Even if Melibee could kill “two or three,” there would be enough remaining to avenge the deaths by slaying Melibee. Prudence concedes that Melibee's kindred are more “siker and steadfast” than his adversaries', but she reminds Melibee that his relatives are only distantly related to him, and that his enemies have close relatives, so that “hir condicioun is bet than yours” (1365-1376). Had Melibee been mindful of these particularities, he might have recognized the folly of the war-mongers at his council.

Though compatible with loftier and more general arguments for Christian mercy elsewhere in the tale, Prudence's argument for nonviolence in this passage consists entirely of shrewd political and military calculations. These worldly calculations grow out of a detailed familiarity with household structures and financial practices. Her wifely perspective and experiential knowledge disprove the common scholarly misapprehension that “[her] arguments and her words are men’s,” that she is merely regurgitating generalized, institutional wisdom, and that her performance of counsel is a far cry “from the Wife of Bath’s experientially-based challenge” to male authority (Laskaya 162). Although Prudence relies heavily on male *auctors* in her counsel, she also insists that Melibee pay greater heed to the circumstantial details and domestic particularities of his dilemma.

II. Marriage as a venue for counsel:
Household time and wifely rhetoric

Honest and wise counselors are present at Melibee's public counsel, but their lack of political cohesion and the weakness of their social ties to Melibee prevent them from making a clear and compelling case for peace. A group of surgeons at the assembly advises against war, but their spokesman stresses that Melibee should not understand them as political allies. It is the healing ethic of their profession, and not an allegiance to Melibee in particular, that requires the surgeons not "to norice were," and they must categorically refuse to privilege Melibee's interest over that of his enemies, since "unto oure art it is nat pertinent to norice were ne parties to supporte" (1012-1014). The physicians argue "Almoost right in the same wise" but throw in a non sequitur that contradicts the argument for peace: "right as maladies been dured by hir contraries, right so shul men warisshe were by vengeaunce" (1016-1017). Though "an avocat that was wys" asks for time to deliberate on the matter (1021-1034), vociferous young hawks call for combat (1036). At the end of the meeting, a wise old man tries to dissuade Melibee against war, espousing a pacifism that foreshadows Prudence's (1037-1046). But the war-mongers drown him out, and the man resigns to being ignored, quoting Solomon: "Ther as thou ne mayst have noon audience, enforce thee nat to speke" (1046-1047). Amid the confusion and temptations of the public assembly, the wise counselor cannot command Melibee's "audience" and so retreats into silence.

The wise old man and the other honest members of the assembly fail to convince Melibee because their individual commitments to his welfare are not strong enough to compel them to organize. They do not collaborate with each other to craft a rhetorically cohesive argument, and they do not espouse any motives to collaborate with Melibee in particular. As a result, the flatterers, who *do* espouse loyalty to Melibee, succeed in egging on his desire for vengeance (1018-1020).

Prudence succeeds where the honest council-members fail partly because her commitment to Melibee in marriage motivates her to persist in counseling him. But her intimate familiarity with Melibee is also a rhetorical advantage: by crafting personalized appeals that acknowledge Melibee's desires and remind him of their mutual commitment, she maintains his attention and trust. Furthermore, her prolonged and exclusive access to Melibee in a domestic context provides her with the time and privacy to elaborate her counsel with unparalleled thoroughness and clarity. More than any of Melibee's other counselors, she has the environmental and rhetorical resources to transform the way he thinks and acts.

In her demand for Melibee to consider the details of his economic situation, Prudence demonstrates an experiential knowledge of household politics. But her counsel also reflects a more intuitive and intimate form of wifely wisdom: a familiarity with her husband's feelings and ideas. This familiarity equips Prudence to coach Melibee through the ethical and intellectual challenges of evaluating diverse counsel. After witnessing his initial reaction to the home invasion, she can later discern when he is biased, insincere, or insufficiently critical in his reception of new arguments; she can also acknowledge and gently challenge his stubborn inclinations in her rhetoric. As a result, Prudence is both a counselor and a meta-counselor, advising him not only on the dilemma at hand but also on questions about how best to take counsel.

Until Prudence reforms him, Melibee exhibits a strong bias towards faulty counsel that merely validates his initial desire for retribution. Since Melibee did not enter into his public meeting in a spirit of sincere inquiry, Prudence shows him that the event "sholde nat, as to speke properly, be called a conseillyng, but a mocioun or a moevyng of folye" (1238). After the commotion of the assembly, she asks him what he understood by the physicians' theory that "in maladies [...] oon contrarie is warisshed by another contrarie." When Melibee answers that the proverb implies one should take vengeance against wrongdoing, she laments, "Lo, lo, [...] how lightly is every man enclined to his owene desir and to his owene plesaunce!" (1277, 1283). Invoking the wisdom of Saint Paul, Prudence shows Melibee his interpretive error: to cure wrongdoing with its contrary would mean to cure it with peace and mercy, not with further violence (1285-1294). Although she understands Melibee's inclination towards "his owene desir and [...] his owene pleasaunce" as ordinary human folly, common to "every man," her familiarity with his experience allows her to diagnose the particular form this folly takes in her husband: a blinding desire to validate his rage. Thus Prudence turns the "moevyng of folye" that was his botched assembly into a rich pedagogical opportunity. She both corrects the physicians' interpretation of their own theory and shows Melibee that his emotional bias makes him susceptible to false logic.

Prudence's familiarity with Melibee's emotional habits also empowers her to anticipate and counter his resistance to her counsel. When Melibee asks her to evaluate the counselors he has assembled, she prefaces her critique with a disclaimer designed to maximize his receptivity to her counsel. Prudence beseeches Melibee “in al humblesse” not to “wilfully replie agayn my resouns, ne distempre youre herte, thogh I speke thyng that yow displese” (1336). Her direct appeal meets with no resistance, and her critique succeeds; Melibee replies “I graunte wel that I have ered” and says he is “al redy to chaunge my counseillours right as thow wold devyse” (1261, 1263). The “humblesse” and forthrightness with which Prudence frames her critique seem to elicit the same qualities in her husband's response.

Although it would not necessarily take a wife to anticipate Melibee's temper and craft a disclaimer to mitigate it, neither of the wise counselors who speaks up at his public assembly frame his counsel with personalized appeals. The wise “advocat” speaks in especially impersonal terms, relying on passive constructions, abstract nouns, and legalistic reasoning. He opens with the vague claim that “the nede for which we ben assembled […] is a ful hevy thyng and an heigh matiere” and uses almost equally vague language to list the reasons Melibee's dilemma is “heavy and high:” “the wrong and [...] the wikedness that hath been doon,” “the greet damages that in tyme comyng been possibe to fallen for this same cause,” and “the grete richesse and power of the parties” (1021-1025). If the surgeon’s professional ethics alienate him from Melibee’s cause, the lawyer’s professional rhetoric also has an alienating effect; it transmutes the compelling particulars of Melibee’s case into logical but sterile generalities that fail to contend with his rage.

The “olde wise” man who stands up later uses far more vivid rhetoric, invoking human subjects and action verbs to make what is probably the strongest case for peace at the meeting: “ther is ful many a man that crieth 'Werre, werre!' that woot fel little what were ammounteth," he warns; "ther is ful many a child unborn of his mooder that shal sterve yong by cause of thilke werre" (1037-1038). But his sweeping, third-person claims about the instigators and victims of war are too general and distant to resonate with most of his listeners, who experience the man's intervention as a "sermon" and "beden hym ful ofte his wordes for to abregge" (1043-1044). By using direct address and acknowledging Melibee's emotional subjectivity, Prudence engages his attention and preempts his emotional disengagement or resistance. Although her ideas are similar to those of the old man and the advocate, her unique familiarity with Melibee enables her to craft more personalized, immediate, and persuasive rhetoric.

In addition to making overly general claims, the well-intentioned male counselors at Melibee's assembly also fail to establish their loyalty or good faith. Prudence, by contrast, prioritizes her self-presentation as an honest and committed counselor. Her wifehood is integral to this self-presentation. By frequently invoking their shared investments as a couple, Prudence establishes trust and transparency with her husband. When she pleads for Melibee not to "wilfully replie agayn [her] resouns, ne distempre [his] herte," she strengthens her appeal for his patience by reminding him that her critical input is intended for his best interest: "For God woot that, as in myn entente, I speke it for youre beste, for youre honour, and for youre profite eke" (1236-1237). The loaded terms "honour" and "profit" evoke various socioeconomic, moral, and material advantages that Prudence and Melibee would understand as beneficial to both of them. As a legal, social, economic, and spiritual partner to her husband, Prudence shares the greatest possible vested interest in Melibee's success. More than any of his male counselors, she can sincerely claim to espouse her husband's honor and profit as her highest priorities, since her own honor and profit are bound up in his.

By affirming that all of her counsel is for their mutual benefit, Prudence saves Melibee the mental work of discerning her motives and allows him to focus more fully on the content of her arguments. Most notably, she invokes the marriage bond and her credentials as a loyal wife to efficiently neutralize Melibee’s deeply counterproductive distrust of her gender. Early in the text, Melibee threatens to dismiss his wife's counsel entirely on the grounds of her sex. In response to his malicious comment that “alle wommen been wikke” (1057), Prudence argues that, though some women are disposed to counsel men for evil ends, she in particular has her husband’s best interest in mind, as evinced by past events in their marriage: “sire, by youre leve, [wicked] am nat I, / for ye han ful oft essayed my grete silence and my grete pacience, and eek how wel that I kan hyde and hele thynges that men oghte secreely to hyde” (1088-1089). Here, Prudence invites Melibee to recall past situations in which she demonstrated specific traits associated with good counsel: patience and discretion. She also supplements this personalized plea with a more conventional case, comparing her own righteous aims to those of Rebecca, Judith, and Abigail, whose actions in the Bible prove that “ful many a good woman” has been “ful discret and wis in conseillyng” (1096-1102). But even this seemingly general argument relies on Melibee’s intimate familiarity with Prudence's moral constitution through marriage. Though any counselor might compare himself to biblical exemplars, he or she would not be able to substantiate these claims as Prudence does. The intimacy and longevity of marriage have allowed her to demonstrate patience and discretion to an exceptional extent—in “grete” measure and “ful oft.” The particular narrative of Melibee’s married life not only provides him with evidence of his counselor’s credentials but also forces him to reconsider his reductive ideas about gender and counsel.

Although Prudence is strategically transparent in her commitment to Melibee's welfare, she must occasionally resort to deceptive rhetoric in pursuit of this end. When, as the tale nears its climax, she counsels her husband to make peace with his enemies, his old pridefulness flares up again, threatening to wreck all their progress. Melibee retorts that showing “greet humylitee or mekenesse” to his adversaries would make them despise him (1675, 1686). In order to get back on track with her counsel, Prudence must humble her husband once and for all. Her strategy is a performance of outrage, or “semblant of wratthe” (1687). She begins her remarks by reminding Melibee of her commitment—“I love youre honour and youre profit as I do myn owene, and evere have doon”—but proceeds by asserting her authority as a counselor and affirming the correctness of he argument: “if I hadde seyd that ye sholde han purchaced the pees and the reconsiliacioun, I ne hadde nat muchel mystaken me ne seyd amys” (1688-1690). The self-assured rhetoric and “wrathful” tone of this claim leave no room for dissent or resistance.

Prudence's performance of rage succeeds at humbling Melibee and forcing him to think critically about his own behavior. He responds, “Dame, I prey yow that ye be nat displeased of thynges that I seye, / for ye knowe wel that I am angry and wroth, and that is no wonder; / and they that been wrothe witen nat wel what they don ne what they seyn” (1697-1701). Melibee's remarks demonstrate the simultaneous affective, rhetorical, and pedagogical effectiveness of Prudence's “semblant of wratthe:” the performance gives him a renewed sense of humility, secures his assent to the argument for peace, and teaches him to think more clearly by controlling his anger. In his response, Melibee shows that he is simultaneously assimilating both Prudence's counsel on how to react to misfortune and her meta-counsel on how to think clearly about counsel.

But notwithstanding this positive outcome, the ethical integrity of Prudence's surprising performance demands investigation. Typically a model of honesty and emotional control, Prudence violates both of these ideals by taking on the guise of rage. Just as Melibee’s flatterers make “semblant of wepyng” in order to garner favor with him, Prudence pursues her desired results through deceptive means, performing her own version of rage to contend with Melibee's (1019). But unlike the flatterers, Prudence has Melibee's honor and profit at heart, as she assures him even while in the throes of her “wratthe.” She also has the time and private access to deconstruct her own rhetorical strategy for Melibee's benefit after it has yielded the desired effect. Leaving off her “semblant of wratthe” as soon as there is no longer a need for it, Prudence debriefs her husband on her performance and reiterates its ultimate aim: “I make no semblant of wratthe ne anger,” she tells him, “but for youre grete profit” (1706). The familiar refrain of Prudence's commitment to her husband's profit signals a return to the trademark transparency and composure of her counsel.

Both Prudence's “wratthe” and her subsequent debriefing of Melibee reflect her unrelenting commitment to thoroughness. Even in her pretend rage, Prudence sustains her exhaustive rhetorical style by dispensing a few nuggets of explicit counsel (1687-1697). And by commenting the rhetorical purpose of her performance, she clarifies any ethical confusion her strategy might have caused. Although medieval writers typically associated talkative women with “unruly,” “uncontrollable” habits of speech, Prudence's verbosity is a systematic bid for thoroughness and clarification (Bodden 6-7).

Critical studies by Diane Bornstein and J. D. Burnley have shown that these rhetorical imperatives inhere throughout *The Tale of Melibee*, and that enhancing linguistic clarity was an imperative for Chaucer when he translated *Le Livre*. Bornstein's meticulous comparative analysis of the English and French versions suggests that Chaucer worked with an eye to heightening Renaud’s “clergial style,” a courtly rhetoric that stressed elaborate, Latinate sentence structures, subordinate clauses, and doublets (237, 239). The study shows that Chaucer extended Prudence’s language into even more ceremonious and thorough turns of phrase than she uses in *Le Livre*.[11] J. D. Burnley draws on and qualifies Bornstein’s reading by showing that Chaucer and his English-speaking peers were well versed in “curial prose”—Burnley's term for the style—from “generations of documentary practice” (594). He argues that, because of its origins in civic and political documents, particularly letters, curial prose style reflects a “desire for a particular kind of clarity” (598).

Bornstein's and Burnley's readings spotlight lucidity and thoroughness as primary values in the text, but neither aims to explore what it means for Prudence to be cast as an agent of English clergial or curial style. *The Tale of Melibee* depicts Prudence transforming the documentary practice of curial prose into a live, household performance. In her insistence on clarity and thoroughness, Prudence reforms her husband's habits of mind and saves the polity from his wrath. By heightening the curial style of his source text, Chaucer shows the viability of marriage as a forum for conscientious and sophisticated counsel on matters of widespread political significance.

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[11] See Bornstein’s charts of comparison (241-252).

The fluid, expansive temporality of marriage allows for all the elaborations and clarifications that Prudence's "curial" counsel entails. But although she exploits this temporality to elucidate her ideas, she does not ramble, as if her time with Melibee were infinite. Instead, she dispenses organized counsel that reflects a strong rhetorical drive and takes issues of timing into account. By remaining acutely attuned to the passage of time and its effects on her husband, Prudence makes shrewd rhetorical calculations about when and how to train his thoughts, tame his emotions, and structure his movements between the household and the public sphere.

For Prudence, wifely speech and household time are complementary instruments of control. One unusual feature of the *Melibee* and the other tales of wifely counsel in my study is that they tend to express a deep concern with the problem of controlling *men's* speech and behavior, reversing the conventional "criminalization of women's speech" (Bodden 7). Early on, *The Tale of Melibee* establishes Melibee as the unruly spouse and Prudence's speech as the antidote to his excesses. Although Melibee is the only member of his household who was not attacked during the home invasion, his grief over the incident is overwhelming, and at first even Prudence has trouble reining it in (973).[12] But eventually she calculates a better time to intervene and make her counsel heard: “this noble wyf Prudence suffred hir housbonde for to wepe and crie as for a certein space, / and whan she saugh hir tyme, she seyde hym in this wise […]” (978-979). The work of transforming Melibee begins when Prudence discerns a strategic moment to diffuse his despair. From this early moment in her performance, considerations of time, pacing, and tact are integral to her counsel.[13]

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[12] "Prudence, his wyf, as ferforth as she dorste, bisoghte hyme of his wepyng for to stynte, / but nat forthy he gan to crie and wepen evere lenger the moore" (974-

Prudence's considerations of tact and timing have roots in classical rhetoric. As David Wallace notes, the phrase “whan she saw hir tyme” occurs at three pivotal moments in *The Tale of Melibee* (979-980, 1051-1052, 1724-1729). In Wallace's reading, the trope speaks to Prudence's reliance on “all that Sophistic rhetoric understands by the concept of *kairos*: the timeliness of an utterance and its appropriateness to the particular circumstances obtaining at the moment of speaking” (233). Wallace even argues that understanding “*kairos* (or *quando*) as a guiding principle” in the tale can help modern critics make sense of Prudence's abundant, sometimes self-contradictory rhetoric: Melibee's shifting temperaments call for different philosophical perspectives at different moments (233). Like descriptive details pertaining to character and social context in the tale, narrative details related to timing throw the plot of wifely counsel into high relief and show how marriage can conduce to highly particularized counsel.

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975).

[13] Carolyn P. Collette and Nancy Mason Bradbury attribute the tale’s late-medieval popularity to a pervasive cultural “interest in measure, time and value” (“Time, Measure, and Value in Chaucer’s Art and Chaucer’s World,” *The Chaucer Review* 43.4 [2009]) (348).

Although Wallace focuses on the urgent need to deflect Melibee's ire, Prudence's attention to time and pace is more than just a passive or defensive response to her husband's moods.[14] Her timing is also a means of diffusing and transforming those moods. Like Lady Philosophy in Chaucer's *Boece*, Prudence exploits the affective power of pacing in her counsel to heal her listener and simultaneously quiet his sense of entitlement. In her article "Chaucer and the Consolation of *Prosimetrum*," Eleanor Johnson shows how Lady Philosophy's use of meter attunes Boethius to the temporal "order that embraces and governs all created phenomena in the universe." By reminding him of this order, Philosophy provides Boethius with a new perspective on his cosmic position that both humbles and comforts him (455). But whereas Philosophy relies on the "sensuality and pleasurability" of song to console Boethius through his despair, Dame Prudence must eschew the intoxicating properties of meter (Johnson 458). As a solitary prisoner, Boethius relies on Lady Philosophy for a sensual path of escape from his rational worldly concerns; as a volatile man of the world, Melibee relies on Prudence for a rational path of escape from his visceral impulses. The deliberately prosaic organization of her "manye faire resouns" gradually leads him to recognize when he is "wrooth" and knows not what he does or what he says (1711, 1699-1700).

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[14] According to Wallace, when Melibee is "running on *ire*," he must "be closeted away and softened by the feminine arts associated with rhetoric and the female body" so that he no longer poses a threat to the public at large (224; emphasis Wallace's). However, as Bornstein and Burnley's research bears out, Prudence's rhetoric should not necessarily be classified as feminine; it reflects a style strongly associated with a public discourse that was male-dominated—or, in its courtliness, perhaps somewhat androgynous. And Prudence's counsel seems designed to make Melibee a more rigorous and clear-headed thinker than to soften him; she is not "charming violence out of him" but rather instructing and enlightening him (Wallace 224).

The strategic pacing and thoroughness of Prudence's rhetoric reinforces the tale's deep philosophical investments in deliberation, caution, and patience. As Melibee's first public meeting demonstrates, these values are all too easily compromised in the context of a public meeting, where time is necessarily limited and counselors rush to push political agendas. Melibee's eagerness to go to war after the first assembly demonstrates that rushed counsel can result in rushed actions, which can be both inadvisable for the person receiving counsel and dangerous for public safety. As Melibee prepares for battle, Prudence urges him to slow down: "I yow biseche, as hertely as I dar and kan, ne haste yow nat to faste and, for alle gerdons, as yeveth me audience" (1052). In support of her warning against haste, she cites Petrus Alphonsus and two proverbs:[15] "He hasteth wel that wisely kan abyde," and "in wikked haste is no profit'" (1054). The first proverb also appears word-for-word in *Troilus and Criseyde* (956), and both proverbs are among Chaucer's few additions to *Le Livre* (Benson 925). Prudence's express commitment to deliberation and antipathy to haste preclude us from reading the slow-moving prose as parodic.[16] Rather, her curial counsel models a cautious and gradual mode of thinking and acting that conduces to order and peace.

But for all its emphasis on caution, clarity, and reconciliation, Prudence's rhetoric is not without bold variations in tone. The domestic environment allows her to test the boundaries of formality, politeness, and obedience and to alternate more deferent rhetoric with carefully measured provocations. The beginning of the tale sets this pattern in motion: Prudence responds to Melibee’s initial outburst by saying, “why make ye yourself for to be lyk a fool?” (990), yet soon after listens to him “ful debonairly and with greet pacience” and asks “of hym licence for to speke” (1064). Although her accusation of foolishness is crucial to arresting Melibee's attention, her “sweete wordes” and performances of devotion secure his consent to implement her counsel: “wyf,” says Melibee, “by cause of thy sweete wordes, and eek for I have assayed and preved thy grete sapience and thy grete trouthe, I wol governe me by thy conseil in alle thyng” (1113). By insisting that he has “assayed and preved” his wife's merits, Melibee masks his profession of obedience as a claim to authority, then submits himself incrementally—and, in the end, entirely—to the authority of Prudence's wisdom. Prudence’s wifehood thus provides her with a traditional vocabulary of deference that makes her woman's counsel palatable to Melibee at the same time it sustains a private forum for permanently challenging his authority and promulgating her own.

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[15] See also 1133-1137.

[16] In "What Chaucer Really Did to *Le Livre de Melibee*" (*Philological Quarterly* 53 [1974], 304-320), a resoundingly negative article comparing the *Melibee* to its French source, Dolores Palomo, like Bornstein, concludes that Chaucer deliberately translated the work into more elaborate prose than can be found in the French (or, by extension, in Renaud's Latin source); unlike Bornstein, Palomo reads these embellishments as parodic (306).

Coda:

Wifely counsel beyond the household

By the end of the tale, Prudence exercises her authority not just for Melibee’s benefit but for the sake of public welfare. If *The Clerk's Tale* simply tells us that

Griselda, when given the chance, excels as a community leader—"Ther nas discord, rancor, ne hevynesse / In al that land that she ne koude apese, / And wisely brynge hem all in reste and ese"—*The Tale of Melibee* shows Dame Prudence doing the painstaking rhetorical work that goes into healing discord, both at home and in a more public context (432-433).[17] Although most critical studies focus on Prudence's counseling of Melibee, her diplomatic interactions with the family's enemies are equally crucial to effecting the tale's peaceful resolution.

Prudence's successful performance at home convinces Melibee to authorize her meeting with his enemies, to gauge their "wil and [...] entente" (1721-1724). Using organized, assertive, yet generous rhetoric, Prudence assembles her assailants and addresses them "[i]n a goodly manere," beginning with general remarks about "the grete goodes that comen of pees / and the grete harmes and perils that been in were." In typical fashion, she soon gets down to particulars, arguing that the invaders "oughten have greet repentaunce / of the injurie and wrong that they hadden doon to Melibee hir lord, and unto hir, and to hire doghter" (1726-1732). The household's "enemies" respond in a spirit of meekness and apology, with an immediacy that once again speaks to Prudence's effectiveness as a counselor.

Prudence maintains her authority at the meeting by claiming the role of counselor and asserting the previous success of her counsel. At first, the repentant assailants cast Prudence in the more decorous wifely role of a merciful intercessor.

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[17] "Nat oonly this Grisildis thurgh hir wit / Koude al the feet of wyfly moomlinesse, / But eek, whan that the cas required it, / The commune profit koude she redresse. / Ther nas discord, rancor, ne hevynesse / In al that land that she ne koude apese, / And wisely brynge hem alle in reste and ese" (428-434).

Invoking her “wommanly pitee,” they plead for Prudence “to taken swich avysement in this need that we ne oure freendes be nat disherited ne destroyed thurgh oure folye” (1750-1751). Ultimately, Prudence will grant them their wish, but she implicitly rejects the notion of womanly pity in her response to the assailants' plea. She assures the men that they can trust her to persuade Melibee *as his counselor*. With almost comic certainty, she professes to be “right seur that [Melibee] shal nothing doon in this need withouten my conseil.” In her promise to “werken in this cause that by the grace of oure Lord God ye shal been reconciled unto us,” Prudence leaves the office of “grace” or mercy to God and conceives of her own “werk” as a compatible but separate operation (1763-1764). By delivering a strong rhetorical performance and asserting herself as a counselor and political agent, she sets the tone for a rational and orderly reconciliation.

The rest of the tale shows Prudence navigating diverse political contexts to facilitate this truce. Charles Owen sums up this section of the narrative as Prudence’s “[triumph] through a combination of secret diplomacy, public consultation with friends, formal parley with the enemies, and private suasion of her husband” (272). After Prudence assures Melibee that their former enemies are contrite, he asks to obtain “the assent and wyl of oure freendes” before sealing the peace (1778). This time, *Prudence* assembles a council of the family’s allies, and they immediately agree to pursuing a truce (1779-1790). Rather than show that Melibee has learned to discern ethical from duplicitous counselors, the tale depicts Prudence taking over the job and executing it with striking efficiency. Her success in convening this meeting does not undermine the tale’s many implications that Melibee has assimilated her counsel; nonetheless, it suggests that her own command of these lessons is more masterful. Prudence’s high level of public activity near the end of the narrative emphasizes that she is not merely a skillful assistant to her husband. Her political and rhetorical performance throughout the tale is a formative influence on Melibee’s public performance but remains a superior alternative to it.

Still, the final events of the tale emphasize Melibee's ethical progress. At court, he allows Prudence to critique him in public and embraces her counsel before an audience of his friends and enemies. When the assailants offer a full apology at Melibee's court (1806, 1816-1827), he responds by proposing their exile (1834-1835). But Prudence objects, arguing that the “crueel sentence” is “muchel agayn resoun” (1836). Thus, in the name of “resoun” rather than “pitee,” she calls for Melibee to treat the criminals more mercifully, and Melibee gamely consents (1885-1888). The tale's ending reflects his evolved understanding of judgment as a cooperative, revisionary process, in which his wife plays a vital, assertive, and public role.

In Prudence's performance of wifely counsel, Chaucer offers a normative case of highly skilled, rhetorically transparent wifely counsel that succeeds in both private and public settings. By seeing through the dense textuality of her counsel to the narrative of her success, we discover a thoroughly elaborated performance of wifely counsel that demands to inform how we read wives, husbands, and counsel in other tales. Prudence can especially help us better understand the aims, strategies, and accomplishments of less conventional wife-counselors in *The Canterbury Tales*, and her example will be a touchstone in the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER TWO

Wonderful Counselor:

Persuasive Strategies and Political Reform in *The Clerk's Tale*

Prudence's verbosity and Griselda's obedience would seem to represent very disparate points on a spectrum of female assertiveness. Yet both performances have long offended the sensibilities of modern critics. Articles about either *The Tale of Melibee* or *The Clerk's Tale* tend begin in a register of unease, struggling to explain why scholars and readers have found the tale unpalatable.[18] But whereas the Melibee's troubled reception is a modern phenomenon, *The Clerk's Tale* exhibits a fundamental darkness and moral ambiguity that "proved likewise troubling to medieval readers" (Pugh 75).[19] Far from reflecting a clear set of values, Chaucer's Griselda story has confounded generations of readers who find in it a perverse commitment to leaving high-stakes ethical problems grotesquely unresolved.[20]

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[18] In "Hagiography and the Problematics of Lay Sanctity" (*The Chaucer Review* 33.1 [1998]), McKinley points out that the central bugaboo or "monster" for critics of *The Clerk's Tale* "has been variously isolated, from Walter's sadism to Griselda's acquiescence to Chaucer's artistic failure" (90). But I find that "Griselda's acquiescence" has tended to arouse the most concern among scholars in recent years. For opening paragraphs on *The Clerk's Tale* whose tone resembles that of the opening paragraphs I mentioned in my chapter on *The Tale of Melibee*, see Chapter Four in Pugh's *Sexuality and its Queer Discontents* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) (75), Ashe's "Reading Like a Clerk in the Clerk's Tale" (*Modern Lanugage Review* 101.4 [October 2006]) (935), and Mitchell's "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* and the Question of Ethical Monstrosity" (*Studies in Philology* 102.1 [2005]) (1). Morgan ("The Logical of the Clerk's Tale," *Modern Language Review* 104.1 [2009]) also discusses "moral outrage among […] modern readers" in his opening section (3), and Shutters ("Griselda's Pagan Virtue," *The Chaucer Review* 44.1 [2009]) provides a useful summation of critical reactions to the "discomfort" that Griselda's "extreme devotion" creates (64-65). Ashe credits Charlotte E. Morse ("Critical Approaches to *The Clerk's Tale*," *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, eds. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson [Rochester, New York: D. S. Brewer, 1990]) for providing a salient overview of pre-1990 scholarship that underscores readers' long-time difficulty with the Clerk's "beguiling and horrific" tale (Morse 71; also quoted in Ashe 935). Mark Miller's *Philosophical Chaucer* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), like Ashe's study, cites Morse's overview as "a useful guide" to *Clerk's Tale* scholarship (270). Miller writes: "My claim here is not that each of these critics makes scandal their central theme, but rather that for each of them the tale's main events or characters or metaphorical structures embody a scandal or outrage to important moral or political values, and that the core interpretive questions surrounding the tale concern how we are

Different versions of the same question appear again and again in the critical literature: what role should Griselda play in our experience of the story (Miller 269-270)? What should we make of a woman who keeps pledging allegiance to a man of senseless cruelty—and who, without protest, gives up her children to be murdered at his orders? The Clerk's insistence on Griselda's Christian (if not wifely) exemplarity makes these questions all the more difficult to answer (1145-1162). Explicit textual cues to read Griselda as a Christ-like or Job-like figure give the fleeting impression that she represents a clear set of ideals (204-210, 1146, 1149). But few readers accept that the Clerk's orthodox gloss of Griselda—as an exemplar of self-sacrifice and patience for both genders—fully accounts for her role in the text.[21]

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to understand that scandal or outrage, and how Chaucer means us to understand it. […] I think there is something to be learned from the fact that such reaction to the tale persists across many differences of interpretation and critical methodology, and even across strong differences concerning what values are being violated, and by whom" (269-270).

[19] See Edward E. Foster, "Has Anyone Here Read Melibee?," *The Chaucer Review* 34.4 (2000), 398-409.

[20] McKinley also finds an element of the grotesque, as defined by Arthur Clayborough, in *The Clerk's Tale* (90).

[21] See 932-938 for the Clerk's comparison of Griselda to Job "for his humblesse" (932). One problem with likening Griselda to Job is that the comparison entails a corollary analogy between the marquis and God that is not only bleak in the extreme

Some feminist critics have responded to these difficulties by more or less inverting the Job analogy and casting Griselda herself as the master, aggressor or victor in the tale.[22] Griselda appears in such readings as "the ideal ruler" (Heng 412), "a truer image of God than Walter" (Mann xvii), "the most 'masculine' of the figures in the tale" and "less victim than the master of the man who apparently masters her" (Staley 254). These interpretations are satisfying insofar as they move beyond simply acknowledging the tale's diversity of meanings, now a commonplace in the scholarship. Yet they also tend to be as one-dimensional as the Griselda-as-Job tack has proven to be. A close reading of Griselda's words and actions reveals her to inhabit a morally unstable position "outside of the binary opposition [between…] victimhood and subversion," as well as between subordination and mastery (Rossiter 185).[23] Both

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but also, given the Clerk's overt critique of Walter (78-84, 460-462, 785), probably too blasphemous to for Chaucer to have intended. An understanding of God as a reckless-bachelor-*cum*-abusive-husband is fascinating to consider but does not seem consistent with the devotion of a decent medieval clerk. (In *Feminizing Chaucer* [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002], Jill Mann argues that *Griselda* is the more God-like figure in the tale [xvii], although this reading is, for me, too counterintuitive in its particulars to be fully convincing.) Thus some critics have identified what could be called an ironic or deceptive quality in the tale's biblical resonances—a "deliberate destabilizing of […] allegorical correspondences" and their religious implications (Bodden, "Interrogating 'Virtue' through Violence," *A Great Effusion of Blood?*, eds. Mark D. Meyerson, Daniel Thiery, and Oren Falk [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004], 220). Thus Clerk's invocation of Job serves more as a moment of problematic yet fruitfully provocative free association—as well as an acknowledgment of Petrarch's more orthodox reading—than as a blueprint for systematically interpreting Chaucer's text.

[22] See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) 136.

