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Disrupting 'Male' Narratives:  
Subversive Female Characters in the Works of Chaucer

by

Catherine Anne Radimer

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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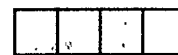
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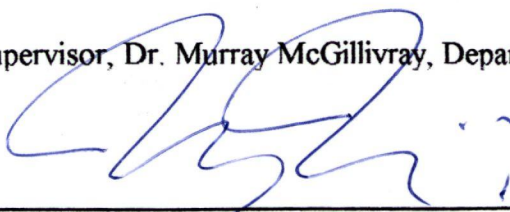
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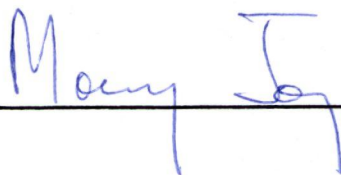
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## ABSTRACT

The following thesis is an examination of four Chaucerian works in which female characters are the locus of narrative disruption. It argues that the female body in the male-authored text cannot wholly be contained by the 'male' structures that inform the text. The Wife of Bath, Alisoun of the *Miller's Tale*, Griselda, and Criseyde all present challenges to the 'male' narratives in which they operate as gendered subjects. They cause a re-examination of the constructions of womanhood imposed on them by their male narrators and fellow characters by disrupting the male expectations and desires that objectify and commodify women.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Introduction

Examining the roles of female characters in the works of Chaucer raises many theoretical issues and problems relating to gender, ideology, and the extent of the author's control over a text. Given the number and centrality of female characters in his works and the insights feminisms can provide into how women operate inside a male-authored text, it is surprising how many established feminist critics of Chaucer's *writing* reveal themselves to be critics of *Chaucer* himself: rather than examining the effects the female characters have within his texts, these critics concentrate on Chaucer and his authorial position. Carolyn Dinshaw, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, and Jill Mann are all prominent feminist medievalists who focus on aspects of Chaucer's textual politics and intentions and assume a fairly unified authorial control that governs the gender power structures within his works. Whether ascribing to Chaucer "pro-feminist" or "antifeminist" sympathies and motivations, these critics assume the presence of an authorial control *over* the text that does not account for the subversions and contradictions *within* the text. These subversions and contradictions can affect the reader and encourage readings that do not necessarily conform to the ideological positions either of the author or of his society, as far as these positions can be determined. My project is to examine the limits of narrative control in the text and to explore how female characters within the male-authored/narrated framework of Chaucer's works challenge this control and subvert the male structures within which they operate. This investigation does not involve merely imposing a feminist reading upon a resistant text, although the positioning of the reader is naturally influential; it relies instead on locating the "trouble spots" in the various texts where female characters, through speech, action, gendered physicality, and mimesis, disrupt the unity of the male narrative and male expectations within the text.

When the female body is incorporated into the male-authored text it occupies a position subordinate to the 'male' economy that informs the text and it therefore becomes subject to male textual control and interpretation. Given the restrictiveness of her position in the text, it is difficult to imagine any possibility of the female character disrupting or subverting the 'male' structures that govern her 'existence.' The ideologies of the text within which the female character operates are informed by the ideologies of the male author and his society and the characters are therefore constructed according to male desire and expectation. In this way, the female character's position within the male-authored text corresponds closely with women's positions in a patriarchal society. The ideological framework that governs women's lives is hostile to the potentially disruptive difference that women represent and contains that difference by defining it according to a male norm. Women are kept in marginalized positions that restrict their ability to assert themselves as independent subjects in opposition to the accepted structures of male society. Similarly, the female character is marginalized by her position within the male-authored text that also constructs her according to a male norm.

However, as many postcolonial, postmodern, and feminist critics have noted, the oppressed or marginalized position can also be one of strength and resistance which is capable of challenging the power structures upheld by those in dominant positions.<sup>1</sup> Carole Anne Taylor comments extensively on how "those inhabiting marginalized positions necessarily work through dominant narratives that objectify them" (64) and outlines strategies for using these positions to resist the impositions of "dominant narratives" on the construction of marginalized subjectivities. From the 'margin,' it is possible to challenge or question the dominance of these narratives. The individual

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Donna Haraway: "The standpoints of the subjugated are not 'innocent' positions. On the contrary, they are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge....'Subjugated' standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world" (584).

subject's challenge to dominant structures or narratives is also a challenge to the dominant ideology of the subject's society and, as such, is in many ways contained within that ideology. This containment leads to the problem that Anthony Appiah observes regarding the possibilities for subversion within ideology: "If subversion is the always necessarily contained product of power, then here, indeed, is a prison house from which there is no escape ... once an agent's socio-cultural location is fixed, his or her capacities for and in agency are fixed also" (66-67). Paul Smith makes a similar point in his critique of Louis Althusser:

...an insistence on a 'double reality' thesis has led to a view of ideology--that which hides the more 'truthful' reality--as always and necessarily a negative force, and one which is never *enabling* for the human being who inhabits ideologically determined social spaces. If ideology is seen in this way and if the 'subject' in history is always to be seen as simply sub-jected to social formations, there can be no room for a genuine theory of resistance or, indeed, for any impulse to social change on the part of the subject/individual. (12)

If ideology is this sort of negative and monolithic social force, then an individual's actions within that ideology must be inconsequential. The individual, whether in opposition to or agreement with the structures and values of this monolithic ideology, is absorbed and contained by ideology in a way that precludes independent thought or action.

The concept of a monolithic ideology assumes that there are no gaps or limits to the control ideology has over our lives but the presence of such varied ideologies in contemporary society as Marxism, feminism, capitalism, and fascism suggests that a dominant ideology is unlikely to be monolithic or absolute. Instead, the dominant ideology of a society is composed of a multiplicity of overlapping ideologies, each of which, Paul Smith argues, can be a site of resistance against the "overarching ruling ideology" (15):

...it should be recognized that the human agent is inextricably bound up in the processes of ideology to the extent that *any* subject-position can be seen as something like a reaction to an ideologically produced message. So, even when he/she 'chooses' to act 'within' the parameters of a particular ideology, the human agent is still the product of ideology-in-general, and thus the promotion of calculation is still required to take into account the modalities of subject-positioning. Thence it becomes necessary to propose that 'choice' or conscious calculation is possible only as the by-product of the human agent's negotiations among and between particular subject positions. Resistance is indeed produced by and within the ideological. (40)

The individual's subject positions within particular ideologies are the site(s) of that individual's challenges or resistance to an overarching ideology. Women, therefore, can position themselves against the structures and values of patriarchy by identifying subject positions within resistant ideologies that are, in turn, located within but not engulfed by the overarching ideology of patriarchy. The female subject can in this way challenge ideology without making the impossible leap outside ideology.

The multiplicity of ideology makes it possible for individuals to challenge aspects of ideologies from particular subject positions and highlights the necessity of the perspectival position to the act of resistance. The challenge to ideology can be made only from a situated position within ideology which must therefore be a position of partiality. Situating oneself involves acknowledging the perspectival nature of one's views. Donna Haraway argues for the strength of the perspectival position because it lacks the self-delusive and complacent attitude of the supposedly objective view: "Knowledge from the point of view of the unmarked is truly fantastic, distorted, and irrational....Positioning is, therefore, the key practice in grounding knowledge" (587). The situated subject is able to recognize many of the limitations of his/her position and, from this site of relative self-

awareness, to question these limitations and the overarching ideology that defines the ways in which the position is limited.<sup>2</sup>

An analogy can be made between these ideologies within which a social agent must operate and the ideologies of the author within which the character must operate. The control of the author over his/her creation is informed by the ideologies of his/her society and cannot be assumed to be monolithic because these ideologies themselves are not monolithic. Smith recognizes that we cannot make any claims for a unified social ideology and argues that "there seems to be no reason to suppose that there exists a correspondingly unified subjectivity" (18). Haraway states this in a less apologetic form: "Subjectivity is multidimensional ... [t]he knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly" (586). The overall construction of the subject, like the "overarching ruling ideology," is made up of many subject positions. The variousness of the author's subjectivity or ideological position thus leaves room for subversive actions, speech, or positionings on the part of his/her characters in the same way that multiple ideologies do for the human agent. Characters and human subjects can take advantage of the partialities in which they exist and can challenge ideology from a situated position. Thus both the social individual and the created character, while existing as products of ideology, have the potential for resistant or subversive actions within ideology.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>I am not claiming that the situated position of women is in any way privileged over other situated positions, merely that the situated position is one of strength.

<sup>3</sup>In pointing out the situatedness of characters I am not ascribing intentionality to them. Although the attribution of intention to characters in critical interactions with texts is common, I am arguing instead that characters occupy situated positions within texts. In the case of the character situated as female in a male-authored text, she does not occupy the same gender position as her author and is situated in opposition to the dominant ideologies that inform the text. From this position it is possible for her to undermine those ideologies.

A literary character might not seem to be capable of this type of subjectivity and resistance since the character is subject to authorial control, but authorial control over a text and its significance is not absolute. The fact that critics can detect patterns of imagery and symbolism in a work not necessarily 'intended' by its author and that readers can construct opposing interpretations of particular scenes in a work of literature suggests that the author's control over his or her work is limited. The author provides a basic plan to the work which allows for a certain amount of flexibility of interpretation within it. The values and ideas of an author and his or her social system actually permeate a text in ways comparable to the ways that ideologies permeate a society. The author's own ideological background provides the text with an ideological structure that informs the actions and speech of his or her characters but does not control them.

This is especially true in the case of the female character in the male-authored text. Within the male narrative structure, the female character is *situated* as female and for this reason can be, in part, outside the male narrative control. As E. Jane Burns points out: "Fictive and constructed as the female protagonist's body is, we read that body as anatomically female, interpreting her voice and words in relation to a constellation of cultural codes that bear on female, not male anatomy" (17). As a result of the female character's gendered significance, she occupies a position in the text that does not correspond with that of her author or conform to the over-arching ideology that informs her construction. Her gendered body is the location of an uncontrolled difference in the text that cannot be defined or contained by the male structures that surround it. Women's bodies, both fictional and real, operate in opposition to a male economy because they cannot be adequately defined by that economy. They disrupt 'male' narratives by their position, as Catherine Clément describes it, "between symbolic systems" (7). By not

fitting into a masculine "symbolic order," women become threats to male power. Hélène Cixous characterizes this threat in terms of an explosion:

A woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor--once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction--will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language. (256)

The female body threatens the unity of male structures and the female character, situated by her gender within the text, poses the same threat to male narratives.<sup>4</sup>

This is not to say that the disruptive potential of women in a male-authored text is a strictly biological one or that women are 'essentially' subversive in some way. It is not due to any inherent and universal traits that the female body is threatening to a male economy. In fact, the concept of an "essence" of femininity is not based upon biological similarity but rather it is a product of the construction of femininity or womanhood in a patriarchal culture. Richard A. Shweder comments that

the way individuals perceive, describe, and explain each other's behavior is decisively influenced by received conceptualizations of the person in relationship to the moral-social order and the natural order. ... we conceptualize the person the way we do, not because that is the way the person intrinsically is, not because that is the way we intrinsically are, but because that is the kind of conceptualization of the person that is presupposed by our social order and a requisite for its functioning ... (174)

Female bodies have been constructed in particular ways in patriarchal societies according to this sort of socio-cultural presupposition which insists on reading the female body in terms of male desire and/or expectation. As Burns observes: "The specificity of

<sup>4</sup>While I resist the essentialism that characterizes the theories of Helene Cixous, Catherine Clement, and Luce Irigaray, I find aspects of their work can be adapted to a non-essentialist and more useful reading of women.

femaleness can ... be tied to the body not as a biological entity but as a *biocultural construct*" (5, my emphasis).

Women's bodies are 'signed' differently in a socio-cultural sense or, as Sandra Gilbert argues in her introduction to *The Newly Born Woman*, cultural definitions of the biological body control male readings of women (xiii), but the generality of these definitions operates like an overarching ideology and can therefore be challenged from a situated position within the definition. The construction of women in a male economy involves the imposition of patriarchal concepts of 'femininity' onto women's bodies and, when women fail to conform to these concepts, whether through their actions, speech, or physicality, they disrupt male expectation. Women cannot perform the leap outside this construction of femininity any more than we can escape ideology, but neither are women completely trapped within it. Judith Butler argues that:

If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its 'natural' past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities. (93)

The subversiveness of the female body inside the male economy or narrative occurs when that body causes a re-examination of how and according to what standards it is constructed. By challenging cultural constructions, the female body situates itself in opposition to the restrictiveness of the male economy that decrees how the body is to be read and interpreted.

It is through various methods of challenging textual constructions of womanhood that the four Chaucerian women characters I examine in this thesis, the Wife of Bath, Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*, Griselda, and Criseyde, disrupt and subvert the male narratives that create them. Each of these characters occupies a situated, gendered



position within her text and, from that position, challenges the validity of male readings of the female body. In the first chapter, I look at how the Wife of Bath, while appearing to conform to the antifeminist image of womanhood, turns this image back on its creators through her rhetorical maneuvers. In a manner similar to the subversive technique of mimesis as it is theorized by Luce Irigaray, the Wife embodies the qualities of garrulousness, deceit, and lustfulness for which antifeminist writers condemn women, but she challenges the biases informing those assignments. She uses such 'male' rhetorical techniques as 'glosing' and exposes their limited scope and biases by undermining their authority. Her challenge to male structures of authority revolves around her discussion of the binary of authority and experience in which she shows how the 'male' realm of authority is inseparable from and intermingled with the 'female' realm of experience. By conflating the binary, she undermines the hierarchical power structures of discourses and creates a space in discourse in which female speaking subjects can draw upon both experience and authority in order to define their subject positions inside a male economy.

The second chapter involves an examination of how the physicality of the female body in a male-authored text can disrupt male narrative control. Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale* places her body in opposition to the constructions of womanhood informed by male desire. Rather than conforming to her narrator's and the other male characters' expectations, she forces them to acknowledge female sexuality and the female body as something that does not fit into a male order. Her exposure of her body in the window shatters their expectations and replaces their purified and objectified image of the female body with the unnerving physicality of her actual body. The effect of her body in the male-authored text is to disrupt male narratives and throw the entire tale into chaos. Despite the many layers of male control that attempt to restrict Alisoun and impose a male reading on her body, that control is subverted by her resistance to male inscription. From

her gendered position within the male-authored and narrated text she exposes the limited constructions of femininity favoured in a male economy and questions their validity.

In the third chapter I look at how the apparently passive female character can also pose challenges to the male order in which she operates. Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale* is characterized by her patience and submission to her husband and sovereign Walter. Although the cruel dominance of Walter over Griselda has often been pointed out, the Clerk has most commonly been read as a sympathetic narrator who is horrified by Walter's inhumanity. I argue in this chapter, however, that the Clerk's sympathy operates to limit Griselda to a subordinate role within the text and that her submissive position is also the site of an effective questioning of male constructions of womanhood. Although her impossible patience has led many critics to read her as a model or allegorical figure of wifely obedience, Griselda's language, with its frequent references to the difference between seeming and being, encourages a closer examination of her position in the *Tale* and the possibility of irony in her speeches. Her discourse takes on a doubled significance and, veiled by an outward submissiveness, she criticizes the constructions of womanhood favoured by a male economy.

Criseyde, with her fluctuating 'trouthe' and disruption of the male ideal of the romantic heroine causes confusion both inside and outside the text. My fourth chapter examines how, while characterized by her "instability" or "ambiguity," she resists attempts to define her according to male expectations. Her challenges to male authority and social dominance are disruptive because of this 'instability.' She by turns satisfies and upsets male desire by being both the ideal romance heroine and its antithesis. Through her language and shifting subjectivities and the impossibility of her situation, Criseyde forces an examination of the oppressive structures under which women exist which are ignored in an economy that assumes the primacy of male concerns. She disrupts the validity of the

basic conventions of romance that are informed by that economy by showing how her attempts to conform to the romance ideal cause her to betray it.

These four women are at the core of the disruptive instabilities of the texts in which they operate. Where they fail to conform to masculine expectation, the text begins to fall apart, to "reverberate," as Cixous would say, with the alternate discourses they represent that are uncontainable in a male economy. Their situatedness as gendered subjects within their respective texts forms the basis for their challenges to the constructions of femininity imposed on women by a male social order. From that position, each woman character uses the distinct impositions placed upon her by male characters and narrators in order to subvert male control and question the role of women in a patriarchal society.

## Chapter One

### "Experiencing Authority": The Wife of Bath's Discursive Subversions

The Wife of Bath, as a female teller of tales who asserts herself in a predominantly male entourage, is the obvious place to start a discussion of subversive female characters in the work of Chaucer. Indeed, her *Prologue* and *Tale* have provoked an enormous amount of critical attention for this reason, especially in the last ten years.<sup>1</sup> The strength of the Wife's character and voice attracts many different critical perspectives which range from describing her as "a feminine monstrosity who is the product of the masculine imagination against which she ineffectively and only superficially rebels"<sup>2</sup> to a powerful and subversive woman.<sup>3</sup> Primarily, the recent discussion of the Wife revolves around the debate between experience and authority which she raises in her *Prologue*. In examining her position and effectiveness in the debate, critics either comment on the challenge she poses to the accepted dominance of male authority or explore how her methods of arguing for the validity of experience as an authoritative discourse serve to undermine her own argument. In either case, the critics assume the permanence of the binary of experience and authority and do not question the necessity of privileging one over the other. The Wife's rhetorical maneuvers in both her *Prologue* and *Tale*, however, defy the assumption of the closed nature of the binary structure and question the relationship between the discourses of experience and authority without limiting the discussion to one dependent on a hierarchical order. From her position as a female speaking subject, the Wife disrupts and

<sup>1</sup>There have been close to 100 articles and books dealing with the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* in the last ten years alone--more than on any other of the individual tales in the *Canterbury Tales*.

<sup>2</sup>Elaine Tuttle Hansen, 35.

<sup>3</sup>H. Marshall Leicester actually describes the Wife of Bath as a feminist (157) while Carolyn Dinshaw suggests that the Wife attempts to "reform" patriarchal discourse by "making it accommodate feminine desire" (116).

challenges the orderly, male rhetorical model of the binary through her use of discourse. By upsetting the hierarchy of language, she also causes a disruption in the social order with implications that reverberate both inside and outside the text within which she operates.

The Wife's challenge to social structures and discourse is situated in her use of language from her unprivileged gender position as a woman character in a male-authored text. Her arguments, though contained within this male narrative framework, maintain a gendered significance and can be read against the male expectations and desires that construct her. The Wife enters male discourse as a female speaking subject and causes a re-examination of the structures and assumptions of that discourse. Her voice does not conform to the dominant discourse that privileges the voice of authority over that of experience but rather forces the recognition of an alternative, gendered perspective that does not replace the dominant one but undermines its pre-eminence in language.