[23] In *Chaucer and the Energy of Creation* (Gainesville, Florida: Univesrity press of Florida, 1999), Edward Condren reminds us that the exploration of wide behavioral spectra is fundamental to the overall structure and thematic content of the *Tales*: "[N]o one would seriously argue, outside of literature, either that the Wife of Bath's campaign for female sovereignty or that Griselda's unconditional subservience to her husband holds promise for a harmonious marriage or an ideal society, although one or the other

Griselda-as-Job and Griselda-as-master must necessarily gloss over the subtlety and variability of this position; they sanitize the "worrisome literality" of the heroine's suffering by prioritizing the anagogical significance of the tale's resolution over the emotional and political significance of literal events in Griselda's marriage (Mitchell 2). Though undeniably resonant, the Christian and feminist implications of Griselda's endurance do not counterbalance the uneasiness that the marital dynamic of Walter's brutality and Griselda's apparent acceptance creates in the reader—or in the Clerk, who seems almost disoriented by the events of his own tale (Condren 124-125; Morgan 3; *ClT* 456-462; 694-700).

The Clerk's response to his own story reflects the same anxieties that remain unresolved in much modern criticism (1142-1206). As some scholars have sensed, we have little choice but to embrace the story's ambiguities as somehow meaningful in themselves: Griselda's role in the text has always resisted a coherent set of standards for moral assessment.[24] Yet, in the very problems this role presents, we find it imbued with a valence of political and ethical significance.[25] In order to comprehend this

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strategy may be effective in a given situation. On the contrary, […the two figures] define the limits of the spectrum within which may be found […] a promising philosophy of marriage […]. The same is true of the whole litany of opposing pairs with which Chaucer criticism has long been familiar" (3). However, as many critics have observed, Griselda's position is unstable or at least difficult to define in *The Clerk's Tale*; Condren is correct that her behavior inspires us to consider the extreme end of a spectrum, but, for reasons I will discuss in this chapter, she cannot be reduced to a model of consistent, "unconditional subservience."

[24] Ashe credits Elizabeth Salter's 1962 study *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and the Clerk's Tale* (London: Edward Arnold, 1962) for establishing this interpretive tradition of embracing the text's hermeneutic instability which continues to prevail among critics of *The Clerk's Tale* (935).

[25] In his historicist reading of the tale and its Latin source, Warren Ginsberg

significance, I propose a turn away from the quest to resolve impossible questions about Griselda's moral status and toward the narrative of her work as a political agent in the most basic sense. Rather than dwell on her performance as a wife or a mother, we can focus instead on the consequences of her actions for the polity of Saluzzo.

As I will argue, Griselda fulfills the role of a counselor in the tale, and studying her unconventional performance of counsel can help us better appreciate not only the problems but also the spiritual and political insights that she generates in the text. As Geraldine Barnes observes, Ricardian romance narratives are often deeply invested in the issue of counsel and its attendant problems (10), and this interpretive angle is especially fruitful for reading *The Clerk's Tale*, where the class issues at stake in other medieval stories of counsel are exacerbated by Griselda's poverty and the institution of wifely obedience. In my reading, Griselda's fidelity to her marriage contract is a rhetorical performance that, in combination with the more explicit advice she dispenses, eventually transforms Walter into a more accountable and prudent leader and husband. This reading departs from the long critical tradition of straining to decipher Griselda's moral standing and identifies a coherent narrative of her political accomplishments in the text.

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demonstrates that the emphasis on problems and contradictions is a Chaucerian contribution to the Griselda story: "Chaucer records his response to early Italian humanism in the ways he translated the fractures that run through Petrarch's discourse"—"fractures" being the "internal antagonisms," contradictions or moral ambiguities inherent in the received narrative (*Chaucer's Italian Tradiction* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002], 261). Likewise, David Wallace writes: "Contradictions detected in the Petrarchan story are not just smoothed away but are critiqued or carried over into English and made a part of the Chaucerian *Tale*" (282). Wallace sees a fundamental incompatibility between the historicity of Boccaccio's Griselda tale (Petrarch's source) and the "classicized, perpetual present" that Petrarch's aspires to occupy, as if "exempt […] from historical contingency" (283).

Few if any scholars, in discussing Griselda's agency and relationship to Walter, have undertaken to study her as a wife-counselor, or in detailed relation to other Chaucerian wife-counselors as such. This gap is understandable, given that Griselda's obedience and suffering loom larger in the modern imagination than most other details about her do. Yet, in much of her dialogue, Griselda implements key tools of the medieval counselor's trade. Famously "discreet and fair of eloquence," she makes pointed observations, advises discretion, takes public relations or "the peple" into account, and ventures some extremely memorable prescriptive statements (410).[26] In the vein of more explicitly defined counselors, she accomplishes the rhetorical feat of speaking unflattering truths to a volatile and patronizing authority figure without offending him. Griselda's prodigious success at resolving conflicts among Walter's subjects, which this chapter will discuss at greater length, serves almost entirely to establish her credentials as a counselor—moral wisdom, civic-mindedness, moral authority, and capacity for prudence—so that we can reasonably discern a coded valence of wifely counsel elsewhere in the text, including her professions of assent to Walter's tyrannical will (428-441).[27]

Yet Griselda's performance of wifehood, in contrast to that of Dame Prudence, is not a transferable model. Her obedience to Walter is predicated on an understanding of marriage not as partnership, as in *The Tale of Melibee*, but rather as a dynamic of automatic spousal unity, dominated by the husband and carried out to an extreme and dangerous degree. Griselda is a wife-counselor for readers to wonder at, question, sympathize with, speculate about, and try to understand—but, given the disturbing particulars of her situation, not, for the most part, one to imitate. As the Clerk himself seems to intuit, the ethical significance of the poem lies not so much in the exemplarity of Griselda's obedience as in the changes she effects in Walter.[28] In other words, the tale does not necessarily endorse Griselda's obedience *as* obedience but rather as an ethical strategy for counsel and reform in a specific political context.

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[26] "Ye koude nat doon so dishonest a thyng, / That thilke wombe in which youre children leye / Shoulde biforn the peple, in my walking, / Be seyn al bare" (876-879). In context, Griselda's advisement against issuing this "dishonest" order seems at least partly rooted in concern for Walter's image before "the peple."

[27] Griselda's moral authority among the people who inhabit the fictional world of the tale, not necessarily among readers, for whom her moral status is more complicated

This chapter will examine the eclectic repertoire of wifely counsel through which Griselda inspires changes in Walter and others. First, in Section One, I will show how Parts One and Two of the tale set up Walter's deficient leadership and need for counsel as the driving problem in *The Clerk's Tale*. In Section Two, I will explain how Griselda's understanding of wifehood empowers her to resolve this problem on Saluzzo's behalf. By stressing her ontological unity with the marquis, Griselda circumvents the dynamic of dread that reinforces Walter's political power; her resistance to dread sets her apart from his subjects and thereby allows her to represent their interests. Last, Section Three will elaborate the content and rhetorical strategies of Griselda's counsel, which are particular to each of her audiences. Griselda counsels in both a direct or conventional mode and a performative mode. Her explicit advocacy of reconciliation and cautious, benign rule is akin to Dame Prudence's counsel *The Tale of*

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[28] See *ClT* 1142-1148.

Melibee; meanwhile, her performance of devotion models the accountability, self-sacrifice and contractual fidelity that Saluzzo needs Walter to practice. By tracing the role of prudence as it vacillates across the different kinds of counsel Griselda dispenses, I gauge the degree to which her virtues should be imitated and by whom.

I. Political precarity and the need for guidance:
How the Clerk establishes a counsel narrative

At the beginning of the tale, the Clerk sets the stage for a narrative of wifely counsel with an extended description of Walter that emphasizes his need for guidance. By the time she is introduced in Part Two, Griselda appears as a source of satisfaction to a set of clearly articulated public needs.

Like the Melibee, *The Clerk's Tale* begins with a male protagonist and patriarch enjoying himself ("in delit") in a public setting, perhaps to the detriment of social order. But the first sentence of *The Tale of Melibee* mentions all three members of Melibee's family, so that the protagonist is firmly situated within a network of social obligations from the very beginning of the narrative (967). By contrast, the Clerk's unmarried marquis of Saluzzo is introduced as emphatically single, and his freedom from family ties in the domestic sphere parallels the relative lack of accountability that the political structure allows him to enjoy.[29] As "The gentilleste yborn of Lumbardye," Walter is, at this early point in the narrative, an object of superlative political and social worship: singular, socially distinct from and above everyone else in the polity. Even before the Clerk refers to the marquis by name, he describes him as being “Biloved and drad, thurgh favour of Fortune,” by his subjects (or “commune”) and his many lieges, who are “obeisant, ay redy to his hond.”[30] Everyone in Saluzzo is tied to Walter through a relationship of steep verticality, of feudal obedience unalleviated by the leveling potential of blood, friendship, or marriage. Although it should be assumed there is some degree of mutual obligation in the relationship between Walter and his lieges, it is the polity’s deference to Walter, and not Walter’s devotion to the polity, that most characterizes Saluzzo’s political climate in the text.

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[29] The Clerk attributes Saluzzo's obedience of Walter—the love and dread that

The Clerk presents this political arrangement in a critical light. By emphasizing the scope of Walter's power, he makes clear that there are dangerously high stakes attached to all of the marquis' choices and actions (83-85, 134-140). The issue of succession is a prime example: far from being a strictly personal choice, Walter's avoidance of marriage translates into a widespread sense of insecurity among his subjects. With the fate of all Saluzzo concentrated exclusively into the hands of a monocrat (and, as we later find out, a rather insouciant one), it becomes imperative for

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keep the power structure in place—to “favour of Fortune” rather than to God or to any merits of Walter’s. This detail both demystifies the origins of Saluzzo’s political structure by suggesting it is an accident of history and, by mentioning Fortune, hints at the possibility of change (68-70). It also aligns with the Clerk with the Wife of Bath, who's loathly lady argues that social class is not related to virtue or merit (*WBT* 1119-1206).

[30] Syntactically, the obedience of Walter’s lieges appears even before the lieges themselves: “And obeisant, ay redy to his hond, / Were alle his liges, bothe lasse and moore” (66-67). This structure suggests early on that Walter’s ability to enforce or inspire obedience is fundamental to his character.

Walter to seek counsel, the go-to measure for patriarchs struggling with high-stakes decisions. Yet unlike other memorable patriarchs in *The Canterbury Tales*—Melibee, Januarie, the Man of Law's sultan—Walter never convenes or even considers convening a "privee conseil" (see *MLT* 204). Like "spousaille or wedlok," a council of advisors might pose a threat to the "free wyl" and unchecked "liberte" that Walter treasures (115, 145, 145, 171).[31]

Ironically, the very political structure that renders counsel all-important to the success of Walter's reign virtually precludes the cultivation of forthright counselors in Saluzzo. Walter's ability to inspire universal dread or fear, "Both [in] his lordes and [in] his commune," does not conduce to a culture of frankness and rationality (69-70). The people's "murmur[ed]" resentment of Walter at multiple points in the tale suggests that dread rather than love prevails in the public culture.[32] The "love" in the phrase "Biloved and drad" denotes an unstable, fear-induced, and possibly even grudging form of allegiance or "love" rather than entrenched devotion.[33] As *The Tale of Melibee* explains, when a community espouses coexisting love and dread for a man of authority, the feeling of dread can predominate, rendering the people's "reverence" unreliable and more conducive to flattery than wise counsel or meaningful support.[34] Dread compromises openness and is therefore in itself inimical to good counsel. The people can interact with Walter in certain ways—eagerly do his bidding like the sergeant in Parts Three and Four (519-596; 673-686), or plead for a particular outcome like the spokesman in Part One (85-142)—but can never venture to radically challenge his way of thinking.

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[31] See my Chapter Four, on *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, in which I discuss Walter's attachment to "choys" and "chesynge" (*ClT* 162-175).

[32] The term "murmur" appears in lines 635 and 726.

[33] The MED's entry for "love" "in phrases, etc." (definition 1b) shows that "love" and "dread" are a common semantic pairing. Definition 1d (a) shows that "love" can denote a political agreement, "A covenant of peace."

[34] "[A]nd therwithal ther coomen somme of his neigheboress that diden hym

The marquis' youth exacerbates the anxiety this arrangement creates. The Clerk's mention of "Fortune" in the aforementioned passage ("Biloved and drad, thurgh favour of Fortune") evokes the precarity of Walter's rule, as well as his need to guard against misfortune by grounding decisions in a sober and steadfast morality he does not yet seem to have fully developed. Walter possesses honor and courtesy, we learn, but he is problematically "yong of age:" the Clerk mentions his youth twice in the third stanza alone (73, 77). The strong implication that Walter lacks experience calls to mind mirrors for princes and other medieval advice genres, which commonly stress the incompetence of youth (Dunlop 197). The Clerk is forthcoming about the marquis' deficiencies: Walter is "Discreet ynough his contree for to gye, / Save in somme thynges that he was to blame" (75-76). Right after supplying Walter's name, the Clerk ventures several bold, specific critiques:

> I blame hym thus: that he considered noght
> In tyme comynge what myghte hym bityde,
> But on his lust present was al his thoght,
> As for to hauke and hunte on every syde.

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reverence moore for drede han for love, as it happeth ofte. / There coomen also ful many subtille flatereres and wise advocatz lerned in the law" (*Mel* 1006-1007).

Wel ny alle othere cures leet he slyde,
And eek he nolde – and that was worst of alle –
Wedde no wyf, for noght that may bifalle. (78-84)[35]

Being a man without peer has left Walter with underdeveloped powers of concentration and self-discipline; in this passage, he appears to lack forethought, prudence, and a sense of accountability.[36] The Clerk's striking shift from a generous and balanced assessment of Walter ("Discreet ynough […] / Save in somme thynges") to more negative and totalizing language ("blame," "on his lust present was *al* his thoght," "Wel ny *alle* othere cures leet he slyde," "worst of alle," "for noght that may bifalle" [emphasis mine]) is ominous. It suggests that Walter's leadership may be marked by a generalized ineffectuality, or at least by the constant threat of a lapse into ineffectuality. And, as I have discussed, the power structure does not allow for one of Walter's lieges to make him a more disciplined leader; to catalyze the marquis' political maturation would require the guidance of someone positioned just a little differently from "his lords and […] his commune" (70). Ideally, this counselor would fully share in the people's perspective on Walter as a ruler, but her subordinate position would be slightly mitigated by an element of horizontality, as in a relationship of mutual affection or contract.

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[35] This passage, especially, precludes us from reading *The Clerk's Tale* as a simple retelling of Job, in which Walter tests his wife as God tests Job and all humanity. In Chaucer's depiction, the Clerk has greater moral credibility than many of the other pilgrims, and no credible medieval Christian in a literary account would publicly assign blame to God the way the Clerk repeatedly assigns blame to Walter.

[36] As discussed later in the chapter, John Allen Mitchell defines medieval "prudence" as the habit of using forethought to discover appropriate courses of action ("Griselda and the Question of Ethical Monstrosity," *Studies in Philology* 102.1 [2005] 1). The detail that "on his lust present was al his thoght" clearly denotes an absence of prudence in Walter: the marquis loses himself in the present moment and values pleasure over wisdom and planning.

The tale’s opening passages imply that a *wife*’s counsel, in particular, is the very counsel that would benefit Walter most. The marquis’ aimlessness seems bound up in his refusal to marry, and the Clerk names Walter’s bachelorhood as the “worst of alle” his offenses as a ruler. In omitting an explanation for this claim, the Clerk reinforces the great magnitude of the marquis' offense by presuming there is no need to elaborate its notoriety. The juxtaposition of Walter’s myopia with his unwillingness to wed sets up an ominous correlation between ineffectuality and bachelorhood in the tale and reflects a belief in the power of marriage to condition young men for political engagement. Before the wedding, Walter’s experience of seeing and finally meeting the woman he will marry appears to give him a new air of seriousness and integrity, at least outwardly. For the first time, with the text’s introduction of Griselda, we see the marquis experiencing sincere admiration of another person: “Commendynge in his herte hir wommanhede, / And eek hir vertu” (239-240). The passage that describes Walter watching Griselda from afar (he “wolde hym ofte avyse” “Upon hir chiere,” “noght with wantown looking of folye / […] but in sad wyse” [237-238]) shows him newly capable of paying sustained attention to something—someone—other than his usual “lust present”; he has turned from hawking and hunting to the “othere cures” of virtue and marriage. That Walter makes a habit of seeking out Griselda and appears “thoughtful” and “sober” in her presence seem at this moment to bode well for his development as a public figure and thus for the future of the polity—that is, "if evere he wedde sholde" (232-245).[37]

Although Griselda brings out a new seriousness in Walter, it would of course be misleading to imply that her only function as his wife is to help him reach ethical maturity. To be sure, historical context and the tale itself make clear that the failure to produce an heir is one of the major liabilities that Walter's bachelorhood poses. Griselda's foremost duty, by the public's account, is to bear his offspring: the people's spokesman tells Walter that they dread "a staunge successour" usurping the marquis' "heritage" in the event of a childless reign (138-139). Nonetheless, the Clerk mentions Walter's political weaknesses before the spokesman brings up his childlessness, and we ought to give those weaknesses equal consideration in relation to the problem of Walter's bachelorhood. Furthermore, the contrast between the description of Saluzzo's raw discontent on the one hand, and the extreme politeness of the spokesman's language on the other, creates a note of dissembling or flattery in the address.[38] The Clerk's conjecture that the spokesman may have been elected for his rhetorical abilities also calls the thoroughness and sincerity of his monologue into question; the public's message to Walter may well have been filtered through the mind of a crafty rhetorician

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[37] See 232-245: "[…] he considered ful right / Hir bountee, and disposed that he wolde / Wedde hire oonly, if evere he wedde sholde" (243-245); "This thoughtful markys spak unto this mayde / Ful sobrely" (295-296). Earlier, when Walter spies Griselda from afar, he looks on her "noght with wantown looking of folye / […] but in sad wyse" (235-238).

[38] "[H]is peple bar so soore" his childlessness (85).

(90).[39] In any case, the spokesman's address to Walter must be highly conditioned by the power structure and the dread I have already discussed, so that there is a lack of transparency in the text of his speech. Despite the spokesman's exclusive focus on progeny, Saluzzo may have multiple reasons for begging Walter "hastily to wyve" (140). And given Walter's youth, the imperative of political guidance seems even more pressing than the need for him to reproduce "hastily." Indeed, the marquis himself chooses to marry Griselda based on her inherent virtue rather than her potential fertility (239-245).

The public's worshipful reception of Griselda in Part II confirms its appreciation for the marchioness in her own right. Although the spokesman's plea for Walter to wed dwells on the issue of succession, the sense of relief and celebration that follows the marriage arises from the public's approval of Griselda's "thewes goode," "heigh bountee," "wit" and "juggementz of […] greet equitee" (406-441). Following Griselda's installation at the palace (389-391), the Clerk devotes seven stanzas to elaborating her virtues, talents and immense popularity (393-441), followed by only one stanza on the birth of her first child (442-448). Tellingly, there is no sign of public disquiet when it is revealed the child is female; instead, the people are content with the birth as a sign of Griselda's fertility and with the "liklihede" that eventually "She *may* unto a knave child atteyne" (446-448; emphasis mine). The brevity and casualness with which this detail is treated suggests that Saluzzo's desire for a successor is less of a priority than the spokesman's rhetoric implied. Nor does the public fret over the issue of succession later in the tale, when Walter and Griselda's children disappear. After the male child is apparently killed, the people are angry not because they have lost a successor—this problem goes unmentioned—but because Walter has exploited his wife's poverty as an excuse to murder their children. The anxious "murmur among hem comunly" is not in response to the broken continuity of Walter's line but to the wickedness of his crime (722-735). Here again, the marquis' moral failings trump the issue of succession as the public's chief political concern. From the beginning of the tale, the people's greatest civic need is for someone to improve the quality of his rule.

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[39] From an ethical standpoint, the public's reliability is often dubious. Later in the tale,"sadde folk" lament the widespread approval of Walter's second marriage: "A ful greet fool is he that on [the people] leeveth" (995-1001).

In the early days of her marriage, Griselda satisfies this need in swift and obvious ways. Well before bearing a child, she has a galvanizing effect on the people and transforms the political atmosphere of Saluzzo. By instilling the realm with a greater sense of civic order, Griselda demonstrates a repertoire of political skills that is comparable to her mastery of domestic arts:

> Nat oonly this Griseldis thurgh hir wit
> Koude al the feet of wyfly hoomlinesse,
> But eek, whan that the cas required it,
> The commune profit koude she redresse.
> Ther nas discorde, rancor, ne hevynesse
> In al that land that she ne koude apese,
> And wisely brynge hem alle in reste and ese. (428-434)

Just as, earlier in the text, Walter's bachelorhood is suggestively paired with his shortcomings as a leader, here Griselda's domestic know-how appears in close juxtaposition with her political and diplomatic gifts. The Clerk's mention of both sets of skills in the same stanza, the same long sentence, suggests a symbiotic relationship between domestic and political life, wifehood and civic leadership. In a stanza that strongly resonates with Chaucer's depiction of Dame Prudence in the Melibee,[40] the Clerk goes on to detail more of Griselda's civic contributions to Saluzzo: when Walter is gone, she takes over some of his public duties, mediating between angry men ("gentil men or othere of hire contree") to "bryngen hem aton," all the while dispensing "wise and rype wordes" and "juggementz of so greet equitee, / That she from hevene sent was, as men wende, / Peple to save and every wrong t'amende" (435-441). Where before Walter's marriage there were armed lieges, hawking, and a widespread anxiety, now there are wise pronouncements, peace summits, and civic feeling. Although most of Griselda's dialogue contrasts sharply with Dame Prudence's in both form and content, this passage reveals that, in the public sphere, the two women possess a similar degree of initiative, rhetorical prowess, and judiciousness.

The Clerk thus situates Griselda as a renowned problem-solver and mediator, comfortable dealing with men from a range of social estates, willing to meet with them on her own accord and able to facilitate constructive solutions. These details take on particular significance in the larger context of an ongoing conversation about wives' counsel in the *Tales*, especially regarding the issue of prudence. In keeping with a thematic association between wifehood and prudent speech that we also find in the

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[40] The image of Griselda using her ethical and rhetorical gifts to peacefully reconcile "wrothe" men outside of her household (437) resembles that of Prudence in *The Tale of Melibee*, when she leaves her husband at home and meets with his enemies by herself to reach a peaceful resolution (see *Mel* 1728-1768).

Melibee, Griselda is given to prudently measure or time her rhetoric (her words have "ripened" by the time she speaks them) and uses measured speech to restore peace and order where there is rancor. Although the narrator's interest in prudence is not as obvious as in *The Tale of Melibee*, *The Clerk's Tale* does invoke the term explicitly: details about Griselda's work as a mediator follow directly after the Clerk's observation that Walter's subjects begin to think of him as "a prudent man" (Scanlon 183). Granted, Griselda has not yet been depicted as instructing Walter in prudence. However, it is the marquis' marriage to Griselda that makes his prudence possible: the people admire him for having seen "that under low degree / Was ofte vertu hid" and choosing so commendable a wife (421-427).[41] Thus Griselda provides an opportunity for Walter to exercise and reflect the prudence that she seems to possess in a higher degree.

Considered in this light, Griselda's political accomplishments in Part Two of the tale are not just symptoms of a generalized exemplarity but rather particular functions and qualities of a wife-counselor. This vocation seems to be the most accurate and comprehensive way to categorize her performance in the text. Despite Griselda's undeniable saintliness elsewhere in the narrative, there is little information about her relationship to the divine during the first phase of her life in the palace.[42] All we learn in this regard is that the people *believe* her to be a heaven-sent savior ("as men wende")[43]—in the same precarious way and at the same point in time they now believe Walter to be prudent.[44] Nor is Griselda an intercessory figure along the lines of Alceste in the *Legend of Good Women*; regarding the topic of justice, we are told that her judgments are equitable, not necessarily merciful.[45] Griselda's purview extends beyond mercy to encompass a range of civic and judicial activities, and the Clerk's description of her work in the public sphere pertains to her powers of reason, judgment, mediation, persuasion, and problem-solving—in other words, the basic tools of a counselor.[46]

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[41] The reason they consider him prudent is that he has chosen to marry a worthy woman of lowly estate (425), but this reasoning reinforces a more general association between prudence and marriage in the tale and speaks to Griselda's success in the role of marchioness.

[42] For a reading of Griselda-as-saint, see McKinley's "Hagiography and the Problematics of Lay Sanctity." McKinley suggests that the tale is little more than Chaucer's "artistic, aesthetic" experiment with hagiographic conventions, and that in

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respect to thematic or moral content "he is quite absent." She concludes that "this [hagiography] is what Chaucer seems to be 'about' in the *Clerk's Tale*, however much this may disappoint, anger or irritate us" (90). However, decades of scholarship bear out that Chaucer's version of the tale, in particular, has impacted readers with distinctly troubling (if not always coherent) moral and political implications. The English poet certainly makes fascinating use of hagiographic tropes, but this dimension of the text is not the only thing he "seems to be 'about.'"

[43] We are also told that Griselda and Walter "In Goddes pees lyveth ful esily / At hoom" (423-424), but the mention of God here does not lend Griselda an aura of sanctity.

[44] It may be significant that *wende*, the past tense of *wenen* ("believed") is a homonym of *wende*, the present tense of *wenden*, which can mean "to wander" or "to change course" (*MED*). Exile, shifting positions and changing course (in contrast to the fidelity Griselda practices) are recurring motifs in the tale, and the changeable nature of public opinion parallels Walter's erratic decrees and the various relocations these decrees enforce. Like any good counselor, Griselda maintains a moral constancy that counterbalances her husband's changeability as well as the public's.

[45] Alceste intercedes for the poet by pleading for the irate God of Love to have mercy on him: "Now as ye be a god and eke a kyng, / I your Alceste, whilom queen of Trace, / Y aske yow this man, ryght of your grace, / That ye him never hurte in al his lyve; / And he shal swere to yow, and that as blyve, / He shal no more agilten in this wyse" (*LGW* F 431-436).

[46] Mediation entails persuasion—the use of rhetoric to coerce behavior—insofar as the mediator persuades two parties to reconcile ("bryngen hem aton").

Considered together as an isolated story, Parts One and Two of *The Clerk's Tale* are thus a straightforward counsel narrative with a simple problem-solution structure. The problem lies in Walter: his recklessness and bachelorhood and the resultant political precarity of Saluzzo. The solution lies in his marriage to a wife-counselor. With the wedding, this two-part narrative culminates in a spirit of joy: Griselda brings peace and equilibrium to Saluzzo not by bearing a male heir but rather by improving the quality of Walter's rule. As Part Two draws to a close, she seems not only to have reconciled feuding elements in Saluzzo but also, for a short time, to have helped bring out her husband's latent prudence.[47]

In Part Three, however, Walter's attention shifts away from the public sphere and back onto his private whims: namely, a longing "To tempte his wyf, hir sadnesse for to knowe" (452). Griselda confronts his cruelty with the infamous performance of obedience that has puzzled so many readers and critics over the centuries. Yet her astonishing devotion is consistent with an ethic of civic-mindedness that she exhibits throughout the poem.

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[47] See again l. 427.

II. Griselda's counsel:

Values, strategies, and consequences

The marquis' determination to test his wife launches us into a second political narrative of problem and solution, this time spanning Parts Three through Six of the tale. Once again, the problem originates in Walter's turn away from his responsibilities to the polity. His recklessness appears even more destructive now that it threatens the wellbeing of the marchioness, whose work has revitalized Saluzzo and improved conditions for its subjects. The solution, then, must be to effect a more permanent change in Walter than the one that occurred in Part Two. Griselda's exceptional values of service, generosity, and fidelity to contract, in combination with her access to Walter through marriage, make her the only person in Saluzzo who is equipped to reform the marquis. This section will explore Griselda's commitment to community—as borne out by discrete moments in the narrative and underscored by her analogous relationship to the Clerk—as well as explain how the circumstances of her marriage enable her to counsel Walter on behalf of the polity.

Unlike anyone else in the narrative, Griselda is almost constantly engaged in the service of others. Her actions throughout the tale betray a deep investment in values of cohesion: cooperative labor, participation in one's community, fulfillment of one's duties, and faithfulness to one's word. Even before she meets Walter, Griselda establishes her commitment to each of these values. At a "tendre […] age," she acts as a servant of "Hir olde povre fader" by keeping sheep while "spynnynge" in the field (218-224). Soon after, in the only passage in the tale to quote her thoughts directly, Griselda devises a plan to stand among “othere maydens […] that been my felawes” and watch the marquis’ wedding. Though excited to participate in a community event, she builds in time to complete “The labour which that longeth unto [her],” demonstrating accountability, community-mindedness, and conscientious forethought all at once (274-294). Several other moments depict her working busily in the service of others, laboring not only manually—at home, on the farm, and in the palace (221-231; 149-150, 953-980; 1008-1029)—but also intellectually, as a mediator (428-441).[48] Griselda is thus a conscientious servant in multiple settings and capacities, including the intellectual service of a counselor. If there is anyone qualified to instill an ethic of service, accountability, and discipline in the marquis, it is his own wife.

That the tale’s narrator provides a similar model of intellectual service (to the pilgrims and to us as readers) supports a reading of Griselda’s devotion to Walter as strategic and instructive. The prologue begins the work of developing a comparison between the Clerk and his heroine that makes it possible to consider the entirety of her work in the text—all of her actions and dialogue—as part of an edifying performance. To put it simply, as R. A. Shoaf suggests, “the Clerk is to Harry Bailey as Griselda is to Walter” (124)—a formulation that would read as reductive if it weren’t so clearly borne out in Harry’s dialogue.[49] The Clerk’s resemblance to a bride reinforces the possibility of reading him as morally or socially aligned with Griselda, and the host’s use of

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[48] In *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Massachussetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), Strohm contrasts Griselda’s “attention to ‘commune profit’ and to relief of civil discord (431-434)” with Walter’s “lying misrepresentation of his subjects’ views (624-637)” (160).

[49] See also Rossiter, *Chaucer and Petrarch* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 188.

"ryde"—given its imagistic incompatibility with "sittynge at the bord" in the next line—seems an especially deliberate link.[50] (Walter sets Griselda "Upon a hors" after their marriage [386-388].) The Clerk's transition, at the host's bidding, from a retiring demeanor into a skillful performance of verse also foreshadows the manner in which Griselda is plucked from obscurity, only to dazzle the public with her competence, eloquence, and "ripe words" (438). Just as the Clerk, who is not a poet by trade, gamely translates Petrarch's prose into finely crafted rhyme royal, the low-born Griselda interprets her marriage contract more faithfully than its author does.[51] But what is perhaps most significant in the Clerk's thematic alignment with Griselda is the suggestion that beneath his outward appearance of reserve there lies a highly active and deliberate intellect: "I trowe ye studie aboute som sophyme," conjectures Harry (5), speculating about the Clerk's inner life in exactly the way that Walter speculates about Griselda's (687-693). Though some readers may interpret "sophyme" as light-heartedly derisive, Harry's musing nonetheless raises the possibility of reading complexity and strategy into the Clerk's performance of effeminate self-effacement, so that we might also read Griselda's professions of obedience in a similar, investigative mode.[52]

No matter what the Clerk says in the course of his tale, he is always performing a public service by telling a story, both to us and to his fellow-pilgrims; likewise,

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[50] See Benson's note and sources on the "maidenly" demeanor of clerks (879).

[51] Walter lays out the terms of their marriage contract in lines 344-357.

[52] However, according to Benson, the word may not have any negative connotations here: "By the fourteenth century, *sophisma* had come to mean not merely an enigmatic proposition or a fallacious argument or conclusion, but any question disputed in logic" (879).

Griselda is always dispensing counsel on multiple levels, though often in unexpected ways. Just as a community of pilgrims gathers around the Clerk to hear his tale, and a readership, figuratively speaking, coheres around the text of the *Tales*, “men and wommen, as wel yonge as olde” from “many a regioun” around Saluzzo are drawn to Griselda by “the bountee of hir name” (414-420). All of these communities have a quality of instability: the pilgrims are competitive, we readers disagree about the tale’s meanings, and the fictional populace of Saluzzo is nothing if not fickle. Yet each community is subject to the edifying impact of Griselda’s or the Clerk’s performance, or to both. As Laura Ashe argues in her article “Reading like a Clerk,” Griselda can be said to interpret or “read” Walter’s actions insofar as her dialogue comments on or recasts their shared experiences. But her own performance, like the Clerk’s, also demands to be read, and her actions, in their consistency and seriousness, are suggestive of an edifying and community-minded authorial mission. This mission involves reaching and permanently transforming the ethical choices of her most resistant audience: Walter himself.

The thematic connections between Griselda and the Clerk include a certain reformist resonance in their relationship to authority. William T. Rossiter and Carolyn Dinshaw have explored how the Clerk and Griselda deal with Harry's and Walter’s respective attempts to limit their expression:[53] both narrator and heroine manage to carry off sophisticated rhetorical feats without breaching their contractual obligations to an overbearing authority figure.[54] Harry calls on the Clerk to tell "som murie thyng of aventures," in "so pleyn" a manner "That we may understonde what ye seye" (15-20), but the Clerk responds with a challenging tale of cruelty and intrigue, with overtones of violence and even incest—"pleyn" in diction, not in form or meaning, and "murie" only on a fleeting basis, at the ends of Parts Two and Six. The tale's bright conclusion, themes of fortune, and clear language fulfill Harry's requirement that it be "murie," "of aventures," and "pleyn," but only technically speaking.[55] Likewise, Griselda conforms her will to Walter's in strict accordance with her marriage vow, but she also maintains a consciousness apart from his and confronts him with a model of ethical consistency that radically challenges his approach to leadership.

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[53] Dinshaw draws on Judith Ferster’s work support her interpretation of Griselda’s “aggression” (136).

In light of these accomplishments, Dinshaw and Rossiter read Griselda and the Clerk's performances as acts of rhetorical "aggression" against "feminization […] as a means of subordination," performed in the service of self-assertion or subjectivity (quoted from Rossiter 189; see also Dinshaw 136). These readings of wifehood and resistance in the text resonate with Paul Strohm's observation that "the fourteenth-century household" was considered "a critical site of struggle within which the assumptions of hierarchy and the privileges of patriarchy were subjected to sore trials" ("Treason" 143). But Strohm's argument, which draws extensively on documentary evidence and on Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife of Bath, deals mostly with issues of sex and property: “violence and mayhem as figures for insurrectionary impulses, the marriage bed as a place where relations of domination and subordination are both evoked and transgressed,” as borne out especially in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* (143). His study focuses on texts that depict wives as dangerous, and married couples as essentially at odds, vying for power in a spirit of conflict.

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[54] "For what man that is entred in a pley," says Harry, "He nedes moot unto the pley assente," so that the Clerk's presence among the pilgrims binds him to participate in the Host's tale-telling game, the same way Griselda's marriage vow binds her to obey Walter's whims (10-11).

[55] On fortune, see line 756.

Strohm’s research, along with the readings by Rossiter and Dinshaw, supports the hypothesis that a valence of undisclosed political intentionality underlies Griselda’s devotion. But the marchioness, like her narrator, challenges patriarchy in a way that differs from the forms of aggression and self-assertion that these scholars describe. Although it may be possible to read Griselda and the Clerk as espousing private grudges in the tale, the Clerk’s overriding investment in ethical questions and Griselda’s determination to honor her vow of devotion render such readings unlikely.[56] Rather than engage with authority figures in a dynamic of aggressive conflict, both figures seem unfazed by the bait of Harry’s and Walter’s provocations and maintain enough composure to preserve a platform for articulating crucial observations. Both are, in a sense, wife-counselors—recall that the Clerk, in Harry’s estimation, resembles a wife—whose “rhetorical dexterity,” “not inconsiderable powers of speech,” and “skillful, deliberate negation” of patriarchal fallacies, to use Rossiter’s terms, help them transcend social disparities to assert a certain kind of public-minded counsel (189).

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[56] As I will argue in the closing section of this chapter, the envoy celebrates wifely insubordination in such a way that reflects the Clerk’s sympathy with the “insurrectionary impulses” that Strohm’s research deals with, but this expression of sympathy serves as a coda; the narrative itself depicts counsel rather than insurrection (Paul Strohm, “Treason in the Household,” *Hochon’s Arrow* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992], 143).

Thus Griselda's vow serves not as an opportunity to transgress or undermine her powerful husband but rather to remake him, slowly but strategically and permanently, so as to benefit both household and polity. Although, in Part Six, Walter claims he has been trying or testing his wife in the years leading up to her restoration, Griselda has been subjecting him to a different manner of "sore trials" and training him in the values of fidelity and devotion that he decidedly lacked in Part One (Strohm 143).

The public need for this kind of rhetorical performance in *The Clerk's Tale* is dire. Recurring examples of concealment, strategy, dishonesty, dissembling and fickleness in Saluzzo establish the necessity for an ethical reformer, a wonderful counselor "from hevene sent" (440). After the brief period of civil order occasioned by Walter's marriage, the political environment of Saluzzo sours. In other words, Griselda's implied retirement from the public sphere coincides with a new proliferation of deceptive or otherwise ethically dubious acts under Walter's watch. If the counsel narrative in Parts One and Two spotlights the problem of Walter's insouciance, the counsel narrative in Parts Three through Six explores the problem of duplicity, both individual and systemic.

In Saluzzo's culture of intrigue, communicational transparency is rare or at best variable. When Walter sends "A maner sergeant" of "Suspecious […] diffame" to carry away Griselda's child "Despitously," the Clerk's language suggests that the sergeant's untrustworthiness reflects a wider political or cultural trend: "Suspect his face, suspect his word also; / Suspect the tyme in which he this bigan" (340-342). The ethically suspect sergeant reflects poorly on the political climate under Walter's leadership (after Griselda's public activities seem to cease, and the testing begins), not only because he is acting and lying on behalf of Walter himself, but also because the Clerk links his suspiciousness to that of the "tyme" in which his actions occur.[57]

Secrecy, the flipside of suspicion, is also crucial to Walter's modus operandi, even in relationships that extend beyond Saluzzo. Covertly, the marquis orders "the court of Rome" to forge papal bulls detailing "How […] the pope, as for his peples reste, / Bad hym to wedde another, if hym leste" (736-749); arranges for his sister in Panico to "hyde / From every wight" the children's identity (594-595); and later writes a letter to the Earl of Panico in Bologna, praying "That he to no wight, though men wolde enquere, / […] nat telle whos children that they were" (767-770). Again, Walter's delegation of unsavory acts to other parties suggests a lack of accountability for his decisions—as does his failure to assure Griselda, despite her explicit request, that anyone has given the child in question a proper burial "in som place / That beestes ne no brides it torace" (570-572). Over the course of the tale, the aforementioned sergeant, "the court of Rome," the Earl of Panico, and Walter's own daughter (without her necessarily knowing it) all participate in the marquis' deceptions and omissions (737, 764-770).

Even the community at large, whose vulnerability is a major theme and receives a fair amount of sympathy in the text, is depicted as unreliable. Like *The Tale of Melibee*, *The Clerk's Tale* emphasizes the need for a patriarch to act in a community's best interest at the same time it expresses distrust in the ethical integrity of the community itself. Prudence and Griselda can counsel their husbands to act on behalf of public order precisely because their values, resources, and social positioning set them *apart* from the public, among whom "men shal alwey fynde a gretter nombre of fooles than of wise men" (*Mel* 1258). Whereas Walter's own changeability is mirrored in the fickleness of the "stormy peple" he rules, Griselda's marriage vow allows her to practice a deep-rooted constancy that stands out in contrast to this familiar dynamic (995).[58] Chaucer emphasizes this point of distinction between Griselda and her people by adding two stanzas to his source that elaborate the public's problematic taste for "noveltee": one stanza in the voice of wise, "sadde folk" who are disappointed in Saluzzo's "stormy peple" for approving of Walter's second marriage, followed by another stanza in the voice of the Clerk himself, who draws the passage to a close by evoking the values that Griselda represents by contrast: “Namoore of this make I now mencioun, / But to Griselde agayn wol I me dresse, / And telle hir constance and hir bisynesse” (995-1008; see Benson 885). Over the course of the tale, public opinion undergoes a dizzying succession of changes: from anxiety about Walter’s childlessness (85) to consternation when he delays his betrothal (246-252), admiration for his choice of a wife (421-427), hatred for “the sclaundre of his diffame” as a “mordrere” (722-732), cynical or grudging acceptance of the papal-bull scheme (750-751), grief over Griselda’s expulsion from the palace (897-898), approval for Walter’s plan to remarry (with the exception of some dissent among the aforementioned “sadde folk” [985-987, 995-1001]), delight in the novelty of a second wedding (1003-1005), and finally a combination of relief, sympathy for Griselda, and joy at her restoration to the palace (1086, 1104, 1109-1110). Although Griselda’s emotional state also changes in response to narrative events, her readiness to accept Walter’s actions is constant. That she never betrays signs of malice or bitterness—an accomplishment she humbly attributes to her poor upbringing (1041-1043)—confounds Walter’s expectations.[59]

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[57] Strikingly, the Clerk also uses "suspect" to describe Janicula's view of Walter's marriage proposal (905); Griselda's achievement is to transform the nature of their betrothal, treating Walter's suspicious proposal with her own prodigious sincerity.

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[58] The tale's argument is not that all wives can reform all patriarchs, but that wifehood is a major factor in Griselda's *particular* suitedness to reforming the marquis. In addition to her wifehood, Griselda's background further distinguishes her from all of his other subjects. Her poverty, in part, has equipped her with the stamina to practice these virtues over time, and her intellectual gifts allow her to practice them in such a way that will enlighten her husband. The symmetry between her status as the daughter of "a man / […] holden povrest of hem alle" (204-205) and Walter's status as "The gentilleste yborn of Lumbardye" creates at once both an extreme imbalance of nominal power and, paradoxically, a perfect balance of personal resources (204-205, 72). On the one hand, it would seem that Walter is more superior to Griselda, in terms of socioeconomic status, than to anyone else in Saluzzo; on the other hand, according to the story's logic, Griselda's innate gifts and long acquaintance with hardship (as "a povre fostred creature" [1043]) have armed her with unmatched diligence, patience, resilience and humility, equivalent in magnitude and significance to the unmatched material power and authority that Walter wields. As the poorest in the land, only Griselda can claim to have developed personal and moral resources that are strong enough to compete with the audacity and "vanytee" that correspond to Walter's might (250). Since the totality of Walter's power over all of Saluzzo renders the social distinctions among his subjects rather trivial, the material results of Griselda's poverty are more important than her nominal status in defining the terms of her relationship to the marquis. The abstract marker of her socioeconomic position certainly remains a factor—Walter exploits it in each of his lies (481-490, 624-644, 792-805)—but the concrete virtues she has acquired through living with this abstract marker substantially empower her to contend with the marquis' vices.

Griselda’s demonstrations of patience and constancy have an unprecedented effect on Walter. Like more traditional forms of counsel, her performances cause him to “wonder” (687-693), to “wait” (708-710), to pay attention (598-602), and ultimately to change his conduct, when he decides to quit testing her (1044-1056). Whereas the marquis inspires wonder and curiosity in his subjects and the Clerk on multiple occasions,[60] Griselda is the only person with the time, venue, and personal resources to command *his* fascination, and thus the only one to exercise any real power over his mind (see 246-252, 456-462, 621-624, 698-700).[61] Had she practiced a grudging form of obedience like that of the public, there would have been no cause for wonder in Walter and no incitement to change his ways.

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[59] On Griselda's lack of “malice,” see 1045.

If the rhetorical purpose of Griselda's faithfulness is to arrest Walter's attention by breaking from prevailing modes of communication, the moral purpose is to model a sense of accountability that is transferable to the political sphere. Just as Griselda guarantees the continuity of Walter's line by bearing his children, she establishes another kind of continuity between Saluzzo's past, present, and future by confronting Walter with narratives that emphasize the fulfillment of promises. All of her responses to Walter's cruel acts either allude to past events that we know to be true or assert a pledge that is later borne out as truthful in the narrative: "This wyl is in myn herte, and ay shal be; / No lengthe of tyme or deeth may this deface, / Ne chaunge my corage to another place" (509-511); "For as I lefte at hoom al my clothing, / Whan I first cam to yow, right so […] / Lefte I my wyl and al my libertee, / And took youre clothing; […] / […] I wol youre lust obeye" (654-658); "How gentil and how kynde / Ye semed by youre speche and youre visage / The day that maked was oure mariage!" (852-855); "To yow broghte I noght ells, our of drede, / But faith, and nakednesse, and maydenhede / […] Naked out of my fadres house […] I cam, and naked moot I turne agayn" (865-872); "Ne nevere, for no wele ne no wo, / Ne shal the goost withinne myn herte stente / To love yow best" (968-973). Griselda's promises to remain faithful are unfailingly borne out by the end of the story, and all of her claims about the past are grounded in specific events, usually associated with some kind of physical object or evidence; even the biblical allusion "Naked I cam," though figurative, truthfully recalls Griselda's arrival to the palace with "no thyng of hir olde geere" (372-376). Her professions of assent and devotion insist on their own honesty and demonstrate to Walter that truth and integrity remain possible despite the precedent he has set for deceit.

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[60] Walter's absolute authority renders him accountable to no one and allows him to take action without explaining himself; thus he is often a subject of speculation by the people and the Clerk. On the day set aside for the marquis' wedding, before his surprise proposal to Griselda, the people wonder "in privetee:" "Wol nat oure lord yet leve his vanytee? / Wol he nat wedde? Allas! Allas, the while! / Why wole he thus himself and us bigile?" (246-252 and 249-252 are Chaucer's insertion [Benson 881]). Later, just before the staged "murder" of Griselda's first child, the Clerk himself wonders why a husband would "assaye a wyf whan that is no nede:" "He hadde assayed hire ynogh bifore, / And foond hire evere good, what neded it / Hire for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore, / Though som men preise it for a subtil wit?" (456-462).

[61] The spokesman at the beginning of the story inspires "pitee" in Walter (141-142) and convinces him to marry, but the people's sense of defeat on the day appointed for the wedding, before they see Walter follow through on his promise (246-252), suggests their intuition that, in the spokesman's words, their leader has had the freedom "to doon right as [he] leste" all along (105). Walter did, after all, have the last word in their exchange, when he told the people to "speketh namoore of this matere" (175). His choice of a low-born wife also allows him to exercise a certain amount of power and liberty over the people even as he assents to "that blissful yok / Of soveraynetee, noght of servyse" that they request he take on (113-114): Walter categorically rejects the spokesman's call for him to "Honour […] God" and himself by finding a nobly-born bride. (Walter sees the privilege of choosing his own wife as compensation for the loss of his bachelorhood: "For sith I shal forgoon my libertee / At youre requeste, as evere moot I thryve, / Ther as myn herte is set, ther wol I wyve" [171-173].) That the people assent to Walter's choice "With heretely wyl," as if they have been consciously won over to the compromised terms of his promise, underscores a lack of steadfastness on both sides (176).

Thus it is not just Griselda's faithfulness and commitment to service that make her a successful model for Walter; her marriage itself—the bare fact of the contract's existence—provides her with a venue to enact these virtues in the first place. For one, on the most basic level, there are ways in which the institution of marriage gives

Griselda a small but unique measure of socioeconomic leverage to assert the moral power I have been describing. Even as it enforces her extreme obedience, Griselda's wifehood slightly boosts her social standing, in that being married to Walter makes her the only person in Saluzzo with something like a horizontal tie to the marquis. The marriage does not make Griselda Walter's equal—"modified-vertical tie" might be a better term, especially since Walter continues to invoke her "povre estaat ful lowe" (473; see 466-485, 624-633, 795)—but it does seem to dissolve the dread that he once inspired in her as a subject and that reinforces his stringently vertical relationship with all other subjects. Walter himself understands "drede" as a political currency in Saluzzo and can imagine the people's unwillingness to "pleyn speke in [his] audience" (634-637).[62] Griselda's yes to Walter's proposal may even be a direct result of this widespread, disorienting fear; seconds before their betrothal, she decides to accept Walter's hand while "Wondryge upon this word, quakynge for drede" (358). But this premarital dread dissipates after the wedding, and Griselda takes on a certain confidence and openness that further sets her apart from those whose relationship to Walter is more strongly characterized by dread.[63]

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[62] These terms are quoted from one of Walter's lies, but they nonetheless reflect his grasp on the role of dread in cementing Saluzzo's political structure.

[63] In the second stanza of Part Three, before the Clerk begins to detail Walter's tests, he interjects, "But as for me, I seye that yevele it sit / To assaye a wyf whan that it is no nede, / And putten hire in angwyssh and in drede" (460-462). But the events that follow, in Parts Three through Six, set Griselda slightly apart from the generic "wyf" the Clerk imagines in this comment. As each of the tests are described, the emphasis is always on her patience, constancy and composure—"And as a lamb she sitteth meke and stille" (538); not even in her tender treatment of the children before their "deaths" does she betray signs of dread. (Or even, if one looks closely, of anguish [see 563-567 and 677-679]: we find out later of her woe and "sorwe," but these emotions are not the same as anguish [1094, 1107].)

The marchioness understands her relinquishing of dread in a very technical sense, as a requirement of her marriage contract. After Walter tells her he must dispose of their daughter, concluding with a demand that Griselda honor the "pacience […] / That [she…] highte and swore […] / That day that maked was oure mariage," Griselda readily complies, explaining that there is nothing she can desire "Ne drede for to leese" now that her will has been subsumed in Walter's (495-497, 508):

> Ther may no thyng, God so my soule save,
> Liken to yow that may displese me;
> Ne I desire no thyng for to have,
> Ne dred for to leese, save oonly yee.
> This wyl is in myn herte, and ay shal be;
> No lengthe of tyme or deeth may this deface,
> Ne chaunge my corage to another place. (505 – 511)

In this interpretation of her marriage contract, Griselda emphasizes not the destruction of her own will but rather the perfect compatibility between her will and the marquis'. She can longer dread any loss or blow that comes of Walter's will because she understands his will to be congruent with her own. The narration substantiates Griselda's claim to have internalized Walter's will and thus to be free of dread; the Clerk tells us she is emotionally composed, "noght ameved / Neither in word, or chierre, or contenaunce" and "nat agreved" (498-500). Griselda thus remains far below Walter in terms of social and legal status, but, in emphasizing their congruent wills, she has slightly bent the vertical column of power that once made her fear him and has thus

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acquired a modicum more social power than anyone else in the realm can claim. She may not be able to control Walter directly, but, once married, she can face him with the emotional control of a good counselor.

The terms of the marriage contract make this composure possible, and invoking the marriage contract allows Griselda to articulate her lack of dread and substantiate her appearance of equanimity. By way of contrast, the "maner sergeant" Walter hires to take Griselda's daughter relates to Walter more predictably; we learn that "the lord knew wel that he hym loved and dradde," making it easy for Walter to enlist the sergeant's services in unsavory business (519-523). The marquis *cannot*, however, count on Griselda's dread, much less on any dread of him to have overridden her moral principles, because she understands her marriage vow as a moral imperative to eschew dread. Walter can count on his wife's love and obedience, but this obedience results from Griselda's own sense of moral obligation, rather than from the dynamic of dread and manipulation that marks his dealings with the sergeant. Although it could be argued that both the sergeant's and Griselda's obedience lead to the same end—the children's ostensible deaths—Griselda's obedience has the merit of modeling a sincere fidelity to contract, unalloyed by fear or opportunism, that Walter might internalize and imitate in the political sphere.

In reminding Walter of their vow, Griselda not only shows her husband that she does not, cannot, dread him, but also confronts him with his own consequentiality, thus hinting at the issue of his responsibilities. Her statements of compliance remind him of her shared stake in his will and take pains to specify that, though her will is congruent to Walter's, Walter alone chooses his actions and thus determines what their wills will be:

"My child and I, with hertely obeisaunce, / Been yours al, and ye mowe save or spille / youre owene thyng; werketh after youre wille" (502-504); "I wol no thyng, ne nyl no thyng, […] / but as yow list. Naught greveth me at al, / Though that my doughter and my sone be slayn— / *At youre comandment, this is to sayn*" (647-649; emphasis mine). That the last two lines of the latter quotation are Chaucer's addition suggests the poet's investment in portraying Griselda's ability to remind Walter of his own conduct (Benson 882). Her professions record the consequences of the marquis' decisions, attribute all initiative to him alone, undermine his false excuses about public pressure, and eliminate any potential ambiguity as to his total responsibility for his actions. In another of Chaucer's additions, Griselda records her own treatment of the wedding vow in such a way that draws a stark and ironic contrast with Walter's: "God shilde swich a lordes wyf to take / Another man to housbonde or to make!" (839-840; see Benson 883). At the very moment when Walter is completely disavowing Griselda, she shows that, for her part, she cannot conceive of taking another husband.

Although the cruelty of Walter's tests suggests that he does not yet understand his wife to be an extension of himself, Griselda persists in reminding him of their connectedness, and Walter experiences increasing sympathy with her over time. After announcing the first execution, he puts on a "drery" face but is privately "glad […] of her answeryng" (512-514);[64] after the second such announcement, he is struck by Griselda's reaction, "wonder[s], evere lenger the moore, / Upon hir pacience" and seems to consider the issue of her perspective in the ordeal ("wel he knew that next himself, […] / She loved hir children best in every wyse" [694-695; see 687-695]). After Walter banishes Griselda from the palace and grants her permission to keep her smock, he reacts with genuine sadness—"wel unnethes thilke word he spak, / But wente his wey, for routhe and for pitee" (890-893)—showing no trace of gratification. Finally, in response to Griselda's plea that he "ne prikke with no tormentynge" his second wife (1037-1043), Walter makes an active choice to change his conduct towards her: "And whan this Walter saugh hire pacience, / […] This sturdy markys gan his herte dresse / To rewen upon hire wyfly stedfastnesse. / 'This is ynogh, Griselde myn,' quod he" (1044-1051). By degrees, Walter has learned to take Griselda's perspective and feelings into account, so much so as to let them change him in the end.

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[64] After the sergeant brings Walter his daughter, the marquis "Somwhat […] hadde routhe in his manere, / But nathelees his purpose heeld he stille, / As lords doon, whan they wol han hir wille" (579-581).

Over the course of the tale, the marquis develops a corresponding appreciation for his connectedness to the public. Just as his consideration and sympathy for Griselda increase over time, so does the complexity of his political imagination. Twisted though they be, Walter's lies to Griselda about her reputation reflect a revision in his understanding of what a ruler should, in theory, owe to the people he rules. Whereas, in conceding to marry at the beginning of the story, Walter emphasizes his "free wyl" and insists on establishing his own terms of marriage, in later moments his dialogue emphasizes the issue of his own obligations and accountability to the public.[65] In Part

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[65] On Walter's "liberte:" "'Ye wol,' quod he, 'myn owene peple deere, / To that [to marry] I nevere erst thought streyne me. / I me rejoysed of my liberte, / That seelde tyme is founde in mariage; / Ther I was free, I moot been in servage. / […] And forthermoore, this shal ye swere: that ye / Agayn my choys [of a wife] shul neither grucce ne stryve; / For sith I shal forgoon my libertee / At youre requeste, as evere moot I thryve, / Ther as myn herte is set, ther wol I wyve" (143-175).

Three, when Walter tells Griselda he must have their firstborn killed, he invokes the principle that it is “for the beste” for a ruler to prioritize the public's satisfaction over his own: “I may nat in this caas be recchelees; / I moot doon with thy doghter for the beste, / Nat as I wolde, but as my peple leste” (488-490). Although Walter is fabricating the public’s hostility toward Griselda, the content of his lie rests on the assumption that a ruler should serve the demands of the people he rules. Nonetheless, his putative reason for wanting to serve the public is fundamentally self-serving—“I desire, as I have doon bifore, / To lyve my lyf with hem in reste and pees” (486-487)—so that even his hypothetical or disingenuous public-mindedness derives from a selfish understanding of rulership. Yet when Walter approaches Griselda about their second child, though his concept of rulership retains this dimension of selfishness (“I wolde lyve in peese, if that I myghte” [638]), his comments reflect a subtler and more complex understanding of his relationship with the public: “Swiche wordes seith my peple, out of drede. / Wel oughte I to swich murmur taken heede, / For certainly I drede swich sentence, / Though they nat pleyn speke in myn audience” (631-637). Here, Walter’s lie imagines a public will at odds with his own, acknowledges the importance of the public’s dread in cementing his rule, and even posits a scenario in which his own dread of the people is greater than the people’s dread of him.

Later, the marquis takes even more elaborate measures to misrepresent public opinion, so that his lies betray a greater interest in issues of protocol and accountability, as well as what is perhaps a humbler understanding of rulership and its limitations. In Part Five, Walter imagines an institutional check on his power in the form of the

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church, claiming that the pope supports the people's demand for a new marchioness (736-749, 800-805):

> But now knowe I in verray soothfastnesse
> That in greet lordship, if I wel avyse,
> Ther is greet servitute in sondry wyse.
>
> I may nat doon as every plowman may.
> My peple me constreyneth for to take
> Another wyf, and crien day by day;
> And eek the pope, rancor for to slake,
> Consenteth it – that dar I undertake –
> And trewely thus muche I wol yow seye:
> My newe wyf is comynge by the weye. (796-805)

By this point, Walter seems to have achieved a fully developed *theoretical* understanding of lordship as "servitute" and of the limits to his own authority. He should, hypothetically, be a servant to the people, seek permission from the pope for morally ambiguous actions, and substantiate the pope's permission by promulgating a document available to the public (736-742). Whereas, in Walter's first lie, he only claimed to act out of a self-serving desire for peace, his lie about the pope aspires to reflect a philosophy of rule-following, accountability, and self-sacrifice.

Of course, Walter's monologue about the pope, like the papal bull itself, is an assemblage of lies. The marquis is not yet putting his new political theory of accountability into practice, as his personal inclination to test Griselda still seems to trump his devotion to the public’s best interests. But Walter has nonetheless fully attained the intellectual grasp that can precede behavioral reform. Before his wedding, Walter saw himself as free from obligation to anyone; understood marriage, not leadership, as the only conceivable form of “servage” that would threaten his “liberte;” and indulged the people’s will out of “pitee” alone, as opposed to a rational sense of obligation (145-147). But over the course of the narrative, as his monologues suggest, the marquis has begun to understand leadership as an obligation to separate personal whims, allegiances, and feelings from political rationale—and even to work against his personal desires if they do not conform to the people's will. In fact, Walter’s transition from breaking the bad news about his children to Griselda “with ful trouble cheere” earlier in the tale (464), as if the public’s murmuring “destroyed hath [his] herte” (627-630), to suppressing his genuine “routhe and […] pitee” and stoically banishing her from the palace in Part Five (796-805, 893), reflects a (pretend) effort to completely merge his will with the public’s. He claims to be “constrained” by his people’s call for him to take a new wife, but he never apologizes to Griselda and no longer complains about the pain of any contrary inclinations on his part. Thus Walter has come to understand his relationship to the public in a way that resembles Griselda’s understanding of their marriage contract: as an obligation to conform one’s will to another’s, without betraying signs of resentment (920-924). Just as Griselda remains steadfastly “bisy in servyse” even after her child is supposedly killed, Walter—in the imaginary circumstance of Giselda’s unpopularity—must persist uncomplainingly in the “greet servitute” his lordship requires.

Thus Walter's changing relationship to Griselda correlates with his changing political philosophy.[66] These two arcs of progress converge when Walter announces publicly that Griselda has passed his tests of her wifely devotion. The scene marks Walter's conversion to prudence, as evinced, in part, by his practical implementation of a principle of fairness: that Griselda demonstrates "no malice at al" and remains "constant as a wal, / Continuynge evere hire innocence overal" when "he so ofte had doon to hire offence" inspires him to cease testing her (1044-1057).[67] Further, when Walter feels compelled to offer the public a rationale for his treatment of the marchioness, his explanation of the tests reflects a new level of both accountability and prudence. The values of judiciousness, forethought, and responsibility are no longer just strangely promising figments in his fantasies of public unrest over Griselda. For the first time, the marquis provides a clear and fully articulated justification for his actions:

> And folk that ootherweys han seyd of me,
> I warne hem wel that I have doon this deede
> For no malice, ne for no crueltee,
> But for t'assaye in thee thy wommanheede,

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[66] Chaucer's section divisions clarify the counterpoint between Griselda's constancy and the shifts in Walter's thinking that I have described (Benson 881).

[67] Other critics have observed a relationship of causality between Griselda's performance and Walter's constitutional improvement at the end of the tale. Laura Ashe argues that Griselda inspires positive moral change in her husband by offering generous critical interpretations or "readings" of his actions (940). Anna Baldwin explores the effects of Griselda's "criticiz[ing] Walter's changeability," arguing that Griselda's implicit critique of Walter is one of Chaucer's most important contributions to Petrarch's version ("From the *Clerk's Tale* to *The Winter's Tale*," *Chaucer Traditions*, eds. Ruth Morse and B. A. Windeatt [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], 200).

> And nat to sleen my children—God forbeede!—
> But for to kepe hem pryvely and stille,
> Til I thy purpose knewe and al thy wille. (1172-1176)

Thus Walter claims to have tested his wife and kidnapped her children as a necessary precaution, to determine the extent of her loyalty and fitness for motherhood. Since Walter articulates this rationale retroactively, having never revealed it before, it reflects a brand-new sense of accountability to his wife and to the public.[68] We might even read the tale as being more about Walter's abandonment of the wife-testing scheme than about Griselda's passing of the test; or, rather, we can understand Griselda's passing of the test as a catalyst for the more remarkable narrative trajectory of Walter's change. Of course, Griselda's performance is remarkable, but since it does not entail a change in her constitution or conduct, it is less of an event that Walter's final announcement is.

This event reflects the marquis' new appreciation for two aspects of what I have referred to as political and ethical "accountability": transparency and purposefulness. In some of Chaucer's most telling additions to Petrarch, the Clerk describes Walter's wife-testing scheme as needless and excessive. In contrast to those who might "preise [testing one's wife] for a subtil wit," the Clerk declares plainly: "as for me, I seye that yvele it sit / To assaye a wyf whan that *it is no nede*, / And putten hire in angwysh and in drede" (459-462; emphasis mine).[69] This addition reinforces the translated claim, a few lines earlier, that "*Nedelees*, God woot, [Walter] thoghte [Griselda] for t'affraye" (455; emphasis mine). In another addition, in Part Four, the Clerk emphasizes the issues of pointlessness yet again, exclaiming, "O *nedelees* was she tempted in assay! / But wedded men ne knowe no mesure, / Whan that they fynde a pacient creature" (621-623; emphasis mine). Later, our narrator locates the origins of Walter's "merveillous desir his wyf t'assaye" in an old, irrational whim (454, 696-707): he wonders, "What koude a sturdy housbonde moore devyse / To preeve hir wyfhod and hir stedefastnesse, / And she continuying evere in sturdinesse," and describes Walter as persisting in the endeavor "as if [he] were bounden to that stake." The image suggests that Walter tests his wife out of inertia or lack of control, rather than from conscious reassessments of the trials' value (698-700).

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[68] Griselda, too, divulges a retroactive account of her behavior: "I nevere heeld me lady ne mistresse, / But humble servant to youre worthynesse" (823-824).

[69] On Chaucer's revisions, see Benson 882: lines 459-462 and 621-623 are Chaucer's creation.

By contrast, at the close of the story, Walter demonstrates a conviction that his actions should grow out of rational precepts. Whereas the narrative begins by critiquing his lack of forethought, it ends with him straining to justify his actions by articulating a plan that might have motivated them. Walter's explanation for testing Griselda also reflects a newly self-conscious regard for public opinion; he is no longer fabricating malicious stories about the public but voicing sincere and explicit concern about whether or not his subjects approve of him. Furthermore, the address reflects a greater complexity in Walter's understanding of the relationship between his political and domestic circumstances. Whereas the marquis' tests seem, initially, to have served only a private desire—to verify his wife's feminine virtues or "wommanheede" (1075)—his *explanation* for the tests, by its public nature, reflects a newfound appreciation that his domestic life is a matter of importance to the public. By the end of the tale, Walter has not necessarily been converted to the complete subservience that characterized Griselda's professions of devotion, or even to the "greet servitute" that he invoked earlier—tellingly, albeit disingenuously—as a standard for his own behavior (798). But his demonstration of accountability is significant, and his acquisition of prudence in particular shows that Griselda, in her constancy, has served the role of a counselor.

Granted, the marquis' new regard for prudence or principled forethought in this passage is retroactive and even a little farcical. As the Clerk's comments affirm, Walter's desire to test Griselda hardly justifies kicking her out of the palace, pretending to murder their children, and staging a fake incestuous wedding. But Walter's rationalization is not worthless. It completes the work of restoring his household and seems to establish a precedent for him to behave more rationally and accountably in the future. In her address to the children upon their return, Griselda invokes images that deftly underscore the narrative of Walter's transformation from the reckless sportsman of Part One, hawking and hunting "on every syde" (79-84), to the more benign patriarch of the story's conclusion: "Youre woful mooder wende stedfastly / That crueel houndes or som foul vermyne / Hadde eten yow; but God of his mercy / And youre benyngne fader tendrely / Hath doon yow kept" (1094-1098). That Griselda refers to herself and her husband in the third person, choosing to focus the address on their children instead, is in keeping with her tendency to understand the marriage mainly in terms of its consequences for others.