Although the Wife's voice and person challenge male discourse and expectation, her effectiveness in that challenge may in many ways be undermined by the exaggerated nature of her character and speech. Her oral flamboyance and lustiness, which are engaging and entertaining to the reader, also work against her by the impressions of thoughtlessness and lack of control they invoke in the reader. David S. Read, for example, dismisses her as a stock figure and an absurdity, commenting that, "[a]long with mothers-in-law, she belongs to a vulgar and perennial fund of anti-feminist jocularly. ... the Wife is the 'Archewyf,' in the guise of comic shrew" (74 - 76). In the Wife's self-mocking role as user and interpreter of 'male' texts, she does litter her discussion with antifeminist representations of women and even describes herself according those representations. She seems to parrot misogynistic attitudes:

For al swich wit is yeven us [women] in oure byrthe;

Deceite, wepyng, spynnyng God hath yive  
To wommen kyndely, whil that they may lyve.

(400 - 402)

Her advice to 'wise wyves' and her treatment of her husbands portray her and all women in precisely the light that Jankyn's book of wicked wives does--as manipulative, deceitful, and demanding.<sup>4</sup> Her behaviour as well as her words are reminiscent of descriptions of women set down by Theophrastus, Jerome, Walter Map and other writers of the antifeminist tradition. The Wife can be read as the embodiment of the qualities described in the antifeminist texts that she attacks and she seems to echo their criticisms of women. Her garrulousness, lustiness, and manipulateness are all typical of antifeminist complaints about women and would seem to undercut any possibility of taking her arguments seriously.<sup>5</sup> In her antifeminist descriptions and revelations, she even seems to betray women to her audience:

We wommen han, if that I shal nat lye,  
In this matere a queynte fantasye:  
Wayte what thyng we may nat lightly have,  
Therafter wol we crie al day and crave.

(515 - 518)

She exposes these 'characteristic' weaknesses of women to her male audience, showing herself to be the same sort of untrustworthy and deceitful woman described by antifeminist

<sup>4</sup>This same "parroting" of misogynist view can be found in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, particularly in the adaptations to the Midas tale and the passages expounding on what wommen "mooste desiren":

A man shal wynne us best with flaterye,  
And with attendance and with bisynesse  
Been we ylymed, bothe moore and lesse.  
And somme seyen that we loven best  
For to be free and do right as us lest,  
And that no man repreve us of oure vice,  
But seye that we be wise and no thyng nyce.

(932 - 38)

<sup>5</sup>Jill Mann claims that, "the more vigorously the Wife asserts herself in opposition to traditional anti-feminism the more she conforms to its stereotyped image of her" (82).

writers. The Wife acts the role of the antifeminist 'woman' and speaks the language of misogyny in a way that might seem to negate her potential as a subversive agent.

Her use of these patriarchal discourses, however, need not completely undermine readings of her as resistant to patriarchal construction. Carolyn Dinshaw argues that the Wife's embodiment of antifeminist stereotypes is

part of her process of mimicry: she not only uncovers what is hidden in the workings of patriarchal ideology but simultaneously appropriates the place of the Other that ideology openly creates; she assumes the place of the feminine (the stereotype) to which patriarchy explicitly relegates her. (118 - 19)

Dinshaw is referring here to the subversive strategy of 'mimesis' as it is theorized by Luce Irigaray. Irigaray explains that

[o]ne must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. ... To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. ... It means to resubmit herself--inasmuch as she is on the side of the 'perceptible,' of 'matter'--to 'ideas,' in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in / by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. (76)

By performing the roles defined for them by men, women can enter male discourse and use those roles to question patriarchal structures. Women have the potential to expose the weaknesses of a male economy by being self-conscious of their use of constructed roles. The Wife's use of the terms and descriptions of antifeminism correspond to the strategies of resistance that Irigaray describes but I am unwilling to argue, as Dinshaw does, that the Wife has the ability to transcend her fictional state. Dinshaw claims that the Wife, "mimics patriarchal discourse ... not in order to 'thwart' it altogether, to subvert it entirely, but to

*reform* it, to keep it in place while making it accommodate feminine desire" (116). Such a statement implies that the Wife is capable of intentions, an idea that is unsupported in Dinshaw's further discussion of the Wife.

Still, Irigaray's theories regarding 'self-conscious' women are applicable to the Wife, although in a less dramatic way. While the Wife's embodiment of antifeminist stereotypes cannot be said to be a *conscious* act of subversion, neither is her embodiment so complete as to preclude any sort of subversiveness completely. Because her exaggerated 'mimicking' of the antifeminist stereotypes about women is coupled with a rhetorical proficiency and an undermining of such traditionally 'male' discourses as glossing, it has the effect of exposing the authoritative assumptions of antifeminism about women as caricatures. Antifeminist discourses and stereotypes emerging from the mouth of a character who also calls attention to the biases and limitations of male conceptions of womanhood (688 - 696) cannot be accepted at face value. The combination of these opposing discourses and the Wife's ability to tackle such complex problems as the debate between authority and experience undermines the validity of the antifeminist constructions of women.

The Wife exposes the fear that lies behind the antifeminist attacks on women. Antifeminist writers' attention to what they see as the negative qualities of garrulousness, lechery, and deceit reveals their discomfort with the idea of a woman who can speak eloquently, articulate and insist on a recognition of her own desires, and who has the intelligence to outwit men.<sup>6</sup> Such a woman poses a threat to their control and forces a re-evaluation of traditional male dominance in society. By placing these qualities in the least favorable light possible, the antifeminist writer attempts to neutralize such a threat. The

<sup>6</sup>R. Howard Bloch notes that: "According to the medieval topos of talkative women, which is no doubt motivated by the desire to silence them, wives are portrayed as perpetual speech with respect to which no position of innocence is possible" (17). He also points to traditional assumptions which link women to deceptiveness in language.



denigration of intelligence, cogent thought, and verbal proficiency in these writings places women who exhibit these characteristics in an unfavorable position and limits their potential to disrupt the male order.

The Wife comments on the effect of antifeminism on the portrayal of women:

For trusteth wel, it is an impossible  
 That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,  
 But if it be of hooly seintes lyves,  
 Ne of noon oother womman never the mo....  
 By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,  
 As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,  
 They wolde han writen of man moore wikkednesse  
 Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.

(688 - 696)

The Wife points to the power of those who control the stories and the ineffectuality of attempting to counter the weight of these written authorities through a simple oral refutation. Her challenge to antifeminist stereotypes does not involve simply contradicting those constructions and reaffirming the hierarchy of the binary of male and female but, instead, is a complex rhetorical examination of authoritative and experiential discourses as they represent masculine and feminine discourses. The Wife, from her gendered position within the text, offers a rereading of the debate between authority and experience in which the gendered hierarchy which the terms signify collapses into interdependence. In doing so, she subverts both the gendered connections of the terms authority and experience and the antifeminist constructions of women which devalue women's voices and bodies.

The Wife's first move is to make her own experience into an authority by phrasing the discourse of experience in authoritative terms. Her treatment of the debate between authority and experience is most commonly understood by critics as an attempt to reverse the traditional privileging of authority in the binary by privileging experience instead.

Critics such as Carolyn Dinshaw, Marshall Leicester, Barrie Ruth Straus, and Barbara Gottfried suggest that the Wife offers her own experiential readings in place of male authoritative ones. Straus argues that the Wife's "voicing [of] women's experience in public not only implicitly challenges the legitimation of patriarchal authority and enunciation. It also subverts phallogentric discourse by exposing, questioning and reworking the boundaries of its terms" (531). But, Gottfried says, this use of experience to oppose patriarchal authority fails as a subversive move due to the Wife's heavy reliance on written authority in her argument: "Even as she attempts a deconstruction of patriarchal literature in an experiential revision of it, the Wife necessarily falls short of the goal of overcoming authority because she can only define herself in relation to that authority" (203). Despite her parody of the act of glossing and her mocking treatment of authority, the Wife still finds it necessary to draw on these same techniques and sources to validate her own position. She acknowledges the privilege of the written text and its power to persuade by according it a privileged position in her own text. Moreover, her own techniques of persuasion mimic those of the clerkly glossator and she is forced to rely on similar methods of extrapolating meanings from texts rather than relying on her own experience to prove her point as she proposes to do.<sup>7</sup> In this reading, the Wife's argument for experience as a valid source of evidence seems to self-destruct as she retreats into authority in order to strengthen her position. Her logic and her argument turn out to be faulty and in the end she merely reaffirms the authority of the written text over experience rather than challenging it.

This reading of the Wife and her rhetoric, however, is limited by its failure to examine experience and authority in other terms than the binary. Instead of merely reinforcing the hierarchical nature of the binary by attempting to reverse it, I would argue

<sup>7</sup>Both Gottfried (209) and Lee Patterson (313) make this point.

that the Wife's shifting discourses actually collapse it. She interrogates the dialectic of experience and authority, and creates a synthesis, showing that experience and authority are not mutually exclusive discourses but, instead, interdependent. The Wife acknowledges the traditional separation and hierarchical relationship of these discourses from the beginning of her *Prologue*: "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage" (1 - 3). She observes that personal experience does not carry the same weight as the authoritative written word for her audience but proposes that this prejudice against the oral, experiential text is unfounded. She does not condemn or dismiss authority entirely, however. As Mary Carruthers comments:

Alisoun does not deny authority when authority is true; she tells us straight off that authority and experience agree on the great lesson 'of wo that is in mariage.' She does insist, however, that authority make itself accountable to the realities of experience. (209)

But the Wife's critique of the binary between authority and experience is not limited to insisting "that authority make itself accountable to the realities of experience." She links experience and authority and makes them interrogate each other. The effect of this linking is to disrupt the traditional privilege that the written or authoritative word holds in patriarchal discourse and thus to subvert the binaries that value authority over experience, the mind over the body, and man over woman.<sup>8</sup> The Wife's rhetorical strategies completely redefine the connections between text and interpreter and how these terms are understood by showing the interplay between experiential and authoritative discourses.

The Wife begins by questioning how the authoritative text is constructed and understood. She recognizes that part of the power afforded the written word is based on

<sup>8</sup>The Wife herself can also be read as a collapsed binary. In her discussion of the astrological make-up of her character (609 - 620), she combines the astrological opposites of Venus and Mars in her personality, collapsing the binary of love and war as well as that of male and female.

scholarship or the use and synthesis of multiple sources to prove a single point. Her answer to this type of authority is to couch her past marital experiences in similar terms:

Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes,  
 And diverse practyk in many sondry werkes  
 Maketh the werkman parfyt sekirly;  
 Of fyve husbondes scoleiying am I.

(44c - 44f)

The Wife speaks of her experience as 'scoleiying,' thus allowing it the same authority that is given to formally written and researched texts. She claims to have gained experience in the area of marriage through a practical education and research which, by the logic of the scholars she imitates, should make her an authority on such matters.

The Wife also textualizes her experiences, giving them the same weight as a written authority. She cites verbal exchanges from her marriages as one would cite a text and presents words she had once spoken to her husbands to her fellow pilgrims, self-consciously quoting herself:

*But herkneth how I sayde:*

'Sire olde kaynard, is this thyn array?  
 Why is my neighebores wyf so gay?  
 She is honoured overal ther she gooth;  
 I sitte at hoom; I have no thrifty clooth. ... '

(234 - 238, my emphasis)

The Wife draws on the 'text' of her past to present proof to her fellow pilgrims of her qualifications to speak knowledgeably about marriage but she does not merely assert herself as an authority to replace male authorities. Her textualization of her own life does not eliminate the experiential elements of her argument by redefining them as authoritative but shows instead, that experience is a text upon which one can draw in order to speak authoritatively.

The Wife also calls the reliability of authority and its position of privilege in 'male' discourse into question by quoting extensively from her husbands and then revealing the falsity of those quotes.<sup>9</sup> This discursive move both appropriates and subverts the authority of the masculine voice. The Wife does not merely insert what she pretends are her husbands' words unchanged into her own text. In her reconstruction of arguments with her husbands, she shows herself as deliberately and insistently telling her husbands what they have said to her. She repeats the phrases 'thou seyst' and 'seistow' like a refrain, reminding her listeners over and over how she is constructing and appropriating her husbands' voices. Jill Mann notes that "thou seyst" and its variations are repeated twenty-five times in approximately 150 lines and argues that the Wife uses the discourse of male attack against women and directs it back at men (78).<sup>10</sup> The Wife does not allow the authority of the male word to overwhelm her arguments or overshadow her own voice but then reveals how she has created the whole scene and that she has constructed voices for her husbands and manipulated them. Peggy Knapp observes that in so doing the Wife is "proving her knowledge of the dominant discourse even as she exercises her distance from and control over it. She is turning the male weapons of learning and authority into instruments of her own use" ("Alisoun of Bathe," 390 - 91). The Wife also calls into question the reliability of the quoted word here and undermines the authority of the scholarly practice of strengthening arguments through the use of other sources and quoted evidence. She shows that there is an instability in indirect evidence, that evidence can be

<sup>9</sup>The Wife says to her audience:

Lordynges, right thus, as ye have understonde,  
Baar I stifly myne olde housbondes on honde  
That thus they seyden in hir dronkenesse;  
And al was fals, but that I took witnesse  
On Janekyn, and on my nece also.

(379 - 383)

<sup>10</sup>Mann claims, however, that the insubstantiality of the Wife's tirade prevents it from being anything other than "performative" (78).

forged, and that authority is capable of misattributing or misquoting its sources. By exposing this instability, the Wife challenges the direct connection between word and meaning and shows that the differentiations between authority and experience and 'truth' and 'fiction' are not at all clear cut.<sup>11</sup>

This same problematizing of authority and experience, truth and fiction occurs in the Wife's parodic use of glossing. Glossing is an authoritative discourse and an exercise of power over text when employed by clerks, but the Wife claims the same ability and right to gloss or to interpret text as clerkly interpreters of the Bible and, in so doing, challenges the privilege of the gloss:

Men may devyne and glosen, up and doun,  
But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye,  
God bad us for to wexe and multiplie;  
That gentil text kan I wel understonde.

(26 - 29)

As well as asserting her understanding of biblical text here, the Wife makes an interesting rhetorical move by connecting 'glosen' with 'devyne' in line 26. By linking the two words, she also links the acts of scholarly interpretation and conjecture that the words signify, placing them on a par with each other. The effect of this connection again is to weaken the authority of the gloss. The Wife suggests in this simple yoking of words that the gloss is quite comparable to conjecture as it too is based upon individual opinion and interpretation. In this way, she exposes the effects of experience and personal perspective on the authority of the gloss. Authority becomes experiential and limited in its scope. It is not a source for indisputable facts but is rather a collection of opinions and speculations.

<sup>11</sup>R. Howard Bloch points out a longstanding connection in antifeminist writings between "the feminine [and] the seductions and ... ruses of speech" (14). The Wife's use of deception in language allies her with antifeminist perceptions of women but at the same time it shows a control over language and meaning that threatens male dominance in discourse.

As the Wife also points out with the question: "Who peyntede the leon" (692), the authority of a text is inextricably connected with the perspective of its author and cannot be read as impartial or objective.<sup>12</sup> She shows an awareness of the multiple perspectives possible in discourse and argues for her right and ability to add her voice to the vast number of clerkly, 'authoritative' interpretations already available. She challenges the notion that glossing is a practise exclusive to formal scholars and embarks on her own crusade of biblical interpretation. The Wife opens up the text to many different interpretations, asserting that her understanding of biblical teachings is just as valid as those explanations given by clerkly glossators. By offering her own knowledge and understanding of God's instructions to Adam and Eve and placing herself in the position of glossator, the Wife disrupts the orderly, closed society of scholars with a woman's voice, claiming equality and validity for her own ability to interpret text. Her own use of the gloss takes the restrictions off of what is traditionally a male discourse. She seizes hold of the power over the text wielded by male scholars and employs it to her own ends.

The Wife does not discredit the written or authoritative word entirely through her actions but exposes its limitations and the problems involved in privileging it above other less accepted or experiential discourses. Neither does she argue that limitations or alternative points of view weaken an argument or a position irreparably. She argues instead for a multiplicity of perspectives rather than allowing herself to be forced into a restricted role in a patriarchal society that privileges a unified (male) position:

I nyl envye no virginitee.  
 Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed,  
 And lat us wyves hoten barly-breed;  
 (135 - 44)

<sup>12</sup>The Wife is referring to a fable in which a lion asks this question of a peasant who shows him a picture of a man killing a lion with an axe.

Her analogy in this passage is the very simple statement that not all bread can be made of the purest wheat and neither can all people be pure and virginal. Although the idea may be somewhat obvious, the implications of the Wife's argument are not. By raising the issue of differences in ability or lifestyle, she shows the constrictiveness of the unified perspective that insists that all people conform to one moral and social viewpoint and offers the alternative of multiple perspectives in its place. Her more inclusive way of approaching arguments allows for multiplicity, a position that challenges the dominant social and religious doctrines of unity.

The clerical exegesis upon which the Wife's method of interpretation is based often takes the form of a translation of a contentious or 'difficult' biblical passage into something that coincides with current religious doctrine. Jerome, for example, in his work *Adversus Jovinianum*, glosses the overt sensuality of the "Song of Songs," interpreting it to mean practically the opposite of the literal meaning of the original passage. The line "Thou has ravished mine heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck" in his hands becomes:

I do not reject marriage: you have a second eye, the left, which I have given to you on account of the weakness of those who cannot see the right. But I am pleased with the right eye of virginity, and if it be blinded the whole body is in darkness.

Jerome transforms the sexuality of the "Song of Songs" into an argument for virginity by extrapolating a contradictory reading from the original text. He rids the "Song" of its focus on pleasure and the body, sanitizing it and turning its physicality into metaphor.



The Wife's method of interpretation, although similar in technique to Jerome's, results in readings with the exact opposite effect to his. Her gloss brings the body back into biblical texts and she imbues the texts she interprets with her own sensuality:<sup>13</sup>

So that the clerkes be nat with me wrothe,  
 I sey this: that they [genitals] maked ben for bothe;  
 That is to seye, for office and for ese  
 Of engendrure, ther we nat God displese.

(125 - 28)

She resists the clerkly sanitization of the Bible and offers a 'physical' interpretation of biblical passages as an alternative. Her readings are grounded in the physical and the practical; she draws attention to the sexuality associated with genitals as well as their 'office' of urination. D. W. Robertson argues that the Wife's attempt at glossing is a deliberate misuse of scripture on Chaucer's part to expose the folly of valuing the bodily experience over the spiritual. He says she is "dominated by the senses or the flesh rather than by the understanding or the spirit .... In short, the wife of Bath is a literary personification of rampant 'femininity' or carnality, and her exegesis is, in consequence rigorously carnal and literal" (321). But Robertson does not acknowledge the humor of the Wife's 'carnal' exegesis or the effect of that humor on the authority of the gloss. The gloss becomes comical when the Wife uses it to create sensual interpretations rather than spiritual ones and the humour of her interpretations works in conjunction with the 'shock value' of her discourse. Over and over she brings the gloss's elevated level of interpretation down to the graphically physical, forcing her audience to focus on the physicality of the body. Her bawdy humour challenges the seriousness and the authority

<sup>13</sup>The Wife does not, as has been argued by Dinshaw (120), present the literal text or even a literal reading of the text but also engages in interpretation and glossing. She imposes a sensual reading on her texts in opposition to the esoteric or spiritual reading favored by the clerks she mocks but this reading cannot be privileged as the "literal" meaning of the texts. The power of the Wife's use of biblical text lies in her challenge to tradition than in her ability to produce a "correct" interpretation.

of the gloss by exposing its insubstantiality as a source of truth. She undercuts the role of the gloss in biblical interpretation by using its techniques to humorous rather than religious effect.