The material that follows this passage seems intended to bear out the permanence of Walter's change. The Clerk tells us that Walter and Griselda "Lyven […] in concord and in reste" for "many a yeer in heigh prosperitee" and that Walter takes in Janicula “Til that the soule out of his body crepeth” (1128-1134). That the couple’s “sone succedeth in his heritage / In reste and peese, after his fader day” and “putte he nat his wyf in greet assay” marks the ultimate satisfaction of Saluzzo’s wish for a successor and suggests that Walter leaves a legacy of prudence and kindness to his son (1135-1138). All of these politically significant events are set in motion by Griselda’s passing of Walter’s test, and, although we are led to roundly critique the style of leadership that occasions a trade-off between Griselda’s well-being and Saluzzo’s political stability, we cannot deny that her abject obedience and devotion, however disturbing, result in positive change for the polity.

This victory on behalf of Saluzzo reflects Chaucer’s interest in the constructive merits of wifehood and wifely instruction or counsel in the context of political reform. Now that we have discerned the narrative of Griselda’s success as a wife-counselor and the values that operate within this narrative, we are in a better position to clarify the specific political arguments that operate within *The Clerk’s Tale*, as well as to address the literary and ethical problems that make these arguments hard to discern.

III. What’s to be learned, and by whom

Prudence and exemplarity for different audiences

By the time of the tale’s conclusion, Griselda’s performances of devotion gradually serve the same ethical end that any good wifely counsel should serve: to make her husband more prudent. Drawing on her resources as Walter’s wife and “a povre fostred creature," the marchioness inspires her husband to quit behaving cruelly, leave off his personal obsession, and provide a rational account of his actions. Yet the form her counsel quite often takes is ethically confusing. With the "murders" of her children, Griselda's devotion to the vow takes on a stubborn or reckless quality that recalls that of Walter's persistence in bachelorhood and, later, his tests of Griselda herself ("This markys in his herte longeth so / To tempte his wyf, […] / That he ne myghte out of his herte throwe / This merveillous desir his wyf t'assaye" [451-454]).[70] These choices, as I have discussed in previous sections, are the main ways in which Walter endangers his polity. If Griselda's more extreme speech-acts reflect an obstinacy that mirrors the marquis' (albeit in an edifying fashion), it is not immediately evident how these more performative acts of counsel serve to break the cycle of Walter's imprudence and to inspire his rational, public-minded self-explanation in Part Six (1072-1078). Though it is clear how Griselda models fidelity for her husband, it is more difficult to understand how she teaches him prudence.

J. Allen Mitchell begins his essay on Griselda and "Ethical Monstrosity" by opposing her "voluntary submission" to the virtue of "ordinary prudence, where

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[70] Griselda's counsel is part of a rational program "Peple to save and every wrong t'amende" (441), but a lifetime of poverty and an intuitive gift for "wyfly hoomlinesse" (429) have so deeply instilled her strengths and values that she can access and persist in them without wavering. When, after both supposed executions, the Clerk describes the "condicion" that sustain's Walter's urge "To tempte his wyf as he was first disposed," he might as well be describing Griselda's unflagging endurance: "But ther been folk of wich condicion / That whan they have a certein purpose take, / They kan nat stynte of hire entencion, / But, right as they were bounden to that stake, / They wol nat of that firste purpose slake" (701-707). In keeping with the symmetry of their social statuses, Griselda meets Walter's "firste purpose" to test and possibly destroy her with an equally intractable determination to honor him in fulfillment of her marriage vow. Her *ambition* to satisfy all of Walter's demands results from a prudent, civic-minded calculation, but her *endurance* reflects a stubbornness learned in poverty and wifehood.

prudence is understood in the medieval sense as a matter of discovering practical precepts for action" (1; emphasis Mitchell's). Regardless of the extent to which Griselda's submission is voluntary, her fanatical adherence to an ethic of wifely submission does not reflect any degree of the prudence we associate with wise wifely counsel (or with any counsel). So by what alchemy of prudence, exemplarity, and their opposites does Griselda's extremism "slake" Walter's own—his radical adherence to a "firste purpose" (705)—rather than continue to enable and exacerbate it? And, further, what should *readers* glean from her instruction as a wife-counselor, with so much of her counsel eschewing conventional prudence, that core value of medieval counsel? I answer these questions in terms of prudence and exemplarity, a key strategy of certain kinds of counsel and of "moral tales" in general. Parsing these interrelated concepts in the narrative is crucial to understanding the lessons that Griselda, the Clerk, and the poet of *The Clerk's Tale* have to offer.

When Mitchell refers to "a problem of prudence" in the tale, he speaks of the apparent loss of focus, clarity, and rhetorical force that occurs when a potentially exemplary performance transcends the bounds of prudence and practicability (2). Both the narrator and Griselda recognize this problem. The Clerk addresses it when, in the envoy, he counsels "noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence" to "lat no clerk have cause or diligence / To write of yow a storie of swich mervaille / As of Grisildis" (1183-1188). This passage occurs within the nine stanzas of framing material (1163-1212g) that Chaucer appends to the tale after his translation of the French and Latin sources ends (1163; see Benson 883). This added material foregrounds the knot of moral contradictions at the heart of the text and compounds our confusion by adding a layer of irony: quasi-veiled, tongue-in-cheek jabs at insubordinate wives.

Yet in its mention of prudence and its irreverent take on the tale, the envoy serves as a useful starting point for discerning the text's arguments. Behind the Clerk's humor, there lies a sincere critique of standards for wifely obedience, forming what Richard Neuse aptly calls a "humorous but nonetheless serious 'recantation'" of the inherited tale (222). In combination with the tale's more troubling moments, the envoy's stress on Griselda's exceptionality implies that most living wives should—unlike the heroine—exploit the value of prudence for the protection of themselves and their children.[71] The word "mervaille" also reminds us of Griselda's extreme particularity and precludes us from reading the tale as a straightforward prescription to imitate her. Perhaps most significantly, the Clerk warns that Griselda's wifely forbearance is "inportable" and that her Christian exemplarity, according to Petrarch, lies more in her general capacity for patience than in the particular acts that manifest her patience (1142-1144).[72] Yet his closing comments invite readers to think critically and creatively beyond Petrarch's interpretation of Griselda's "virtuous suffraunce."[73] The envoy also suggests that the wives of cruel husbands may in fact be an exception to Petrarch's exhortation that "every wight" adopt Griselda's patience in the face of adversity (1162, 1142).[74] Ultimately, the envoy implies, Griselda should be a *negative* exemplar for married women; her self-sacrifice is a useful strategy in Saluzzo's political circumstance, but readers should take from her a lesson on how *not* to interpret their marriage vows. The one, improbable exception would be a reader/wife-counselor who finds herself in exactly the same political/domestic circumstance as Griselda.

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[71] By calling to mind the "heigh prudence" of "noble wyves" in a jocular fashion, the Clerk undermines a tradition of representing wifehood in a flattering light: today's wives, he suggests, don't have it in them to behave as Griselda did. However—he also suggests—they shouldn't be expected to. The joke of the envoy is that wives can be insubordinate, even a pain in the neck, but good for them; so be it, when the alternative model of wifehood (Griselda's) is so extreme. This celebration of wifely insubordination reflects sincere pleasure in the idea of women's resistance and sincere resentment over the patriarchal understanding of marriage that allows for abusive behavior like Walter's. It also provides comic relief from the marital dynamic the tale depicts; the tone should not be misread as sarcastic or acerbic.

[72] Benson defines "inportable" as "intolerable" (152). For the Clerk, Griselda is only an exemplar insofar as "every wight"—every Christian—should imitate her patience and humility in the face of adversity (1145). The Clerk emphatically objects to a reading of Griselda's exemplarity as a model for wifely obedience (1142-1169). One

Like the Clerk, the marchioness herself is aware of her own performance's inimitability—and perhaps even of its inadvisability in marriage. In an illuminating moment, she speaks about issues of imitability, obedience, and wifehood in a clearer, more decisive register than the Clerk uses in his envoy. Just before Walter's ostensible

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of his reasons, he claims, is that contemporary women are morally weaker than Griselda was ("The gold of hem hath now so bade alayes / With bras, that thogh the coyne be fair at ye, / It wolde rather breste a-two than plye" [1163-1169]), but this comment's air of misogynistic nostalgia seems tongue-in-cheek when paired with the merrily glib opening line of the envoy ("Griselde is deed, and eek hire pacience" (1176). Furthermore, the Clerk's words of praise for women's patience at the end of Part Five undercut the surface meaning of disparaging comments about women elsewhere in the tale and envoy and are far more sincere by comparison (932-938).

[73] The mention of "heigh stile" here further distinguishes the Clerk's retelling of the story from Petrarch's, insofar as it recalls two less-than-flattering mentions of "heigh stile" in the Prologue: first, when the host demands that the Clerk offer a tale in "pleyn" speech rather than "heigh stile" (16-20), and second, when the Clerk mentions that his source features "A prohemye" in "heigh stile" that strikes him as "a thyng impertinent" (translated by Benson as "irrelevant") (39-43, 53-55).

[74] The Clerk further qualifies or distances himself from Petrarch's reading by scrupulously attributing it to his source ("therefore Petrak writeth / This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth" [1147-1148]), burying it under the nine stanzas of framing material and, as I have already discussed, taking pains elsewhere to undercut whatever resemblance to God we might have read into Walter.

second wedding, Griselda implies that a second wife would either perish under or rebel against the marquis' harsh treatment:

> O thyng biseke I yow, and warne also,
> That ye ne prikke with no tormentynge
> This tender mayden, as ye han doon mo;
> For she is fostred in hire norissynge
> Moore tenderly, and, to my supposynge,
> She koude nat adversitee endure
> As koude a povre fostred creature. (1037-1043)

Here, Griselda counsels both Walter and us not to read her devotion as an imitable standard for wifely obedience. The passage is a clear-cut example of advocacy—explicit counsel to another party on behalf of a third party's best interest—and a relatively rare instance in which Griselda chooses a rhetorical strategy as prudent as the mission behind it. (This section of Part Six explicitly describes Griselda as having "prudence" again [1022].) As at the end of Part Two, which depicts Griselda mediating public disputes, her language here reflects the deliberation and measured rhetoric that is characteristic of more traditional counsel. In the manner of a skilled diplomat, she conveys a severe admonition about Walter's cruelty in the language and tone of someone rendering an intellectual service. The veneer of subservience is wrought from sincere respect and love—her devotion is a strategy of packaging rather than a disguise—but the spirit of the counsel lies in its offer of an ominous warning, gentler than but similar in tone to the Clerk's critiques of Walter in Part One.

As compared to Griselda's professions of assent, this example of her counsel is craftier in terms of language and politics, yet also more overt in its rhetorical purpose *as counsel*. Rather than harnessing the raw, overt language of devotion in the service of a *covert* mission to change Walter over time, Griselda now relies on more traditionally tactful and measured verbal rhetoric in an *overt* mission to influence the marquis' behavior in a discrete situation.[75] Recalling the rhetorical signposting characteristic of more traditional counselors like Dame Prudence and *Boece*'s Lady Philosophy, Griselda prefaces her advice by specifying the hybrid register in which Walter should receive it: not only as a plea ("biseke I yow") but also as an admonition ("and warne also"). In using the word "warne" without elaborating the ultimate dangers she is warning *of*—the public and private risks Walter would take were he to destroy his second wife—Griselda is, in part, being tactful: she honors Walter's authority, as well as the occasion of his second wedding, by minimizing discussion of doom and cruelty. But she is also being highly suggestive. Her concision prompts us to imagine any number of disastrous consequences that could result from Walter's abuse of a second wife, not only for the woman's well-being but also for the state of Walter's soul, as well as for his political reputation and thus for the fate of the polity. The inextricability of Walter's marital life from his performance as a ruler, as established at the beginning of the tale, makes it easy to imagine both private and public consequences. Griselda's language also implicates Walter in directly harming his people; her use of the plural "mo" in phrase "as ye han doon mo" is an ever so brief yet striking reminder that the marquis is guilty of "tormentynge" not only his first wife but also his subjects. Although Griselda's ability to endure "adversitee" distinguishes her from other subjects, she shares in the polity's collective experience of Walter's torments.

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[75] Yet, for all its sincerity, the language of Griselda's professions of devotion is not without a few subtleties, modest coups, and even ironies of its own. Her addresses to Walter are simply too long to be free of any rhetorical complications, and the tensions we find in these passages reflect a cognitive astuteness befitting of a counselor. There is at least one example of irony in Griselda's dialogue that is sufficiently glaring to consider intentional and that suggests the intellectual complexity of her devotion. After agreeing to let her second child be slain, Griselda concludes at the top of a new stanza (addressing Walter): "Deth may noght make no comparisoun / Unto youre love" (666-667). In context—if we ignore certain prosodic cues—this quotation simply reiterates Griselda's claim in the previous stanza that she would die for her husband if such were his will ("For wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese, / Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plese" [664-665]). But her conclusion that death cannot compare to Walter's love can have a second meaning: that Walter's "love"—his side of the nominal marriage bond—is more destructive to her than death would be; his attentions to Griselda far surpass the ultimate form of destruction. This second meaning is reinforced by the rhymes' indication of a stanza break before the start of the sentence, as well as by a dramatic moment of metrical irregularity at the beginning of the line (the pregnant absence of an unstressed syllable before "Deth"). It may be especially obvious if the reader is attuned to a certain pitch-dark comedy in Walter's egregious lies and morbidity. From this angle, Griselda's words reflect a new readiness to die that contrasts with her earlier, more reluctant comment about love and death ("I nyl yow disobeye, / For to be deed, *though me were looth to deye*" [363-364; emphasis mine]). The subtle shift in her affect acknowledges the destructive potential of Walter's actions in a non-confrontational way, and the artfulness with which two clear, contrasting, yet sincere meanings are packed into a short line reflects extreme rhetorical sophistication.

The example of Griselda's counsel, in its relative conventionality or explicitness, recalls the spokesman's monologue at the beginning of the tale and thus invites a comparison between the two speakers as counselors. In keeping with Walter's dissolution of their marital intimacy, Griselda has prudently shifted to a more restrained manner of address. Doing away with affective professions, which would now be inappropriate, and with documentary observations, which she no longer has the access to make, Griselda adopts a rather distanced register of rational speculation ("to my supposynge"). Like Saluzzo's spokesman, Griselda is addressing Walter in her capacity as one of his subjects, worried about the dangers of a particular eventuality. Both the spokesman and Griselda, in these bookending moments of the tale, cautiously express concern over Walter's perilous contempt for marriage. But despite thematic similarities with the spokesman's counsel, Griselda's argument for Walter to treat his new wife kindly seems, in retrospect, wiser, bolder, more informed, more philosophical, and even more artful by comparison. Well-intentioned as it was, the spokesman's counsel regarding Walter's *first* marriage now appears reckless or irreligious in light of the hasty and abusive union it gave rise to. It also reflects a timid, dissembling quality that, though quite understandable given political circumstances, underscores the dignity and substance of Griselda's tactful but more incisive counsel regarding Walter's impending *second* marriage.[76] Whereas the spokesman's counsel results in a marriage that is in some ways disastrous, Griselda's corresponding act of counsel results in Walter abandoning plans for an even more grotesque union, as well as in his repairing the first one.[77] Despite its brevity, Griselda's final act of counsel reflects an unassailable foundation of experiential moral wisdom that renders it more effective than the spokesman's somewhat cynical promotion of marriage as a means to continue Walter's line and straighten out his attitude. Like *The Tale of Melibee*, *The Clerk's Tale* thus draws a clear and formally prominent contrast between corresponding examples of masculine and wifely counsel that is far more flattering to the latter tradition and points to Griselda's exemplarity as a political agent.

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[76] In addition to the ambiguities discussed much earlier in the chapter, there is also the suggestion of insincerity in the spokesman's explanation for why he was chosen to address Walter: "for as muche as ye, my lord so deere, / Han alwey shewed me favour and grace / I dar the bettre aske of yow a space" (99-105). This explanation is flattering to Walter in that it depicts the marquis as gracious; it also establishes a special (if temporary) good will between him and the spokesman. But earlier the Clerk offers a few different explanations for the spokesman's election: "oon of hem, that wisest was of loore— / Or ells that the lord best wolde assente / That he sholde tell hym what his peple mente, / Or ells koude he shew wel swich matere" (87-91). According to the last of these explanations, the spokesman may have been chosen because of his rhetorical abilities alone.

[77] Taking Griselda's father into the household, settling son and daughter into untroubled marriages, and sustaining his own marriage for "Ful many a yeer in heigh prosperitee / […] in concord and in reste" (1128-1141)

I have explained why the passage quoted above is an important example of wifely counsel and how it reflects a strategy that is, for Griselda, characteristically prudent in its mission and rather uncharacteristically prudent in the form it takes. But the raw content of the passage is also significant for clarifying what impact Griselda's performance should have: in the passage, Griselda articulates a highly accurate self-assessment of her own role in the narrative. She is speaking unapologetically as an advisor who does not often lead by example. The "inportable" humility Griselda practices is a rhetorical strategy tailored to a particular sociopolitical circumstance and should not be expected of all women who have had the misfortune of marrying a tormentor (1143-1144). It thus follows from Griselda's warning and plea ("O thyng biseke I yow […]") that one should not fault other wives who "koude nat adversitee endure" in the same circumstance. In effect, this deliberately vague phrase, which refuses to specify in what events or actions a second wife's lack of endurance might manifest itself, apologizes for a vast spectrum of wifely responses to male domination, in such a way that might condition our reading of other wives in the *Tales*. Whether Walter's second wife crumbles and dies as a result of Walter's mistreatment, or whether she rises to his aggression by morphing into another Wife of Bath, Griselda's *sympathy*, it is suggested, extends to all, even though her *example* is not to be followed in the home.

As the above passage most clearly suggests, exemplarity and prudence operate differently on various levels in *The Clerk's Tale*. Although the critical tradition has focused on the issue of Griselda's problematic exemplarity and lack of conventional prudence as a wife and mother, her political exemplarity for Walter, and for embattled political agents among her readers, may be more fruitful matters to consider. The tale's defining narrative event is a political leader's ethical transformation as occasioned by Griselda's performance; thus rulers and their counselors stand to gain considerably from the tale's instructive dimension. If we read Chaucer's heroine as an exemplar, we must read her as multiple exemplars in one: inside the world of the tale, she counsels Walter by exemplifying self-sacrifice and commitment; beyond the world of the tale, she exemplifies these same qualities for political leaders *like* Walter, as well as for particularly embattled counselors like herself, whose circumstances have rendered conventionally prudent counsel ineffective. Of course, she remains Petrarch's exemplar of patience for Christians experiencing severe crisis (1145-1148). But by way of exception, according to the Clerk's envoy, she is a negative exemplar for wives of cruel husbands, whether among the inscribed audience of pilgrims or the living audience of readers (1142-1143).

The slowness with which Griselda's counsel converts Walter does not compromise its political exemplarity for counselors under duress or for rulers in general. The contention that beleaguered counselors should practice Griselda's uncompromising openness, devotion to institutional authority, and commitment to contract may be unsatisfying to some readers; the tale is indeed reformist rather than radical in posing gradual and legally spotless strategies for political change. But the implication that *leaders* (real-life Walters) should imitate Griselda's extreme devotion and self-sacrifice is obviously a radical idea, as is the critique of misogyny and misogamy that is implicit in the Clerk's depiction of Griselda's trials. If all leaders practiced a devotion to the public good that resembled the devotion required of wives, counselors could make their points using frankness and simple advocacy; there would be no need for them to abandon prudence in extreme displays of self-sacrifice. In the end, Chaucer's Griselda story invites us to consider the prospect of demanding obedience from leaders rather than wives.

Coda:

"Crabbed eloquence" in the Clerk's envoy

At the end of his tale, the Clerk dedicates an envoy not to his main character, the patient and discreet Griselda, but to his fellow narrator Alison of Bath and "al hire secte:"

> For which heere, for the Wyves love of Bathe—
> Whos lyf and al hire secte God mayntene
> In heigh maistrie, and ells were it scathe—
> I wol with lusty herte, fresh and grene,
> Seyn yow a song to glade yow, I wene;
> And lat us stynte of ernestful matere. (1170-1175)

This explicit dedication to Alison is followed by a six-stanza envoy that strongly evokes ideas developed in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* and invites readers to imagine the possibility that Alison's combative behavior in marriage has positive exemplary value (1203, 1177-1212). The Clerk's call for wives to use an arsenal of strategies—from "crabbed eloquence" to "jalousie" to affectation ("Be ay of chiere as light as leef on lynde")—as weapons in the struggle for spousal sovereignty resonates with Alison's penchant for various tools of verbal argument and emotional game-playing in marriage (*ClT* 1203, 1205, 1211).[78] More specifically, his images of combat and of insurrectionary speech—"The arwes of thy crabbed eloquence / Shal perce his brest and eek his aventaille"—recall Alison's "Marcien" heritage and the close relationship between physical and verbal abuse in her prologue, as when she recalls telling her husband that she wished for his "welked nekke be tobroke!" (*ClT* 1203-1205, 1192; *WBP* 276-277, 609-613).[79] Like Alison's prologue, the Clerk's envoy depicts marriage as a competition in which wives must struggle fiercely to get "the bettre in each degree, / By sleighte, or force, or by some maner thyng, / As by continueel murmur or gruchhyng" (*WBP* 404-406).

In the wake of *The Clerk's Tale*, the envoy's clear echoes of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* call on us to understand Alison's model of wifehood in contradistinction to that of the steadfast Griselda, "the flour of wyfly pacience, / That neither by hire wordes ne hire face, / Biforn the folk, ne eek in hire absence, / Ne shewed she that hire was doon offence" (*ClT* 919-922). Even without a cue from the envoy, it is easy to see the conceptual distinction between Alison and Griselda as wives: rather than suffer her husbands' demands with the patience of Job or Griselda, Alison puts the onus on her husbands to "been al pacient and meke, / And han a sweete spiced conscience, / Sith [they] so preche of Jobes pacience" (*WBP* 343-436). Her declaration that "I have the power durynge al my lyf / Upon [my husband's] proper body, and noght he" is all but diametically opposed to Griselda's pledge: "I have […] seyd thus, and evere shal," she tells Walter, "I wol no thyng, ne nyl no thyng, certain, / But as yow list" (*WBP* 157-158; *ClerkT* 645-647). If Griselda understands marriage as a surrender of her will and as a threshold of radical stasis, Alison sees marriage as a female-dominated power struggle, an opportunity for wives to grapple, gain, and grow.

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[78] For an example of her expert facility with the kinds of techniques the Clerk advocates, see *WBP* 395-402, when Alison recalls her "myrthe" in pretending to be jealous of her elderly husband's supposed affairs with other "wenches"—a performance that involved flattering him ("tikled I his herte") as well as manipulating him with the "Deceite, wepyng, [and] spynnyng God hath yive / To wommen kyndely."

[79] "With wilde tonder-dynt and firy levene / Moote thy welked nekke be tobroke!" (*WBP* 276-277).

In underscoring this distinction, the Clerk leaves us to puzzle out *why* he would suggest Alison's pugnacious model of wifehood as a desirable alternative to Griselda's devotion and patience. The Wife of Bath is obviously not an exemplar of the morally unassailable variety, and the envoy's comic, un-"ernestful" tone precludes us from reading its exhortations to "archewyves" as entirely literal (1175, 1192). Even if we bracket the Clerk's irony, treating his envoy, implausibly, as a literal prescription for all wives to emulate Alison's aggression, her prologue does not elicit our approval of all the particular sins and foibles she admits to. The Wife of Bath's transgressions emerge in a comical, sometimes even endearing, but rarely entirely flattering light. We might, for example, enjoy the lies she recalls telling, as when she recounts a monologue of over 130 lines that she used to accuse her husbands of having "seyden in hir dronkenesse"

(*WBP* 246-378).[80] After Alison finishes the monologue and admits to having Jankyn and her niece corroborate its malicious accusations, her swift, unrepentant confession that "al was false" is both intriguing—to what end, exactly, was her lying so elaborate?—and, in terms of comic timing, hilarious (*WBP* 380-383). But the humor in such passages, however it may endear readers to Alison's mischief, does not invite us to condone her dishonesty or other offenses, and we cannot ignore the examples of her wrongdoing when we consider her potential as some kind of model for wives.

And yet, after the trauma of *The Clerk'*s *Tale*, there is something more desirable than dystopian about the envoy's fantasia of wives gone wild. Signs of the Clerk's sympathy for married women throughout the tale invite us to reconsider Alison and her sect with an open mind.[81] The Clerk's plea that wives do their husbands "no reverence" both evokes and recontextualizes Alison's trademark irreverence in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*: readers who once found her lapses in honesty and wifely devotion to be egregious must now reconsider them in light of Walter's more severe acts of dishonesty and cruelty.

The Clerk hints at the social value of voluble, combative wives like Alison by suggesting that his depiction of Walter the marquis has contemporary relevance. Unlike Griselda and her patience, "bothe atones buryed in Ytaille," Walter and his cruelty, to the Clerk’s mind, can transcend the boundaries of time and geography. “Grisilde is deed,” perhaps, but the Clerk’s “crie” that “No wedded man so hardy be t’assaille / His wyves pacience in trust to fynde / Grisildis” implies that Walter, or the kind of authority he represents, is dangerously alive (1177-1182). The ostensible “death” of Griseldian patience as a cultural practice may bode well for most married women, but the Clerk’s envoy suggests that some wives could still use a rousing nudge in the direction of resistance. By raising our awareness that “Walter” remains a threat in the realm of lived experience, the Clerk invites us to consider Alison's attitude of defiance—that is not to say all of her particular sins—as a strategy for staving off abuses of patriarchal power.

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[80] Alison's dishonesty with her husbands often takes the form of false accusations: "They were ful glade to excuse hem blyve / Of thyng of which they nevere agilte hir lyv. / Of wenches wolde I beren hem on honed, / Whan that for syk unnethes myghte they stonde" (*WBP* 391-394).

[81] See my previous chapter, as well as Neuse, *Chaucer's Dante* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 222.

The raucous presence of Alison's sect in the Clerk's envoy also serves to redresses a poetic injustice inherent in the end of the Griselda story. In many ways, *The Clerk's Tale* conforms to the standard ending for Chaucer's tales of good wifely counsel: Walter becomes more humane and accountable; he acknowledges the virtue of Griselda's performance; the marriage shifts to a happily-ever-after mode; the couple's son even turns out to be a kind husband, indicating that Walter's transformation has set a precedent for future generations of men (*ClT* 1051-1057, 1128-1129, 1135-1138). But a comparative study reveals that Walter escapes a fate commonly reserved for willful husbands in Chaucer's tales of wifely counsel. Whereas the once-bellicose Melibee, the once-fatuous Jankyn in Alison's prologue, and the rapist in Alison's tale all end up conceding some form of permanent authority over to their wives, the marquis in *The Clerk's Tale* never explicitly “enclyne[s] to the wil of his wif,” surrenders to her “wise governance,” or tells her to “Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf” (*Mel* 1870-1871, *WBT* 1230-1235, *WBP* 820). Rather than revise Petrarch's ending, wherein the marquis maintains his authoritative status, the Clerk spotlights the injustice of Walter's easy fate, by reminding us how the marquis "putte [...] his wyf in greet assay" (*ClT* 1138). He also redresses this injustice by generating carnivalesque images of female power and male subordination in his envoy, allowing us to envision the Walters of the world as they "couche as doth a quaille" (1206), receiving their comeuppance from all manner of wives: "archewyves," "sklendre wyves" and, in a lovely echo of Alison's "loathly lady" tale, "fair" wives and "foul" wives (1195-1199, 1207-1210). The sense of poetic justice that results from Alison's presence in the envoy thus invites us to (re-)read her "crabbed eloquence" as yet another important rhetorical strategy for contending with patriarchal power.

The Clerk's Tale and envoy also serve to remind us that transformative events in individual marriages can have consequences of a more global nature. When the Clerk advises married women the world over to eschew Griselda's example, he espouses the same end for which Griselda herself dispenses counsel: "For *commune profit* sith it may availle" (1193-1194; emphasis mine; see *ClT* 431).[82] His universalizing appeal to a diversity of "noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence" (1183), invites us to consider the Wife of Bath's sect not just as practitioners of radical behavior in their own homes but also as participants in a widespread movement. Thanks in large part to *The Clerk's Tale* and envoy, we have a strong basis for understanding Alison's "crabbed eloquence" to be, like the more idealized forms of wifely counsel I have already explored, socially and politically beneficial on a grand scale.

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[82] Nat oonly this Griseldis thurgh hir wit / Koude al the feet of wyfly hoomlinesse, / But eek, whan that the cas required it, / The *commune profit* koude she redresse. / Ther nas discorde, rancor, ne hevynesse / In al that land that she ne koude apese, / And wisely brynge hem alle in reste and ese" (*ClT* 428-434; emphasis mine).

CHAPTER THREE

“Muchel Care and Wo:”

The Making of a Counselor in *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*

The Clerk's Tale and envoy suggest that women are entitled to argue with and even berate their husbands in order to stave off the kind of cruelty that Walter of Saluzzo represents. For the Clerk, it is better that women be loud and aggressive than that they be “bidaffed for [their] innocence” (*ClT* 1191).[83] This perspective invites us to consider the Wife of Bath's irreverent, combative rhetoric for its social and political value. But what are the intellectual merits of Alison's speech and rhetorical style? Is her wifely “crabbed eloquence” merely a necessary tool for keeping husbands in line, or does it serve the constructive, pedagogical purpose of counsel?

Whatever Alison's store of rhetorical, intellectual, and ethical gifts, she seems lacking in certain strengths that Griselda and Dame Prudence exemplify as wife-counselors: consistent and scrupulous honesty, highly measured and organized speech, a disarming attitude of service, a capacity for affective restraint, a commitment to peace, and an appreciation for prudence. In her prologue, Alison not only fails to enact most of these values but quite joyfully embraces their opposites. With typical relish, she baldly admits to following her “appetit” rather than using “discrecioun,”[84] a term that Benson glosses, significantly enough, as “moderation” or “prudence” (*WBP* 622-623, Benson 113). The language of her prologue—like, one imagines, the language of her gossip “From hous to hous”—eschews decorum and meticulous logic in favor of swagger and hyperbole (640).[85] And unlike Griselda, who commands wonder with her “rype words,” or Prudence, who exhibits an unwavering command of formal rhetoric, Alison is by her own estimation “a verray jangleresse” and identifies more readily as a gossip than as a counselor (*ClT* 435-441; *WBP* 112-113, 524-542, 638).

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[83] Benson glosses “bidaffed:” “fooled, cowed, deafened (?)” (153). This instance is the only one listed in the *MED*, which defines the term as “Outwitted; ?cowed.”

[84] Alison is referring to her behavior in situations involving love (*WBP* 609-626).

In her reading of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, Elaine M. Treharne sums up Alison's ostensible lapses in rhetorical discipline. Treharne's analysis of Alison's language shows why it is easy to discount the Wife of Bath's potential as counselor, especially if we as readers are susceptible to the institutional prejudices that Alison's prologue critiques:

> [C]onfirming the stereotype of the verbose woman are the speeches within the speech by which the Wife recalls her own words to her husbands, condemning the successive husbands’ anti-feminist commonplaces, while simultaneously confirming them. The myths of women’s inability to maintain privacy, their tendency to gossip, and to speak of ‘trivial’ matters—such as love and relationships—are shown to be part of the operative mode

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[85] Elaine M. Treharne also discusses hyperbole in Alison’s speech (“The Stereotype Confirmed?,” *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval* Literature [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002], 106-109).

of the Wife. (103)

The "anti-feminist commonplaces" and thematic focus on eros that Treharne observes in the prologue certainly set the Wife of Bath's rhetoric apart from that of the idealized wife-counselors I have studied. But Treharne's reading reveals the danger of projecting our own prejudices onto Alison's performances and attributing these prejudices to the poet. The topics of "love and relationships" are of tremendous moral and intellectual import to Chaucer in the *Tales*; it is Treharne herself who buys into the myth of their triviality. Rather than devalue her rhetoric, Alison's engagement with these topics connects her to "a number of ancient and medieval currents of thought in which, by the late Middle Ages, questions of sexuality and questions of agency and autonomy had come to intersect" (Miller 3).[86] Likewise, it is Treharne who judges the stereotypically female characteristics of Alison's language as rendering it "perceptibly inferior," "less authoritative, more subjective and less effective than it might otherwise have been" (113, 110). In her study of medieval gossip, Susan E. Phillips acknowledges the stereotypical features of Alison's speech—levity, gossip, verbosity—but links these tropes to "both theory and […] practice of pastoral instruction" and notes their "centrality to Chaucer's poetic practice." In revealing how Chaucer exploits "gossip's utility as a rhetorical technique," its capacity for "discursive approriations," and "its myriad narrative possibilities," Phillips' analysis suggests that Alison's speech contains some of the most complex, sophisticated, and groundbreaking rhetoric in the *Tales* (106, 11).

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[86] Miller lists these "currents of thought" as "the tradition of Christian thinking about morality and sociality that Peter Brown has so brilliant traced from Paul to Augustine, a tradition that turned time and again to the conceptual and metaphorical links between problems of sexuality and problems of autonomy; […] an Augustinian and Boethian tradition of thinking about desire and its frustrations, an Aristotelian tradition in philosophical psychology, and an analysis of utopian intimacy developed in Aristotelian and Ciceronian discourses of friendship" (3).

We can read Alison as a counselor not only because her speech is intellectually sophisticated, as Phillips demonstrates, and politically meaningful, as the Clerk suggests, but also because it is ethically transformative. The Wife of Bath forces her husbands to question the sources of their knowledge and their assumptions about women; successfully protests against her fifth husband's "book of wikked wyves," a cause of "wo" and "pyn" in their marriage; and counsels him (her fifth husband, Jankyn) to give her "al the bridel in [her] hond, / [and…] the governance of hous and lond, / And of his tonge, and of his hond also" (685, 813-815). As I will argue, Chaucer depicts Jankyn's transformation as an ethical triumph, insofar as it engenders household peace and mutual kindness and honesty among spouses (811-828).[87]

Like the other wife-counselors I have so far discussed, the Wife of Bath is not only a counselor to her husbands but also to individuals and groups beyond her household. Both she and her fellow pilgrims to Canterbury treat her prologue as a didactic performance. Even though the Wife of Bath offers an unorthodox intellectual perspective and exhibits a complex and uneasy relationship to institutional authorities, her experience allows her to fulfill an authoritative role among the pilgrims. "Experience" may be "noon auctoritee / […] in this world," but it is immensely valuable in the "liminal" context of pilgrimage, "a religious rite" wherein members of

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[87] See Section Three of this chapter, on the Prologue's ending.

"a new and wider *communitas*" can, at least partly, set aside traditional epistemologies to make room for more practical, raw, and unconventional kinds of wisdom (*WBP* 1; Duffy 164-165). Eager to learn whether or why he should sell his "flessh" to a woman in marriage, the Pardoner playfully but aptly dubs Alison "a noble prechour in this cas" and calls on her to share her experience: "Telle forth youre tale, spareth no man," he says, "And teche us yonge men of youre praktike" (163-187). The Pardoner explains that he "was aboute to wedde a wyf" but is still unmarried, implying his interest in the Wife of Bath's first-hand experiential knowledge of marriage. Alison affirms her "expert" status, promises to educate the Pardoner on "tribulacion in mariage," and quotes Ptolemy's *Almageste* to remind her listeners that "Whoso that nyl be war by othere men, / By hym shul othere men corrected be."[88] The Wife of Bath understands her marriages to have been a form of "scoleiyng," herself to be a clerk, and her pilgrimage to be a platform for transmitting what she has learned (44a-44f).

In this chapter, I aim to elaborate the Wife of Bath's "practike" as a counselor. Section One explains the ethical value of Alison's irreverence and epistemological skepticism in counseling her husbands and fellow pilgrims. Section Two examines the ethical complexity of Alison's gossip, which her prologue invites us to consider in relation to advice-counsel. Last, Section Three explores the transformative effects of

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[88] As I will later discuss, Alison concedes that she dislikes being corrected ("Ne I wolde nat of hym corrected be. / I hate hym that my vices telleth me" [661-662]), but in this case she is responding to an example of unquestionably faulty counsel (654-660) and therefore exercising intellectual discernment by rejecting her husband's "olde sawe" (660). By acknowledging her resistance to correction, she is also owning up to her imperfections (both to her resistance itself and to the vices that stand in need of correction) and betraying a familiarity with human behavior ("And so doo mo, God woot, of us than I" [663]) that also characterizes the counsel of more consistently virtuous women, such as Griselda, Dame Prudence, and Lady Philosophy.

Alison’s counsel, not only on her husbands but also on herself, and explains how she achieves a hard-won condition of marital harmony at the end of her prologue (811-827). In sum, I hope to show that Alison's infamous ethical and rhetorical lapses are what make her performance of wifely counsel Chaucer's strongest argument for the efficacy of women's wisdom. *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* demonstrates that even a self-professed “jangleresse,” book-burner, and liar can foster ethical and intellectual growth in other people through an aggressive, unorthodox, yet distinctly “wifely” brand of counsel (380-383, 816).

I. Irreverent counsel:
Source critique and self-critique

The Wife of Bath's unique rhetorical style is characterized first and foremost by a tone of irreverence, both towards her sources and towards herself. Her refusal to take institutions and authorities too seriously coincides with a lack of self-seriousness that is both refreshing and ethically valuable. One the most conventional yet skillful examples of Alison’s counsel establishes the rejection of vanity as one of her defining values. Addressing the pilgrims, the Wife of Bath recollects her life with husband number four, “a revelour” (453):

> How koude I daunce to an harpe smale
> And synge, ywis, as any nyghtyngale,
> Whan I had dronke a draughte of sweete wyn!

. . . . . .

Whan that it remembreth me
Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee,
It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote.
Unto this day it dooth myn herte boote
That I have had my world as in my tyme.
But age, allas, that al wole envenyme,
Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith.
Lat go. Farwel! The devel go therwith!
The flour is goon; ther is namoore to telle;
The bren, as I best kan, now moste I sell;
But yet to be right myrie wol I fonde. (452-480)

In this passage, Alison's joyful memory of her revels gives way to a morally astute and theologically valid lesson about the inevitability of decline and the necessity to embrace it with a "myrie" attitude. In a subtle way, the passage's formal structure enacts the classic, one-two technique by which a counselor first establishes credibility and then moves on to dispense counsel:[89] first, Alison reminds us of her "Experience"—the foremost of her credentials, established as early as line 1—by hinting at her relatively advanced age and showing off the vividness of her memory. Then she moves on to teach a lesson, both explicitly and by example, about how to age gracefully. On an explicit level, the passage uses imperative language ("Lat go. Farwel! The devel go therwith!") to advise against vanity and acedia as one ages; in a more exemplary mode, it demonstrates a correct attitude, a way of maintaining one's self-respect, energy, and faith after youth and beauty have disappeared. We learn from Alison's model how to transmute the worldliness of youth into the vital contentment of untroubled age, a process that requires abandoning vanity and self-importance.[90]

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[89] See my Chapter One on Dame Prudence's performance of counsel, which takes this form on a larger scale.

This passage prefigures the thematic importance of physical appearance and women's aging in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, in which an implicit critique of standards for feminine beauty coincides with the loathly lady's theologically unassailable counsel against another form of vanity: economic prejudice ("He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl, / For vileyns sinful dedes make a cherl" [1157-1158, 1106-1206]). That the latter argument resonates perfectly with the ethics of *The Clerk's Tale* ("But hye God sometime senden kan / His grace into a litel oxes stalle" [206-207]) not only enhances the ethical credibility of Alison and her loathly lady but also elevates the parallel argument against privileging physical attractiveness in women. Reconsidered in light of the *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, Alison's rejection of *vanitas* in her prologue takes on greater thematic and ethical significance and emerges as one of her most accomplished performances of counsel.

The Wife of Bath's eschewal of *vanitas* is rooted in her resistance to acedia or grief: Alison rejects vanity precisely by refusing to grieve for her looks, her youth, and her late husbands. This resistance creates room in the prologue for her trademark "jolitee" (*WBP* 470, 587-592). Lest we be tempted to judge the mirthful, irreverent style of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* as a mark of intellectual or moral inferiority, we should consider the thematic emphasis in Alison's texts, *The Tale of Melibee*, and *The Parson's Tale* on resisting different forms of vanity and acedia, the sin that makes people "hevy, thoghtful, and wraw" so "that they ne may neither wel do ne wel thynke" (*ParsT* 677, 686). According to the Parson's definition, acedia can be paradoxically intellectual and anti-intellectual, taking the form of an excessive thoughtfulness that ultimately gets in the way of thinking "wel." Prudence, too, depicts acedia as an enemy of wisdom; one of her first acts of counsel in *The Tale of Melibee* is to argue that "it aperteneth nat to a wys man to maken swich a sorwe" (*Mel* 981). Alison's banishment of her youth and former beauty to the devil shows her unwillingness to be too long "anoyed and encombred" by her own nostalgic thoughts (*ParsT* 687). By voicing a rejection of vanity and acedia in her own life, she not only counsels her listeners to do the same, but also demonstrates her mental and emotional agility and her fitness to be a counselor.

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[90] As Sue Niebrzydowski points out, Alison is interested in what might be considered vain pursuits—namely, fashion, material wealth, and worldly entertainments. But it seems she is able to revel in these pusuits precisely because she is willing to "Lat go" of them, send them to "The devel," and move along on her journey when the time comes (*Bonure and Buxum* [Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lange AG, 2006], 187).

The Wife of Bath brings a lightness and mental resilience not only to the events of her life but also to her dealings with source texts. Rather than elaborate her ideas schematically, Alison tends to free-associate, registering brief reactions, critiques, or questions about her sources before pushing the sermon forward and finding fruitful new tangents (*WBP* 14-25, 66-70). Although she does venture some memorable extended discussions, usually with a theological valence, she avoids the rhetorical signposting and thoroughness that we see in *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale.*[91] In keeping with Alison's worldview, this rhetorical style eschews both vanity and acedia. Her refusal to pay "reverence" to the "Honour," "dignytee," and "heighnesse" traditionally accorded to worldly authorities reflects a lack of intellectual or academic vanity; it also allows her to engage with authoritative and often offensive sources without getting bogged down in the overly serious or "hevy" habits of mind associated with acedia (*ParsT* 190).

Alison brings her irreverent mode of textual interpretation both to her marriages and to her performance of the prologue. At the beginning of her prologue, in her discussion of remarriage, Alison recalls Jesus' "sharp word" to the Samaritan woman—"Thou has yhad fyve housbondes, […] / And that ilke man that now hath thee / Is noght thyn housbonde"—and admits she does not know what the passage means: "What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn." Rather than give up on the passage, Alison asks questions about it—"I axe, why that the fifthe man / Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan? / How manye myghte she have in mariage?"—and, in search of answers, moves on to another "gentil text" a few lines later (9-25, 27-28). Her response reflects a commendable humility, a lack of intellectual vanity, at the same time that it shows her unwillingness to fret for too long over cryptic scripture—or over her own five marriages. Likewise, the Wife of Bath's decision to "sette noght an hawe" by her husband's antifeminist proverb from Ecclesiastes not only speaks to her laudable skepticism towards mortal authors—echoing her irreverence toward Solomon at the beginning of the prologue (35-38)—but also serves as a form of resistance to Jankyn's "wood"-ness and to the "wo […] and pyne" that his misogynistic books create in their household (650-665, 787).[92] Alison often reacts emotionally to her sources—not with the "slouthe," "hevynesse," "despair," or "drede" of acedia, but instead with the constructive aim of reshaping her marriages, or reshaping our ideas about marriage (*ParsT* 686, 694).

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[91] These longer theological discussions include Alison's remarks on remarriage and on virginity (*WBP* 14-58, 62-150).

Alison's irreverence extends from specific sources and authorities to the concept of counsel itself. Like *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee*, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* invokes counsel as an issue of some importance fairly early in the text, but Alison's discussion of the term is distinctively skeptical. Whereas the Clerk introduces the theme by portraying efficacious acts of counsel—by Saluzzo's spokesman and, soon after, by Griselda herself (85-140, 428-441)—and Prudence elaborates at length on the value of good counsel, Alison first mentions counsel in such a way that undermines its authority and usefulness, reminding her audience that any counsel ought to be considered in perspective, understood as suggestive rather than imperative. In her critique of the Pauline cult of virginity, Alison remarks, "Men may conseille a woman to been [a virgin], / But conseillyng is no comandement" (63-67). Fewer than twenty lines later, she reiterates this philosophy: "I woot wel that th'apostel was a mayde; / But nathelees, thogh that he wroot and sayde / He wolde that every wight were swich as he /

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[92] Technically, Alison's casual attitude towards scriptural counsel also inheres in her remarks on scriptural *commandments*, despite the early distinction she makes between these two forms of prescriptive speech. The "proverb of Ecclesiaste" by which she "sette[s] noght an hawe" is actually, by her account, a commandment: "That ilke proverb of Ecclesiaste / Where he comandeth and forbedeth faste / Man shal nat suffer his wyf go roule aboute" (650-661).

Al *nys but conseil* to virginitee" (79-82; emphasis mine). Here Alison qualifies the prescriptive status of counsel—and of exemplarity, a common strategy of medieval counsel—not only by defining "conseil" as less binding than "comandement" but also by refusing to let Paul's theological status alter her stance on the weight that counsel ought to carry. In keeping with the irreverence towards authoritative counsel that Alison betrays in these passages, her language throughout the prologue, though often self-consciously prescriptive, does not announce itself as "counsel" proper.[93]

It is worth noting that the Clerk, whose tale reflects considerable respect for the political and ethical value of counsel, also speaks, or sings, of "counsel" with irony and irreverence, in his envoy. When he advises wives to use "crabbed eloquence" and to "[clap] as a mille, I yow consaille" (1203, 1200), the Clerk flouts idealized depictions of counsel as ethically impeccable; his counsel is mischievous, intended to sow the seeds of marital conflict. With supreme irony, he also manages to "consaille" wives against providing good counsel, at least in its traditional guise. Yet the tale's thematic emphasis on counsel withstands the Clerk's ironies: Walter is transformed by the counsel of his people, and even more so by the subsequent counsel of his wife. Like *The Clerk's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* thus acknowledges some epistemological and ethical limitations of counsel at the same time that it offers meaningful and compelling performances of advice and instruction.

Nowhere in Alison's comments on scripture does she fully reject the value of counsel. The Wife of Bath demonstrates undeniable interest and skill in counseling even as she disavows an overly reverent attitude toward it. The very comments in which Alison would seem to disparage the value of counsel reflect a counselor's expertise. Her remarks on the cult of virginity reflect her mastery of a skill that is crucial to the cycle of receiving, assessing, and transmitting wisdom that counsel involves: source critique. Dame Prudence's advice to her husband about weighing the credibility of sources demonstrates the importance of source critique to even the most orthodox of counselors. For Chaucer, counseling a listener to keep someone *else's* counsel in perspective is not only wise but standard, as when Prudence advises Melibee to think critically and ask probing questions about the counsel he receives:

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[93] Except where "conseil" means something different—"gossip" or "secret"—as I will discuss later in the chapter.

> [C]onsidere the thynges that acorden to that thou purposest for to do by thy conseillours, if resoun accorde therto, / and eek if they myght may attaine therto, and if the moore part and the bettre part of thy conseillours acorde therto, / […and] what thyng shal folwe of that conseillyng, as hate, pees, werre, grace, profit, or damage, and […] of what roote is engendred the matiere of thy conseil and what fruyt it may conceive and engender. Thou shalt eek considere alle thise causes, fro whennes they been sprongen. (*Mel* 1205-1210)

Prudence's philosophy inheres in the critique of clerkly wisdom that Alison launches later in the Prologue: "it is an impossible / That any clerk wol speke good of wyves, / But if it be of hooly seintes lyves / […] / Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?" (688-692). This question speaks to Alison's sincere interest in the very questions that Dame

Prudence advises Melibee to ask in the excerpt quoted above. In her remarks on clerks, Alison betrays a keen appreciation for the ways in which the source of a given claim can affect the claim's accuracy and usefulness and astutely implies that the truth value of institutional wisdom has been compromised by generations of male bias. She underscores her argument with a metaphor (painting the lion) and a rhetorical question, "imprint[ing] a lesson in our minds" about the value of source critique (see *ClT* 1193-1194: "Emprenteth wel this lessoun in youre mynde, / For commune profit sith it may availle"). Thus the Wife of Bath promotes a specific type of critical thinking that Dame Prudence herself considers essential to the successful reception and transmission of advice. In this regard, Alison seems more interested in the operations of counsel—the intellectual processes by which we generate, assimilate, evaluate, and share prescriptive wisdom—than in the raw artifacts of wisdom.

One could even say Alison takes Prudence's methodology—the principle of determining "of what roote [counsels are] engendred […] and from whennes they been sprongen"—to a comically literal, yet illuminating, extreme, when she traces the origins of institutional wisdom to issues of sex and gender. In a particularly memorable passage, the Wife identifies a root cause of clerical misogyny in male sexual frustration: "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!" (707-710). Similarly, she explains the theological concept of paying one's marriage debt not in terms of contractualism or Christian virtue ethics but rather as a custom enjoined by sexual biology: the "membres of generacion," the Wife explains, were designed not just for purgation but also "for ese / Of engendrure, ther we nat God displese. / Why sholde men elles in hir books sette / That man shal yelde to his wyf hire dette?" (115-130). Although the Wife of Bath's discussions of sex draw heavily on "capitalistic" economic metaphor, revealing what Sheila Delaney calls "the psychological effects of economic necessity" on sexual practices (104), Alison also locates an origin of the "marriage debt" in biological determinism. By tracing the roots of this and other theological conventions and intellectual commonplaces all the way back to primal sexual motives and determinants, Alison provides a comic dramatization of Prudence's imperative to locate the root from which a particular claim is "engendered." She is also enacting the role of a gender theorist.

For all of her notorious antifeminist comments in the prologue and tale, Alison's insistence on locating the formative role of sex and gender in a variety of institutional structures—from theology to marital customs to fashion and public life (338-356)—instructs pilgrims and readers in an alternative critical methodology that allows us to critique examples of misogyny in her own texts. We might understand her delivery of what Jill Mann calls "the most extensive and unadulterated body of traditional antifeminist commonplace in the whole of the *Canterbury Tales*" as, in part, a demonstration of Alison's irreverent zeal for calling any and all sources of wisdom into question, including her sex and herself (57). Her stereotypical depictions of women as wanting what they can't have, as "vinolent" and "likerous," and as untrustworthy certainly complicate issues of feminism in her texts, but they also establish the indiscriminate or poly-discriminate nature of Alison's critical approach: women are not exempt from the scathing critiques that Alison inflicts on clerks (*WBP* 205-210, 465-468; *WBT* 950).

In this way, the Wife of Bath’s willingness to invoke antifeminist stereotypes lends her a certain kind of integrity as a counselor. It assures us that her take-downs of authoritative, masculine sources of counsel and wisdom do not derive from an epistemological bias towards her own sex. Whereas Prudence and Griselda establish moral credibility, in part, by advocating for other women in clear, persuasive ways (see *Mel* 1070-1111 and *ClT* 1037-1043), Alison establishes a measure of intellectual credibility in her unwillingness to spare her own sex a proper roasting. Unlike that of the clerks, for whom women seem to be an exclusive target—at least according to the prologue—Alison’s ridicule is nonpartisan.

Just as Alison reminds us to keep Paul’s counsel and clerks' arguments in perspective, her prologue reminds pilgrims and readers to keep her own counsel in perspective as well. The text begins with a reminder that the Wife of Bath's counsel (on the “wo that is in mariage”) simply is what it is: lessons learned in the course of an individual life, valuable in her estimation (“for me”) but not by the worldly standards of any “auctoritee” (1-6). That her experiential wisdom has little to no institutional cachet beyond the liminal community of pilgrims precludes her from buying into the illusion of total certainty that “auctoritee” can provide. Behind Alison's swagger lies an intellectual modesty that reads as even more sincere than that of the Clerk, whose translation of Petrarch seems self-consciously virtuosic.

Although Alison is famous for her more raucous behavior—berating her husbands, destroying books, playing possum—the combination of her intellectual discernment in critiquing sources and her rejection of intellectual *vanitas* can make for a graceful performance of wifely counsel. In one passage, Alison recalls her fifth husband, the “joly clerk Jankyn” (628), confronting her with some particularly fatuous counsel. In the passage, she astutely critiques Jankyn’s counsel yet acknowledges her own shortcomings, demonstrating a degree of moral self-awareness that more idealized wife-counselors do not get the chance to perform:

> Than wolde he seye right thus, withouten doute:
> 'Whoso that buyldeth his hous al of salwes,
> And priketh his blynde hors over the falwes,
> And suffreth his wyf to go seken halwes,
> Is worthy to been hanged on the galwes!'
> But al for noght, I sette noght an hawe
> Of his proverbs n’of of his olde sawe,
> Ne I wolde nat of hym corrected be.
> I hate hym that my vices telleth me,
> And so doo mo, God woot, of us than I.
> This made hym with me wood al outrely;
> I nolde noght forbere hym in no cas. (654-665)

In espousing a ridiculous proverb, Jankyn demonstrates a lack of humility, of ethical sophistication, of religious ardor (in disallowing pilgrimages), and of literary taste. His would-be counsel comes off as especially fatuous if we read the phrase “withouten doute” not just as an idiomatic filler but rather as a literal reference to Jankyn’s certainty. His counsel is as flawed as counsel gets: the rhyming couplets and the horse that “priketh” anticipate the self-consciously bad poetry of *Sir Topas* (see *ST* 754), and the hyperbolic misogyny behind suggesting a husband who lets his wife take a religious pilgrimage should be put to death seems blasphemous, or in any case unworthy of a clerk.

The husband's "olde sawe" in this passage belies Treharne's argument that the Wife of Bath texts portray Alison's speech and rhetoric as consistently "'deficient' or 'deviant' in relation to the norms of male language usage" (113). Thanks to a disclaimer early in the prologue, we can attribute any rhetorical or ethical sloppiness in Alison's performance to the fact that her "entente nys but for to pleye" (188-192)—a rhetorically skillful maneuver of self-deprecation that the Nun's Priest, too, invokes in his own discussion of wifely counsel ("If I conseil of wommen wolde blame, / Passe over, for I seyde it in my game" [3261-3262]). But Alison's husband provides no such disclaimer, and his "wood" affect at the end of the passage, as well as his lumping the "olde sawe" together with a proverb from Ecclesiastes (650-653), can be read as evidence that he takes the "olde sawe" quite seriously.[94] Alison's response, though certainly obstinate, is almost humble by comparison, and her silence, set against his "wood"-ness, is eloquent. At least in this situation, rather than attack her husband or assure him of her own correctness, she simply ignores what she knows to be faulty counsel. In other passages, misogynistic books by learned men are worth grappling with, but this "olde sawe" isn't worth a "hawe." Alison discerns that, unlike the works by Jerome, Tertullian, and the other authorities bound in her husband's "book of wikke wyves," this mindless nugget is beneath her intellectual attention (669-685).

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[94] Even if the last two lines of the passage (664-665) are read as a more general comment on the marital dynamic, Jankyn's "woodness" suggests a self-seriousness that contrasts with Alison's playful expressions of irreverence, which the text presents as a more intellectually productive mode of communication.

It is significant that the Wife of Bath's judgment here does not reflect the doubtless self-righteousness that characterizes her husband's belief in the old saw. Although, in the passage, she admits to resisting criticism—"I hate hym that my vices telleth me"—she attributes this resistance to ordinary emotional defensiveness—"And so doo mo, God woot, of us than I" (661-663)—rather than to a belief in her own moral or intellectual perfection. That she neither deigns to engage with the trivial text nor denies her own fallibility or vices demonstrates that she lacks the need to establish her own rightness. Here and elsewhere, her characteristic inclination to critique, resist, argue, fight, and master is less about pure self-gratification than about achieving an array of other, often worthier objectives: to participate in social life ("walke […] / From hous to hous, although he had it sworn" [639-640]), to rectify ignorance or intellectual complacency, and—when she tears "thre leves" from Jankyn's "cursed book"—to redirect her husband's focus away from misogynistic tropes, forcing him to engage with her directly instead (788-806). The Wife of Bath certainly values "wynnyng" (translated by Benson as "profit" [110]), "maistrie," "soveraynetee," "honour," and wealth or "estaat," but, in keeping with her Tale's claim that women have no special desire to be trusted, she does not express a wish "to been holden stable, and eek secree"—or, for that matter, "to been holden" wise and virtuous (416, 946, see ll. 945-950). Whatever the purpose of her counsel, whether she is teaching her audience about the "wo that is in mariage" or critiquing her husbands' reading material, we can trust that intellectual arrogance or conceit is not among her motives, and in this sense she has greater credibility as a counselor than Jankyn the clerk and the antifeminist authors he admires (3).

II. Guidance-conseil and gossip-conseil:

Tensions and convergences

I have so far explained a few of Alison's accomplishments as a counselor: she both argues for and models a kind of ethical merriment as an alternative to acedia and vanity; she also argues for and models a vigilant irreverence toward the sources of one's knowledge. Furthermore, in her moral imperfection, the Wife of Bath shows an impressive willingness to acknowledge and understand her own vices, to confess her least dignified acts in an instructive fashion. Her lack of self-importance allows her to freely recount memories that are morally unflattering to her, endowing her counsel with a confessional style that aims "to transform her texts as well as her audience" (Phillips 110).[95] As a result, Alison's prologue resonates with medieval Christian religious practice in ways that Griselda's and Prudence's counsel cannot.[96] Perfect wives have nothing to confess; Alison, by contrast, has a wealth of material.

But, as Susan E. Phillips and Karma Lochrie have noted, Alison's confessional register is also a register of gossip. For all their didactic value and rhetorical effectiveness, Alison's confessions often drag her prologue into dubious ethical territory, resulting in a "tricky and treacherous" "slippage from confession" into the mire of secrecy and betrayal (Lochrie 56).[97] By aligning her "gossib" or confidante with her "parisshe preest," Alison reminds us that even her most edifying and curative confessions are a form of gossip, a mode of speech we often associate with shame, deception, and perfidy (533, 540-542).

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[95] See Phillips and Lochrie (*Covert Operations* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1999]).

[96] See Phillips 17, 44-47, 120.

Any discussion of Alison's counsel must take her gossip into account, not only because her confessions and anecdotes are examples of gossip but also because her prologue spotlights the close semantic and conceptual ties between gossip and counsel in Middle English. A passage in which the Wife of Bath recounts gossiping about her husband establishes "conseil" as a synonym for "secret" or "gossip" in the remainder of Alison's texts and draws attention to the complex relationship between gossip and advice-counsel as modes of communication (*WBP* 525-542).

If guidance-counsel is a traditionally a form of highly deliberative, organized, emotionally controlled speech, related to homiletic speech in its ethical aims, gossip-"counsel" (by which I mean "gossip" or "secret") often has an uncontrolled quality; it can be laced with malice, and the transmission of gossip-counsel involves a volatile flux between secrecy and outburst.[98] As a result, Alison's gossip is both rhetorically and morally disruptive. Whereas Griselda consistently invokes contractual rhetoric in her counsel to Walter, and Prudence endlessly invokes authoritative wisdom, Alison combines "clerkish proverbs and proof texts and exempla" with a wealth of personal anecdotes (Mitchell 87).[99] The stories Alison tells her husbands are often deceitful; the stories she tells the pilgrims and her confidantes are slightly treacherous, insofar as they cast her husbands in a negative light. Given these complications, how does Alison's infamous gossip affect the moral status of her wifely counsel, and what kind of ethical (or unethical) work does her gossip accomplish?

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[97] "And as a bitore bombleth in the myre," Midas' wife "leyde hir mouth unto the water doun: Biwreye me nat, thou water, with thy soun" (*WBT* 972-974). For a salient and thorough discussion of gossip, secrecy, and confession in Alison's Prologue, see Karma Lochrie, "Tongues Wagging: Gossip, Women, and Indiscreet Secrets," Chapter 2 of *Covert Operations* (56-92).

[98] See my chapter on *The Clerk's Tale* for a discussion of Walter's secrecy and the ethical problems it presents.

The prologue's much-discussed passage on gossip shows Alison using words carelessly and destructively to rile up her husband, making "his face often reed and hoot" with shame and regret for ever having trusted her. In effect, Allison's gossiping provokes in her husband the kind of volatility that Prudence seeks to neutralize in Melibee, and results in the kind of suspicion and guardedness that Walter creates in his marriage to Griselda.[100] In the passage, the Wife of Bath recalls divulging her husband's secrets to a beloved gossip, also named "Alisoun," as well as to other confidantes:

> To hire biwreyed I my conseil al.
> For hadde myn housbonde pissed on a wal,
> Or doon a thyng that sholde han cost his lyf,
> To hire, and to another worthy wyf,
> And to my nece, which that I loved weel,

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[99] On preaching and homiletic conventions in the Wife's prologue, see Lindeboom (*Venus' Owne Clerk*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) 319-394, Mitchell 79-93, and Tinkle's "The Wife of Bath's Marginal Authority" (*SAC* 32 [2010]), which reads Alison as Chaucer's "unlikely woman preacher" (67). Phillips makes a similar point about the tension between the Wife of Bath's gossip and her references to religious institutions like confession (119-121).

[100] The narrator describes Melibee as behaving "lyke a mad man," and Prudence accuses him of acting "lyk a fool" (*Mel* 273, 980).

I wolde han toold his conseil every deel.
And so I dide ful often, God it woot,
That made his face often reed and hoot
For verray shame, and blamed himself for he
Had toold to me so greet a pryvetee. (527-542)

Here, the connotations of “counseil,” meaning “secret(s),” are in tension with the more positive connotations of “counsel,” meaning “advice,” that can be found elsewhere in the *Tales*. In *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Clerk’s Tale*, Chaucer’s idealized depictions of wifely counsel are deeply infused with virtue ethics: Griselda and Prudence are steadfastly devoted to their husbands' welfare; they are almost always honest; in the name of service or fidelity, they prioritize their marriages over all other relationships. In light of these depictions, Alison’s use of the term “counsel” to denote the rumors she used to spread about her husbands—rather viciously, or at least carelessly—is both striking and unsettling. The passage suggests that, ironically, Alison would go out of her way to betray her husband's gossip-counsel to her friends and niece, all the while neglecting to provide him with much-needed wifely counsel at home. Her account simultaneously emphasizes his physicality and vulnerability, forcing us to imagine his body in intimate, dangerous, and embarrassing situations—urinating on a wall, putting himself in harm's way, turning red for shame—and implying that he could have used plenty of wifely support or guidance at the time.

Yet for all that, the Wife of Bath’s performance of gossip-counsel entails some of the values and consequences we associate with guidance-counsel. In the above passage, it is particularly significant that Alison conflates her own “counseil” or secrets with the secrets of her husband: the direct object shifts from “my conseil” in line 527 to “his conseil” in line 538, suggesting that Alison conceives of the marriage as a sort of partnership of pooled or interchangeable experiences. Just as Prudence betrays a sense of her shared stake in Melibee’s future, and Griselda insists that Walter’s will has subsumed her own, Alison blurs the distinction between her own private consciousness and her husband’s.[101] In her discussion on “biwreying conseil,” as I understand it, Susan E. Phillips interprets the phrase “his conseil” (the husband’s secrets) as a sort of overwriting or correction of the phrase “my conseil” (Alison’s own secrets) and argues that the entire passage on gossip can be read as pertaining to “[Alison’s] husband’s secrets […] and not her own” (120). But I would argue that both pronouns, *his* and *my*, carry equal weight and meaning in the passage, and that their juxtaposition reflects the Wife of Bath’s sense of a shared stake in her husband’s experience. Here, for her, the pronouns are more or less interchangeable, because she understands her “conseil” and her husband’s to have become one and the same. That the Wife’s gossip about her husband, as Phillips explains, has the quality of a confession or shrift—the act of acknowledging one’s *own* sins—further indicates the degree to which Alison understands her husband’s experience as bound up in her own: her husband’s gossip-worthy deeds are sufficiently *hers* to merit mentioning in her own confessions, both to her friend and to the pilgrims (119-120).

The Wife of Bath returns to ideas about marriage, shared identity, secrecy, gossip, confession, and shame after she launches into her tale, in a passage so tangential to the main narrative as to suggest her extreme investment in these themes. In recounting the knight's struggle to discover "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren," Alison digresses to dispute the falsehood or "tale" that women desire "to been holden stable, and eek secree / […] / And nat biwreye thyng that men us telle." To her, the common belief that women enjoy earning trust by keeping (or appearing to keep) secrets is "nat worth a rake-stele" (*WBT* 905, 946-948). To further prove that "wommen konne no thyng hele" and "kan no conseil hyde"—a theme already developed in her prologue—Alison retells a story from Ovid about the betrayal of King Midas' secret (*WBT* 950, 980). In Ovid's version, Midas' male barber takes care to bury the king's secret in a hole, though it is ultimately unearthed by the wind. But the Wife of Bath recasts the barber as Midas' wife and exposes her in the act of her repeating the secret verbally (Benson 873). At first, having learned of her husband's "two asses eres," Midas' wife is determined *not* to "biwrey" the secret (948, 954, 974):[102]

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[101] “For God woot that, as in myn entente, I speke it for youre beste, for youre honour, and for youre profite eke” (see *Mel* 1236-1238, as well as the analysis in my first chapter).