The Wife's humour and her ability to combine such traditionally 'male' discourses as the gloss with a 'feminine' sensuality subvert the hierarchy of the binary of authority and experience. She shows an interdependence between the two discourses that undermines the unexamined privilege of the authoritative voice and introduces the authoritative potential of the experiential voice. Her rhetoric opens authority to the 'female' realm of experience and questions the reliability of the authoritative voice's constructions of femininity. Her language, a mixture of antifeminist stereotypes and authoritative and experiential discourses, collapses the binary of authority and experience and challenges the patriarchal structures that attempt to limit the the female voice to experience. The Wife shows how the female voice can use both experience and authority to expose the weaknesses in a strictly authoritative discourse.

The Wife's challenges to patriarchal dominance in discourse and the representation of women are not limited to her *Prologue* but occur throughout her *Tale* as well. The *Tale* acts as an exemplum of her subversion of the debate between authority and experience that the Wife engages on the theoretical level in her *Prologue*.<sup>14</sup> The story of the young knight and the loathly lady plays with the supposed polarities of authority and experience by subverting the class and gender assumptions that are closely linked with the two terms. The authoritative voice, which the Wife associates in her *Prologue* with clerkly glossators and antifeminist writers, is characterized as a male, educated one while

<sup>14</sup>The *Wife of Bath's Tale* has always been problematic to critics due to the confusion about the attribution of the tale and its seemingly radical departure from the Wife's rhetorical style and the themes that are evident in the *Prologue*. My purpose is not to enter into the attribution debate or to speculate on how what has come to be read as the *Shipman's Tale* relates to the Wife but to show how her *Tale* does in fact carry on the themes of her *Prologue* and is peculiarly fitting to her character and the subversive effects she has within her texts.

the voice of experience is represented by such women as the Wife herself, whose life experience compensates for a lack of education. As the Wife demonstrates rhetorically in her *Prologue*, however, the distinctions between the two discourses are not so clear. She also points out through the *Tale* the instabilities of the experiential and authoritative voices by undermining the accepted associations that inform our reading of them.

In the *Tale*, the young knight's initial position of power, based on his sex and class and his exertion of physical control over the woman he rapes, seems to represent authority, but he soon finds himself placed in a position where he must look to women as sources of authority. The purpose of his quest, as set out by the queen and her court, is to seek out the supposedly authoritative reply to the question of "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (905). At this point, the *Tale* merely works on the level of role-reversal, with the knight taking a feminized position in relation to a female authority, which temporarily takes on the unified position of a male authority as he sets out in search of a single answer to the question of female desire. But this unity quickly dissolves as the knight finds:

...he ne koude arryven in no coost  
 Wher as he myghte fynde in this mateere  
 Two creatures accordyng in-feere.  
 (922 - 24)

The authority he seeks reveals itself to be a multitude, thus undermining its 'authoritative' nature or showing authority to be something diffuse and perspectival.

Even when the knight pronounces the 'correct' answer he learns from the hag, the women's reaction is qualified:

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.  
 (1043 - 45)

They do not pronounce it the 'right' answer; rather, no one asserts that it is 'wrong.' The women deem it a sufficient answer to spare his life but the implications of the many options offered by the various women asked and the reticence of the court to proclaim the knight's answer as absolute suggest that there could have been several acceptable answers. The Wife illustrates the pluralism of authority, showing how what is accepted as authority need not be limited or exclusive and she de-mystifies it and redefines its parameters by placing it in the hands of women of all classes, ages, and backgrounds.

Again, as in the *Prologue*, it is not merely a deflating of the absolute nature of authority that the Wife accomplishes in the *Tale* but the establishing of the interdependence of authority and experience. It is not enough for the knight to simply repeat the hag's 'authoritative' answer to the court; she forces him to learn through experience the validity of the answer. Part of the hag's lesson to the knight is that he must *experience* the relinquishing of mastery as well as acknowledging it to be what women 'mooste desiren.' The voices of authority and experience move from their traditional male / female split at the beginning of the *Tale*, to a reversal of convention in the middle, and finally, at the end, to a blending of the two discourses.<sup>15</sup> The Wife subtly carries the debate between authority and experience through to its logical conclusion, in which opposites intermingle and pluralism is embraced. The hag's experiential voice is accepted as authority by both the court (representing authority) and various women who offered answers (representing experience) while the knight's reliance on authority is tempered by both the experience of his quest and his marriage to the loathly lady.

The endings of both the *Prologue* and *Tale* share this intermingling of authority and experience as well as raising issues of control in gendered relationships that have long been problematic to critics. More traditional readers have tended to see the relationships

<sup>15</sup>I am not suggesting that the end of the tale represents a balance or harmony between male and female but, instead, a deconstruction of the binary of authority and experience.

in the endings as "egalitarian," evidence of "a happy balance of power," "perfection," "mutuality," and an "ultimate success."<sup>16</sup> They see an equal exchange in power between the Wife and Jankyn and their counterparts the hag and the knight. Susan Crane critiques these types of readings, saying, "Sovereignty's redefinitions are all provisional, each cancelling another, because the most Alison can tell us about her ideal of female power is that it is not present. In her present, she can only tear the inert texts that have determined her, and wish for more" (27). She raises questions regarding both the Wife's and the hag's surrender of mastery immediately after receiving it, speculating that the concept of female sovereignty is too diffuse and contradictory in the Wife's argument to be representable and must therefore be relinquished. Peggy Knapp and Carolyn Dinshaw each discuss the endings as an insufficient victory for the Wife by twentieth century standards but revolutionary for its time. Knapp points out that "what Alisoun does in her endings is to image a reconciliation which awards women justification and a degree of self-definition, without injuring men," a move that is at best a compromise and possibly "the most radical gesture available" ("Alisoun of Bathe" 51 and 50). Dinshaw offers a similar observation: "[the Wife's] final call for wifely governance and longevity functions, I think, within the renovated patriarchal scheme, her final repetition of the language of mastery reveals and indicts its power of exclusion. Men's desire is still in control, as her tale shows, but feminine desire must continue to be acknowledged" (129).

There are few critics now who would be willing to argue for the achievement of a perfect balance at the end of either *Prologue* or *Tale*, but the closures that are effected need not be dismissed as completely unsatisfactory for feminist readers of the Wife. Reading the two endings strictly in light of the gender imbalances and the exchange of mastery and submission that occur between husbands and wives leads to a recognition of

<sup>16</sup>In order, these descriptions are from Long (274 and 276), Patterson (313), Mann (92), and Carruthers (215).

the limited or illusory victory achieved by both wives but in the endings, as with the rest of the *Prologue* and *Tale*, the Wife's real challenge to the patriarchal system occurs in the realm of discourse and the relation between experience and authority. While the Wife does not accomplish the radical reversal of gender positions that many critics would appreciate, she does achieve a deconstruction of the binary of experience and authority.

The critical confusion about how to read her endings is an indicator of what the Wife accomplishes. By turns, both men and women demand and submit, confer mastery and relinquish it until all characters are in positions of both dominance and obedience, gendered positions that relate to the gendered discourses of authority and experience. The *Prologue* and *Tale* provide almost identical illustrations of the exchange of the positions of authority and experience that are shared by husbands and wives. In the *Tale*, the hag, representing the Wife's concept of authoritative experience, offers the knight, representing a humbled authority, the chance to create her according to his desires, placing him in a position of power. The knight responds with:

"My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,  
I put me in youre wise governance;  
Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance  
And moost honour to yow and me also.  
I do no fors the wheither of the two,  
For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me."

(1230 - 35)

He shows how his position of authority has been tempered by experience to the point that he recognizes when to bow to the authority of the hag's greater experience. The result of the exchange of power, while it does not indicate a balance of power between the sexes, shows an intermingling of the gendered discourses of authority and experience and poses a challenge to patriarchal assumptions regarding the traditional gender associations of the terms authority and experience. The passing back and forth of mastery between man and

woman questions the presupposition of male dominance, showing that like authority, dominance is not a static or unified state. In the relationships that the Wife presents, both men and women occupy positions that conflate authority and experience in a way that subverts the hierarchical power structure favored by the patriarchy.

The Wife of Bath's most important achievement in her *Prologue* and *Tale*, therefore, is a subversion of unity. By deconstructing the binaries of authority and experience and sovereignty and submission, she invites a plurality of expression that resists restriction. Her rhetorical techniques free her to a certain extent from the 'male' framework within which she operates. Although the Wife is undoubtedly the creation of a male author and, as Arlyn Diamond observes, "a figure compounded of masculine insecurities and female vices as seen by misogynists" (68), she still operates as a resisting woman in a male-authored text. Disguised in a parody of antifeminist portrayals of women, she manages to assert her sexuality and question male dominance in discourse. She proves that the traditional distinctions made between experience and authority only remain strong as long as they go unquestioned. She exposes the interdependence and intermingling of the opposing terms and, in so doing, creates a space for the perspectival and disruptive views of women in 'male' discourse.

## Chapter Two

### Alisoun and the Disruptive Female Body

The Wife of Bath, as a female speaking subject, conducts the most obvious challenge to male social order in the *Canterbury Tales*. She attacks the structures and restrictions of patriarchal society through a *spoken* discourse which is readily identifiable. Her use of language undermines male control of discourse and forces a recognition of a female voice as one capable of subtlety and subversion. The Wife's 'speech act' is very effective in questioning the structures and assumptions embedded in the male-authored text but speech is not the only way in which these things can be and are challenged. Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*, while not a speaking subject in the same way as the Wife, also poses an effective challenge to the layers of male control that surround her. In her case, it is her physical body rather than her speech that resists the attempts to limit her disruptive potential in the text. In many ways, Alisoun's position is more problematic than the Wife's. Unlike the Wife, she operates under the control of her male teller and the other male characters in her tale as well as that of her male author. Her actions must be read through and against the readings that these male tellers and characters attempt to impose upon her. Alisoun must navigate at least three levels of oppression in order to assert her opposition to this control and and disrupt the structures that contain her.

These levels of control serve to keep the significance of Alisoun subordinate, to a certain extent, to issues of male desire. Critical argument surrounding the *Miller's Tale* has, for the most part, glossed over Alisoun as an interesting but essentially marginal character and focused instead on the 'larger' issues of male competition and desire. Even feminist critics like Elaine Tuttle Hansen and Emily Jensen have turned away from



theorizing her as a potentially subversive character, in favor of seeing her as an object of male control without an individual subjectivity. Alisoun's role in the tale is certainly a problematic one, buried as she is under these layers of male authorship and control, but her importance as a disruptive woman in a male text cannot be easily dismissed. In fact, it is possible to show that Alisoun manages to challenge or pose a threat to male authority both inside and outside the tale. Her actions, despite being controlled and restricted by male characters and authors, draw attention to and question the dominant ideologies that inform the tale, especially those surrounding gender. By disrupting male control and male assumptions about sexuality, Alisoun successfully asserts herself as an agent in the *Miller's Tale*.

In order to read Alisoun as a subversive force in her tale we must recognize that she occupies a gendered position in the tale that does not coincide with that of her author(s) and therefore has the potential to be subversive in ways that are not necessarily controlled by these author(s). As I have argued in my introduction, the control of the author is necessarily limited in scope or, to use Donna Haraway's term, perspectival, and cannot completely govern the actions or significance of his or her characters. This limitation on the author's control leaves room for characters to pose challenges to 'authority' and to work against, in this case, the gender assumptions encoded in the text. Although Alisoun is the product of male construction, she is not entirely contained within that construction. In fact, she translates her male constructedness through a body that is read as female in order to question and subvert the ideology of her own construction. Her body is signed as anatomically female within the *Tale* and cannot be contained by a 'male' textuality.<sup>1</sup> Alisoun's male author(s) cannot 'ungender' her body to the extent that it loses

<sup>1</sup>E. Jane Burns uses the example of Mae West as a woman who is constructed by male desire and expectation but, at the same time, resists that construction. She describes West as a 'textualized woman' who speaks "simultaneously in her own voice and in the dominant voice that culture imposes on her speech" (xvi). This simultaneous act reinterprets culturally imposed constructions through the female

its gendered significance and it therefore remains in the tale as a significant and potentially disruptive female force.

To a certain extent, Kara Donaldson's article "Alisoun's Language: Body, Text and Glossing in Chaucer's 'The Miller's Tale'" relies on similar theories of women's bodies as sites for textual dissent and resistance in order to argue for Alisoun's subversive potential. Donaldson combines arguments from Bakhtin and Cixous in her examination of levels of discourse and their disruption in the *Miller's Tale*. She reads the tale as a "confrontation between the sanctioned language of the courtly love tradition and the voices of those it attempts to silence within the structure of a humorous and bawdy fabliau" (139). The woman's body in particular becomes the locus of this confrontation because the body is constructed as a text upon which language, defined as an instrument of male control, is inscribed:

The Miller's Alisoun, in the last textual layer as a character in a tale within the *Tales*, is not given a voice to protest the several layers of patriarchal interpretation being performed upon her. Furthermore, John, Nicholas and Absolon reduce Alisoun to the 'status' of a text, each glossing her body according to his own need, desires and interpretive strategies. (142)

It is particularly Alisoun's sexuality that the men within the tale attempt to contain through their glosses. Donaldson focuses on the exchange between Absolon and Alisoun in which Absolon tries to control Alisoun through the use of an authoritative and courtly language. Alisoun becomes the 'other' in this power relationship and in this role "[her] words are divorced from power and her body is subject to the interpretation and mediation of the men who primarily view her as a sexual being and want to control her sexuality" (140). Absolon attempts to construct her in the idealized image of the Virgin Mary by reading her

body and turns them into a discourse of resistance: "While often speaking a dominant discourse that figures woman's oppression, the Arthurian lady and fabliau wife can also be heard to speak against those dominant discourses, to resist and dissent, turning their borrowed speech into something else" (17).

as the pure and unattainable woman of courtly tradition. Through this discursive move he tries to neutralize Alisoun's sexual energy and establish his own superiority as a signifying subject.

Unlike Hansen and Jensen, however, Donaldson doesn't limit Alisoun's role in the tale to one defined or confined by male concerns, but sees her position as representative of an unprivileged 'female' discourse that functions as a potential challenge to authoritative 'male' discourse. Using the feminist theories of Hélène Cixous, Donaldson posits that Alisoun resists male inscription by (re)writing her own body: "[Alisoun] must 'write' herself, create herself as her own text by using her body to interrupt and change Absolon's reading of her" (147). Donaldson's claim is that Alisoun 'writes' her body *a la* Cixous when she thrusts it into Absolon's reading of her but the value of this interpretation of Alisoun's actions is questionable. Cixous' theories of *écriture féminine* depend on an essentialized view of women in which women, by drawing on the inherent creativity of their bodies, can escape or resist patriarchal restrictions.<sup>2</sup> 'Writing with the body' is supposed to free the woman writer and produce a more 'natural' and 'feminine' discourse. But Alisoun's use of her body in the scene with Absolon is not an essentially female or creative act. It is rather a disruptive and subversive act that challenges male inscription of the female body. Alisoun disrupts male readings and control of the feminine but does not set up an essentially female discourse or reading in their place.

Donaldson's attempt to read Alisoun's actions as essentially female is not empowering for either the female character or the female reader of medieval texts. In fact, the essentializing view of the female body works to negate individual women's potential

<sup>2</sup> Cixous claims: "Because the 'economy' of her drives is prodigious, she cannot fail, in seizing the occasion to speak, to transform directly and indirectly all systems of exchange based on masculine thrift. Her libido will produce far more radical effects of political and social change than some might like to think" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 252). Women's bodies, or more particularly, their sex drives, are posited here as inherently radical and disruptive, rather than as disruptive due to their resistance to being contained within a socio-cultural construct.

for agency by falling into the destructive binary of woman/nature vs. man/reason. The essentialized woman's challenge to male domination is reduced to a merely biological act, a reduction that undermines the true disruptive power of the female body in a male-authored text. A stronger argument than Donaldson's can be made, however, by relying on less problematic portions of Cixous' theories. While I reject biological essentialism because it is not a liberating theory for women, the female body still has a disruptive potential in a socio-cultural sense.<sup>3</sup> The essentializing of the female body is the effect of external social expectations of what constitutes a woman. The female body is therefore read according to its signification in a socio-cultural sense. 'Rewriting' the body in essentialized terms merely reaffirms the restrictions imposed on women by society. In order for this culturally-coded body to be a source of potential power for women rather than a site of oppression, it must be used to challenge the limitations of its constructedness by disrupting the patriarchal discourse that creates it.

Combining the idea of a socio-culturally constructed woman's body with Cixous' reading of the body as potentially disruptive, it is possible to return to Donaldson's argument and defend her statement that "Alisoun's action disrupts the symbolic function of Absolon's courtly language, destroying Absolon's way of reading himself, Alisoun and the world" (147). Alisoun counters Absolon's construction of her body, not with an essentialized female body, but with the physical actuality of her body itself, overturning his culturally-coded expectations. She does not draw upon any sort of inherent creativity associated with her gender but uses male conceptions of her gendered body and challenges their validity. Her body is transgressive in its failure to conform to the role of the de-sexualized woman valued in courtly romance; she does not satisfy male expectations of

<sup>3</sup>Refer to my introduction for a more detailed explanation of how women are constructed within the male-authored text. Also see Catherine Clement, E. J. Burns, and Richard Shweder regarding socio-cultural constructions of women and Luce Irigaray for how these constructions can be used by women to subvert male expectations.

what a woman should be. Alisoun refuses the restrictive role of Virgin Mary and resists the metaphorical transformation of her body into a text open to male inscription. By offering Absolon her ass instead of her lips at the window, Alisoun disrupts the structures of patriarchal discourse and control that Absolon values and challenges male readings of the female body.

Absolon, however, is not the only male who attempts to control and dominate Alisoun in the tale. Her husband, John the carpenter, tries to keep a jealous eye on her as one would on a valued possession, but this control is subverted by her unbridled and untamable nature. We can see the tension between these conflicting positions of object and subject in almost every passage referring to Alisoun in the first quarter of the tale:

This carpenter hadde wedded newe a wyf,  
Which that he lovede moore than his lyf;  
Of eighteteene yeer she was of age.  
Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage.  
For she was wylde and yong, and he was old  
And demed hymself been lik a cokewold.

(3221 - 26)

Alisoun is "wylde" and "yong," suggesting action, and yet is confined by her jealous husband. This confinement restricts her movements and limits her power to challenge authority but, at the same time, there is evidence of a force of character that resists restriction. The carpenter's need to 'cage' Alisoun reflects not only his possessive nature but suggests that an uncaged Alisoun poses a threat to his masculinity. The description of her clothing in lines 3233 - 70 also metaphorically demonstrates the carpenter's desire to contain his young wife:

A ceynt she werede, barred al of silk,  
A barmclooth as whit as morne milk  
Upon hir lendes...

A brooch she baar upon hir lowe coler,  
 As brood as is the boos of a bokeler.  
 Hir shoes were laced on hir legges hye.  
 (3235 - 37 and 3265 - 68)

She is belted, girdled, plucked, laced, and pinned into place<sup>4</sup> but her "likerous ye" (3244) and the vigour of her song (3257 - 58) threaten to burst out of this confinement. The carpenter, threatened by Alisoun as a dynamic person, tries to keep her as an object controlled by the clothing he provides for her and by his jealousy.<sup>5</sup> Unrestrained, she has the power to challenge his position as master of the house and to put him in the ridiculous role of the ineffectual cuckold. Her sexuality resists the confinement of typical gender roles, threatening to overturn the power structure of her household.

Nicholas is perhaps more successful in his attempts to inscribe his reading on Alisoun's body. In his first encounters with her, he tries to control her sexuality through physical domination:

And prively *he caughte hire by the queynte*,  
 And seyde, "Ywis, but if ich have my wille,  
 For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille."  
 And *heeld hire harde by the haunchebones*,  
 And seyde, "Lemman, love me al atones,  
 Or I wol dyen, also God me save!"  
 (3276 - 3281, my emphasis)

By grabbing her cunt and her hipbones, Nicholas restricts Alisoun's movements in a very literal sense and, at the same time, restricts her role in relation to him to that of a sexual object. In a metonymic maneuver, he identifies the woman with cunt and hipbones,

<sup>4</sup>V. A. Kolve points out these metaphors of constraint and confinement in *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales*, 163.

<sup>5</sup>Priscilla Martin makes the interesting observation that: "All [of Alisoun's] vibrant, warm, sleek, soft, singing, skipping, playful, skittish sexuality is harnessed by another kind of power, that of money" (73). The restraint of Alisoun's clothing is the physical representation of the carpenter's power over her which is, as is obvious from the conditions of their marriage, an economic one.

reducing her whole identity to the physicality of her genitals. Alisoun becomes, in his reading, a site for male penetration and domination.

Nicholas also tries to limit Alisoun's subjectivity by seeing her as the sexual prize to be won through his clever trick on the carpenter. Both Emily Jensen in her article "Male Competition as a Unifying Motif in Fragment A of the *Canterbury Tales*" and Elaine Tuttle Hansen make this idea central to their exploration of the *Miller's Tale*. They note how Alisoun is forced by the male characters in the tale into a role similar to that of Emilye in the *Knight's Tale*: the passive woman who fades into the background while male characters and male competition decide her fate.<sup>6</sup> While Alisoun has a far more developed character than Emilye, she, like Emilye, is defined by the male characters in the tale as the booty exchanged after a competition that centres on male pride. Hansen goes on to point out that "Nicholas and Absolon compete with each other and with John for sexual access to Alisoun, and, true to type, the male rivals actually demonstrate less interest in the female object of their desire than in their own gender and class identity and hence their relations to each other in a closed sphere of male activity" (228). She contends that the male characters "are less interested in Alisoun than in besting each other and proving their threatened manliness" (225). Similarly, the elaborateness of Nicholas's plot threatens to overwhelm its purpose to the extent that Alisoun is almost lost in its intricacies. Nicholas, assuming the role of story-teller / controller by directing his fellow characters, attempts to 'write' Alisoun into a peripheral and submissive role.

While this reading of male competition is accurate, it is also limited in its scope because it does not examine the full range of Alisoun's roles in the *Tale*. Despite her objectification and marginalization in the face of male competition, Alisoun does not

<sup>6</sup>Jensen notes that the progression of the tales in Fragment A marks a gradual lowering of the women's stature although this lowering seems to rest mainly on the qualifications she gives to their common roles as objects: "she is the distant, idealized object of men's love and 'stryf' in the *Knight's Tale*; in the *Miller's*, she is the physical object of men's sexual desire..." (325).

passively remain objectified throughout the *Tale*. Her participation in the plot to trick her husband is active rather than being passive like the participation of the miller's wife and daughter in the *Reeve's Tale*. The women in the *Reeve's Tale* are only marginally involved in the clerks' plot and are hardly even participants in their own 'swivings.' Alisoun, on the other hand, conspires with Nicholas to find a way in which "She sholde slepen in his arm al nyght, / For this was his desir and *hire also*" (3406 - 07, my emphasis). She plays a part in fooling her husband by informing him that:

...she nyste where he [Nicholas] was;  
Of al that day she saugh hym nat with ye;  
She trowed that he was in maladye,  
For, for no cry hir mayde koude hym calle,  
He nolde answer for thyng that myghte falle.

(3414 - 18)

Her part in the plot is not merely as the desired reward of a successful outcome but as a co-conspirator in its execution. In this way, she becomes involved in desire rather than merely being an object of it.

This involvement becomes more profound when Alisoun takes the initiative in the scene with Absolon at the window. Uncoached by the supposedly superior prankster Nicholas, she plays her own joke on the effeminate clerk: "And unto Nicholas she seyde stille, / 'Now hust, and thou shalt laughen al thy fille'" (3721 - 22). Alisoun takes control of the situation, dealing with her unwanted suitor by sticking her "nether ye" out the window. She again becomes agent rather than object at this point, acting on her own to call into question male constructions of female desire and more importantly, women's roles in male desire. Not only does she subvert Absolon's sanitized construction of women's bodies but she forces Nicholas to recognize her as a powerful and active woman. She resists Nicholas' reading of her as a passive object of lust by appropriating his role as the



trickster and upstaging his quick wit.<sup>7</sup> Hansen recognizes that Nicholas' subsequent actions indicate that he is threatened by Alisoun's show of initiative: "His substitution of his male body for Alisoun's female body, his 'ers' exposed instead of hers, preempts the woman's initiative ... Even in play, or perhaps especially in play, it seems that the female cannot be left in the unsuitable role of agent for long" (234 - 5). She argues that Alisoun's show of initiative is short-lived and soon quelled due to its inappropriateness in a male economy. Her prank displaces Nicholas from his dominant and controlling position of trickster and organizer of the events in the tale and transgresses the male social order. By assuming her place at the window, he tries to reassert his primacy in the narrative and neutralize the threat that Alisoun's actions pose.

But Nicholas cannot reclaim control of the scene by 're-writing' Alisoun's trick with his own body, because the chaos caused by the physical intrusion of a woman's body into a 'male' text has already been achieved. As Cixous says, "women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. They (illes) go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down" ("The Laugh of the Medusa," 258). While Cixous' description of women here is again essentialized, the socio-cultural connection of the female body with chaos makes her comment appropriate. Women's bodies do not fit into the male social

<sup>7</sup>Lesley Johnson points out that the role of trickster is quite common to women in the fabliaux and that women are often placed in 'winning' roles. From this she argues that "Sexual roles are used in the fabliaux not necessarily to confirm or promote sexual stereotypes but as a valuable means for overturning conventional relationships or subverting appearances in the interests of comic action" (303). While the celebration of female wit may be common in French fabliaux, we cannot ascribe the same sort of celebration in the authorship of the *Miller's Tale*. Despite his familiarity with the fabliaux form and its subversive readings of society, Chaucer places Alisoun in a role that attempts to reinforce rather than overturn conventional relationships. The power structures of the tale are, on the surface, ones in which the woman is continually placed in an oppressed position. Alisoun's subversiveness comes from her resistance to male efforts to restrict her to these conventional roles. She does not belong in Johnson's category of 'winning women' who are given control over the outcome of their tales but, instead, she acts in opposition to those who would control her and her role in the outcome.

order unless they can be contained within male constructions of womanhood and, therefore, their uncontrolled presence is disruptive. Alisoun's exposure of her body marks a turning point in the tale, after which the 'order of space' is indeed jumbled, disoriented, and dislocated. Her actions at the window begin the chain of events that lead to the physical injury or insult of all of the male characters while she goes 'unpunished.'<sup>8</sup> Alisoun disrupts the male inscriptions that have been imposed upon her body and upsets each male character's attempts to control both her and the events of the tale.

Alisoun's physical disruption of male expectation and control is coupled with another potential subversion: the laugh. Her "'Tehee!'" (3740) mocks male attempts to restrict her to the role of object. Catherine Clément, in *The Newly Born Woman*, associates the laughing woman with such figures as Medusa, the sorceress, the witch, and the hysteric--women who have escaped male domination and discovered a power of their own (32). The laughing woman poses a threat to male authority by failing to conform to a male economy. Cixous also describes how women's laughter disrupts 'male' orderliness:

Culturally speaking, women have wept a great deal, but once the tears are shed, there will be an endless laughter instead. Laughter that breaks out, overflows, a humor no one would expect to find in women--which is nonetheless surely their greatest strength because it's a humor that sees man much further away than he has ever been seen. ("Castration," 490)

Alisoun's laughter shows such a perspective. From the position of 'other,' Alisoun achieves a distance that allows for a questioning of the constructions of women in male desire. She laughs at the misplaced and misinformed attempts to define female sexuality on the part of the male characters and challenges their male inscriptions of her body with humor.

<sup>8</sup>See Morton Bloomfield's "unBoethian" interpretation of this scene. He reads Alisoun as a wicked adulteress who goes unpunished while her kind-hearted husband is punished unjustly.

As narrator of the tale, the Miller also plays a part in the male efforts to control the unmanageable Alisoun. In keeping with her force of character, his description of Alisoun (3233 - 70) is the fullest and most animated of any of the characters in the tale. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, it emphasizes her energy within the limitations imposed upon her by the male characters inside and outside the tale. Much of the language, most notably the active verbs and animal imagery, that the Miller uses to describe her in this passage foregrounds her vitality and sensuality. The Miller's portrait of her suggests, in other words, that she is attractive to him. As readers, we might expect him to provide a stock description of the attractions of a medieval woman similar to what can be found in the *Book of the Duchess*,<sup>9</sup> but this expectation is denied by the Miller's attribution of lively and distinctly unchivalric qualities to Alisoun:

But of hir song, it was as loude and yerne  
 As any swalwe sittynge on a berne.  
 Therto she koude skippe and make game,  
 As any kyde or calf folwynge his dame.  
 Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth,  
 Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth.  
 Wynsyng she was, as is a joly colt,  
 Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt.

(3257 - 64)

This description is hardly typical of medieval idealized portraits of women; instead, it reflects the Miller's own desires and preoccupations. Rather than dwelling on austere and courtly attractions, he provides examples of Alisoun's attractions in terms of images that

<sup>9</sup>A description which centres on the passivity and beauty of the woman and bestows upon her a statue-like perfection that is, in effect, quite unnatural:

But swich a fairnesse of a nekke  
 Had that swete that boon nor brekke  
 Nas ther non sene that myssat.  
 Hyt was whit, smothe, streght, and pure flat,  
 Wythouten hole or canel-boon,  
 As be semyng had she noon. (BD, 939 - 44)

suggest earthiness and availability. The passage alternates between images of Alisoun as a creature of activity (weasel, swallow, kid, calf, and colt) and those of her as a possession or object of desire (doll, coin, primrose, and pig's eye). The Miller's description of Alisoun positions her as a sexual toy by focusing primarily on her chest and midriff and using such terms as "popelote" (3254) to characterize her. He defines her role as a woman in terms of her sexuality:

She was a prymerole, a piggesnye,  
For any lord to leggen in his bedde,  
Or yet for any good yeman to wedde.

(3267 - 70)

According to the Miller, Alisoun's worth as a woman is measured in relation to the men who find her attractive or possess her. In keeping with his attempts to read her as an object, the Miller does not name Alisoun in his description of her. He prefers to keep her in the nameless and objectified role of male sexual possession rather than making her an active individual.

Relegating Alisoun to the status of object, the Miller remains fascinated by the character he has created. All of the images that he uses to describe Alisoun focus on her youth, freshness, and lustiness. But he wants to see her as an easily available sex object without any hint of the 'messier' or less 'savory' aspects of womanhood. There is a strange sort of purity in his description of Alisoun's delicate and small body, clothed as it is in an apron "as whit as morne milk" (3236). This image suggests a fresh wholesomeness and is untainted by the hints of her sensuality, which are confined to the relatively harmless sphere of "a likerous ye" (3244). As the tale progresses, however, Alisoun subverts the Miller's attempts to contain her in the innocent yet lusty role of his ideal woman by reasserting the physicality and reality of her body. The Miller's attraction to Alisoun depends on her remaining in the uncomplicated position of an abstract object of lust.

When she sticks her ass out of the window for Absolon to kiss, turning the titillating and abstract image of the woman into the physically repulsive and unwelcome reality of the body, she disrupts the Miller's restrictive and idealized reading of her body and incurs his disgust as well as Absolon's.<sup>10</sup>

The Miller shows a fear or at least an awareness of the potential threat posed to male dominance by female sexuality. Even in his *Prologue*, he expresses his reluctance to inquire into his wife's (or women-in-general's) 'pryvetee' (3163 - 4), a word that layers the meanings of 'secrets' and 'private parts' in his tale.<sup>11</sup> He says:

An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf  
Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.  
So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,  
Of the remenant nedeth nat enquire.

(3163 - 66)

He does not want to know about such things and is, therefore, repulsed and threatened when Alisoun forces a view of her 'pryvetee' on him. She refuses the role of the paradoxically immaculate but sensual woman that he prefers and offers him instead "a thyng al rough and long yherd" (3738). This description of a woman's genitals suggests to both the Miller and Absolon a dirty, manlike beard, perverse to them for its homoerotic implications and disgusting for its apparent uncleanness (seen in Absolon's compulsively thorough attempts to cleanse his mouth after kissing it). Hansen comments on how the Miller uses a "strategic vagueness, or obfuscation, in his portrayal of female 'pryvetee,' as he at once focuses on and just fails to bring into focus Alisoun's genitals" (226). This

<sup>10</sup>Hansen comments that Alisoun's substitution of her 'hole' for her mouth exposes "what is usually kept hidden by polite discourse" (223). Alisoun subverts this convention through her self-exposure and incurs the wrath and disgust of Absolon and the Miller.

<sup>11</sup>The Miller calls attention to this duality of meaning by placing 'pryvetee' in the context of adultery, thereby defining it in terms of sexual secrets. He also goes on to instruct husbands that "So he may fynde Goddes foyson there [referring to his wife's 'pryvetee'], / Of the remenant nedeth nat enquire" (ll. 3155 - 6). again playing with the idea of finding bounty in both secrets and genitals.

wavering implies both a fascination with and a horror of female genitalia. Hansen reads this vagueness as an erasure or at least a blurring of female sexual difference and concentrates on how this affects the male characters in the *Tale* (228), but the reluctance of the other characters to focus on the fact of female difference indicates their discomfort with it. The "strategic vagueness" that Hansen mentions operates as an attempt on the part of the Miller to contain Alisoun within a male economy by refusing to recognize her sexuality, physical difference, and desire. Alisoun challenges and subverts the Miller's ideas of what a woman should be and presents him with the physical reality of women in place of his sanitized fantasy. She counters his reluctance to inquire into female 'pryvetee' by forcing him to acknowledge her physical body instead of the construction of womanhood by which he has attempted to define her.

Unable to deal with this physical reality, the Miller promptly writes Alisoun out of his tale, silencing her voice, erasing her body, and forcing her into the status of object once again.<sup>12</sup> Her active participation in the trick on her husband is glossed over and she becomes merely the object of sexual attention. At the end of the tale, the Miller attempts to reassert his narrative control over Alisoun by returning her to the position of the unnamed possession of her husband, saying, "Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf" (l. 3850).<sup>13</sup> After having kept her nameless for nearly 180 lines at the beginning of his tale, the Miller moves in again at the end to take away her name and reduce her role in the action. The fictional narrator of the *Canterbury Tales* echoes this erasure and refers to the tale as "this nyce cas / Of Absolon and hende Nicholas (ll. 3855 - 6). Threatened by the

<sup>12</sup>A surprising number of critics (Macklin, Bloomfield, Martin, Tripp...) read this erasure as Alisoun's evasion of punishment at the end of the *Tale*. Tripp goes so far as to maintain that "In the end Alisoun, like love, remains free and we surmise in control of herself--and the situation" (211).

<sup>13</sup>Hansen points out that with this remark of the Miller's, Alisoun becomes "the grammatical object of the verb [swyved] and a nameless possession of her husband" (235).

disruptive force of an active woman in the tale, two levels of male narrators write her out of the story in an attempt to negate or silence the threat to male control that she poses.

Critics also take their own part in this campaign to negate Alisoun's power as a resistant and subversive woman. Most critics fall into two general categories according to their reactions to Alisoun: those who are attracted by her sexuality and those who are disgusted by it. Both reactions, however, bespeak a discomfort or uneasiness with Alisoun's physicality. Critics who admire Alisoun's 'lustiness' tend to focus on the objectifying elements of the Miller's description of her as examples of her vitality and exuberance.<sup>14</sup> Patrick Gallacher, for example, centres in on the image of Alisoun as a doll ('popelote'), claiming that it evokes "the urge to grasp and fondle" (40). The other adjectives that he uses ('seductive,' 'inviting,' 'enticing') place Alisoun in the position of a sexual commodity, an object of the male gaze. He presumes that Alisoun's role in the *Tale* is to attract the sexual attention of the other characters, tellers, and readers. E. Talbot Donaldson presents a similar opinion when he refers to Chaucer as 'teasing' the reader with his restraint from exposing Alisoun's physical attractions in her portrait. He asserts that the reader is tantalized by the limited exposure and is in the end disappointed, assuming again her objectified position relative to the male gaze. Though critics such as these seem to admire Alisoun's vitality and initiative, their admiration has the effect of relegating her to the role of sexual object in the same way that Nicholas, Absolon, John, and the Miller attempt to do. By focusing on her attractions, they inscribe her body with their own desire and try to erase the reality of the physical body that she exposes at the window. Their admiration attempts to negate her disruptive potential in the *Tale* by trivializing her role into that of an object.

<sup>14</sup>See V. A. Kolve, Macklin Smith, and Earl Birney as well as those discussed in the following paragraph.