> [F]or al this world to wynne,
> She nolde do that vileynye or synne,
> To make hir housbonde han so foul a name.
> She nolde nat tell it for hir owene shame. (961-964)

When she betrays Midas' secret to a marsh, Midas' wife begs of the water not to betray her in turn: "Biwreye me nat, thou water, with thy soun" (970, 974). Just as Alison's "conseil" or "pryvetee" overlaps with or subsumes her husband's, Midas' wife's

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[102] Phillips, too, notes that the verb "biwreye" appears in both the prologue's passage on gossip and the tale's depiction of Midas' wife (120).

"owene shame" is bound up in considerations of *her* husband's reputation and secret life. Thus, in taking on his secret, the wife has also taken on his susceptibility to betrayal. When she unburdens herself to the water, she closely reenacts her husband's confession to her ("save his wyf, ther wiste of it namo;" "to thee I telle it and namo"), so that the acts of harboring and divulging the same secret become a shared experience (957, 975). Midas' wife is betraying her husband at the same time she is internalizing and replicating his thoughts and actions, so that, paradoxically, the wife's act of gossip is both a betrayal and way of reinforcing the identity she shares with her husband. Thus Chaucer's portrayal of gossip in the Wife of Bath texts reflects his broader interest in the ways that both marriage and gossip can alter one's identity or sense of selfhood and separateness. Alison's conflation of pronouns, the marsh-whispering wife's internationalization of Midas' shame, Dame Prudence's collaborative ethic in *The Tale of Melibee*, and Griselda's wholesale replacement of her own will with Walter's all suggest that Chaucer finds women particularly susceptible to an alteration in self-consciousness after marriage. That this phenomenon signifies integrity, commitment, and fidelity to contract in Griselda and Prudence suggests that there is also some ethical value in Alison's gossip, since it reinforces her sense of a shared identity in marriage.

Even if Alison's gossip shames her husband, it has positive ethical value for her audiences, insofar as it teaches us about the "wo that is in mariage" (3). To the pilgrims and her readers, in talking *about* her acts of gossip, the Wife of Bath tells a confessional story about marriage that has qualities of both gossip-counsel and guidance-counsel. The story is gossip because it reiterates the same kinds of intimate secrets Alison used to reveal to her friend of the same name—the examples of her husband "pyss[ing] on a wal" and putting his own life at risk. But it is also guidance-counsel insofar as it forms part of Alison's larger discussion on marriage—her presentation of marriage as a space for two people to "imprint upon" and challenge one another.[103] The upshot of Alison's story about gossip, as she tells it, is that her behavior was hurtful and wreaked havoc on her husband's emotions, as well as compromised his trust in her. The narrative doesn't explicitly moralize, but it does provide a simple lesson in cause and effect, in the immediate consequentiality of one's behavior in marriage: betraying your spouse's trust, which may be terrifically fun in the moment, can result in damage to both of you.

The story of Midas' wife and the passage in Alison's prologue about her own proclivity to gossip are usually read as reflecting a facile misogynistic bias (525-542). Patterson calls the Midas passage "an image of feminine speaking that suggests both obscurity and uncleanness" (287). Likewise, Treharne reads Alison's speech as that of "a woman who is undermined by her own prolixity and hyperbole" (111), and Desmond attributes Chaucer's revision of Ovid to a "discourse on wives and secrets" involving "the erotic volubility of a wife's body," which prevents married women from "physically keep[ing] a secret" (142). Although Desmond makes a valid argument about secret-keeping and gossip as bodily experiences, readings that focus on the problems of stereotyping and misogyny in the texts tend to obscure the moral complexity of Chaucer's take on gossip. Susan Phillips offers a useful perspective by focusing on the important social roles that gossip can play in later Middle English works, reminding us that narrative depictions of gossip necessarily participate in the act of "janglyng" by relaying "gossip's idle words" to a reader. Whereas Treharne reads Alison's speech and gossip as reflective of her rhetorical and moral deficiencies, Phillips spotlights the rhetorical density and sophistication of gossip (3).[104] Though she acknowledges the issue of misogyny, she would probably caution against the knee-jerk assumption that any depiction of women's gossip is antifeminist.[105] I would go even further than Phillips: the value of Alison's gossip is not only social and rhetorical but in some ways deeply ethical in character. It is Alison's enthusiasm for gossip-"conseil"—her pervasive reliance on anecdotes and experiential wisdom to support her arguments—that makes all of her guidance-"conseil" possible. Any morally valid teaching to be found in her prologue must therefore reflect positively on gossip's potential to effect ethical transformation.[106] In an instructional context, good gossip can be integral to good counsel.

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[103] Again, this phrase is from the Clerk's envoy (*ClT* 1193).

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[104] In her analysis of *The Manciple's Tale*, Phillips writes, "Both the narrative and its moral participate in the 'janglyng' they condemn, as the Manciple's exemplum functions less as a cautionary tale than as an illustration of idle talk's talent for discursive appropriation" (3).

[105] "[T]o reduce all idle talk to women's work is both to miss the complicated ways in which Middle English writers represented women's gossip and to underestimate its power […] [T]o focus exclusively on the idea of [gossip as] transgression ignores the discursive appropriations that make idle talk both so problematic and so productive in late medieval England" (Phillips 6).

[106] In her discussion of gossip as confession, Phillips explains that "intimate confessional exchanges," like Alison's exchange with her gossip, "transform relationships," since "the characters who engage in them forge kinship through conversation" (120).

III. Interactivity and symbiotic transformation

So far I have stressed the ways in which Alison’s counsel and persuasive strategies—in particular, her all-encompassing irreverence, her insistence on source critique, and even some aspects of her gossip—can be said to have inherent ethical value. I have also alluded briefly to the transformative effects of her counsel. In this concluding section, I will more closely examine the household consequences of Alison’s wifely counsel. In her fifth marriage, especially, Alison's counsel facilitates a radical interactivity between spouses that transforms both of them into more ethical communicators. By seeking out opportunities to practice counsel, Alison also transforms herself into an exemplary wife-counselor over the course of five marriages.

Several examples of affection between the Wife of Bath and her husbands suggest that her marriages, for all her talk of “wynnyng,” are characterized by some degree of mutuality and cooperation.[107] Alison introduces all five spouses as “worthy men in hir degree” and—when she is not roasting them—recalls her fourth and fifth husbands with particular clarity, suggesting that these marriages remain especially meaningful to her (6-8). Of her fifth husband, Jankyn, Alison recalls, “I trowe I loved hym best, for that he / Was of his love daungerous to me”; she later draws him in erotic detail at the scene of his predecessor’s funeral (513-514, 592-602). Even her fourth husband, who “hadde a paramour” and caused Alison “greet despit / That he of any oother had delit," receives a forgiving enough send-off: "Lat hym fare wel; God yeve his soule reste!" (454, 481-482, 501). Alison's confession to having been this husband's "purgatorie" (489) strongly implies that her difficult behavior towards him had positive instructive value, but she elects rather graciously in the passage to provide a self-deprecating account of her challenges to him rather than to focus on his developmental need for these challenges (489, 483-494). These indications of respect, affection, and attachment suggest that instances of Alison's dishonest and exploitive behavior—at least towards her fourth and fifth husbands—result more from her self-interest and habitual irreverence than from enmity, and that a sense of partnership might coexist with rivalry in these marriages.

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[107] Benson glosses “wynnyng” as “profit” (see 414-416).

Of course, Alison's interest in partnership or cooperation can be hard to see. Her emphasis on the issue of mastery, along with her fondness for alluding to stereotypical oppositions between male and female behavior, have led many critics to understand her marital relationships as essentially antagonistic, or at least as weaker and less valuable than her homosocial bonds.[108] Even Lochrie's masterful discussion of secrecy and gossip, for example, reflects this somewhat misleading perspective. Her study focuses on gossip as "a kind of insurrectionary discourse on the part of women," positioned "alongside—but also in resistance to—a variety of institutionalized, written discourses," but Lochrie falls short of fully examining the implications of Alison's gossip for her marriages (56-57). Likewise, Tara Williams' 2008 article on Harry Bailey and his wife exemplifies a broader tendency among critics to overlook depictions of partnership, collaboration, and instruction in Alison's and other marriages. The article names "marital identity" as an important social determinant for the Canterbury pilgrims and argues that the *Tales*' exploration of "personal communities based on marital identity" is crucial to Chaucer's critique of antifeminism (385). Although Williams' perceptive work brings much-needed scholarly attention to the thematic centrality of wifehood in the *Tales*, her understanding of "sexual desire and suspicion" as "the twin hallmarks of [Chaucerian] marriage" limits her reading to rather exhausted questions about identity groupings, gender, and sexual difference (403). Like Phillips and Lochrie, Williams seems to internalize Harry Bailey's assumption that (in Williams' paraphrase) "wives have a reciprocal loyalty that supercedes their loyalty to men, even […] their own husbands" (387). The article glosses over Alison's many expressions of fondness towards and interest in her husbands, as well as her unsparing critiques of women. Williams' account treats (and reads Chaucer as treating) the sexes as fundamentally separate, focuses on tensions rather cooperation or mutual influence among spouses, and obscures the ways in which wives teach, mold, discipline, and change their husbands in the *Tales*.

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[108] See Tara Williams' "The Host, His Wife, and Their Communities" (*The Chaucer Review* 42.4 [2008]), Lochrie's *Covert Operations*, Mari Pakkala-Weckström's *The Dialogue of Love, Marriage and Maistrie in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2005) and Elizabeth Scala's "Desire in the Canterbury Tales: Sovereignty and Mastery between the Wife and Clerk" (*SAC* 31 [2009]).

The Wife of Bath's Prologue does not present the sexes, however different they may be, as socially cordoned off from one another; nor does it imply that homosocial relationships are necessarily more valuable or collaborative than marital relationships. Alison speaks with more affection and fairness about some of her husbands than about her own sex. Whereas she often makes sweeping negative generalizations about all women, she specifies a clear distinction between her three “goode” and two “badde” husbands, and, as I have discussed, she goes on to reveal some positive feelings about the “badde” ones (195). Although she betrays a certain fondness for women in encouraging them to persist in mischief of “ber[ing] [their husbands] wrong on honde” she seems more interested in pursuing confrontational, intellectually challenging engagements with men—both in the past, during her marriages, and on the pilgrimage to Canterbury—than in seeking solidarity with women (226).[109]

The purpose of my intervention is not to devalue homosocial relationships in the Wife of Bath texts, but to point out that Alison exhibits an impressive level of comfort, expressivity, and intellectual engagement in her relationships with men, including her marriages. In overlooking this accomplishment, we risk missing the full scope of Alison’s work as a thinker, storyteller, and counselor in her texts, as well as Chaucer’s appreciation for the intellectual opportunities and ethical training that marriage can offer. The Wife of Bath embraces these opportunities with unforgettable zeal. Her counsel is not only irreverent and festive in quality but also highly interactive. By Alison’s account, any marriage is an opportunity for “scoleiying,” for both parties to learn and change. As I will argue, it is ultimately Alison’s self-cultivation as a counselor that makes it possible for her husbands to change along with her (441).

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[109] “Now herkneth hou I baar me properly, / Ye wise wyves, that kan understonde. / Thus shulde ye speke and bere hem wrong on honed, / Fo half so boldely kan ther no man / Swere and lyen, as a woman kan. / I sey nat this by wyves that been wyse, / But if it be whan they hem mysavyse. / A wys wyf, if that she kan hir good, / Shal beren hym on hond the cow is wood, / And take witnesse of hir owene mayde / Of hir assent” [...]” (224-234).

Examining the prologue's structural intricacies in more detail reveals the narrative events, transitions, and resonances that are most crucial to Alison's development as a counselor and to the transformations she effects in others. By the time of her pilgrimage to Canterbury, Alison's affinity for her fourth and fifth husbands shows itself in a pronounced concern for their departed souls. To draw a connection between her two most memorable spouses, she uses a chiastic structure whose fulcrum is the issue of their souls' repose: lines 452-502 recount the "jolitee" (l. 470), "angre," and "verray jalousye" (l. 488) of her tumultuous years with husband four, ending with description of his tomb and the short prayer that God grant "his soule rest"; lines 502-503 seal the coffin on husband four ("He is now in his grave and in his cheste") and introduce his successor ("Now of my fifthe housbonde wol I telle"); line 504 expresses worry over the fate of *his* (the fifth husband's) soul ("God lete his soule nevere come in helle!"), and the remainder of the poem fans out again into a narrative of that marriage's ups and downs (505-828).

In some ways, Alison's fourth marriage thus serves as a preview to her fifth. But it is also significant for containing Alison's sophisticated counsel on beauty and age (discussed earlier in this chapter), as well as for delivering the first moment in which Alison recounts making a sincere emotional investment and suffering serious consequences. In recalling her previous three marriages, all to old men, she admits to having affected and experienced a number of emotions, as well as to having manipulated her husbands on several occasions. But the line "I hadde in herte greet despit," in reference to husband four, marks a point of departure, after which events in her married life become more emotionally and intellectually consequential (481).

Though she responds to his infidelity with her usual, ethically dubious game-playing—taking revenge, making him jealous and miserable ("Ther was no wight, save God and he, that wiste, / In many wise, how soore I hym twiste")—she is not, this time, reacting out of caprice (493-494). Her pain is sincere and results from her fourth husband's violation of the marriage contract, and though her vengeful behavior is misguided, it reflects a new depth in Alison's concern for the marital bond.

After that, in her fifth marriage, Alison betrays a greater awareness of marriage's emotional hazards for both spouses. Although, during the marriage, she may not sufficiently appreciate Jankyn's keen sense of betrayal when she "[tells] his conseil every deel," the fact that she recounts his reaction to the Canterbury pilgrims in intimate detail suggests that she certainly registered having caused her husband pain (538-542). Likewise, it is her own hurt feelings at Jankyn's absorption in misogynistic literature that seem to motivate the series of violent events at the end of the Prologue: "Who wolde wene, or who wolde suppose," she asks, "The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne?" (786-787). Though her fury is raw, it has deep intellectual roots in her sustained critical engagement with her husband's beloved reading material. By this point, Alison has achieved a greater level of focus and intimacy in marriage than we have yet seen.

The Wife of Bath's "wo […] and pyne" gives way to a fast-paced sequence of climactic action that results in the most memorable and salient example of symbiotic transformation in her prologue. In a heated battle with Jankyn, Alison tears pages from his "cursed book" (798-791); strikes his cheek, sending him into the fire (792-793); receives a blow "on the heed" and collapses into a pretend swoon (795-799); elicits an apology (803-807); hits him again on the cheek (l. 800); calls him a theef; and exclaims that she is dying (809-810). Finally, Jankyn surrenders all authority into Alison's hands ("Myn owene trewe wyf, / Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf"), and the couple reconciles, living peacefully together until his death:

> And whan that I hadde geten unto me,
> By maistrie, al the soveraynetee,
> . . . . .
> After that day we hadden never debaat.
> God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde
> As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,
> And also trewe, and so was he to me.
> I prey to God, that sit in magestee,
> So blesse his soule for his mercy deere. (811-828)

Once the reins are in Alison's hands, the "care and wo" that previously plagued the marriage are dispelled, and there are no signs that she abuses her power. Alison and Jankyn have enabled each other's simultaneous transformations into a benevolent sovereign and her affectionate consort. But we must credit Alison, who has struggled to educate and transform herself over the course of five marriages, for having set the symbiosis into motion with her trademark provocative style.

Like *The Clerk's Tale*, Alison's prologue has a problem-solution structure. That her fourth and fifth husbands are introduced as young and "badde" at the time of their marriages suggests their need for reform or counsel (196); Alison's special affinity for the two men suggests that she has a similar need; and her peaceful assumption of sovereignty, coinciding as it does with what I would call her "graduation" as a counselor, assures us that the text's implicit call for reform has been satisfied. Although, as Crane argues, there is something "patently illusory" in this happy ending, its illusory quality only adds to the prologue's crucial resonance with *The Clerk's Tale*. These counsel narratives, along with *The Tale of Melibee*, come to pat conclusions that are not necessarily satisfying by modern standards of naturalism. But their endings are well-suited to complete the texts' argumentative structures, and one of their effects is to drive home Chaucer's argument for the small- and large-scale benefits of wifely counsel in three very different forms.

But the prologue is not just a straight-forward counsel narrative; it is also a story about the making of a wife-counselor. The narrative traces Alison's journey from the relatively frivolous, self-inflicted drama of her first three marriages, through the transitional interlude of her fourth, more serious and scarring marriage and into the battles of her most challenging and consequential marriage. It is this marriage, Alison's fifth, that entails what I would consider to be the most formative events in her unique development as a counselor: her provocative experiments with gossip and source critique, her participation in intellectual debates so intense they devolve into combat, and her victory in gaining household "sovereignty"—which by this point seems a more desirable status than the "auctoritee" that is out-of-reach for her at the beginning of the prologue (530-542). Once Alison graduates from the "tribulacion[s] in mariage" of her "five husbondes scoleiyng," she assumes an authority that stabilizes her household and makes cooperation possible (173, 44f).

The new dynamic that Alison's counsel effects may seem at first to replicate an autocratic or oppressive structure of power. But reading the Wife of Bath as a counselor allows us to understand her "sovereignty" as Chaucer's dramatization of the political power that ought to be afforded seasoned counselors. On a more literal level, as a marital dynamic, the Wife's sovereignty is also perfectly in keeping with the couple's twenty-year age difference, with Alison's greater experience in marriage and with Jankyn's as-yet-unsophisticated intellectual tastes, which reflect the intellectual complacency or premature ossification that Chaucer seems to associate with institutional wisdom (600-602). It is a testament to Alison's counsel—namely, her model of rejecting intellectual vanity, her uncompromising and cold but respectful rebuff of Jankyn's "olde sawe," and her critique of his reading material—that Jankyn ultimately recognizes his own need for schooling and surrenders his authority to her.

Positioned as we are in Alison's audience, we readers, along with her later husbands and with Chaucer's pilgrims, can appreciate the significance of Alison's extraordinary developmental arc from a wife obsessed with "wynnyng" to a conscientious wife-counselor (413-418). But our access to *The Canterbury Tales* in written form allows us to shuffle, revisit, and recontextualize the stories in illuminating ways, treating us to what is arguably the richest possible perspective on Alison's accomplishments as a wife-counselor. Intertextual cross-references show the Wife of Bath in her most flattering light: the Friar's and Summoner's crass, dead-end rivalry, for example, entertaining as it is, shows Alison's competitive relationships with men and even her stereotypical boisterousness to be intellectually fruitful and socially beneficial by comparison. Furthermore, Chaucer's conventionalized depictions of Prudence, Griselda, Pertelote, and the Sultaness, whose moral identities are complex but ultimately static, make the Wife of Bath, with her rougher textual artifice and dramatic moral transformation, an essential part of his study. Her imperfections and inconsistencies assure us that powerful examples of wifely counsel can be found beyond the confines of literature’s most idealizing (or demonizing) genres.

CHAPTER FOUR

Curative Instabilities:

Disport, Quest, and Multiplicity in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*

Like *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Clerk's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* diagnoses flaws in patriarchal leadership and promotes wifely counsel as a means of reforming both household and polity. But *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* shows Alison to be more or less uninterested in the antidotal values—stability, restraint, and devotion—that are cornerstones of wifely counsel and reform in the other tales. At the root of her divergent strategy is an unorthodox understanding of marriage. Unlike the steadfast Prudence and Griselda, the Wife of Bath embraces marriage as a fundamentally unstable institution (Woods 122). While it lasts, a marriage can foster strife among spouses and changes in each of them; after it ends, with the death of a spouse, one marriage can be "refresshed" by, or changed out for, a brand new one (*WBP* 38). Alison depicts both forms of marital instability with fondness and appreciation, as part of her "scoleiyng" (44f). She does not imagine marriage as a haven from the chaos of public life; for Alison, wifely counsel partakes in chaos and makes it instructive.

The theme of instability as a mode of education is one of the boldest threads connecting Alison's prologue to her fantastical "loathly lady" tale. Susan Crane has written about the "poetic instability" of Alison's texts, arguing that the "clerical mixture" of "antifeminist tracts, marital satire, [and] biblical exegesis" that forms the foundation of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* is also integral to the shifting narrative and thematic structure of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Crane analyzes issues of aesthetic instability—mainly, shifts between the romance genre and tropes of antifeminist nonnarrative genres—in order to unearth the ideological or conceptual instability of Alison’s politics. She concludes that Alison’s definitions of “sovereignty” in the tale tend to contradict one another, “in part because she confronts generic and ideological differences on the issue” (21). Crane's reading bears out that the structural instability of Alison's tale is deeply related to its political themes.

In my reading, Alison’s very incoherence is what renders her performance so crucial to Chaucer's intertextual conversation on wifely counsel. Her disorienting vacillations between misandry and misogyny, religion and irreverence, accuracy and error, distinguish the Wife of Bath from idealized wife-counselors, who exemplify more coherent values but set inimitable standards for rhetorical and moral consistency. Alison's eclectic rhetorical experiments in her prologue make us more likely to imagine her separately from the literary discourses that she juggles, and to consider her campaign for female sovereignty in relation to a lived context.[110] By depicting multiple wife-counselors, both of whom draw on diverse, often unconventional strategies, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* accomplishes a similar feat. Like her prologue, Alison's tale shows us that rhetorically eclectic, chaotic, inconsistent, contradictory, and disruptive wifely counsel can still be efficacious and vital to social reform.

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[110] In *A Companion to Romance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), Saunders calls her “perhaps the most three-dimensional character in the *Canterbury Tales* (94). In *Ovid's Art and the Wife of Bath*, Desmond writes, “The didactic confidence of the Wife of Bath's Prologue gives the Wife of Bath unusual stature as a literary character; she is the only pilgrim in the *Canterbury Tales* to compete with Chaucer for the authority of authorship. Mistaken for an author, Chaucer's Wife of Bath appears to be a female speaker whose subjectivity is compellingly accessible. [...] Such readerly transference has resulted in highly empathetic connections to the Wife” (118).

This chapter explains how the women in Alison's tale reform a wayward knight using a program designed around both literal and rhetorical instability. The first section deals with representations of literal instability in the form of relocation or mobility. In my study of the knight's movements, I examine a dichotomy between two different kinds of “disport” in the *Tales* and argue that Alison's initial account of the knight resonates with a problematic form of male disport that Chaucer critiques in other texts. The second section of this chapter explains how Alison aligns Queen Guinevere with the knight in a dynamic of wifely counsel, by which the queen uproots the knight from Arthur's court and transforms his criminal disport into a disorienting but morally purposeful quest. The third section of this chapter explores another source of instability in Alison's tale: the trope of multiplicity. I argue that Alison invokes multiple voices of counsel not only in the course of the knight's wanderings but also in the person of the loathly lady, whom he eventually marries. As a shape-shifter, the loathly lady is not only radically unstable at her core but also furnishes the most rhetorically eclectic performance of wifely counsel in the *Tales*. I examine how her contractual, rhetorical, and corporeal prestidigitations finally dismantle the knight’s sense of authority, completing his transformation from bachelor-rapist to respectable husband. Ultimately, I aim to show how *The Wife of Bath's Tale* reconciles the prologue's argument for marital instability with the more conventional ideals of wifely counsel we have seen in other tales.

I. Mobility, social exchange, and the problem of male "disport"

The theme of transformative relocation or travel, especially as it relates to gender, marriage, and marital status, emerges repeatedly in Chaucer's tales of wifely counsel. Being both a consummate pilgrim—a lover of "visitaciouns," "vigilies," "processiouns," "prechyng," "pilgrimages," "pleyes of myracles" and "mariages" (*WBP* 543-559)—and an expert on married life (*WBP* 1-8), the Wife of Bath is particularly interested in the relationship between travel and the hearth,[111] or in what Sarah Rees Jones calls "the cyclical movement of human bodies between household, street, and city" (246).[112] Leigh Ann Craig provides a thorough reading of Alison's "Wanderlust" and "enjoyment of mobility" in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*; Craig observes that Alison "categorize[s] all sorts of travel as essentially the same," so that "whether going to meet with a friend or going on a pilgrimage, all of her wandering [is] an expression of the same habit" (40-41). Although Craig's reluctance to "revolutionize interpretation of the Wife of Bath" results in a timid argument, her analysis draws crucial attention to the trenchant issue of “mobility” and supplies this useful term as a catch-all for the morally and politically charged relocations at the heart of Alison's texts.[113]

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[111] The *General Prologue* lists Alison's travel credentials: "And thries hadde she been at Jerusalem; / At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne, / In Galice at Seint-Jame, and at Coloigne. / She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye" (463-467).

[112] Here, Jones is discussing Giles of Rome, but her description of medieval European "space" as an arena for this kind of "cyclical movement" applies to Alison's texts and others in *The Canterbury Tales*.

The Wife of Bath's moral lapses and inconsistencies in her prologue certainly reflect medieval anxieties about the supposed “sexual and materialistic ill-conduct” of “mobile women” (30, 23). At the same time, however, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* deconstruct the traditional “castigation of mobile women” by acknowledging the obstacles that make it difficult for women to leave their homes in the first place (23). The texts also explore the social, economic, and intellectual work that women can accomplish when they overcome or circumvent these obstacles. Alison's consummate appreciation for and mastery of mobility are among her assets as a wife-counselor. William F. Woods argues that the Wife of Bath's “walking abroad, traveling,” and “restless moving about—call it drifting” helps her maintain spiritual strength and economic viability “over the years of her many marriages” and reflects a deep-seated “prudence,” that hallmark of Chaucerian wifely counsel (122).

Like Craig, Woods is naturally interested in the travels Alison recounts in her prologue. His analysis suggests that Alison maintains an active itinerary and social life in order to protect herself, financially and spiritually, from being “foresaken” or widowed, and that her prudence, mobility, and “diligent vitality” result from an abiding “need for safety” (122). Though I agree with Woods that Alison's travels sustain her with material and spiritual benefits across marriages, Alison also seems to enjoy travel and socializing for their own sake, and she does not betray the deep-rooted fear of loss or abandonment that Woods' reading rather implies.[114] I propose that safety emerges as a major theme, not so much in Alison's prologue, but in her tale, in the form of a practical concern with male criminality.

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[113] In *Wandering Women and Holy Matrons* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009), Craig writes: “In sum, Alison is endlessly fascinating, and as Arthur Lindley has pointed out, straightforward explanations of her attitudes and presentation are impossible and therefore undesirable. In the discussion which follows, I do not propose to revolutionize interpretation of the Wife of Bath; indeed, my examination of the surface use of a stereotype does not particularly challenge any of these viewpoints [on how to interpret her]. My sole purpose is to show that fears of women's mobility were central to the way in which she is represented, and it is my hope that reading her in that context may help provide nuance to other critical approaches and also to the reading of other texts that feature mobile women” (40).

From the very beginning of the tale, a panorama of “halles, chambres, kichenes, boures, / Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures, / Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes” sets us up for a narrative in which physical movement, travel, navigation, and discovery are major values (868-871). Yet Alison's description is not entirely rhapsodic: danger is embedded in the landscape, in the form of *men's* mobility. The driving problem in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is that the undisciplined movements of men, whether knights errant or “lymytours and othere hooly freres,” can pose a threat to women's mobility and autonomy (866). Prevailing authorities either perpetuate this problem or prove impotent to solve it. Just as the church, which claims to impose boundaries or limits on mendicant “limiters,” fails to prevent the incubus-like “lymytour hymelf” from doing women “dishonour,” Arthurian law and ethics fail to prevent Alison's knight from raping a maiden (874-888).[115]

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[114] Alison's memories of her adventures in drinking and sex (“likerous mouth” and “likerous tayl” [458-468]) transition into a more general reverie on the worldliness and “jolitee” of her youth: “But—Lord Crist!—whan that it remembreth me / Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee, / It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote. / Unto this day it dooth myn herte boote / That I have had my world as in my tyme” (*WBP* 469-473).

The men in Chaucer's tales of wifely counsel tend to travel or “mobilize” for the purpose of “disport.” Parsing the different meanings of this term helps to clarify Alison's arguments about the relationship between gender, mobility, and public life in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. The Middle English word “disport” can denote entertainment, recreation, and the pleasure taken in such.[116] In the *Tales*, disport is often but not always mobile in nature, and it almost always takes place outside of the household. The term tends to refer either to the leisure of a physical excursion or to the more stationary yet social activity of lively conversation.

When *The Clerk’s Tale* and *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* depict a bachelor pursing his “lust present” (*ClT* 80) on a hunting trip, they conjure the former definition of disport (*ClT* 78-84; *WBT* 882-885). *The Tale of Melibee* invokes “disport” explicitly, furnishing the term as a way to conceptualize this type of outing: “Upon a day bifel that he for his desport is went into the feeldes hym to pleye” (*Mel* 958).[117] There is nothing deliberately vicious in either Walter's or Melibee's excursions, but the benefits of these outings do not extend beyond the individual men themselves to serve any sort of collective or cooperative end.

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[115] Alison's remark that now “Wommen may go saufly up and doun” appears deeply ironic, even sarcastic, in the context of her portrait of the modern limiter (888), whose corrupt habits strongly resonate with those of the Summoner and the Friar in Alison's audience. In keeping with the Clerk's implication that husbands have not improved since Griselda's time (*ClT* 1177-1200), the Wife of Bath positions her account of the rape directly after her critique of contemporary friars, suggesting that the Arthurian bachelor's crime is feasible in a modern context.

[116] The *Middle English Dictionary* offers several different uses for “disport,” including: “an activity that offers amusement, pleasure, or relaxation,” “a pastime, sport, or game,” “the game of love, flirtation,” “consolation, solace,” “deportment, conduct; customary behavior,” or an example of such. The fifteenth-century denotation of “disport” as “departure” post-dates Chaucer.

[117] *The Man of Law's Tale*, as I mentioned in my introduction, also begins by

An alternative form of disport, which we might define as lively social conversation, has a higher moral status in the tale. In the *General Prologue*, the Host contrasts the pleasures of conversation and storytelling with the dullness of silent locomotion. For the Host, a pilgrim in isolation, riding "by the weye," might as well be a rolling stone:

> For trewely, confort ne myrthe is noon
> To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon;
> And therfore wol I maken yow disport,
> As I said erst, and doon yow som confort. (773-776)

The Host's use of "disport" in contradistinction to antisocial travel suggests that not all excursions or departures are beneficial or even particularly gratifying. Regardless of how much he socializes, a pilgrim on horseback may well be undertaking a kind of disport, insofar as riding "offers amusement, pleasure, or relaxation" (*MED*). But the Host's somewhat paradoxical simile between a solitary or socially withdrawn traveler and an inanimate "stoon" suggests that the mobility of disport can sometimes coincide with a certain kind of social or intellectual inertia. By contrast, the passage associates

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evoking "disport." The Man of Law describes a group of "masitres" who leave Syria for Rome "for chapmanhod or for disport, / Noon oother message wolde they thider sende, / But comen hemself to Rome; this is the ende" (141-145). The ambiguity surrounding "disport" in this passage coincides with the extreme ambiguity of the Man of Law's take on wifely counsel.

“confort” and “myrthe” with the disport of social engagement and conversation. The latter form of disport is a motivating force behind *The Canterbury Tales*, including its most pious and didactic texts.

The Wife of Bath is associated with both physical and conversational disport. The word surfaces twice in her prologue, and the shift from one meaning to another marks her transformation into a wife-counselor. In the first instance, as Alison recalls her retorts to possessive husbands, she quotes her former self using the term: “Thou sholdest seye, ‘Wyf go wher thee liste, / Taak youre disport; I wol nat leve no talys; / I knowe yow for a trewe wyf, Dame Alys’” (318-320). Here, Alison refers to disport in the sense of leisure or pleasure taken outside of the household. Her remark suggests that disport is a privilege, a desirable opportunity to be earned with good and “trewe” behavior.

But the kind of disport she remembers desiring is morally ambiguous at best: Alison later concedes that her defensive remarks to former husbands were “fals” or disingenuous, so that her use of “disport” connotes dishonesty and deviance (380-383). In some instances, she took her disport not only in “walkynge out by nyghte” but in claiming that the purpose of her walks was “for t'espye wenches that [her husband] dighte”; Alison recalls, “Under that colour hadde I many a myrthe” (397-399). The kind of disport Alison invokes would not endanger public safety in the way that the knight's does in her tale. But her deceptive speech, as she remembers it, suggests that her mode of disport in earlier marriages was not inherently superior, morally speaking, to the activities that take Melibee away from his household, Walter away from his duties, and the Man of Law's merchants away from their homeland for an undisclosed purpose (*MLT* 141-145).