The critics who express disgust with Alisoun also focus on what Hansen has described as her "excessive female sexuality" (220). These critics try to minimize her role or importance in the *Tale* by reading her as the characterization of 'uncontrolled appetite' and incapable, therefore, of directed action or agency.<sup>15</sup> Morton Bloomfield shows his distaste for Alisoun's initiative and physicality by describing her as a wicked adulteress who unjustly escapes punishment. He further exposes his discomfort with her sexuality by his prudish reference to her sticking "a portion of her anatomy" out the window for Absolon to kiss (209). Unable to cope with her frank sexuality, he attempts to gloss over it with euphemistic language and 'delicate' phrases. In so doing, he both reveals and denies the power of her body to disrupt the male social order. While dismissing her as a moral aberration, he shows the upsetting effect she has on his own assumptions about the 'proper' roles for women. Alisoun's transgressive use of her body is effective even outside the frame of both her tale and the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole as even her critics feel a need to contain its threat through language and erasure. Both the critics who applaud and those who revile her make similar gestures to silence her and limit her importance or disruptive potential in the *Tale*.

But despite the many levels of silencing and control that are imposed upon Alisoun, none of the characters, tellers, or readers, either inside or outside the tale, manage to contain her energies. Her body and her sexuality disrupt male readings and force a consideration of female desire as something distinct and ungoverned by male constructs of female sexuality. Although she is silenced, contained, and erased by the men inside and outside the tale, Alisoun maintains a position central to the tale's questioning of gender stability. In fact, the attempts on the part of the male characters, tellers, and critics to control readings of Alisoun's sexuality serve to confirm the threat that her body and

<sup>15</sup>David Williams makes a brief reference to Alisoun's libido and uncontrolled appetite but does not defend this position and, indeed, ignores her role in the *Tale* throughout most of his article.



actions pose to a male economy. Both male characters and tellers recognize the power of an active female agent and, in their efforts to contain this power, they demonstrate a fear of her subversive potential if allowed to operate unchecked.

Even when forced into a passive or subservient role, women show a potential for disruption. As E. Jane Burns says, "the voice of the nag, though dismissed, suggests the possible threat of female dominance in speech. The voice of the beguiler, though avowedly subservient, threatens to get what it wants through cajoling" ("This Prick Which Is Not One," 202). The very dismissal or denigration of the female body or voice calls attention to male concerns with the potential power of women to disrupt the status quo. Male inscriptions and constructions of the female body are attempts to limit this potential. Alisoun, though forced into these objectified and male-constructed roles, threatens to expose these same roles and overturn the tale's male economy. She resists inscription by forcing male recognition of the physical reality of her body as opposed to the constructed and sanitized image that male characters, tellers, and critics attempt to impose upon her.

The many layers of control forced upon Alisoun testify to her ability to challenge authority and resist containment. Her sexuality subverts male inscription and glossing and draws attention to the instability of gender constructs. Hansen argues that only male concerns about identity receive scrutiny in this tale and that Alisoun is merely a foil to these concerns. Burns sets up this argument as common to many critics of women in male-authored texts:

As the man's negative counterpart, the mirror image of the male model, woman cannot fully possess the capacity of the speaking subject that the binary logic dividing mind from body reserves for him alone. The issue becomes not what she wants but whether or not she can express desire within the constraints of the dominant patriarchal language. The voicing of female desire becomes an

impossible conundrum; it can only echo what males imagine female sexuality might be like. ("This Prick Which Is Not One," 194)

Burns argues against this position, positing instead that it is possible for a character to "talk back at her author" (194). The female body inside the male-authored text carries this potential for resistance due to its disruptive nature. Female characters, like Alisoun, occupy gendered positions that challenge the author's authority because their gender cannot be contained by a male textuality. Alisoun's physical body does not conform to the sanitized and objectified images of women acceptable within a male economy. She refuses to remain within the objectified roles constructed for her by male characters, tellers and critics and subverts the gender assumptions and biases that inform these constructed roles. By examining the gender politics within the tale, we can see that Alisoun's role as woman in the *Miller's Tale* questions male assumptions of female sexuality and that her female body disrupts male readings of gender difference. She is an active female force in the tale and from this position she subverts male expectations and control.

### Chapter Three

#### Griselda's Passive Resistance

The Wife of Bath and Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale* both use the sexuality of their bodies to effect challenges to male social structures and assumptions. The Wife asserts her sexuality through speech while Alisoun does so through self-exposure. The female body, verbalized or actual, in these cases acts as the locus of disruption of patriarchal discourse and values in the text. Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale*, however, does not (is not allowed to?) draw upon the same strength. Her physicality and her gendered role in the *Tale* have been largely suppressed or ignored by the male characters, teller, and readers who affect how she is portrayed in the *Tale*. The Clerk and Walter both minimize her identity as a physical woman, which limits her potential to disrupt the text through the assertion of her sexuality in the same ways as the Wife and Alisoun. And Griselda has primarily been read by critics as a representation of a characteristic in a religious or political allegory rather than as a woman operating in a male social order. She is not afforded the same level of characterization by either her teller or her critics that is given to many other women characters in Chaucer's corpus, a fact which encourages critics to interpret her in terms of allegory. Despite its allegorical qualities, however, the *Tale* also achieves a non-allegorical complexity when Griselda's speech and significance as a woman character are examined from a different perspective. Griselda's submissive language and her outward obedience actually become sources of power as she uses them to subvert the layers of control imposed upon her by antifeminist values.

The lack of characterization and development noted by most critics of the *Tale* is not limited to Griselda; in fact, the whole story reads as extremely stylized and repetitive, particularly to a modern reader. None of the characters are very fully developed and the

plot is, for the most part, formulaic. This two-dimensionality of characterization and plot is behind much of the critical distress surrounding the tale and makes the allegorical approach most immediately satisfying to readers of the *Clerk's Tale*.<sup>1</sup> The most common interpretations involve examinations of either the religious or political significance of the events and characters in the *Tale*.<sup>2</sup> As Christian allegory, the *Clerk's Tale* is relatively simplistic. Most critics acknowledge the Christ or Job-like role that Griselda occupies in relation to Walter's cruelty.<sup>3</sup> Mary J. Carruthers adds that, "Griselda is a Christ-like figure because she is aristocratic in virtue. She becomes part of a litany of types of virtue disguised in humble origins" (225). The Clerk himself (following Petrarch's example) encourages us to read her in terms of allegory:

This storie is seyde nat for that wyves sholde  
 Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,  
 For it were inportable, though they wolde,  
 But for that every wight, in his degree,  
 Sholde be constant in adversitee  
 As was Grisilde ...

(1142 - 47)

In such a reading, Griselda comes to represent the Christian 'Everyman' in an allegory of temptation. But at the same time, according to Jill Mann, "Griselda's suffering reaches

<sup>1</sup>Thomas A. Van, S. K. Heninger, and Michaela Paasche Grudin comment on modern discomfort or exasperation with the *Clerk's Tale*, citing its unwarranted acts of cruelty and overly obvious morality as the cause of critical frustration.

<sup>2</sup>Two notable exceptions are Carolyn Dinshaw and Deborah S. Ellis. Dinshaw sees Griselda as a metaphoric text and argues that the *Tale* is riddled with images and actualities of translation and that the Clerk's sympathies for Griselda are linked with his interest and sympathy for the translated text (135), while Ellis sees her as "an emblem of the domestic treachery that forms an important motif in many of Chaucer's works" (99). Both readings, however, have the same effect as allegorization in their erasure of the possible agential power of the individual character. Griselda becomes a symbol or object rather than a woman and loses her status as a potential subject.

<sup>3</sup>Marjorie Swann points out, however, that the logical continuation of the equation of Griselda with Job problematically places Walter in the position of God. Her argument is that Walter's hedonistic and sadistic nature makes this reading both heretical and unlikely for a Christian audience.

beyond the human, figuring forth the divine" (158). Thus, she becomes in critical thought both the symbol of an unattainable perfection in Christian morality and the representative of the masses. S. K. Heninger, Jr. argues that her resistance of temptation and her submissiveness to authority are necessary to an upholding of 'divinely ordained order.' He reads her as an example of obedience to a 'natural' law, facing her trials as Everyman and rising above them as a Christ-figure.

The *Tale* has also been read as a political allegory by critics including Carol Heffernan and Michaela Grudin who see the struggle between Walter and Griselda as representative of the class struggle. Heffernan equates Walter with tyranny and Griselda with 'commune profit' and argues that Griselda's bond with the common people helps her to transform Walter's tyranny into effective leadership. She claims that, "by refusing to capitulate before Walter's indignities, Griselda frees the Marquis from the tyranny of his own will" (338). Grudin points out the political and legalistic language used in the *Tale* in both the public and domestic scenes. She draws parallels between Walter's relationship with his subjects and with Griselda, between the collective and the individual experience, in an exploration of political order and unity. Again, Griselda comes to represent 'commune profit' and the importance of constancy in both the personal and political realm.

Certainly, the religious and political references and symbolism in the *Tale* cannot be ignored; however, reading the interaction of Walter and Griselda as symbolic of the relationship between Temptation and the Good Christian or the struggle between the classes ignores the gender issues that are vital to an understanding of the power structures in the story. Although allegory is a useful and illuminating way of examining the *Tale*, to allegorize Griselda is to erase her position as a woman in the *Tale* and to assume and reaffirm the 'natural' dominance of a male social order. Given the two-dimensional characterization of Griselda, however, it is difficult to imagine a way to read her as a

gendered force within the *Tale*. She seems to occupy the position of the passive and submissive woman so thoroughly that there is no room in her character for rebellion or even the smallest show of defiance. Her speech and gestures continually repeat her original promise to Walter:

"And heere I swere that nevere willyngly,  
In werk ne thoght, I nyl yow disobeye,  
For to be deed, though me were looth to deye."

(362 - 64)

Throughout the *Tale* she proves her ability to passively endure any test without complaint in a way that even the Clerk recognizes as superhuman.<sup>4</sup> Impossibly patient and submissive, Griselda hardly seems to be a figure with the potential to resist male authority. She appears to be a cardboard character who operates more as a symbol than as a woman. But this appearance does not completely encompass her role in the *Tale* nor does it take into account the structures of oppression that created her as such.

Although gender issues are largely ignored by critics of the *Clerk's Tale*, Elaine Tuttle Hansen being the most notable exception, they deserve a more prominent place in critical discussion than they have been afforded. Despite her lack of development as a character, Griselda still takes on a gendered role within the *Tale*, and it must be acknowledged. Even if we prefer to interpret the *Tale* on the level of allegory we must examine the significance of the fact that 'Patience' is characterized as a woman and that the discussion of patience as a virtue is a gendered one in this context. The Clerk states quite openly his belief that humbleness or patience is a womanly virtue:

Though clerkes preise wommen but a lite,  
Ther kan no man in humblesse hym acquite  
As womman kan, ne kan been half so trewe

<sup>4</sup>The Clerk describes Griselda's story as a "mervaille" (1186) and counsils men not to attempt to test their own wives in such a way as Walter did because they will fail (1182).

As wommen been, but it be falle of newe.

(935 - 38)

It is also no coincidence that what is allegorically read as a test of patience or constancy is described by Walter as a test of Griselda's "wommanheede" (1075).<sup>5</sup> Griselda's value as a woman is equated in the *Tale* with her ability to endure such trials as Walter invents for her. The power structures that this relationship of tester and object, definer and defined, sets up are gendered ones as they are enacted in the *Tale*. An examination of Griselda's trials and her responses in the *Tale* as a whole raises questions of what constitutes a woman, what her proper roles and qualities are, and how she fits into a male economy. Griselda's lack of characterization, therefore, becomes a gender issue and her position as a woman becomes significant and worthy of exploration.

In order to examine Griselda's role within the *Tale* and how it takes on a gendered significance, it is important to recognize the levels of oppression under which she operates. This is evident at the most basic and obvious level in the way the dominant male characters in the *Tale* control her fate. Walter decides, after observing Griselda's virtue and sobriety, that "he wolde / Wedde hire oonly, if evere he wedde sholde" (ll. 244 - 45) but does not see any reason to consult with her regarding this decision until the day of the wedding. Even then, he goes first to her father, Janicula, saying:

"If that thou vouche sauf, what so bityde,  
Thy doghter *wol I take*, er that I wende,  
As for my wyf, unto *hir* lyves ende."

(306 - 8, my emphasis)

His language immediately puts Griselda in an objectified and subordinate position, implying as it does that she is available for his taking. He also asserts his dominance by

<sup>5</sup>Elaine Tuttle Hansen points out that the word 'wommanheede' replaces Petrarch's word 'virtue' and is unique to the *Clerk's Tale*.

stating that the marriage vows will bind her until the end of *her* life, without making any such promise himself.

Janicula does not question Walter's authority, either as a sovereign or as a man, to assert control over Griselda's future. Indeed, his parallel assumption and assertion of power over Griselda shows that it is not merely Walter's status as ruler that allows him such authority. Janicula's power over Griselda is not one of class but a product of patriarchal values. As her father, the dominant male in the family, Janicula assumes the right to govern his daughter's actions and does not think to ask for her opinion on the prospect of marriage to Walter. He gives his assent unconditionally, acknowledging Walter's prerogative:

"Lord," quod he, "my willynge  
Is as ye wole, ne ayeynes youre likynge  
I wol no thyng, ye be my lord so deere;  
Right as yow lust, governeth this mateere."  
(319 - 22)

It is only after the patriarchal assent is given that Walter decides to approach Griselda with his 'proposal.' Even this, however, is phrased with the assumption that Griselda will act according to what has already been decided by her father and prospective bridegroom:

"Grisilde," [Walter] seyde, "ye shal wel understonde  
*It liketh to youre fader and to me*  
That I yow wedde, and eek it may so stonde,  
*As I suppose*, ye wol that it so be."  
(344 - 47, my emphasis)

Her assent is assumed and without waiting for a reply Walter goes on to list his demands of her as his future wife. Griselda's oppression is both class and gender-based in this scene. She must necessarily submit to Walter as her sovereign lord but also as a dominant male in a patriarchal society. This double submission sets up an equation between the



power structures of class and gender that carries throughout the *Tale*. Walter's authority is based upon his position as ruler and man, just as Griselda's obedience / submissiveness is connected to her poverty and her 'womanhood.'

The conditions of the marriage further emphasize the equation of class and gender in the *Tale*. Walter's demands in marriage blur the categories of servant and wife:

"... be ye redy with good herte  
To al my lust, and that I frely may,  
As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,  
And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?  
And eek whan I sey 'ye,' ne sey nat 'nay,'  
Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?  
Swere this, and heere I swere oure alliance."

(ll. 351 - 57)

The marriage 'contract' that Walter offers Griselda places her even lower than a paid servant; he demands an absolute obedience night and day without any sign of remuneration. Rather, Griselda is expected to serve him and satisfy his every desire on the basis of both her class and gender according to the social system of Walter's rule.

Walter's marital tests of her patience further degrade Griselda as they cease even to take into account basic human emotions. Unsatisfied with mere obedience under normal conditions, Walter forces Griselda to place her promise of submission over maternal love, pity, and modesty as he pretends to kill her children and replace her with another wife. He uses his position as ruler and man to subject Griselda to inhuman cruelties. Robin Kirkpatrick has noted that Walter is a more fully developed character in contrast to Griselda but does not acknowledge how Walter's partial control over how Griselda is portrayed affects the extent to which her character is developed. Walter designs his tests in order to emphasize in Griselda's character a single virtue so it is only logical that her portrayal would reflect that limitation. We are shown only one side of Griselda because

that one side is the only one with which Walter is concerned. He refuses to allow her to be involved in the different aspects of life such as motherhood that would further develop her character because he prefers her to be completely under his control and completely submissive to his pleasures. Thus, the two-dimensionality that has led critics into allegorical readings of Griselda is also a function of the oppression under which she exists.

Like Walter, the Clerk also limits the development of Griselda's character and exerts his control over her. Most critics, even feminist critics, have read the Clerk as a genuinely sympathetic teller of his tale who sets his tale in opposition to the Wife of Bath's to prove that it is indeed possible for clerks to "speke good of wyves" (*WBP* l. 689).<sup>6</sup> By presenting a 'good' or 'exemplary' woman, the Clerk seems to challenge the negative portrayals of women put forward by writers in the antifeminist tradition but, in fact, he merely reinforces the stereotypes. Hope Phyllis Weissman notes in her discussion of antifeminism and Chaucer that

The literary tradition of antifeminism may ... be defined in a wider sense to include not simply satirical caricatures of women but any presentation of a woman's nature intended to conform her to male expectations of what she is or ought to be, not her own. By this wider definition, an image of woman need not be ostensibly unflattering to be antifeminist in fact or in potential; indeed, the most insidious of antifeminist images are those which celebrate, with a precision often subtle rather than apparent, the forms a woman's goodness is to take. (94)<sup>7</sup>

In his portrayal of Griselda, the Clerk avoids the blatant antifeminism that the Wife of Bath attacks in her *Prologue* but is guilty of this more 'insidious' form of antifeminism that

<sup>6</sup>See Marjorie E. Swann, Carolyn Dinshaw, Carol Falvo Heffernan, Mary J. Carruthers, Michaela Paasche Grudin, and Elizabeth Psakis Armstrong for this view.

<sup>7</sup>This idea is also examined by R. Howard Bloch in *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*.

Weissman describes.<sup>8</sup> His sympathy, in much the same way as Walter's cruel tests do, forces Griselda into an absolute identification with the submissive and obedient role that the antifeminist tradition finds most acceptable for women. While seeming to sympathize with Griselda's predicament, he continues her oppression by limiting her sphere of action to that which relates to Walter. He presents her primarily as the object of Walter's tyranny rather than acknowledging her potential to resist or disrupt this tyranny. His descriptions of her are as much patronizing as sympathetic as they focus on her seeming helplessness and her victim status. She is to him "this povre creature" (232), "a pacient creature" (623), "this humble creature" (755), and "thilke sely povre Grisildis" (948), all terms of condescension rather than admiration. He underestimates her understanding of her situation, commenting repeatedly on her innocence and passivity. His selectiveness in his description of Griselda restricts her to an emblem of patience and submission and places her in the admired but oppressed role of a virtuous woman.

The Clerk's obvious disgust and anger with Walter's treatment of Griselda given her miraculous patience and goodness might seem to indicate that he does have a genuine concern for her in the face of her tribulations. But most of what critics read as his sympathy toward Griselda comes from the many instances of his reproaches to Walter. His admonitions serve almost as a prelude or introduction to each of the trials that Griselda endures:

But as for me, I seye that yvele it sit  
 To assaye a wyf whan that it is no nede,  
 And putten hire in angwyssh and in drede.

(460 - 62)

<sup>8</sup>The Clerk's claim to be merely translating Griselda's story from Petrarch's Latin version does not absolve him of responsibility in her portrayal. As many critics, including Robin Kirkpatrick and J. Burke Severs, have pointed out, there are significant changes to Petrarch in the Clerk's 'translation' which exaggerate Walter's cruelty and the pathos of Griselda's situation and point to the Clerk's involvement in his *Tale*.

O nedelee was she tempted in assay!  
 But wedded men ne knowe no mesure,  
 Whan that they fynde a pacient creature.  
 (621 - 23)

...nathelees, for ernest ne for game,  
 He of his crueel purpos nolde stente;  
 To tempte his wyf was set al his entente.  
 (733 - 35)

These passages express an indignation at Walter's cruelty but at no point does the Clerk question Walter's right to test Griselda or Griselda's duty to submit. Contrarily, his praise of Griselda is centred on the fact that she does submit, that she does her wifely duty at whatever cost. He does not express any shock at Griselda's implicit consent to the murder of her children but merely notes her 'admirable' steadfastness and strength in adversity (561 - 67 and 603 - 9). Clearly, although he finds her trials reprehensible, he sees her obedience and submission to them a womanly virtue. His sympathy is based on Griselda's ability to endure Walter's torture and to fulfill the antifeminist role of the passive woman.

Linked to the Clerk's 'sympathy' and 'admiration' for Griselda's 'virtues' and his desire to limit her to the exemplary figure of Patience is an oppressive idealization of her character. He comments that:

It were ful hard to fynde now-a-dayes  
 In al a toun Grisildis thre or two;  
 For if that they were put to swiche assayes,  
 The gold of hem hath now so badde alayes  
 With bras, that thogh the coyne be fair at ye,  
 It wolde rather breste a-two than plye.  
 (1164 - 69)

The pliancy that he admires in Griselda relates to the metaphoric pure gold of her make-up and is all the more valuable for its scarcity. Her perfection is to him one of purity and submission and guarantees a lack of resistance or rebellion in her character. He creates Griselda in the ideal image of women as it is defined in antifeminist writings--passive, submissive, and lacking in initiative and sexuality. By idealizing her, the Clerk endeavours to contain Griselda within the manageable sphere of the archetypal obedient wife.

In constructing this ideal woman, the Clerk makes a move similar to that of the Miller who attempts to sanitize his character Alisoun in order to ensure her continued attractiveness to him. The Miller exerts his control by restricting the scope of Alisoun's sexuality to the non-threatening realm of lusty innocence. The Clerk's criterion for attraction, on the other hand, requires an almost complete erasure of the potentially disruptive female body and is therefore more effective than the Miller's partial control. Unlike the Miller's predominantly physical description of Alisoun, the Clerk's description focuses for the most part on Griselda's intangible or abstract qualities:

But for to speke of vertuous beautee,  
 Thanne was she oon the faireste under sonne;  
 For povreliche yfostred up was she,  
 No likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne.  
 Wel ofter of the welle than of the tonne  
 She drank, and for she wolde vertu plese,  
 She knew wel labour but noon ydel ese.

But thogh this mayde tendre were of age,  
 Yet in the brest of hire virginitee  
 Ther was enclosed rype and sad corage;  
 And in greet reverence and charitee  
 Hir olde povre fader fostred shee.  
 A fewe sheep, spynnyng, on feeld she kepte;  
 She wolde noght been ydel til she slepte.

(211 - 24)

The Clerk emphasizes her virtuous work-habits and abstinence while restricting explicit comment on her physical person to the vague observation that she was "fair ynogh to sighte" (209). His portrait of her is riddled with images of a ripe sexuality but these images are contained by their association with Griselda's abstract virtues (eg. "vertuous beautee" and "rype and sad corage") or couched in negative terms ("No likerous lust"). He limits all traces of her sexuality to the realm of the abstract. As readers, we have no sense of her corporeality and are left with the impression that her physical existence is irrelevant to the *Tale*. Dislocated from her gendered body in this way, Griselda lacks the disruptive potential upon which both the Wife of Bath and Alisoun of the *Miller's Tale* draw. The Clerk limits Griselda's power as a woman by deliberately de-emphasizing her physicality and her gender. He refers to her more often as a 'creature' than as a woman and glosses over specific references to her sexuality to the extent that even her unequivocally gendered role as a mother lacks a definite physical element. As Griselda herself points out, her relationship with her children is not the natural, intensely physical one of most mothers:

"I have noght had no part of children tweyne  
But first siknesse, and after, wo and payne."

(650 - 51)

Her experience of motherhood as it is presented by the Clerk, aside from the initial sickness, consists of abstract emotion divorced of actual contact, which serves to further accentuate Griselda's disembodiment.

The Clerk, in attempting to restrict Griselda's character to its abstract qualities, reveals a discomfort or even fear of the female body and female sexuality. His *Tale* responds to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* in its treatment of marital obedience but he avoids the vigorous and exuberant attention to the physical that the Wife accentuates.

Aware of the dangers the Wife's sexuality poses to a male social order, he limits these dangers in his own *Tale* by trying to erase the female body and diffuse its disruptive potential. The result is very similar to what happens with the relentless repetition of exempla in the *Legend of Good Women*. Like the undeveloped characters of Philomela, Dido, Hypsipyle, and the other martyred women of the *Legend*, Griselda becomes a faceless abstraction of the misogynist concept of a 'good woman' and is denied the power of her sexual body to challenge the assumptions of this concept. The Clerk attempts to confine her to the stereotypical role of the passive and virtuous woman because it is an asexual role and one that depends on *male* desire for its definition.

The Clerk's controlling tactics are obviously effective, given the critical response to his portrayal of Griselda's character. She is most often seen as "vulnerable" (Ellis 105), a "victim" (Edden 372), "naive" (Engle 445), "a stoic blank" and a "symbolic extension of her husband" (Van 219). Thomas Van goes on to assert:

She lives a life over which she exercises no control or foreordination. She is dependent on someone else not only for whatever happens to her, but also for the explanation of it. (219)<sup>9</sup>

All of these readings presume the helpless submissiveness in Griselda that the Clerk has foregrounded in his portrait of her. Despite his supposed sympathy towards women, then, the Clerk obviously exerts his narrative control to disenfranchise and restrict Griselda's disruptive potential.

Between the critical predilection for allegorical interpretation outside the *Tale* and the restrictive and oppressive tactics of the Clerk and Walter within it, Griselda has been given little attention or credit as a potentially disruptive woman. Only a very few critics,

<sup>9</sup>See also Valerie Edden: "[Griselda] is the victim of a man who is literally her lord and master; she is the victim of the whim of the fickle people of Lombardy; she is robbed of the power to act by her poverty and low social class" (375).

including Elaine Tuttle Hansen and Lars Engle, have commented on her moments of resistance to any extent but even they do not examine the full extent to which she challenges male constructions of womanhood and undermines the male narrative. The levels of oppression under which she exists cast her in the futile role of passive victim and critics have, for the most part, been satisfied with this interpretation. Certainly, her limited and disembodied character make her form of resistance necessarily more subtle than that of such fully characterized women as the Wife of Bath and Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*. Griselda's subversions take the form of intricate dialogic and mimetic strategies which transform her seemingly submissive speeches into ones that challenge male domination. She uses the idealized and obedient image that Walter and the Clerk construct for her and redefines it, exposing the patriarchal structures that confine her.

Griselda's passivity and her identification with the 'womanly' virtues of patience and submission can be read in this way. The seemingly powerless role of the obedient wife is also a powerful one as Elaine Tuttle Hansen points out in her examination of the implications of Griselda's paradoxical position as a woman:

she attains certain kinds of power by embracing powerlessness; ... she is strong, in other words, because she is so perfectly weak. The Tale suggests on one hand that Griselda is not really empowered by her acceptable behavior, because the feminine virtue she embodies in welcoming her subordination is by definition both punitive and self-destructive. On the other hand, the Tale reveals that the perfectly good woman is powerful, or at least potentially so, insofar as her suffering and submission are fundamentally insubordinate and deeply threatening to man and to the concepts of power and gender identity upon which patriarchal culture is premised. (190)

Griselda inhabits the contradictory space of submissive resistance according to Hansen. She suggests that Griselda's speech and actions do not openly challenge Walter's control



over her but they trigger and expose his cruelty. Indeed, Griselda's almost unbearable goodness does seem to be the cause of Walter's desire to test or to discover the limits of her patience. The Clerk observes:

This markys in his herte longeth so  
 To tempte his wyf, hir sadnesse for to knowe,  
 That he ne myghte out of his herte throwe  
 This merveillous desir his wyf t'assaye;  
 (451 - 54)

Walter seems overcome with the desire to break Griselda's resolve; a desire that becomes an obsession as the *Tale* progresses:

... ther been folk of swich condicion  
 That whan they have a certein purpos take,  
 They kan nat stynte of hire entencion,  
 But, right as they were bounden to that stake,  
 They wol nat of that firste purpos slake.  
 Right so this markys fulliche hath purposed  
 To tempte his wyf as he was first disposed.  
 (701 - 7)

Griselda's absolute obedience and submission drives Walter to further and further extremes in his attempt to find her breaking point. Her goodness reveals his weakness of character and his cruel nature. Hansen points out that, "Walter cannot and does not solve the mystery or negate the threat that her perfect womanly behavior poses; he merely stops trying to do so and stops giving his wife the chance to act in ways that he cannot understand or control" (194).<sup>10</sup> Because Griselda's patience has no discernible limit, Walter cannot completely control her--he cannot force her to resist his cruelty and therefore her patience becomes in itself a form of resistance.

<sup>10</sup>Jill Mann also points out that, "it is not Griselda who gives way under the pressures of her trial, but Walter" (152).

Lars Engle also reads Griselda's goodness as her strength by arguing that the conflict between Walter and Griselda is based on "an exercise of discursive authority" (436). He posits that a "successful act of domination requires that there be an act of resistance to overcome" and that Griselda thwarts Walter's exercise of power by refusing to resist (446).<sup>11</sup> Again, her passivity becomes an act of resistance. Engle sees Walter as representing an authoritative discourse as defined by Bakhtin while Griselda is limited to a dialect of obedience. However, "any dialect can be subtly transformed to serve purposes asymmetrical with those of the center, and this is what we find in Griselda's speeches. She presses Walter's monologic to expose the ugliness of his purposes" (447). Griselda asserts her obedience but her assertions contain reminders to Walter of his responsibility for his acts. As such, they position Griselda in opposition to Walter's authority and reveal her desire and ability to resist accepted patriarchal structures of male dominance.

Engle argues that Griselda's resistance is achieved through discourse and sees the struggle between her and Walter as one to do with social order but Engle does not recognize the importance of gender in this social order. His argument follows the pattern of those critics who emphasize the political aspects of the *Clerk's Tale*: Griselda represents the common people in a struggle with discursive authority and operates from a 'gender neutral' position. While I agree with his analysis of the dialogics of the *Tale*, Griselda's gendered significance within this dialogic struggle also needs to be addressed. Griselda's reliance on a 'dialect of obedience' is a result of gender as well as class stereotyping and therefore, her resistance must be examined in terms of her position as a woman within a male economy.

<sup>11</sup>Engle also reads Walter's marriage to Griselda as an attempt to punish his subjects for their interference in his life. Walter expects Griselda's common background to offend his people but again, Griselda thwarts his will by being an effective ruler and being more popular with the people than Walter himself.

The transformation of obedience into resistance through language is affected by the gendered status of the site of transformation. Griselda changes the language of obedience forced upon her by the patriarchal structures within which she operates by adapting it to her role as woman in the *Tale*. E. J. Burns argues a similar point regarding the heroines of Medieval French Romances, claiming in her chapter on Tristram and Iseut that Iseut manages to mimic and rewrite the patriarchal voice:

Performing for Marc's benefit, saying precisely what he wants to hear, this 'subject' [Iseut] plays out the stereotype of the female body as typically constructed by the rhetoric of medieval law and courtly practice. ... her carefully chosen words mimic but change, through playful repetition, the master discourses that typically construct the beautiful bodies of medieval heroines. (208 - 209)

Through this process of mimesis, "the fictive woman's body that conditions a possible misogynous reading of female identity on the one hand, also opens the possibility for constructing female subjectivity on other terms" (243). Burns relies on Irigaray's theories of mimicry to show how male discourse can be transformed and translated by its displacement into a female mouth. The female character's gendered body reflects the male social order but reverses it in the manner of a speculum. Thus, instead of reinforcing patriarchal values, female characters can expose and undermine male structures through repetition.

Griselda's proficiency with this sort of doubled speech is far greater than Hansen and Engle acknowledge. They assume the continued strength of Griselda's marriage vow and that Griselda's dedication to her husband's pleasure does not waver when, in fact, there is a distinct change in her manner of speaking from the beginning of the *Tale* to the end. Griselda's first promise to Walter is all-encompassing--complete obedience in thought, speech, and action--but, upon repetition it becomes modified. In line 860 her

promise merely includes "word" and "werk" (speech and deed but not thought) and her devotion to him is phrased in the past tense: "I yow yaf myn herte in hool entente" (861). She focuses on past intentions rather than confirming her continued love. By line 920 the Clerk tells us that:

... neither by hire wordes *ne hire face*,  
 Biforn the folk, ne eek in hire absence,  
 Ne *shewed* she that hire was doon offence;  
 Ne of hire heighe estaat no remembraunce  
 Ne hadde she, *as by hire contaunce*.

(920 - 24, my emphasis)

The whole-hearted promise of her wedding day has gradually become one of appearances. No longer are her thoughts or her intentions included in her loyalty to Walter but she merely gives the continued illusion of obedience. Her carefully worded promises and her guarded countenance leave her free to think about her discontent and warn the reader to examine her speeches for evidence of this internal rebellion. Her language is riddled with references to the difference between seeming and being, appearance and reality. In a subtle reproach to Walter she exclaims:

"O goode God! How gentil and how kynde  
 Ye *semed* by youre speche and youre visage  
 The day that maked was oure mariage!"

(852 - 54, my emphasis)

She reminds him of his own deceptions and reminds us that seeming does not have to correspond to the actuality. Clearly, Griselda's power and independence cannot be limited strictly to her passivity as is suggested by Hansen and Engle. The subtlety of her veiled speech shows an awareness and subjectivity beyond that of a completely passive woman.

Once we have overcome our assumptions regarding Griselda's supposedly blind obedience, we are able to see how her comments become more obviously pointed as

Walter's treatment of her worsens. Griselda's mild complaints regarding her treatment by Walter indicate that she is aware of his cruelty. She is blunt in her comment regarding her children's deaths:

Naught greveth me at al,  
 Though that my doughter and my sone be slayn--  
*At youre comandement*, this is to sayn.

(647 - 49, my emphasis)

Her pause serves to stress Walter's involvement and even his culpability in the two murders. Later in the *Tale*, when Walter reveals the truth about her children, barbed comments are again mixed in with her seemingly harmless speech:

"O tendre, o deere, o yonge children myne!  
 Youre woful mooder wende stedfastly  
 That crueel houndes or som foul vermyne  
 Hadde eten yow ..."

(1093 - 96)

Griselda characterizes herself as 'woful' while Walter becomes the metaphoric 'houndes' and 'vermyne' she feared had eaten her children. She emphasizes his guilt and his cruelty in such a way that, despite her overt submissiveness, it is impossible to continue to read her as innocent and naive.

Granting Griselda's awareness of Walter's cruelty changes the tone of all her subsequent remarks about his "benignitee." Her speeches take on an ironic twist that rewrites her outward obedience into resistance and disrespect for his authority. She says, "I ne heeld me nevere digne in no manere / To be youre wyf, no, ne youre chamberere" (818 - 19) which on the surface would seem to indicate her humbleness but also contains the comment that her marriage to Walter was never a source of pride or dignity for her. She encourages him to marry again with the words, "For I wol gladly yelden hire my place" (843), suggesting, perhaps, her pleasure at the thought of her own escape from

such a marriage. She also expresses a desire that Walter receive his due for his treatment of her, saying:

"That ye so longe of youre benignitee  
 Han holden me in honour and nobleye,  
 Where as I was noght worthy for to bee,  
 That thonke I God and yow, to whom I preye  
*Foryelde* it yow; ther is namoore to seye.

(827 - 31, my emphasis)

Her prayer, read ironically, becomes a curse in which she asks God to repay Walter for how he treated her. She uses the patriarchally acceptable language for women--that of submission and obedience--and transforms it into criticism. Her words subtly challenge the assumption of male authority, showing its weaknesses and cruelty.

Although Walter seems quite oblivious to Griselda's challenge to his authority, the Clerk is less complacent. The chaos of his ending(s) belies a discomfort with his story or an attempt to divert attention from its meaning. He offers a fairy-tale ending in the recrowning of Griselda and then a Christian moral derived from Petrarch but still finds himself concerned with what to do with Griselda and what to make of his own story. Throughout the *Tale* he attempts to confine Griselda to a single-faceted character, but in the final scene, she breaks free from this and becomes recognizable as a woman rather than a symbol of patience or obedience. She shows emotions and reclaims the roles of mother and effective ruler that have been denied her through Walter's machinations and the Clerk's narrative control. When he realizes that he is unable to maintain his control over her characterization, his *Tale* finally falls apart into the confusion of the 'Envoy,' which has left many critics baffled.<sup>12</sup> The most common method of dealing with the

<sup>12</sup>While the Envoy is attributed to Chaucer by the scribal notation, I agree with Thomas Farrell that this attribution does not exclude it from the Clerk's tale or voice. Farrell claims that, "the wording of this rubric has nothing to do with the dramatic element in the *Canterbury Tales*. It is not an attempt to sort out a fallible narrator from the (presumably) infallible poet. Nor is it what Howard claimed: a scribal

'Envoy' is to treat it as the Clerk's ironic response to the Wife of Bath's excesses. Certainly the tone and the references to Chichevache suggest mockery but behind the mockery, the Clerk's discomfort remains. He recognizes the subtle danger that a seemingly submissive woman can pose to the dominance of a male social order and retreats to the more obvious threat that women like the Wife of Bath represent. The Wife of Bath, as he represents her in the 'Envoy,' can be mocked and dismissed according to antifeminist arguments but Griselda fits too closely to the antifeminist standards of ideal womanhood to be criticized. The perfection that the Clerk emphasizes in his description of Griselda prevents him from diffusing the challenge to his and Walter's authority that she embodies. He uses the relatively easy target of the Wife in order to gloss over Griselda's subversions but the result is a dramatic change of tone that sounds uncontrolled and out of character. The 'Envoy' fails to contain or mask Griselda's challenge to the male order which the Clerk values and merely emphasizes her disruptive influence over his text.

Griselda's control over language undermines both Walter and the Clerk's authority over her. They are unable to prevent the doubled speech that both submits and objects to their power. She reinterprets patriarchal discourse through her gendered body and disrupts the male economy, exposing Walter's unsuitability as a ruler and revealing her own capabilities and popularity with the people. Despite her under-valued status as commoner and woman, she proves herself to be the more effective sovereign, thus challenging patriarchal and antifeminist assumptions regarding the abilities of women. While she does operate allegorically as Christ-figure, Christian Everyman, and representative of 'commune profit,' Griselda's power in the *Tale* is in her role as woman struggling against an oppressive male social order. It is as a woman that she redefines the

mistake, the false intuition of a shift in (or away from) the dramatic character of the text: the manuscripts attribute the "Envoy" to both Chaucer and the Clerk, and they are right in either case. The dramatic question is, in this case, simply a false issue" (333).

qualities necessary for leadership and challenges societal expectations for women. By taking on the role of the passive and obedient woman and using it as a locus for resistance, Griselda sabotages antifeminist attempts to keep women in a subordinate position. She becomes the site of disruption in the male-authored text while at the same time offering no overt challenge or threat. She uses antifeminist ideals against their source and disrupts male control both inside and outside the *Tale*.