However, a later passage in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* associates Alison with the positive, social disport that the Host promises the pilgrims in the *General Prologue* (773-776). This present-tense passage, an interjection from the Summoner, occurs at the time of Alison's pilgrimage to Canterbury and therefore well after her five husbands' schooling. When the Friar remarks on Alison's "long preamble of a tale" (831), the Summoner verbally attacks him:

> a flye and eek a frere
> Wol falle in every dyssh and eek mateere.
> What spekestow of preambulacioun?
> What! amble, or trotte, or pees, or go sit doun!
> Thou lettest oure disport in this manere. (835-839)

In his defense of Alison's performance, the Summoner, like the Host in the *General Prologue*, evokes an opposition between two different kinds of disport. On the one hand, he uses imagery we might normally associate with independent, recreational disport—namely riding, as in the Host's passage—to propose that the uncooperative Friar leave the group. On the other hand, the Summoner invokes the term "disport" explicitly to describe how the group experiences Alison's storytelling. For the Summoner, listening to Alison's long preamble is more vital and engaging—more worthy of the term "disport"—than the antisocial activity of riding away from the group, or of indulging one's impulses at the expense of the group's concentration.

Real disport, the Summoner implies, lies in the training Alison provides for young men. His comments to the Friar echo the Pardoner's earlier call for Alison to "Telle forth youre tale, spareth for no man / And teche us yonge men of youre praktike" (186-187).[118] To be sure, the *General Prologue* accords the Summoner, the Pardoner, and the Friar little to no moral credibility, and some readers might interpret their direct engagement with Alison in the course of her "disport" and "practike" as a hint at her own moral failings. But the possibility of an automatic moral affinity between Alison and these men does not pan out.[119] Alison's foibles rather pale in comparison to those of the corrupt male pilgrims, and she receives a comparatively flattering treatment in the *General Prologue.*[120] Furthermore, although the Pardoner and Summoner enjoy her performance, her prologue does not immediately resonate with the Friar, who, like a slacking pupil or a reader of *The Tale of Melibee,* complains of its length. Like any public pedagogical performance, her prologue appeals to some listeners and leaves others cold. In any case, the complex, somewhat ambiguous, but ultimately goodhumored and well-crafted response it elicits from the Clerk suggests that Alison's teachings are of interest to pilgrims on a wide moral spectrum (*ClT* 1170-1176).

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[118] Leaving the group, as the Summoner proposes, would provide the Friar with physical freedom and mobility, allowing him to practice a conventional kind of disport on his own, or to continue in the corrupt "daliaunce" that characterizes his round-the-clock professional efforts as a mendicant (*GP* 208-211). But a return to the status quo of exploiting "yonge wommen" and shoeless widows would result in the Friar's intellectual stagnation and a missed opportunity to partake in the more edifying disport of Alison's female-dominated "praktike" (*GP* 213, 253-255; *WBP* 187).

[119] Compare Chaucer's portraits of the Friar (*GP* 208-269), the Summoner (623-668), and the Pardoner (669-714) to his far more flattering portrait of the Wife of Bath (445-476).

[120] James Keller describes the Friar and Summoner as "two damned souls" and suggests that "the poet's portrayal of the Summoner is intended to be socially productive, inspiring a reformation of the apparitor's office and an end of abuse" ("A Sumonour Was Ther With Us In That Place," *Chaucer's Pilgrims*, eds. Laura C. Lambdin and Robert T Lambdin [Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996], 312).

Regardless of whether the Summoner, the Friar, and the Pardoner are sincerely interested in moral education, Alison's teachings have instructive value for these men. Like the knight in Alison's tale, the men in this trio rely on the mobility their positions afford them in order to exploit other people, often “ful many” “younge wommen” and “young girles” (*GP* 212-213, 664). They are therefore the target audience of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, which argues that men fare best when they abandon the pursuit of empty pleasure and surrender to women's control. Alison's rhetoric succeeds with at least two of the men: the Summoner and the Pardoner sense that her storytelling offers an engaging, social alternative to whatever leisure they might pursue in the absence of the group.[121]

Whereas the *General Prologue* and other framing materials establish social, co-educational disport as a value in the *Tales*, the narratives of wifely counsel that I have so far discussed depict antisocial male disport as a careless and potentially disastrous enterprise.[122] *The Tale of Melibee*, *The Clerk's Tale*, and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* each betray a deep concern with various local and global consequences of leaving men to their own devices outside of the household, whether they are holding summits or hunting for waterfowl. Considered together, these tales launch a multifaceted critique the male privilege to roam.

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[121] One symptom of the Summoner's need for ethical counsel is his own performance as a counselor, which the text implies to be exploitative or lecherous in nature: “In daunger hadde he at his owene gise / The yonge girles of the diocise, / And knew hir conseil, and was al hir reed” (*GP* 663-665).

[122] *The Man of Law's Tale* and *The Cook's Tale* include examples of male disport-as-excursion involving companions or groups, but the male-dominated activities in these tales are antisocial in their mysteriousness and criminality, respectively (*MLT* 141-145; *CkT* 4382, 4420).

The first section of *The Clerk's Tale* and the first few lines of *The Tale of Melibee* associate male disport with neglect, a secondary cause of hypothetical or real disaster. Walter's disport or aimless recreation in bachelorhood leaves Saluzzo feeling vulnerable to "a straunge successour" (*ClT* 78-84, 136-139), and Melibee's quotidian disport leaves his wife and daughter vulnerable to attackers who invade their home (*Mel* 967-972). In these tales, the patriarch taking his disport is not a criminal himself (at least, in Walter's case, not yet). Rather, he inadvertently makes it possible for aggressors—usurpers, attackers—to injure the people ostensibly in his care. Alison's tale betrays even greater anxiety about male disport and suggests that it poses a more direct sort of danger than we see in the other tales of wifely counsel.[123] Somewhat like *The Cook's Tale*, which links male disport directly to "gambling and theft" (*CkT* 85, l. 4382), prostitution (86, l. 4420), and "lower-class criminality" (Patterson 278), *The Wife of Bath's Tale* depicts male disport as the immediate precondition for sexual assault:[124]

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[123] The *Middle English Dictionary* defines "danger" as both "unaccomodating; haughty, aloof; reserved, reluctant" and "Fraught with danger; hazardous, risky, dangerous." Both sets of synonyms apply to Alison's knight. Other definitions include "Domineering, overbearing" and "Niggardly, chary," both of which are qualities associated with bad husbands in the *Tales*.

[124] Female disport or wandering, though not always innocuous, is far less dangerous to public safety by comparison. In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, there is little to no moral anxiety around the prospect of a wife's infidelity; male criminality and entitlement are far greater sources of concern. When the loathly lady proposes turning herself "yong and fair," so that the knight would have to "take [his] aventure of the repair / That shal be to [his] house by cause of [her], / Or in some oother place," cuckoldry appears in the crone's formulation as an equitable trade-off for the pleasures of having a beautiful wife (1223-1226). Both Alison and the crone imply that men's privileges are more dangerous

And so bifel that this kyng Arthour
Hadde in his hous a lusty bacheler,
That on a day cam ridynge fro ryver,
And happed that, allone as he was born,
He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn,
Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed,
By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed. (882-888)

The theme of patriarchal negligence that we see in *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee* still inheres in this passage, insofar as we sense that Arthur should have commanded better behavior from his lieges. Alison's account implicates the court in the maiden’s rape in much the same indirect way that *The Tale of Melibee* implicates Melibee in the neglect of his household. But Alison is also concerned with the knight's antisocial disport. By leaving the court and partaking in the solitary leisure of hawking “allone as he was born,” the knight in the passage alienates himself from the bonds of civil society and the civilizing impulses those bonds engender.

The Wife of Bath's Tale represents patriarchal negligence in the person of “kyng Arthour” and patriarchal “oppressioun” (889) in the person of the “lusty bacheler” riding out from Arthur’s house. Alison's narrative of the maiden's rape thus joins a general critique of the Arthurian power structure to a more localized indictment of male criminality. As a “bacheler,” the knight is a “novice in arms” as well as “a young

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to public order and more inimical to Christian virtue than any of the stereotypical vices that women might possess.

unmarried man;" his identity and ethics are not yet fully formed, and his conduct betrays his need for moral guidance that the feudal system has not provided (*MED*).

The bachelor's perversion of disport at the beginning of the tale is a symptom both of his own failings and of systematic flaws in Arthur's rule, which fails to protect public order. As in *The Clerk's Tale,* when a representative of Saluzzo pleads for Walter to marry (*ClT* 92-140), the people in Alison's tale vent their anxiety about untamed bachelorhood through appropriate channels of power: "For which oppressioun was swich clamour / And swich pursute unto the kyng Arthour / That dampned was this knyght for to be deed" (889-892). But for Alison, the existing power structure is insufficient to remedy the very problem it allowed to happen in the first place. In her study of "supernatural rape" in medieval romance, Corinne Saunders notes that the maiden's rape in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* "contravenes generic expectation, that rape is not explicitly enacted except by otherworldly or monstrous figures. The morality of the Arthurian world is immediately thrown into question" (*Rape and Ravishment* 301).[125] But even a reader without much knowledge of the romance genre would sense the tale's critique of the Arthurian tradition, of undisciplined knights, and of the lecherous (if less dangerous) "lymytours and othere hooly freres" that descend from the same British stock (866, 873-881). In keeping with the *General Prologue*'s critique of male corruption, as well as her own prologue's irreverence towards institutional authority, Alison's tale takes as its very premise the failure of patriarchy to educate "yonge men" and civilize their disport (*WBP* 186-187). It also shows women deploying a program of destabilizing but ultimately curative counsel to correct for these failings and promote public safety.

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[125] The phrase "supernatural rape" appears on 318.

In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the wayward knight's transformation begins to manifest in a shift between two different phases of mobility: a self-directed phase of mindless disport, and a female-dominated, intellectually purposeful phase of quest. Helen Cooper observes that the quest the queen crafts for the knight facilitates his "mental traveling, to distance himself from his former violent and misogynist self" (53). But in keeping with Alison's ethic of mobility, the knight's traveling is not entirely figurative or "mental." His physical quest takes him to every "coost" of Britain (918-922), and the literal dimension of his journey is inextricable from the metaphorical. By merging travel with social engagement, Guinevere exploits both forms of disport for their pedagogical value and transmutes them into a fruitfully disorienting education.[126]

II. The queen and her quest

As I will argue, we can read Queen Guinevere's address to the knight and the riddle-and-quest she designs for him as examples of good counsel. Both are rhetorically sophisticated acts of instruction, intended to make the knight more accountable. But how does the queen's performance qualify as *wifely*, and why does the issue of wifehood matter to her role as a counselor? Alison never shows Guinevere dispensing counsel to King Arthur, and certain hallmarks of wifely counsel are necessarily absent from the queen's interactions with the unmarried knight. Nonetheless, the text's emphasis on her literal marriage to Arthur, on her radical access to and influence over the knight, and on the role of wives in her court invites us to read Guinevere's performance as another example of “wifely” counse1 or instruction in the *Tales*.

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[126] In a reading that is in some ways similar to my own, Elizabeth M. Biebel interprets *The Wife of Bath's Tale* as involving a "treatment program" whereby women "set out to rehabilitate the knight." But Biebel reads the old hag as the knight's "primary counselor," who "mak[es] the assailant fully aware of the role of victim when he himself is placed in a situation of victimization" ("A Wife, a Batterer, and a Rapist," *Masculinities in Chaucer*, 73-74). However, I contend that Guinevere and the loathly lady are equally important to the knight's rehabilitation, as well as to Alison's underlying argument for diverse forms and strategies of wifely counsel.

The queen's literal wifehood is logistically crucial to her performance of counsel, insofar as her marriage to the king allows her to commandeer his public role and to exercise royal sovereignty over the knight. As Arthur's wife, the queen commands access to the knight that any other woman might only gain through kinship or marriage, as the loathly lady demonstrates when she marries the knight in order to counsel him. But, in a figurative sense, she also plays a “wifely” role in relation to the knight himself. Moreover, certain ethical and rhetorical principles of wifely counsel inhere in the structure and proceedings of the queen's court, where wives are well-represented.

Alison's description of the queen's court—“Ful many a noble wyf, and many a mayde, / And many a wydwe, for that they been wise”—accords a certain precedence to married women (1026-1029). Of all the women in attendance, “Mayde[s]” have the most in common with the knight's victim and the most at stake in his reform. But beginning the roster with maids would imply that the trial is primarily about obtaining justice for the knight's victim, when actually it is almost entirely about educating and rehabilitating the knight (Biebel 73-74). By starting with “Ful many a noble wyf” and ending with wise widows, Alison bookends the court roster with women who have been married, because these experienced women are best equipped to reform young men. Her gentle emphasis on the role of wives in Guinevere's court bolsters the authoritative status of married women in the tale, signals the court's reformational aims, and thus establishes the tale, at least in part, as a narrative of wifely counsel.

Furthermore, there are ways in which the queen's court resembles domestic environments in other tales of wifely counsel.[127] Although Guinevere’s relationship to the knight is not one of partnership or interdependency, her court, like Prudence's home, is free of the ruthless social competition that creates distrust, confusion, and cacophony in public settings. Furthermore, the queen's court is also characterized by control and unity of purpose. The environment allows for open communication and even a kind of intimacy or at least direct access between the knight and the queen:

> And afterward this knyght was bode appeere;
> To every wight comanded was silence,
> And that the knyght sholde telle in audience
> What thyng that wordly wommen loven best. (1030-1033)

Here, Alison depicts the female-dominated court as conducive to active listening (“his answere for to heere”) and clear, concise self-expression. The passage also stresses the queen's power: the knight shows up because he is “bode appeere,” and everyone in the court is “comanded” to be silent. If other wife-counselors gain a certain measure of access to and influence over their husbands by virtue of their physical proximity and spousal interdependence in marriage, the queen commands a comparable—or, theoretically, even greater—level of access and control by virtue of her status as Arthur's wife: she can command the knight's presence at her will. Thus her marriage to Arthur provides her with something like marital access to the knight's person. Like Prudence and Alison, the queen can dispense counsel to the knight over an extended period of time, in a space she appears at least partly to control.

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[127] At the end of the knight's quest, Alison conflates the esoteric, female-dominated environment that is Guinevere’s court with the knight’s home: “But hoom he gooth; he myghte nat sojourne; / The day was come that homward moste he tourne” (987-988).

Alison's shifts between naming and anonymity in the tale reinforce Guinevere's literal wifehood as Arthur's queen as well as a figurative dimension of wifeliness in her relation to the knight. As in the *Melibee*, issues of naming at the beginning of the tale are loaded with implications for how to read the key relationships within it. Critics, however, have paid less attention to Guinevere’s namelessness in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* than one would expect, and some seem not to have noticed.[128] In any case, there is a tendency in some scholarship to represent Arthur’s queen in such a way that obscures the detail of her namelessness.[129] Scholars who do remark on Guinevere's anonymity have not yet posed a satisfying explanation, although some of their readings furnish useful insights.[130] Jane Bliss' *Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance* comments briefly on *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, arguing that Alison's choice to name only Arthur and Midas "serves to emphasize the women's voices" and to establish the tale as a sort of exemplum (53).[131] The queen's namelessness, in particular, underscores the exemplary tropes that Bliss detects. But Alison's rhetorical maneuvers with naming are more surgical than Bliss' reading suggests. Like her take on the Midas story and her comments on scripture, Alison's approach to naming manifests the "scholastic skill" of quoting selectively to accommodate specific rhetorical goals related to wifehood and marriage (Minnis 248).

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[128] Arthur Lindley notes that all the women are nameless in Alison’s tale, arguing that “The nameless women show a remarkable tendency to flow into one another: “We cannot avoid seeing the women as aspects of one personality, avatars of one goddess, nor seeing that all the aspects are ‘defined’ by their relation to the knight. They are his victim, his judge, his salvation, his desire.[...] [T]he women remain impenetrably mysterious even while playing their roles to (with? upon?) the knight” (*Hyperion and the Hobby Horse* [Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1996], 58-59). But the women in the tale are more individualized and distinct than Lindley’s reading acknowledges. As I hope my analysis shows, they are also not very mysterious.

[129] Kathleen E. Kennedy, for example, writes, “A nameless knight rapes a nameless maiden while riding along one day,” yet goes on to mention “Guinevere” by name and “Guinevere’s court of ladies” (*Maintenance, Meed, and Marriage* [New York: Palgrave

Alison sets off the queen and the knight as partners in a counsel narrative by withholding their names and supplying Arthur's as a counterpoint. The absence of the queen's name also minimizes the potential for moral ambiguity in her relationship with

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Macmillan, 2009], 54). Samantha J. Rayner refers to her accurately, as "Arthur's queen," but saves the epithet "nameless" for the knight alone (*Images of Kingship* [Rochester, New York: D. S. Brewer, 2008], 128).

[130] Esther Casier notes Guinevere's namelessness in order to argue that "beneficent and/or powerful women" in Chaucer's work are "more or less disguised" versions of women in his memory ("not only Queen Philippa and Queen Anne, but the Duchess Blanche, the Princess Joan, and Constance of Castile") (*Geoffrey Chaucer and the Poetics of Disguise* [Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2008] 16). Quinn's reading draws attention to Guinevere's moral importance in the narrative, but her emphasis on extratextual models rather obscures the queen's complex relationship to several other figures in *The Canterbury Tales* and especially in Alison's texts.

[131] Mentions of the Wife of Bath's texts appear on pages 9, 53-54, 68, 74, 102, and 106. But Bliss largely brackets *The Wife of Bath's Tale* because, in her reading, it holds up "less as romance than as exemplum" (*Naming and Namelessness* [Rochester, New York: D. S. Brewer, 2008] 53). She reserves thorough analysis for more typical examples of the romance genre;

Arthur's knight. Abstracted and idealized into a queen with no name, Arthur's wife emerges as the knight's unequivocal moral superior—in other words, as something like the kind of wife-counselor we see in Griselda and Prudence. At the same time, drawing focus from the extratextual tradition of "Guinevere's" adultery allows Alison to redirect critical focus onto Arthur. Just as the tale's depiction of rape inverts the traditional scrutiny of mobile women to spotlight the criminality of a mobile man, invocations of the king's name make us more likely to scrutinize him than to question the moral standing of his wife. Whereas Arthur's name is loaded with moral ambiguity in the tale, Guinevere clearly operates on the side of innocence, to represent the interest of the blameless maiden and to reform the rapist.[132] The victim's anonymity as an unnamed "mayde" also serves to reinforce the knight's unequivocal guilt, by spotlighting her virginity before the crime (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 301-302).[133]

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[132] Furthermore, while readers might be able to forget about or bracket Guinevere's adultery while they read *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, they might also leave the tale prepared to reevaluate her traditional portrayal by the "Britons" who "speken greet honour" of Arthur (857-858). Why should the tradition emphasize the criminality of consensual adultery, without fully dealing with the crime of rape? Why should it emphasize Guinevere as an erotic figure rather than a philosophical or political figure? Guinevere's association with adultery will always complicate her moral status to some degree, but Alison's defiant omission of this tradition from her tale forces readers to consider these destabilizing questions about wifehood, virtue, patriarchy, and British culture. Just as Guinevere sends the knight off on a quest to learn more about women, the Wife of Bath sends readers forth to learn more about Guinevere. For a time we are allowed to inhabit a lush and nostalgic Arthurian landscape, but not to remain complacent in our feelings or beliefs about that landscape.

[133] Saunders mentions that "theft of virginity" constitutes "the gravest category" of rape in medieval romance. That Alison offers only one piece of information about the victim—the fact of her maidenhood or virginity—underscores the severity of the knight's offense (*Rape and Ravishment* [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001], 302).

Another tension related to naming in the tale is the glaring contrast between Guinevere’s anonymity and her instrumental role in propelling the narrative. This imbalance casts the patriarchal status quo “Of which that Britons speken greet honour” in an ironic light (858). Arthur gets credited by name four times but is largely and conspicuously absent in the narrative, and his unnamed wife appears all the more active, vocal, and essential by comparison (Rayner 127-128).[134] Even before surrendering the knight's case to the queen, Arthur's judicial role is rather passive: he moves to execute the people's will, but only after their “clamour” and “pursute unto” him. As in *The Tale of Melibee*, which depicts Melibee's intent to “maken werre” on his family's attackers as a rash and potentially disastrous concession to public opinion, the queen's response to the rapist's crime is more rational, constructive, and proactive than her husband's is (*Mel* 1049-1051). Like Griselda in her administrative mode, Alison’s queen accomplishes political work not alongside or in the service of her husband, as a consort, but rather in place of him (*ClT* 428-441). As a result of this irony, Arthur's name, like Midas', marks him out as vestigial to the plot of the knight's conversion. The almost comically unequal division of political labor in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, as well as in *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee*, reflects these texts' shared interest in the tension between women's civic capabilities and the extent to which their work and talents are acknowledged.

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[134] See bibliography for citation of eChaucer concordance. The three references to “Arthur,” all made by Alison, appear in line 857 (“In th’old dayes of the Kyng Arthour, [/ Of which that Britons speken greet honour]”), line 882 (“And so bifel that this kyng Arthour [/ Hadde in his hous a lusty bacheler]”), and line 890 (“And swich pursute unto the kyng Arthour [/ That dampned was this knyght for to be deed]”); “Arthures hous” appears in line 1089 as part of the loathly lady’s dialogue (“Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures hous?”).

Alison's discretionary use of names also forces readers to understand the queen's wifely counsel in relation to a specific polity. Her tale accomplishes a rhetorical feat that neither the Melibee narrator nor the Clerk undertake, except in framing materials: to situate wifely counsel in a British cultural context, on the home turf of Chaucer's readers.[135] Thus, in disclosing certain names and withholding others, the Wife of Bath achieves a sophisticated rhetorical balance: reminding us of Arthur and the weak British patriarchy he represents, while locking out the tradition of "Guinevere's" adultery in order to idealize and authenticate the queen.

The queen's high moral status in the tale, along with her salvation of the knight, have led many critics to read her within the tradition of queenly intercession for judicial lenience. Directly after the rape, Guinevere leads a group of women who plead on the knight's behalf: "the queene and other ladyes mo / So longe preyeden the kyng of grace / Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place" (894-896). This moment resonates with other late-medieval depictions of "queens or high-ranking women who successfully intercede for men under royal sentence" (Watkins 33).[136] In a salient overview of queenly intercessors in Chaucer's works, Stephen Rigby links Guinevere to Alceste in *The*

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[135] See Christopher Fee, *Gods, Heroes and Kings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Fee argues,"The Arthurian setting and the commonplace magic suggest the popular oral traditions of the times, and this [Alison's] may be Chaucer's most populist tale" (209-210).

[136] *The Prologue to the Legend of Good Women* has attracted ample critical attention for its depiction of Alceste as a queenly intercessor on behalf of Chaucer. See John Watkins' "Wrastling for this world': Wyatt and the Tudor Canonization of Chaucer" (*Refiguring Chaucer in the Renaissance*, ed. Theresa M. Krier [Gainesville: University of Flrida Press, 1998], 32-33), Strohm ("Queens as Intercessors," *Hochon's Arrow* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992]), John Carmi Parsons' *Eleanor of Castile* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), and Wallace's *Chaucerian Polity*.

Legend of Good Women, to Mary in the invocation to Mary in the *Second Nun's Prologue*, and to Hippolyta in *The Knight's Tale.*

But the paradigm of queenly intercession, which involves what Rigby calls a "characteristically feminine mercy," misreads the affective dynamic between Guinevere and the men in the tale and does not fully account for the work that she and her court accomplish. Arthur exhibits none of the "vengeful wrath" that usually provokes a queen to intercede (Rigby 142), and neither Guinevere nor her ladies express the "pite" or charity we see in intercessors like Alceste (Frandenburg 144-145). Nor does Guinevere particularly humble herself before Arthur—who, appropriately enough, surrenders total sovereignty over the knight's case to the queen "al at hir wille, / To chese wheither she wolde hym save or spille."[137] Rather than intercede, Guinevere supersedes, entirely supplanting Arthur's judiciary and shifting the court's focus from punishment to rehabilitation through counsel. If narratives of queenly intercession stress "the power of certain privileged women to assuage rather than to suffer tyrannical wrath" (Watkins 32-33), Chaucer's tales of wifely counsel stress that women can offer a constructive alternative to inadequate forms of justice.

Viewing *The Wife of Bath's Tale* as a story about counsel and reform rather than mercy allows us to honor the women of Guinevere's court as political agents and reveals the scope and complexity of Alison's political argument. In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the citizenry and legal system have decent intentions. Saunders notes that both the public and the court respond to the rape "with a legal realism unique in Arthurian romance": the public's pursuit of justice from the king "recalls the possibility of presentment and indictment at the time," and the court's cooperation reflects a progressive strain of thirteenth-century legal theory that was sympathetic to rape victims (*Rape and Ravishment* 303-304).[138] But the prevailing order does not necessarily promote the general welfare. As in *The Tale of Melibee*, when Melibee's "woodness" is justified but counterproductive, the people's "clamor" for the knight's execution registers that his crime is detrimental to public order but does not offer a constructive solution to the problem of unruly noblemen. "[K]yng Arthour" and "cours of lawe" (890-892) would only punish and dispose of the criminal, thus maintaining the status quo that made the rape possible. The ladies' determination to prevent this outcome, coupled with the queen's constructive tone and style of address, reflects a collective imperative to reform that is in keeping with political themes in other tales of wifely counsel.

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[137] After the queen thanks Arthur "with al hir myght" (896-899), he disappears from the story, except for the loathly lady's brief, unflattering allusion to "the lawe of kyng Arthures hous" (1089).

Guinevere's rhetoric especially resonates with that of idealized wife-counselors in its emphasis on measurement, awareness, and accountability. Like Prudence and Griselda, she assumes the responsibility of speaking reason to a man who has nearly been undone—made "lyk a fool" (*Mel* 980), or "lyk a man had lost his wit" (*WBT* 1095), or "as he were wood" (*GP* 636)—by his own violent and self-serving impulses:

> And after this thus spak she to the knyght,
> Whan that she saugh hir tyme, upon a day:

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[138] Saunders argues that the public's outcry and pursuance of justice "echo the emphasis [on victims' rights] of legal theorists such as Bracton." On Bracton and the Glanville treatise that was his main source, see *Rape and Ravishment*, 52-56.

> “Thou standest yet,” quod she, “in swich array
> That of thy lyf yet hastow no suretee.
> I grante thee lyf, if thou kanst tellen me
> What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren.
> Be war, and keep thy nekke-boon from iren!
> And if thou kanst nat tellen it anon,
> Yet wol I yeve thee leve for to gon
> A twelf-month and a day, to seche and leere
> An answere suffisant in this mateere;
> And suretee wol I han, er that thou pace,
> Thy body for to yelden in this place.” (900-912)

Direct, deliberate, and emotionally controlled, the queen's counsel stresses caution—“of thy lyf yet hastow no suretee”; “ Be war, and keep thy nekke-boon from iren!”—and prioritizes the imperative to “leere.”[139] Like the other wives' counsel, Guinevere’s speech is pragmatically generous: her plan anticipates and allows for the knight’s initial ignorance of the answer to her riddle. With a sensitivity to timing that contrasts with the “clamour” and reactivity of the public (889), the queen waits, just like Prudence, until “she saugh hir tyme, upon a day” to prescribe a course of action (*WBT* 901, *Mel* 980). Guinevere also uses formal rhetoric to reinforce a pre-existing bond with the knight, ensuring that he remains somehow accountable to her. After his failure to uphold the most basic chivalric values, the queen requests a fresh and explicit vow—"And suretee wol I han" (911)—that reflects the ethos of contractualism that we see in *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee*, as well as "evoke[s] the language of mercantile and political contracts" (Gastle 190). Although the Wife of Bath avoids measured language and emotional restraint when she counsels her husbands in her prologue, she acknowledges the usefulness of these strategies in her tale by including the idealized queen in a multifaceted program to reform the knight.

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[139] By the time the knight departs from court, he understands learning to be his primary objective: “he hopeth for to fynde grace / To lerne what thyng wommen loven moost” (920-921).

In Alison's vision, the queen's rhetorical formality reinforces her legal authority. Bruce Holsinger credits Guinevere with establishing "a queenly jurisprudence" that stands out in contrast to Arthur's judiciary, or "the legal embodiment of the 'auctoritee' that [Alison] invokes in the first line of her Prologue" (159):

> The Tale thus defines its own sphere of legal knowing by opposing a queenly jurisprudence to the normative form of legal authority promulgated in and through 'statut.' […] One of the points of the Wife of Bath's Tale (and, for that matter, of the medieval 'courts of love' more generally) is to suspend imaginatively the authority of the royal courts in favor of a provisional, experimental, and fleeting form of legal power—a power that here achieves much of its resonance from the experiential vernacular of the Wife herself. In this case, then, written 'statut' yields to ad hoc tribunal just as royal apparatus makes way for female jurisdiction. (159)

The “provisional, experimental” nature of Guinevere's court reflects the Wife of Bath's taste for ethical or ideological flexibility: the queen does not claim to set any precedents for the future treatment of rapists; nor does she articulate any steadfast principles of justice or morality. Instead, she tailors her response to the knight's particular case, devising a way to maximize his exposure to women's counsel over the course of a year. But Holsinger's term “ad hoc” somewhat belies the formality of Guinevere's performance and the highly coordinated and unified nature of her court. Saunders remarks on the organization of the women at the beginning of the tale, reading the maiden's silence “as a mark of the efficacy of the women of the court who plead on her behalf” (302), and Alison emphasizes the court's total agreement on the knight's answer after his return: “In al the court ne was ther wyf, ne mayde, / Ne wydwe that contraried that he sayde, / But seyden he was worthy han his lyf” (1143-1145). The queen's legalism is experimental or flexible at the same time that it embraces conventional forms and contractual rhetoric, establishing the idealized and artificially unified court as a symbolic site of women's sovereignty.

But the queen's rhetoric emphasizes the knight's agency and options rather than her own undeniable authority over him, thus positioning her as more of a counselor than a unilateral enforcer. What is “fleeting” about the queen's jurisprudence is not, as Holsinger contends, her “legal power”—Arthur's power, in this tale, appears fleeting by comparison—but her emphasis on judgment. The focus of her entire judicial process is rehabilitation, which takes mostly outside of the court, and judgment of the knight's heinous crime plays little to no role in the year's events. Guinevere's aim is not to isolate the knight in a static stew of guilt and remorse but, in sovereign fashion, to control his movements and reshape his relationship to women.

That the knight perceives Guinevere's language as prescriptive rather than compulsory allows him to maintain a sense of autonomy—at least temporarily—as he embarks on his quest. Even though he must answer the riddle on pain of his life, the knight understands himself to be making an unpleasant but ultimately autonomous choice to embark on the journey:

> Wo was this knyght, and sorwefully he siketh;
> But what! He may nat do al as hym liketh.
> At the laste he chees hym for to wende
> And come agayn, right at the yeres ende,
> With swich answere as God wolde hym purveye;
> And taketh his leve, and wendeth forth his weye.
> He seketh every hous and every place
> Where as he hopeth for to fynde grace
> To lerne what thyng wommen loven moost[.] (913-917)

The word "chees" indicates the knight's (so-far) enduring sense of independence, in spite of public's call for his execution. Alison makes clear that the queen objectively possesses freedom of choice; given Arthur's mandate, the knight's fate is "al at hir wille, / To chese wheither she wolde hym save or spille" (897-898). But whether the knight is truly "choosing" to embark on the quest that his survival depends on is a matter of perception. He has just narrowly escaped decapitation, yet he understands the quest as an opportunity that might be turned down. In Alison's paraphrase, his pouty logic for accepting the challenge— "But what! He may nat do al as hym liketh" — betrays a lack of humility and of self-awareness that infuses the tale with irony. "The queene and other ladyes mo" (894) have undertaken to speak up for the knight and save his life; whatever chance at salvation they offer ought to liketh him a lot.

That same line links Alison's knight to Walter the marquis, who uses similar language and deeply covets the autonomy of his choices. When the people beg Walter to marry, he stipulates with pedantic thoroughness that he must be allowed to "chese" a wife of his "free wyl" and that the people must respect the autonomy of his "choys" (143-175). Walter's later claims that the people have pressed him to kill Griselda's children and find a new wife are so egregiously false as to underscore the total autonomy of his secret choice to set this charade in motion.[140] And even at the very end of the tale, Walter insists on clarifying that his actions were voluntary, when he publicly explains the entire narrative in terms of his choice to test or "assaye" Griselda (1072-1078). Alison's knight displays a similar if less self-conscious attachment to the notion of free choice. The ultimate moral victory in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* happens when he agrees to let his wife do all the choosing: by the time the "loathly lady" offers him a choice—"Chese now [...] / To han me foul and old" or "yong and fair" (1219-1223)— the knight responds, "Cheseth yourself" (1232-1233). His answer suggests that the barrage of women's counsel he has encountered throughout the tale has progressively weakened his sense of authority to choose.

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[140] "I moot doon with thy doghter for the beste, / Nat as I wolde, but as my peple leste" (*ClT* 489-490); "I may nat doon as every plowman may" (779). Of course, the reverse of his tremendously ironic formation is true: it is "plowmen" or peasants like Griselda and her father who are constrained to obey, whereas Walter has the power to make whatever choices he likes.