## Chapter Four

### Criseyde's Contradictions: Disrupting the 'Male' Narrative

Criseyde's character and its seeming inconsistencies have been the focal point for much of the critical debate surrounding *Troilus and Criseyde*. Far more attention has been paid to her than to any other character or aspect of the work despite the textual dominance of Troilus, Pandarus, and the narrator's voices in the poem. Critics have been preoccupied with her shifting roles, discourses, and loyalties in their attempts to define her and unify the contradictions of her character. They speak of her 'instability' and 'ambiguity' while puzzling over the extent of her self-knowledge and awareness of her situation and debate about whether or not she ever truly loved Troilus.<sup>1</sup> Criseyde's contradictions cause a similar confusion within the text. The other characters and the narrator attempt to define her and explain her actions, which rarely entirely conform to their expectations. She reflects the male desires that construct her role in the text but the male characters and narrator are not able to limit her to this role. She moves between being the idealized woman and the disruptive woman. The very instability of her character that has resulted in critical conflict and confusion is also the site of her subversion of the 'male' narrative and value system in which she operates. She challenges the traditional images of women imposed on her from both inside and outside the text by refusing to conform to the expectations of her lover, uncle, narrator, and audience.

Criseyde's subversiveness as a female character in a male-dominated and authored text is in many ways more subtle than that of the Wife of Bath, Alisoun of the *Miller's Tale*, or Griselda of the *Clerk's Tale*. Each of these other Chaucerian women relies on one dominant method of challenging male expectations: the Wife as a speaking subject,

<sup>1</sup>See such critics as Archibald (190), Cook, Donaldson (*Speaking of Chaucer*, 83), Hansen (174), Herman (122), Mann (23), Patterson (143), and Rowland (130) for examples of critical attention paid to Criseyde's 'ambiguities.'

Alisoun through her role as a disruptive physical presence, and Griselda through her mimetic strategies and layered discourse. Criseyde's methods, however, cannot be defined as readily. Her character encompasses elements of all of the above-mentioned subversive identities and techniques and challenges the static male constructions of womanhood by which she is read with the instability of her character. Her position in the text changes frequently, frustrating critical and narrative attempts to read her in terms of an idealized romance heroine. She by turns satisfies and disrupts male desire, conforming to and questioning the two-dimensional role of romantic heroine imposed upon her from inside and outside the narrative.

The construction of ideal womanhood according to patriarchal values informs the role of women within romantic conventions. Romance narratives typically position women according to these conventions which define the romance heroine as beautiful, modest, virtuous, and passive. The role of the ideal romance heroine within these conventions could be most succinctly characterized as a lack of subjectivity. The romance woman is read in relation to her knight, the object to his subject, and as such is dependent on him for her identity. As E. Jane Burns points out with regard to Old French romances,

The elaborate ideology of courtliness that conditions so many medieval texts fashions an ideal of femininity that actually alienates female identity, often using it as a foil to stage primary relationships of power between men. If the courtly lady is always present, always watching, waiting, listening, and thereby validating the existence of her courageous savior-knight, she is also always marginalized--whether socially, psychologically, or historically--standing beside, walking behind, or lying beneath the principal male subject of the chivalric adventure story. (13)

Women in romance texts are placed in a secondary position, objectified and passive. Their passivity ensures the primacy of male concerns within the text and that male dominance in the social system is not questioned.

The romance woman's desirability is connected with her passivity and her unthreatening position in relation to male power. Her objectified role within the text curtails the possibility of her agency and places her on a pedestal, incapable of interacting with or affecting the action surrounding her. Male desire in the courtly romance idealizes women and controls them. The language of desire with its seeming praise and respect for women is a particularly effective method of limiting women's agency because of its apparent innocuousness. The romantic privileging of women in society actually serves to oppress and objectify them. As Burns points out, "an ideology of courtly adoration and love, [while] appearing to elevate women to a privileged position in social interaction, masks an alternate formulation of women as desired and desirable bodies" (15 - 16). The romantic text keeps the heroine under the control of the male gaze and subject to his approval by defining her as 'body' rather than agent.

Helene Cixous, in her discussion of women in fairy tales, remarks on the tendency of patriarchal texts to objectify women and argues for the necessity of the absent woman to male desire:

Man's dream: I love her--absent, hence desirable, a dependent nonentity, hence adorable. Because she isn't there where she is. As long as she isn't where she is. How he looks at her then! When her eyes are closed, when he completely understands her, when he catches on and she is no more than this shape made for him: a body caught in his gaze. (*The Newly Born Woman*, 68)

The ideal woman, the most desirable woman is the object or the statue, the woman who can embody and reflect male fantasy without her own subjectivity interfering. Although Cixous' comments address fairy-tale conventions rather than those of medieval romance, the two genres are related in their portrayals of women. Both the fairy-tale princess as described by Cixous and the medieval romance heroine are remarkable for their passivity and lack of subjectivity, qualities embodied, for example, by Emily of the *Knight's Tale*.

Like the woman who "isn't where she is," Emilye is scarcely a presence in the *Tale* other than as an object to be gazed upon or fought over by her male admirers.<sup>2</sup> She is superfluous to the story as anything other than a body as is evident in the comical exchange between Palamon and Arcite where they argue over who loved her first (KnT. 1123 - 1186). She triggers male competition without ever having any contact with either of the knights. Their obsession with her reveals itself to be an obsession with the idea and ideal of romance rather than being based on any real interest in Emilye as a flesh and blood woman. Emilye's lack of subjectivity is characteristic of both fairy-tale and romance, genres which emphasize male dominance and construct femininity so as to conform to male desire. The women in these texts fulfill male fantasies of the submissive and 'absent' female who reaffirms male social and textual dominance and control. They are both objects of the male gaze that constructs them according to male desire and subject to male interpretation which forces their actions and speech to conform to male expectation.

The conventions of the romance narrative in their construction of womanhood impose this sort of male reading and gaze onto the body of the heroine but, in the case of Criseyde (and many other romantic heroines, as Burns proves in *Bodytalk*), there is also room within that narrative for subversion and challenges to the social system reflected in the romantic text. While *Troilus and Criseyde* may more accurately be called a 'tragedy' (as it is by Chaucer and his narrator), the conventions of romance are vital to an understanding of the poem. The narrator of the poem and the two main male characters foreground the romantic elements of the plot, particularly in the construction of Criseyde.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Note the end of the *Tale* when Theseus instigates the transfer of Emilye from Arcite to Palamon. Her interests and opinions are of no importance in the transaction which occurs as smoothly as if she had been a trophy passed from man to man.

<sup>3</sup>As Elaine Tuttle Hansen points out, the courtly conventions of the male lover are also under scrutiny in the poem but are evoked in a very different way than those connected with Criseyde. The treatment of Troilus in the work provides a space for a 'non-threatening' questioning of the 'feminized' role of the male lover. I call this a non-threatening examination because, while it does question male social roles, it

The narrator attempts to portray her in terms of the helpless and idealized woman typical of the courtly romance. In the first book he dwells on her friendless state in Troy, abandoned by a traitorous father and subject to the retaliation of the betrayed city:

Now hadde Calkas left in this meschaunce,  
 Al unwist of this false and wikked dede,  
 His doughter, which that was in gret penaunce,  
 For of hire lif she was ful sore in drede,  
 As she that nyste what was best to rede;  
 For bothe a widewe was she and allone  
 Of any frend to whom she dorste hir mone.

(I. 92 - 98)

The narrator's description of Criseyde's helplessness turns out to be a romanticized one as we later encounter her in her mansion surrounded by friends and relatives. This exaggeration of the desperateness of her situation serves to incite pity for Criseyde in her readers but it is also one of many of the narrator's attempts to read her in a way that is later contradicted in the text. His depictions of her are designed to evoke an image of the traditional heroine as helpless and in need of male support and protection.

The narrator's tendency to romanticize his heroine has traditionally been read as his attempt to avoid addressing the final tragedy of the story he is telling.<sup>4</sup> By idealizing Criseyde, he tries to hide the inevitability of her betrayal from both himself and his audience. In doing this, however, he also exerts a control over Criseyde by inscribing his desire and his narrative on her body. He tries to limit her potential to disrupt the romance narrative by defining her in terms of the romance ideal and constructing her as impossibly beautiful and almost inhuman:

maintains the hierarchy of gender. Troilus' 'feminized' role does not place him in danger of losing his position of dominance in society. The examination of male roles in courtly romance that takes place in *Troilus and Criseyde*, as Hansen notes, is not so much subversive as a reaffirmation of the primacy of male concerns.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Bloomfield (35).

Criseyde was this lady name al right.  
 As to my doom, in al Troies cite  
 Nas *non so fair*, forpassynge every wight,  
 So *aungelik* was her natif beaute,  
 That lik a thing *immortal* semed she,  
 As doth an *hevenyssh perfit creature*,  
 That down were sent in *scornynge of nature*.

(I. 99 - 105, my emphasis)

He denies Criseyde's link to the natural world by emphasizing her 'other-worldly' qualities and, in so doing, attempts to confine her to the limited role of the romantic ideal. Her more than natural beauty recalls the sterile beauty of Pygmalion's statue, placing her in a similar, objectified role.<sup>5</sup> She becomes trapped in the discourse of the chivalric romance in which the woman, although seemingly powerful in her position on the pedestal and ability to provoke male devotion, is actually incapable of controlling her own destiny.

The narrator in *Troilus and Criseyde* uses this tradition of the lovely and passive heroine as a method of controlling Criseyde. He attempts to keep her in an objectified position and curtails the power of her potentially disruptive female body by moving it out of the physical realm. By describing her body in terms of the ethereal, he perfects and sanitizes it. He offers her as the opposite to the male body and bestows her with such virtues as would guarantee her good behaviour in his text:

... that creature  
 Was never lasse mannyssh in semyng;  
 And ek the pure wise of hire mevyng  
 Shewed wel that men myght in hire gesse

<sup>5</sup>Cixous refers to Pygmalion as a classic example of the man in love with the 'absent' woman. The concept of the woman as statue is also noted by Burns who connects it to medieval romance: "Miming the work of Ovid's model artist and master-craftsman, twelfth-century romance narrators often paint portraits of idealized feminine beauty that suggest posed statues rather than living flesh" (109).

Honour, estat, and wommanly noblesse.

(I. 283 - 87)

He places her firmly within the male gaze and subject to its appreciation and values. The qualities of 'honour,' 'estat,' and 'wommanly noblesse' are, according to the grammar of his sentence, ones that men find admirable in women and would hope to find in Criseyde.

There is no direct statement that she embodies these qualities but merely the remark that men might see her as having them, indicating an act of inscribing male desire on the female body.<sup>6</sup>

Criseyde's movements, gestures and actions are subject to re-interpretation according to how the narrator wishes to read her and have his audience read her. He often moves in to forestall audience interpretations by providing his own reading of Criseyde's behaviour. Recognizing that his description of Criseyde's strong and sudden emotions on seeing Troilus could indicate a woman capable of taking the initiative without consideration of propriety of male privilege in desire, he quickly softens the impact of her reaction:

For I sey nought that she so sodeynly  
 Yaf hym hire love, but that she gan enclyne  
 To like hym first, and I have told you whi;  
 And after that, his manhod and his pyne  
 Made love withinne hire for to myne,  
 For which by proces and by good servyse  
 He gat hire love, and in no sodeyn wyse.

(II. 673 - 79)

In his explanation of how Criseyde falls in love, the narrator glosses over her physical appraisal and approval of Troilus.<sup>7</sup> Criseyde's initial reaction is uncontained by a male

<sup>6</sup>See Donaldson (*Speaking of Chaucer*, 56) for a more detailed account of how our image of Criseyde is created by very few concrete details and the effect of the grammar of 'seeming' that is used in this passage.

<sup>7</sup>Haahr also points out that, "Criseyde is seduced by Troilus' beauty" and notes that "This stress on the male lover's beauty, while common in classical poetry, is rare in the Middle Ages" (26).

primacy in the scene and is therefore unacceptable as an expression of female desire so the narrator translates it to correspond to his model of what a woman should be. The narrator re-writes her expression of arousal, the much quoted "Who yaf me drynke" (II. 651), into a more gentle 'inclination' toward Troilus and his attractions. He denies her strong emotion and forces her back into the role of the virtuous and passive woman. Troilus, on the other hand, is placed back in the position of control in the same passage: "and by good servyse / *He gat hire love*" (678 - 79, my emphasis). The narrator returns Troilus to the subject position to counter-act the effect of the disturbing moment when Criseyde reverses the typical romance power structure by making him the focus of the *female* gaze.<sup>8</sup>

The narrator uses his power over the story as a way to control his audience's perceptions of Criseyde. He attempts to portray her in a 'sympathetic' manner that emphasizes her passive and romantic qualities but this description of her is undermined by the reader's foreknowledge of the story's conclusion. The narrator fights against this foreknowledge and against Criseyde's disruption of the romance plot by offering interpretations and excuses for her behaviour. What is on the surface a defence of Criseyde's character, however, is also an exercising of control over her individuality. He assures his audience that his character is indeed acting in accordance to romance tradition and that her love is real:

... That hire herte trewe was and kynde  
Towardes [Troilus], and spak right as she mente,  
And that she starf for wo neigh whan she wente,

<sup>8</sup>Troilus' actions in this scene intensify the effects of the reversal of power. He puts himself on display for Criseyde by riding past her house straight from the battle but displays a maidenly modesty in reaction to the attention he receives:

For which he wex a litel reed for shame  
When he the peple upon hym herde cryen,  
That to byholde it was a noble game  
How sobrelich he caste down his yen.

(II. 645 - 48)



And was in purpos evere to be trewe;

(IV. 1416 - 20)

The narrator tries to maintain Criseyde's unthreatening position within the male economy of the romance narrative by convincing his audience that her intentions are harmless. Critics have often speculated that his 'sympathetic' insistence on her innocence and faithfulness are indicators of his own attraction for Criseyde. His love, however, is based on his construction of her in the romantic and unthreatening role of the passive woman. He glosses over or ignores her 'flaws' or 'slips' out of the romantic mould because of the danger an uncontrolled woman poses to social structures that uphold male dominance in text and society and because his own attraction to her depends on her adherence to the romantic construction of womanhood. His attraction is based on his ability to control Criseyde and limit her to the harmless role that patriarchal values construct as acceptable for women.

Criseyde and her behaviour are clearly of utmost importance to the narrator as is evident in his desire to 'defend' her femininity and her faithfulness<sup>9</sup> but he is not alone in imposing his desires upon her. While the narrator's overall control over Criseyde's character from his position as 'author' is more inclusive and wide-reaching than that of the other characters in his text, the exertion of male control that occurs within the text is no

<sup>9</sup>Troilus is the other character that the narrator finds it necessary to defend, in his case against the 'feminization' that Hansen observes in him. The narrator has to assure his audience of Troilus' manliness on several occasions in order to downplay his ineffectuality as a lover. When Troilus wavers in his conviction to action regarding Diomedes, the narrator moves in to assert that it is not due to any lack of courage and to reaffirm Troilus' ability to act:

But why he nolde don so fel a ded,  
That shal I seyn, an whi hym liste it spare:  
He hadde in herte alweyes a manere drede  
Lest that Criseyde, in rumour of this fare,  
Sholde han ben slayn; lo, this was al his care.  
And ellis, certeyn, as I seyde yore,  
He hadde it don, withouten wordes more.

(V. 50 - 56)

less important. Troilus and Pandarus also impose their own desired readings on Criseyde's body and speech, Troilus in a manner similar to the narrator and Pandarus through a diminution of her potential as a thinking and speaking subject. They both attempt to define her femininity according to their own desires and to limit her role in the text to one which stays within the confines of male expectations. Their constructions of her as an object of desire deny her subjectivity while asserting their own dominance and control.

Troilus' exertion of control over Criseyde, like the narrator's, is based on his desire to keep her character within the romance tradition. His construction of the romance heroine and her place in the love relationship coincides with Cixous' description of the ideal female body that "isn't where it is." Many critics including Hansen have observed the significance of the 'twice-told' narrative of Troilus falling in love as an example of "the young man [who] falls in love with love even before he has a female object on which to focus his attentions" (144). As Hansen points out, the narrator repeats his description of Troilus falling prey to Love's arrow but includes the object of his love only in the second version, which shows the lack of mutuality in the courtly romance. The actual presence of Criseyde is of secondary importance to Troilus' love and, indeed, he seems reluctant to initiate physical contact with the object of his affections. Without the continual proddings of Pandarus, it is questionable whether Troilus would ever do anything but languish and sigh in his darkened bedroom. His image of love does not seem to include the presence of the loved one and, when it is forced upon him by Pandarus' machinations, he is left at a loss.<sup>10</sup> Troilus is clearly more comfortable with an abstract notion of love and one that keeps Criseyde in the realm of the abstract as well.<sup>11</sup> He even goes so far as to doubt

<sup>10</sup>At Criseyde's bedside, rather than masterfully taking charge of the situation and exerting his dominance, Troilus falls into a faint and must be revived by Criseyde and Pandarus' efforts. While the postponement of consummation is a part of the romance tradition, it is more typically caused by the woman's modesty than the man's incapacity.

<sup>11</sup>See Mieszkowski (120).

"wheither goddesse or womman... / She be" (I. 425 - 26). This hint at immortality is an echo of the narrator's more developed concept of Criseyde being somehow more than natural. Troilus is also reluctant to grant her the status of a sentient and active being, reading her instead, like the narrator, as idealized and objectified.

In her objectified position, Criseyde is at the mercy of Troilus' interpretation. By keeping her in the position of object to his subject, Troilus is free to impose his desires on her and re-write her and her responses to him to fit his expectations. The most obvious example of this imposition comes in Book II with reference to Criseyde's reply to Troilus' letter. The narrator first offers us an account of what Criseyde writes:

She thanked hym of al that he wel mente  
 Towardes hire, but holden hym in honde  
 She nolde nought, ne make hireselven bonde  
 In love; but as his suster, hym to plese,  
 She wolde fayn to doon his herte an ese.

(II. 1221 - 25)

Shortly after this description, he provides Troilus' interpretation of this same letter:

But finaly, he took al for the beste  
 That she hym wroot, for somewhat he byheld  
 On which hym thoughte he myghte his herte reste,  
 Al covered she tho wordes under sheld.  
 Thus to the more worthi part he held,  
 That what for hope and Pandarus byheste,  
 His grete wo foryede he at the leste.