Guinevere's contribution to this process is to design a riddle and quest that expose the knight to his own ignorance and intellectual frailty. In the course of his travels to “every hous and every place / [...] / To lerne what thyng wommen loven moost,” the knight faces an onslaught of contradictory, often misogynistic counsel about women's desires. Until the end of his journey, “he ne koude arryven in no coost / Wher as he myghte fynde in this mateere / Two creatures accordynge in feere” (919-924). Strangers offer him diverse answers: “richesse,” “jolynesse,” “lust abedde,” “to be wydwe and wedde,” to be “yflatered and yplesed,” “attendance and [...] bisynesse,” “to be free and do right as us lest,” and to “been holden wise and clene of synne” and “stable, and eek secree, / And in o purpos” (924-949). Even Alison herself weighs in on the riddle for the pilgrims, arguing against the stranger who claims that women want to be trusted with secrets; in an antifeminist digression, as noted earlier, she recounts Ovid’s tale of King Midas’ wife, who is so anxious to betray the secret of her husband’s “two asses eres” that she leans over a marsh and tells it to the water (949-982).

The sheer number of stereotypes in Alison's account of the quest diffuses each one's rhetorical weight. Collectively, the antifeminist stereotypes create more confusion than meaning in the text and are profoundly unhelpful to the knight. His resignation and sense of failure at the end of his journey suggest that the queen's quest serves to weaken his sense of authority, making him more accountable in the process:

> Whan that he saugh he myghte nat come therby—
> This is to seye, what wommen love moost—

> Withinne his brest ful sorweful was the goost.
>
> But hoom he gooth; he myghte nat sojourne;
>
> The day was come that homward moste he tourne. (984-988)

Heidi Breuer observes that by the end of his quest, the knight "has given up […] and admitted that he does not know what women want, can not [sic] name it and thus assert control over it" (80). At the same time the knight gives up on his capacity to understand and control women, he ceases to profess control over his own movements. Keeping on the move—"he myghte nat sojourne"—and turning "homward" to the Guinevere's court are not things he chooses to do but things he "moste" do, in fulfillment of his contract. When he chances upon the loathly lady, the knight finally articulates the severity of his need for a woman's expertise: "My leeve mooder," says the knight, "certeyn / I nam but deed but if that I kan seyn / What thyng it is that wommen moost desire. / Koude ye me wisse, I wolde wel quite youre hire" (1005-1008). Over the course of his quest, he has had to accept his legal subordination to Guinevere; to acknowledge his own ignorance of the riddle's answer; to seek counsel from a diverse multitude of strangers; to acknowledge his inability to manage and synthesize this counsel; to humble himself before a "foul, and oold, and poore" woman (1063); and to bind himself to this woman as a debtor.

But male surrender is not the only ethical imperative in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*; Alison's ethic of vitality and mobility remains at play and informs the denouement of the first half of the tale. At first, the knight's self-presentation at court after his quest exemplifies a "manly" style of surrender that is in keeping with this ethic. He articulates his answer to the riddle with a dignified combination of humility and self-possession, deference and confidence, resignation and readiness, that can be read as a bolder version of the male rhetoric of surrender in Chaucer's other tales of wifely counsel. In the queen's presence, the knight "ne stood nat stille as doth a best, / But to his questioun anon answerde / With manly voys, that al the court it herde:"

> "My lige lady, generally," quod he,
> "Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee
> As wel over hir housbond as hir love,
> And for to been in maistrie hym above.
> This is youre mooste desir, thogh ye me kille.
> Dooth as yow list; I am heer at youre wille." (1034-1042)

Here, Alison depicts a new degree of animation in the knight's comportment and directs us to read this development as a sign of his progress. The strange but crucial observation that the knight "ne stood nat stille as doth a best" links stillness to animal fear and muteness, and perhaps to the moral stagnation that gives way to the knight's beastly act of rape at the beginning of the tale. We can imagine that, in the context of the silent court, the knight is physically composed when he addresses the queen. But at this early yet pivotal moment in his moral development, Alison chooses to emphasize the knight's *activity* in engaging with the court. Whereas Arthurian justice would have required the knight to passively submit, Alison and Guinevere require him to participate in his own rehabilitation, and the loathly lady empowers him to do so with "no fere" (1022).

Thus, by "send[ing] the thoughtless young knight into an aporia of women's desires," the queen—in partnership with her court, her subjects, and the loathly lady—

have succeeded at keeping the knight mobile while making him more accountable (Woods 122). But like *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, Alison's tale grapples with the challenges and limits of wifely counsel at several stages. When, in payment for her answer to the riddle, the loathly lady demands the knight's hand in marriage, he undergoes an ethical relapse, indulging in a tour de force of unmanly behavior that suggests he remains unfit for public life. The knight's fruitless desperation to retract his "trouthe"—"For Goddes love, as chees a newe requeste! / Taak al my good and lat my body go" (1060-1061)—not only reflects poorly on "Arthures hous," as the loathly lady herself observes (1087-1097), but bodes ominously for public safety, suggesting that the knight is not, after all, fully prepared to meet Arthurian codes.

In a complete reversal of his admirable and "fere"-less public performance (1022-1025), the knight becomes comically antisocial, arranging to marry the loathly lady "prively" to avoid the exposure of a public feast, and hiding "as an owle" from his "foule" wife once they are married (1077-1082). When he deigns to speak to her, both before and after the wedding, his exclamations reflect a profound shallowness, pusillanimity, cruelty, and an un-Christian and unchivalrous classism: "'My love?" quod he, "nay, my dampnacioun! / Allas, that any of my nacioun / Sholde evere so foule disparaged be" (1067-1069); "Thou art so loothly, and so oold also, / And therto comen of so lough a kynde, / That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and wynde" (1100-1102). The knight's cruelty to the crone does not negate the educational value of his quest, but it does define the limits of his education so far. He has learned to understand women as self-possessed agents, as aspirants to sovereignty, but he has not learned to speak to all women respectfully, and he has retained a harmful sense of socioeconomic entitlement.

That Alison's idealized queen only partially succeeds at reforming her charge is in keeping with the prologue's argument for the value of “Divers scoles” and “diverse practyk” (*WBP* 44c-44e). Fortunately, mobility is a cornerstone of Guinevere's counsel, and mobility can beget diversity. The knight's quest introduces him to counselors beyond his geographic and social ken and culminates in his marriage to the loathly lady, a consummate counselor who is multiple and diverse unto herself.

III. Multiplicity and the loathly lady

Even though the Wife of Bath does not live out the Old-Testament imperative “to wexe and multiplye” in its traditional sense, she nonetheless espouses multiplicity—of sources, destinations, rhetorical strategies, social perspectives, marriages, and counselors—as a key value (*WBP* 28). Alison is no more interested in a monolithic style of counsel than she is in the monolithic authority of clerical wisdom, and the explicit arguments for diversity in her prologue are born out in her tale of two very different wife-counselors (44c-44e, 95-104). In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, Alison's zeal for variety leads her to explore collaborative models of wifely counsel, wherein multiple wife-figures mobilize to reform an individual bachelor, in addition to a more traditional and intimate model of counsel involving two spouses.[141]

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[141] Male-to-male counsel in *The Tale of Melibee* and other Canterbury texts also tends to take on either an individual or a collaborative format, but the *Tales* depict heterosexual marriage as a distinct context for one-on-one counsel, and Alison imagines

We have already seen that multiplicity plays a major role in Queen Guinevere's counsel: her court is comprised of women with diverse marital backgrounds (1043-1045), and her own performance can be said to subsume all of the ideas the knight collects from her subjects on his quest (919-982). Although none of these ideas are sufficient to answer the queen's riddle, they are collectively valuable for their dizzying variety, and not just because they discombobulate the knight. Having previously encountered only conventional or idealized examples of women in the tale—the nameless victim and the idealized queen—the reader must, over the course of the quest, acknowledge women's diversity and imperfections. We partake in the knight's confusion amid the clashing ideas that emerge during his journey, and that confusion forces us to reflect critically on conclusions we might have drawn earlier in the tale regarding women as types and paragons. Without undermining Alison's critique of male criminality or the admiration that the queen's court commands, the litany of misogynistic stereotypes destabilizes the moral paradigm of the tale, reminding us that, outside of Guinevere's unified, idealized court, there is a world of women who are fallible, ideologically diverse, and as difficult to categorize as the Wife of Bath herself.

That one of these unconventional women completes the knight's transformation speaks to Alison's faith in an eclectic, collaborative model of wifely counsel. As the second major wife-counselor to work closely with the knight, as a purveyor of counsel in radically diverse forms, and as a shape-shifting trickster who contains more than one woman in one body, the loathly lady is a symbol and a generator of multiplicity in *The*

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the tradition of "fictional love courts" as a distinct context for collective counsel (Crane, "Alison's Incapacity and Poetic Instability," *PMLA* 102.1 [January 1987], 23).

Wife of Bath's Tale. The rest of this chapter will parse the multiple strategies that make up the loathly lady's chimerical performance of wifely counsel: contracts, homily, spouse-testing, and shape-shifting. By focusing mainly on contracts and homily, I aim to show how the lady maximizes the destabilizing power of these conventional strategies of wifely counsel in order to reform the knight and shake up the Arthurian social order.

The loathly lady's socioeconomic inferiority to the knight necessitates her innovative use of diverse rhetorical strategies. Whereas the queen's power over the knight is institutional, automatic, and unchanging, the loathly lady, being "foul, and oold, and poore," must draw on a repertoire of trickery to gain long-term access to the knight through marriage (1063). Thus Alison prioritizes the old hag's legal transformation from generic "wyf" to married woman as the all-important first step in her performance of counsel. In her introduction to the loathly lady, the Wife of Bath draws attention to issues of wifehood, power, and identity by evoking the term "wyf" while maintaining an intriguing aura of ambiguity around the lady's marital status:

> [...] on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf—
> A fouler wight ther may no man devyse.
> Agayn the knyght this olde wyf gan ryse,
> And seyde, "Sire knyght, heer forth ne lith no wey.
> Tel me what that ye seken, by youre fey!
> This olde folk kan muchel thyng," quod she.
> "My leeve mooder," quod this knyght, "certeyn
> I nam but deed but if that I kan seyn

> What thyng it is that wommen most desire." (989-1007)

Alison does not fully negate the lady's potential for wifehood; her repetition of "wyf" as a generic marker of gender foreshadows other definitions of wifehood—"The female partner in a sanctioned union," "the mistress of a household," "a woman who has had sexual experience" (*MED*)—that the lady comes to represent later in the tale. But in the above passage, stripped of contextual resonances, the word "wyf" simply denotes the loathly lady as "a human biological female" (*MED*). We might assume from the lady's advanced age and from the absence of a husband that she is unmarried or widowed, but the passage does not specify her marital status or history. In order to underplay the lady's current eligibility or potential for marriage, Alison—in this early moment—desexualizes her, stressing the hag's ugliness and androgyny. She invokes the phrase "olde wyf," sometimes used as "a term of disparagement" since the thirteenth century, and calls the hag the foulest of "wight[s]," an androgynous word that can refer to any living creature, including animals and monsters (*MED*). The lady also refers to herself with the androgynous term "old folk," misdirecting the knight so that he does not read her as a peer or heterosexual match (*MED*). In turn, the knight calls her "mooder," signaling his obliviousness to the lady's sexuality and to her potential as a mate. The knight's inability to recognize her as a prospective wife allows the crone to trap him in a marriage contract he cannot see coming.

The loathly lady designs this trap by combining multiple strategies associated with traditional wifely counsel—a lesson and a contract—into an economic transaction, leveraging her life-saving wisdom in exchange for radically unlimited power over the knight's "body" and "good" (1061). When the loathly lady intercepts the knight near the end of his quest, she “teche[s]” him the answer to the queen's riddle—“What thyng it is that wommen moost desire”—in exchange for his rash promise to do whatever “nexte thyng” she might require of him (1007, 1010, 1019-1022). The striking formality with which the lady executes her first contract with the knight underscores its narrative and thematic importance. Both steps in the transaction involve what theorist Walter Beale would call “instructive performative rhetoric,” which serves “to interpret and reinforce the value, importance, or true significance of a thing” (146). Richard Firth Green notes the lady's formality in demanding that the knight “plight his troth 'heere in myn hand'” (1009), which obliges him to carry out a “ritual confirmation” of his promise involving the customary practice of “shaking or slapping [...] hands” (Green 13). The loathly lady also creates an aura of ceremony around her disclosure of the riddle's answer, by whispering it as “a pistel in his ere.” In its intimacy, this gesture prefigures her marriage to the knight and binds them together with shared knowledge that will not be disclosed to the reader or to the court for another sixteen lines (1021-1022, 1038).[142] Like the knight's “ritual confirmation” of his troth, the lady's whispering has a symbolic or performative dimension. We know there is no risk of someone overhearing them: the “ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo,” whose dancing first lured the knight to green, have all “Vannyshed,” leaving behind “No creature […] that bar lyf” except the loathly lady and the knight himself (991-998). In the absence of other people, the hag's performance of secrecy thus serves to formalize her disclosure of the “pistel” and to underscore that she is fulfilling her half of their first contract. The knight's hasty pledge to fulfill *his* end of this contract—"'Have heer my trouthe,' quod the knyght, 'I grante'" (1009-1013)—sets in motion a succession of further agreements that structure the rest of the tale: the marriage contract that the lady demands as payment for her life-saving wisdom, and the couple's agreement that the lady should exercise "maistrie" in their married life (1070-1072, 1230-1238).

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[142] The hag's whispering also echoes the scene in which Midas’ wife traitorously whispers the king's “conseil” or secret into the mire (969-980). The rhyming image of whispered counsel is comically foreboding for the knight's sexual fate but nonetheless suggests a marital dynamic between the knight and the loathly lady.

The strategic importance of contracts to the loathly lady's counsel is in keeping with the emphasis on contracts in *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Clerk's Tale*. The old hag's particular brand of contractualism echoes the Wife of Bath's distinct and unconventional understanding of marriage: like Alison's multiple marriages, the loathly lady's multiple contracts have a temporary quality, insofar as each contract is "refreshed" by another until the end of the tale. Whereas Griselda and Prudence invoke the concept of marriage or a marriage contract in order to protect a constant set of terms or values, the loathly lady devises multiple contracts to deconstruct, and eventually reconstruct, the terms of her initial relationship to the knight.

The Wife of Bath's Tale depicts at least three kinds of multiplicity that contracts can foster. First, the loathly lady demonstrates how one contract can multiply *itself*, to amplify the destabilizing effects of its original terms. In its strategic vagueness, the hag's demand for an unspecified "next thing" makes her marriage contract possible, and her marriage contract makes possible the knight's explicit surrender to her "governance" in marriage. Thus the loathly lady designs her initial contract to "wax and multiply," so that it begets other contracts of increasing specificity, usefulness, and iconoclastic power. As a result, the generative power of contracts becomes a major engine of the narrative and a source of the tale's most subversive themes.

Second, the class disparity between the hag and the other major players in the tale indicates that contracts can facilitate live interaction between people from multiple backgrounds. The loathly lady's command of contracts opens up channels of access not only to the nobleman she seeks to reform but also to the queen and the women at court who are empowered to support her efforts. The hag's in-person collaboration with Guinevere's court, carried out in the knight's presence, represents a convergence of disparate social classes brought together by contracts (911-912, 1009-1013).

Third, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* shows how diverse contractual agreements can reinforce each other's terms and effects over time. The queen's demand for surety and the hag's extraction of a rash promise have very different effects on the knight: Guinevere's quest is restorative in its broad outline, saving the knight's “lyf,” protecting his body or “nekke-boon,” and redeeming his public image by allowing him to show he is “worthy” of pardon (903, 906, 1023-1045); by contrast, the knight's “biheste” to the loathly lady spawns a socially and economically disadvantageous marriage contract that dismantles his self-command and social identity—so much so that, like an “owle,” he goes into hiding after the wedding (1059, 1073-1082). But the compatibility between the hag's mission and the mission of the queen's court allows both parties to operate symbiotically in a common effort to reform the knight. By extracting a rash promise, the loathly lady not only enables the knight to fulfill his contract with the queen but also compounds the vulnerability and subordination that the queen designed her contract to bring out in him. The hag's first contract initiates a period during which the knight is in thrall to two female authorities at once (1013-1045); it also perpetuates the power structure inherent in the court's temporary relation to the knight well after he is released.

In addition to her shrewd use of contracts, the loathly lady's command of litigious rhetoric further empowers her to engage the queen and her court as collaborators. Even after the knight clears himself by answering the queen's riddle, the hag invokes the authority of her "sovereign lady queene" for support in holding the knight to his vow:

> Er that youre court departe, do me right.
> I taughte this answere unto the knyght;
> For which he plighte me his trouthe there,
> The firste thyng that I wolde hym requere
> He wolde it do, if it lay in his myghte.
> Before the court thanne preye I thee, sir knyght,
> […] that thou me take unto thy wyf,
> For wel thou woost that I have kept thy lyf.
> If I seye fals, sey nay, upon thy fey! (1048-1057)

The lady's two invocations of the court itself bookend her explanation of the initial contract with the knight and reflect her emphasis on the legal dimension of their agreement. Although her plea has the abrupt tenor of a comic outburst, Joseph Allan Hornsby notes that it conforms to legal practice. In offering the knight a chance to refute any "fals" allegations, the hag is reminding him of his right to "deny [the vow] word for word and wage his law, that is, swear to the truth of his counterassertions" (88). The knight responds by begging the old hag to "chees a newe requeste," but he nonetheless acknowledges the terms of his initial contract —"I woot right wel that swich was my biheste"—and resists the temptation to fabricate "counterassertions" (1059-1060). Thus, right after the knight demonstrates a new accountability to royal leadership, the loathly lady's legal performance enables him to demonstrate a new respect for the law.

The destabilizing effects of the hag's contracts and legal performance extend beyond the knight himself. By marrying the knight, she alters his public status and identity in a way that threatens to affect the status of people in his social, economic, and kinship networks. The knight experiences his marriage contract not only as his own "dampnacioun" but also as the undoing of his whole "nacioun" (1067-1069). Benson glosses "nacioun" as "family," but the term could also refer to the knight's social class—or, given the emphatically British setting of this Arthurian tale, to his race or his country (*MED*). The knight's exclamation that he and his "nacioun" are damned forever demonstrates the scope of the loathly lady's destabilizing contracts, rhetoric, and marriage politics.

In response to the knight's dismay, the loathly lady delivers a homily on "gentilesse" that dismantles his classist logic and shores up her moral and epistemological status in the tale. The sermon synthesizes literary, religious, experiential, and even scientific teachings into a coherent argument that is, compared to the rest of her performance, uncharacteristically lucid in its logic and rhetorical aim. The lady contends that the knight should not "repreve" her "poverte" (1205-1206), because true nobility derives from Christian virtue, not material wealth: "Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentillesse, / Nat of oure eldres for hire old richesse" (1117-1118).

Her assertion that all human virtues come “fro God allone” distinguishes the hag as the figure most clearly aligned with Christianity and sound moral education in both of Alison's texts (1162).

To this end, the loathly lady's lecture exhibits the transparency, directness, citationality, and Christian orthodoxy of traditional good counsel. Although many scholars have oversimplified the hag's role in the tale by stressing the event of her shape-shifting, others have perceptively emphasized the striking rhetorical orthodoxy of her sermon.[143] Elizabeth Passmore links women's counsel in English and Irish loathly-lady narratives to the mirrors-for-princes genre, and A. C. Spearing remarks that “The Loathly Lady's lecture makes *The Wife of Bath's Tale* one of Chaucer's most rhetorically directed poems” (Passmore 3, Spearing 246). Comparing the lecture to Prudence's speeches in *The Tale of Melibee*, which are to some extent similar in style and content, reveals the masterful conventionality of the lady's performance during this extended moment in the tale. Like Prudence, the loathly lady deals with her husband's resistance by successfully integrating a case for her own credibility into broader arguments about virtue. Just as Prudence defends her wisdom and intentions by deconstructing Melibee's distrust of women, the old hag defends her authority by mounting a theologically expert critique of the knight's contempt for her low birth (*Mel* 1055-1111). More generally, her sermon bears out that she is capable of rational, ethically consistent counsel, and that she is versed in multiple wisdom traditions. The loathly lady demonstrates an impressive breadth of knowledge when she invokes the classical authorities Seneca and Valerius, the Christian Boethius, and the poets Dante and Juvenal (1125-1132, 1165-1170, 1183-1184, 1191-1194), in addition to the experiential wisdom of her own social observations (1150-1158, 1207-1212). Ultimately, the speech illuminates a synchronicity between the eclectic citationality of traditional “counsel poems” and the loathly lady's subversive interest in diverse discourses (Steiner 3).

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[143] Interpretations of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* that focus on the loathly lady's shape-shifting tend to overlook the clerkly themes and arguments of her sermon and to obscure her role as a counselor. Angela Jane Weisel reads the lady as a purveyor of “a natural magic, tied to generation and the green mede,” in contradistinction to “The clerk's magic, or 'science,'” which prioritizes “control over nature” (*Conquering the Reign of Femeny* [Rochester, New York: D. S. Brewer, 1995], 112; see also Lindeboom 208). Susan P. Starke cites Alison's loathly lady to argue that “In medieval romance, […] the recurrent figure of the shape-shifter,” with “her alliance [to] the unpredictable and 'uncanny' operations of the mysterious natural world,” embodies “Women's uncertain epistemological status” (*The Heronies of English Pastoral Romance* [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007], 30). Manuel Aguirre claims that Chaucer's old hag partakes in a tradition wherein a shape-shifting woman represents “Earth, the cycle of the seasons, the process of life and death” and plays a symbolic rather than a “moral” role (“The Roots of the Symbolic Role of Woman in Gothic Literature,” *Exhibited by Candlelight*, eds. Valeria Tinkler-Villani and Peter Davidson, with Jane Stevenson [Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996], 62). Aguirre and Starke are comparativists arguments that both reflect and reinforce a generalized perception of women in medieval English literature “as fickle, as variable, as subject to irrational moods and changes” (Aguirre 62). All five readings of the old hag's performance ignore crucial arguments in her lengthy monologue on nobility, poverty, and age (*WBT* 1109-1212), as well as the rhetorical techniques and Christian epistemology that inhere in this speech.

In its Christian orthodoxy and conventional argumentation, the sermon serves to authenticate the crone's intellectual and theological credentials and to authenticate the diverse and unconventional strategies that characterize the rest of her counsel. To seal the knight's command of her teachings, the lady completes her performance with three such unorthodox strategies: a test, another contract, and an act of shape-shifting. All three moves are rhetorically destabilizing, insofar as each comes as a surprise; they are also socially destabilizing, insofar as each move further alienates the knight from his initial assumptions about class and gender. But this final sequence in the narrative is thematically “stabilizing,” at least temporarily, insofar as it helps the knight and the reader to synthesize an argument from the tale's diverse themes, concerns, and implications.

The test is designed to determine whether the knight has internalized both the answer to the queen's riddle, which is that *women desire to be sovereign*, and the old hag's sermon, which argues for *honoring the virtuous over the rich*. After the loathly lady demonstrates her own exceeding wisdom and virtue in her homily, she offers the knight a choice between having her “foul and old” and “trew [and] humble,” or “yong and fair” but unfaithful (1219-1235). The knight successfully synthesizes an answer that *honors the hag's superior virtue* precisely by *granting her the sovereignty she desires*: “I put me in youre wise governance; / Cheseth youreself which may be moost pleasance / And moost honour to yow and me also.”[144] The knight's response to the hag's bedroom sermon reflects his intellectual progress by demonstrating his ability to synthesize diverse ideas. His response provides a model of interpretation for the reader, showing how multiple arguments—the hag's seemingly unrelated claims about women's desires on the one hand and the social construction of class on the other—might be reconciled and applied in the service of social reform.

The remainder of the tale galvanizes the loathly lady's status as paragon of multiplicity, subversive contractualism, and female power. After the knight passes his test, his wife shifts back to a contractual mode, pressing him to formalize his commitment to her sovereignty: “Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie […] / Syn I my chese and governe as me lest?,” she asks; “Yes, certes, wyf,” says the knight, ‘I hold it best'" (1237-1238). In return for this vow, the lady pledges her own "trouthe," on pain of her "lyf," to satisfy his "delit" and to obey him "in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng" (1217, 1255-1266). To fulfill this contract, she uses her magic to transcend the grim binary opposition between fidelity and youthful beauty by morphing herself to embody both traits, "This is to seyn, [...] bothe fair and good." The lady's shape-shifting adds a new degree of mutuality to her third contract with the knight at the same time that it demonstrates her superior prowess: earlier in the tale, the knight complains that his misery in marriage "wol nat been amended nevere mo," and the lady accepts this grievance as a challenge: "I koude amend al this, / If that me liste" (1098-1102, 1105-1108). By transforming herself, she simultaneously makes good on this boastful claim and disproves the misogynistic stereotype that claims multiple virtues cannot reside in the same woman.

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[144] That the lessons of both the riddle and the lecture inhere in the knight's answer, and that he perceives his wife's “honour” as correlational to his own, suggest that the knight has sincerely assimilated the wifely counsel of both the queen and the hag.

In light of the knight's crime at the beginning of the tale, the loathly lady's pledge of devotion may strike readers as distasteful or even dangerous. But it is nonetheless compatible with the logic of the tale and with the imperative of rehabilitation that tends to structure narratives of wifely counsel. The (formerly) loathly lady's wifely generosity and exemplarity are predicated on the knight's vow to let her be sovereign; Alison stresses that her devotion is an autonomous choice, and the exceeding pride the lady takes in her ability to satisfy the abject knight implies that she maintains a will that is separate from his. Furthermore, details in the tale imply that her "obedience" is primarily nominal: it is easy to obey your husband's wishes after he has sworn to make you master of the house. The knight himself suggests that the loathly lady knows what's good for him and that he has come to understand their best interests as equivalent: “For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me” (1232-1233, 1235). Immediately after the knight’s felicitous transformation, Alison includes “meeknes” in her summing up of what makes an ideal husband, implying that the knight himself has become a meek man:

> And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende
> In parfit joye; and Jhesu Crist us sende
> Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
> And grace t’overbyde hem that we wedde;
> And eek I praye Jesu shorte hir lyves
> That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;
> And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
> Go send hem soone verray pestilence! (1257-1261)

That there is no line break or sentence break between the ending of the knight’s story (“In parfit joye”) and the list of husbandly virtues in Alison's prayer suggests that the knight now possesses these virtues. “Meekness” would imply that the knight is more obedient than his wife, who maintains her boastful, assertive style even as she swears her devotion. Although the rapist’s “parfit joye” in marriage might, at first glance, appear as a concession to patriarchal mores, Alison’s prayer in the very same sentence, in which she pleads for Jesus to shorten married men’s lives, deeply and hilariously undercuts the sentimentality of the tale’s resolution. It also ends the tale on a destabilizing note in keeping with *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, reminding us that no marriage is eternal, and that an uncooperative husband might expire at any moment.

The lady's boastful profession at the end of the tale exemplifies a vital, dynamic, public-minded manner of wifely devotion that reflects Alison's values. When the lady identifies herself among an international roster of powerful women, she concludes *The Wife of Bath's Tale* with an image of multiplicity and female power, as well as the suggestion of mobility. In her words of assurance to the knight, the lady promises to style herself "as fair to seene / As any lady, emperice, or queene, / That is bitwixe the est and eke the west." Her confident, expansive language recalls Alison's ending to the *The Wife of Bath's Prologue,* as well as the loathly lady's initial act of counsel to the knight in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*:

> God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde
> As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,
> And also trewe, and so was he to me. (*WBP* 823-825)
>
> . . . .
>
> Lat se which is the proudeste of hem alle
> That wereth on a coverchief or a calle
> That dar seye nay of that I shal thee teche. (*WBT* 1014-1022)

All three of the above passages either describe or exemplify a dynamic of devotion, collaboration, or counsel among spouses. But perhaps more important, each reflects the speaker's self-identification with a diverse range of other women. (The two passages that conclude Alison's prologue and tale suggest geographical diversity in particular, by evoking images of travel "from Denmark unto Ynde" and "bitwixe the est and eke the west.") The speaker in each of these passages—Alison narrating her own life (*WBP*), Alison narrating the hag's life *(WBT*), and the hag professing her intellectual prowess

(*WBT*)—uses a deceptively boastful tone to stress her parity or agreement with the other women and wives she imagines. In turn, she espouses a collaborative model of wifehood, whereby diverse women mobilize across social and geographic lines to share in each other's intellectual accomplishments.

CONCLUSION

Reading the *The Tale of Melibee*, *The Clerk's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* with special attention to plot and character reveals in each of these texts a bold narrative of male transformation through wifely counsel. I hope my analysis of Dame Prudence, Griselda, the Wife of Bath, Arthur's Queen, and the loathly lady as counselor-figures will inspire further research into the rhetorical and political accomplishments of influential women in *The Canterbury Tales* and other late medieval texts.

The narratives of wifely counsel that I have studied call for new ways of thinking about counsel and about marriage in the *Tales*. An expanded definition of political counsel that incorporates female voices and domestic settings can help open up the circumscribed conversation on Ricardian counsel to more diverse depictions of political influence. Likewise, recognizing narratives of wifely counsel across a wide range of genres can help complicate our understanding of marriage in the *Tales*, which portray domestic life as a site of collaboration and reform more often than the current scholarship would suggest.

I want to conclude by pointing out a few thematic commonalities among my source texts and some of the critical questions that these patterns raise:

The unequal benefits of marriage

The tales in my study consistently celebrate marriage as a venue for educating and reforming husbands. The men in these texts tend to emerge from their wives' tutelege as more respectful, accountable, and cooperative husbands or leaders, and the changes they undergo bode well for the insitutions they represent. At the same time, the tales reflect considerable anxiety about the challenges, disadvantages, and even abuses that women can face in marriage. In *The Clerk's Tale*, Griselda is a sacrificial figure: she subjects herself to Walter's cruelty as a strategy for effecting incremental changes in his attitude towards the polity. Despite the benefits of her counsel, the Clerk treats her suffering in marriage as a huge moral problem. In *The Tale of Melibee*, one cannot help but notice the unequal division of labor in Prudence's marriage. Melibee reaps all the benefits of Prudence's intelligence and patience, but what does Prudence reap from Melibee? What does it mean for her to suffer a physical assault while her husband plays in the fields, and then to have to coach *him* through the aftermath of that assault? *The Wife of Bath's Tale* also portrays a woman as a victim of assault and provokes us to wonder if the social benefits of reforming a rapist through marriage outweigh the injustice of his happy fate and the risks he might pose to his wife.

Christianity and wifely counsel

Although I have more or less bracketed issues of religion and theology in this dissertation, the principal texts in my study are emphatically Christian. Prudence in *The Tale of Melibee* relies heavily on biblical wisdom to construct her arguments against vengeance-taking; *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* are deeply Christian in their critiques of classism; and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* shows Alison to be enthusiastically invested in Christian literature and practice.

In some ways, the relationship between Christianity and wifely counsel in these tales is exciting. The wife-counselors I have studied challenge patriarchal biases in Christian institutions by espousing and embodying more inclusive ideas about Christan wisdom and viritue. But the centrality of religion in these texts also raises questions. Is good wifely counsel possible outside of Christian marriage practices? Must women be Christian in order to be good counselors in the *Tales*? What does the Man of Law's damning yet complex portrait of a Muslim woman's counsel say about the relationship between gender, religion, authority, and wisdom?

Male transformation as a romance trope

In her book *Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance*, Geraldine Barnes argues that romances situate a hero within a predominately masculine network of counselors: "The hero of Middle English romance operates within clearly defined spheres of counselling resources: parental, feudal, and divine," writes Barnes; "Throughout his life he is bonded by blood, love, and loyalty to a network of friends, family, and lord, who provide him with counsel, strategy, and when possible, armed support" (15). Although "family" might include wives, women in the romances Barnes studies are often "ignored altogether," "blamed by the heroes themselves for instances of knightly misconduct, […] or reduced to a subordinate role" (16). The tales in my study, by contrast, portray women and wives as the most effective "counselling resources” available, both to young men and to established patriarchs. Far from blaming women for men's misconduct, the male “heroes” of my counsel narratives eventually come to appreciate their wives' superior intelligence.

If, as these tales suggest, wifely counsel is the engine behind male transformation, might we read wifely counsel plots as behind-the-scenes romances? To what extent do these narratives participate in and innovate on the romance genre? What other formal and generic qualities do Chacuer’s diverse tales of wifely counsel have in common? The structural consistency of the tales in my study, all of which narrate a man’s ethical transformation and subsequent acknowledgement of his wife’s wisdom and virtue, suggests that we can read Chaucher’s tales of wifely counsel as partaking in a genre all their own.

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