(II. 1324 - 30)

Clearly the substance of Criseyde's letter with its sisterly emphasis has been noticeably altered by Troilus' reading.<sup>12</sup> He sees in it what he wants to see and what is to him an

<sup>12</sup>Interestingly enough, the necessity for Troilus' revising of Criseyde's letter is due to her failure to conform to Pandarus' expectations of what she should write. Pandarus attempts to dictate the content of the letter through his suggestions to Criseyde which she resists, but her resistance is again countered by

appropriate response from the object of his affection according to his understanding of romantic interplay. Criseyde's letter becomes as 'absent' as Criseyde herself by Troilus' unwillingness to acknowledge its actuality and his reading or re-writing of the letter denies Criseyde's part in its creation. Because he does not recognize Criseyde's individuality and subjectivity, Troilus is free to make her conform to his desires and ideals.

The refusal to acknowledge Criseyde's subjectivity exhibited by Troilus is shared by most of the male characters in the text as is evident in the way that Criseyde is passed from man to man. Both Troilus and Pandarus treat Criseyde as an object of exchange over which they have an unquestioned control. They show little concern for her desires but assume the lack of subjectivity in her that is characteristic of the typical romance heroine. Hector's assertion that in Troy, "We usen here no wommen for to selle" (IV. 182) is clearly ironic given the attitudes of the Trojan council and those of Troilus and Pandarus in their discussions regarding Criseyde. Pandarus unabashedly takes on the role of a procurer for Troilus, telling him that "Were it for my suster, al thy sorwe, / By my wil she sholde al be thyn to-morwe" (I. 860 - 62). Later, when the relationship between the lovers has been established, Pandarus claims responsibility for 'giving' Criseyde to Troilus:

"For the have I my nece, of vices cleene,  
So fully maad thi gentillesse triste,  
That al shal ben right as thiselven liste."  
(III. 257 - 59)

Although Troilus objects to the implications of "bauderye" in Pandarus' self-congratulations (III. 393 - 99), he immediately offers to return the favour:

"And that thow knowe I thynke nought ne wene  
That this servise a shame be or jape,

Troilus' exertion of his control. Male control is actually layered in this instance, subjecting Criseyde to two tangible levels of imposition on her ability to think and act.

I have my faire suster Polixene,  
 Cassandre, Eleyne, or any of the frape--  
 Be she nevere so fair or wel yshape,  
 Tel me which thow wilt of everychone,  
 To han for thyn, and lat me thanne allone.

(III. 407 - 13)

Troilus and Pandarus assume their power over the women they discuss so casually, treating them as commodities and proving that, despite Hector's statement to the contrary, the women of Troy are indeed for sale and objects of trade. Thus, the two male protagonists force Criseyde into a subordinate position by interpreting her according to romance conventions regarding the heroine's lack of subjectivity and her passive submission to male exchange.<sup>13</sup>

As well as treating Criseyde as a gift in his power to bestow, Pandarus acts to limit her potential as a thinking and speaking subject by reading her according to his assumptions regarding her weak understanding and her dependence on his advice. He drastically underestimates her cognitive abilities, thinking to himself that:

"If I my tale endite  
 Aught harde, or make a proces any whye,  
 She shal no savour have therin but lite,  
 And trowe I wolde hire in my wil bigyle;  
 For tendre wittes wenen al be wyle  
 Theras thei kan nought pleyntyly understonde;  
 Forthi hire wit to serven wol I fonde"--

(II. 267 - 73)

Pandarus blinds himself to the possibility of Criseyde being quite capable of understanding more than he realizes, preferring to read her as slow-witted and easily manipulated. The

<sup>13</sup>Again, *Emilye of the Knight's Tale* provides an excellent example of this type of passive heroine. She is passed between Arcite and Palamon by her guardian Theseus without her registering any sign of distress or even interest.

idealized romance heroine should not be aware of more than what her male 'keepers' think it necessary she should know and so Pandarus, in keeping with this tradition, tailors what he tells Criseyde. Despite the unromantic banter that characterizes his interactions with Criseyde and would seem to grant her a greater respect than Troilus and the narrator's idealizations, Pandarus does not recognize her as an equal in any way. His treatment of her, although allowing a certain degree of deviation from the idealized image of womanhood forced upon her, is generally condescending and designed to prey on her fears and ignorance rather than to engage her in a rational discussion of her future. He presumes her helplessness and her reliance on his superior understanding.

Pandarus, Troilus and the narrator all read Criseyde in terms of the helpless 'fair maiden-in-distress' stereotype and as a woman who is incapable of assessing her own situation. Their readings of her as such attempt to constrain her within this role and keep her under their control, incapable of acting for herself. As object or commodity, they realize, Criseyde poses no threat to male dominance in society and their continued control over her protects their own positions of strength. The narrator, with his repeated re-writings of Criseyde's responses and his imposition of his own wishes on her motives, seems particularly aware of the potential for disruption that she holds. Criseyde's subversions, however, since she cannot directly address the narrator, are primarily acted out through her interactions with Troilus and Pandarus. Her dealings with her lover and uncle involve smaller subversions of male expectations which, when read in terms of the narrator's control over the text and its values, provoke a larger questioning of women's roles in literature and society. The control that Troilus and Pandarus exert over her is primarily for their own convenience and pleasure but the narrator, with his awareness of the story's ending, recognizes the wider significance of her actions and attempts to curtail her potential disruptions by reading her as the passive romantic heroine.

Criseyde, nevertheless, is not so easily controlled, as can be seen by her reactions to the impositions of her lover and uncle. Through her subversions of their authority, she also manages to disrupt the narrator's endeavours to limit her subjectivity and influence over events. Her most basic form of resistance, that of failing to conform completely to the expectations of male characters and narrator, is quite obvious on the surface but its implications are less so. This is quite possibly due to the contradictory and diverse ways in which Criseyde resists the role of the romance heroine, which include such techniques as mimicry, sliding between discourses, and an acute awareness of her situation unusual to a romance heroine. The range of her subversions prevents an easy counter-attack on the part of the other characters and the narrator. She adapts her actions and responses to each encounter by both using and resisting male expectations at the same time.

In fact, she plays the part of the romance heroine very well when the occasion requires it, as can be seen in her effective pleas for male protection. Hector and Troilus are both taken in by her expressions of fear and gratitude and her appeals to their manly strength.<sup>14</sup> Her fears are indeed very well founded given the precariousness of her situation in Troy but her pretensions to helplessness are belied by her shrewdness in knowing to whom and how to make these appeals. Her appeal to Hector is particularly good as an example of how she uses male expectation and desire to achieve her goals. In this scene she plays to his masculine pride and sympathy for the helpless woman, constructing herself as the distressed heroine who must be saved by the powerful knight:

On knees she fil biforn Ector adown  
 With pitous vois, and tendrely wepynge,  
 His mercy bad, hirselves excusynge.

(I. 110 - 12)

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, Book I, lines 110 - 120 and Book III, 74 - 77.

Hector's response to this plea is predictable both in its nature and particularly its reasoning:

Now was this Ector pitous of nature,  
 And saugh that she was sorwfully bigon,  
*And that she was so fair a creature;*  
 Of his goodnesse he gladede hire anon,  
 And seyde, "Lat youre fadres treson gon  
 Forth with meschauce, and ye youreself in joie  
 Dwelleth with us, whil yow good list, in Troie."

(I. 113 - 19, my emphasis)

Criseyde, in the role of the beautiful and helpless woman, sways masculine opinion and provokes a desire in Hector to protect her. To draw upon Irigaray's theories of mimesis again, Criseyde "recover[s] the place of her exploitation...without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it" (*This Sex Which Is Not One*, 76). She mimics male expectations of her but at the same time challenges these expectations by showing how they can be manipulated to conform to her needs. While she must necessarily rely on a man for protection, her reliance and her mimicry of the helpless female expose the male economy that prefers to construct women as helpless and dependent on men. Criseyde's assumption of the romance heroine's role places Hector in the dominant role of male saviour and establishes her control of the situation. Her mimicry of male expectations achieves a further enactment of the traditional roles of hero and heroine which results in the offer of the male protection necessary to Criseyde's continued safety in Troy.<sup>15</sup>

With Troilus she also plays the part of the romance heroine but because her relationship with him is more complex than her brief encounter with Hector, her

<sup>15</sup>Mieszkowski argues that, "She does not threaten men by wanting to substitute her projects for theirs. she does not cast them as instruments in her plans. Instead, she reflects back to them the importance of their being, acknowledging them and their capacity to do without requiring them in turn to acknowledge her" (112). Mieszkowski sees this flexibility as a weakness in Criseyde rather than seeing that Criseyde does not merely 'reflect' male expectation but mimics it in such a way as to disrupt the expectation.



assumption of the role is also more complex. She does not limit herself to fulfilling his expectations and manipulating him through his own desire although mimicry is central to her interaction with him. She does enact his fantasy of the woman who "isn't where she is" by maintaining a distance between them and emphasizing her own modesty and unwillingness to sacrifice her reputation, but at the same time assumes a position of dominance in the relationship that goes farther than the illusory power the woman conventionally has over her knight.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Criseyde shows herself to be in control of the situation numerous times while Troilus dissolves into sighs or even faints.<sup>17</sup> She exerts her control carefully, showing her dominance only at those times in which Troilus is immobilized or incapable of action and retreating back into her strategic submission when he recovers. This shift is particularly noticeable in Book III when Criseyde moves from a position of control in which she can taunt Troilus ("Is this a mannes game?" III. 1126) to the role of a trembling aspen leaf in his arms (III. 1200 - 01) in the space of a hundred

<sup>16</sup>Troilus does actually propose this traditional type of relationship, offering to be her servant:

"... verrey, humble, trewe,  
Secret, and in my paynes pacient,  
And evere mo desiren fresshly newe  
To serve, and ben ylike diligent,  
And with good herte al holly youre talent  
Receyven wel, how sore that me smerte;  
Lo, this mene I, myn owen swete herte."

(III. 141 - 47)

Criseyde, however, recognizes the truth of the power structure and the irony of his proposal. She reminds him of his dominant social status but warns him that she intends to take his metaphoric abasement as real:

"A kynges sone although ye be, ywys,  
Ye shal namore han sovereigntete  
Of me in love, than right in that cas is;  
N'y nyl forbere, if that ye don amys,  
To wratthe yow; and whil that ye me serve,  
Cherichen yow right after ye disserve."

(III. 170 - 75)

<sup>17</sup>I find it odd that Hansen, who is so sensitive to the feminization of the masculine characters that she deals with, does not examine the apparent role reversals that occur between Troilus and Criseyde. She points out occasions where Troilus is 'unmanned' in connection with Criseyde but does not look at the dominant role that Criseyde assumes on those occasions.

lines. While the submissiveness and flexibility that critics read in Criseyde can account for her trembling like a leaf as an adaptation to Troilus' expectations, her competency and level-headedness in his moments of crisis can not be so easily explained. In order to fit into the mold of the romance heroine and to the submissive role expected of her by male characters and the narrator, Criseyde should be useless in a crisis situation. She should be the helpless woman the narrator describes her as in the first book, but instead she is capable and practical.

As a further indication of her resilience and practicality, she recovers first from the news that she is to be traded for Antenor and is the first to proffer a plan of action. Her competency exposes the fallacy behind the image of the beautiful and vapid heroine of romance tradition and contrasts sharply with Troilus' own ineffectuality. She shows her common sense in such speeches as:

"Lo, herte myn, wel woot ye this," quod she,  
 "That if a wight alwey his wo compleyne  
 And seketh nought how holpen for to be,  
 It nys but folie and encrees of peyne;  
 And syn that here assembled be we tweyne  
 To fynde boote of wo that we been inne,  
 It were al tyme soone to bygynne."

(IV. 1254 - 60)

Criseyde takes charge of the situation with such practical advice which emphasizes Troilus' incompetency in contrast to her own competency. She reveals herself as capable and pragmatic, determined to be involved in decisions that will affect her own future. Rather than accepting Troilus' romantic but ill thought-out plan to "stele away and be togedere so" (IV. 1507), living off the charity of his friends, Criseyde points out its flaws

and offers a more concrete plan in which she is more responsible for her own well-being.<sup>18</sup> She shows an independence in her desire to trust to her own talents instead of completely relying on Troilus' somewhat questionable ones. Her strength does not let him assume the role of the powerful knight capable of protecting his helpless lady, and exposes his inability to keep her from harm.<sup>19</sup>

Criseyde's faith in her uncle also seems limited and she shows a caution in her dealings with him that contradicts his assumptions regarding her intelligence and his patronizing attitude with her. She shows that her abilities to deceive are just as developed as her uncle's in our first picture of their interaction in Book II.<sup>20</sup> Their exchanges resemble the move and counter-move of a game, with their serious intentions concealed by the banter. Pandarus assumes a position of dominance in the scene from the beginning by hinting at a secret that he possesses and that affects Criseyde. She adapts to the situation and plays to his expectations with such comments as "My wit is for t'arede it al to leene" (II. 132), flattering him in his belief of his own mental superiority. Instead of pressing

<sup>18</sup>Mieszkowski argues that, "Criseyde is assertive with Troilus to submit herself to the ruler of the Greeks and Trojans. Her planning, then, has nothing to do with the expression of an independent selfhood in projects and goals. Her characteristic decision is the choice between more powerful people's choices" (119). However, such a choice indicates an intelligence and awareness in Criseyde of the powers that are exerted over her that contradicts Mieszkowski's opening assertion that Criseyde "has no personal substance and no projects of her own; she never chooses and acts or sets goals and tries to reach those goals. She responds to the men around her and mirrors them, but she is not someone herself" (109). Clearly, Criseyde's awareness of the levels of power over her (an awareness that Troilus and Pandarus seem to lack) displays more 'personal substance' than Mieszkowski allows for in her. She makes a political decision in order to protect herself from the men who are gradually leading her to ruin.

<sup>19</sup>She shows this lack of faith in him earlier as well, in her response to Pandarus who appears with a message from Troilus regarding their situation:

"Allas," quod she, "what wordes may ye brynge?  
What wol my deere herte seyn to me,  
Which that I drede nevere mo to see?  
Wol he han pleynte or teris er I wende?  
I have ynough, if he therafter sende!"

(IV. 857 - 61)

She does not expect him to have any constructive advice but merely more sighs, tears, and complaints, of which she has plenty already.

<sup>20</sup>See Stokes (25).

him for the information that has pricked her curiosity and, to a certain extent, her fear, she pretends to a lack of interest which she obviously does not feel:

Tho gan she wondren moore than biforn  
 A thousand fold, and down hire eyghen caste;  
 For nevere, sith the tyme that she was born,  
 To knowe thyng desired she so faste;  
 And with a syk she seyde hym atte laste,  
 "Now, uncle myn, I nyl yow nought displese,  
 Nor axen more that may do yow disese."

(II. 140 -47)

She immediately drops the subject despite the curiosity she displays in the text and pretends to an indifference. In order to regain his dominance in the conversation, therefore, Pandarus must reassert and reveal the importance of his secret. In this way, Criseyde deceives him and uses his weakness of wanting to be the centre of attention against him in order to find out what she wants to know. In fact, she reveals what her tactics will be with regard to the pressures Pandarus puts on her to accept Troilus as her lover when she says: "It nedeth me ful sleighly for to pleie" (II. 462). Her comment shows her awareness of the game she must play and that deceit is her strongest weapon in her dealings with Pandarus. She uses her ability to deceive and moves between 'playing dumb' and exerting control over her uncle, manipulating him during his attempts to manipulate her.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Hansen notes, "Criseyde has not only changed the whole course of Troilus's life, but now, due to the same instabilities he once exploited, she has also predictable spoiled Pandarus's game and brought him face to face again with his own actual powerlessness. Worst of all, her behavior has called into question the authority of Pandarus's words and fictions; she has, in effect, however unwittingly, silenced the most garrulous, inventive of men" (179). While I would argue that Criseyde's actions are far from unwitting, Hansen points out an important part of the threat Criseyde poses to Pandarus and his reasons for attempting to keep her in a disenfranchised position.

Criseyde's ability to deceive extends into a capability for switching roles in her discourse which alters according to the situation and the expectations of those to whom she speaks. Gretchen Mieszkowski has pointed out the flexibility of her voice:

Criseyde...has no idiom of her own. She sounds like Pandarus with Pandarus and like Troilus with Troilus; she speaks colloquially with her uncle and then sings virtual duets with her lover, her vocabulary as formal and her romantic cadences as stately as any of his. With Troilus she is the lady of romance; with Pandarus, the woman of the *fabliaux*. Criseyde's style is so different with Pandarus and Troilus that she could be two different speakers. (122)

Mieszkowski's observations regarding the levels of Criseyde's discourse are very astute but I cannot agree with her conclusion that, "To the extent that Criseyde is both the woman of the *fabliaux* and the lady of romance, she is no one at all" (123).<sup>22</sup> I also find her distinctions between Criseyde's roles too black and white; Criseyde's discourse with Troilus may be predominantly romantic in tone (notice should be taken of her occasional slips into the colloquial such as "Is this a mannes game?" 1126) but its intent or content is not always so. She discusses thoroughly pragmatic topics with him and displays an initiative in her speech that is uncharacteristic of that of the romance heroine. When faced with Troilus' seemingly endless rhapsodies and lack of action in her bed, she prods him with:

"But lat us falle away fro this matere,  
For it suffiseth, this that seyde is heere,  
And at o word, withouten repentaunce,

<sup>22</sup>Patterson makes a similar point when he describes Criseyde as being made up of three 'separate' characters: 'Troilus' courtly lady, Pandarus' flirtations niece, and Diomedes' self-interested lover. He goes on to argue that, "It is all too easy to decide that the last of these Criseydes is the real one, but to do so requires us to impeach all the rest by assuming a self-consistency—a constancy of selfhood—that the poem itself shows to be an illusion" (143). Trained to expect an obvious consistency of character, Patterson, like many other critics, assumes its lack to mean a lack of selfhood rather than a deliberately elusive self.

Welcome, my knyght, my pees, my suffisaunce!"

(III. 1306 - 09)

While the language may indeed be befitting romance conventions, the sentiment of "shut up and take me" lacks the subtlety and modesty one would expect under the circumstances. Neither is Criseyde's interaction with Pandarus entirely ribald and coarse as Mieszkowski would seem to suggest. She is certainly more free in her discourse with him but she is capable of elevated language in his presence as well, as is evident in her reply to Pandarus' false accusation of betrayal:

"Allas! I wende, whoso tales tolde,  
My deere herte wolde me nought holde  
So lightly fals! Allas, conceytes wronge,  
What harm they don! For now lyve I to longe!"

(III. 802 - 05)

Her melodramatic earnestness at this point rivals that of Troilus himself and is far from the language of the fabliaux.<sup>23</sup>

While I agree with Mieszkowski's distinctions regarding Criseyde's ability to shift between discourses, I believe that her use of these discourses has a mimetic subversiveness rather than being a mere parroting of the dominant male's discourse. The discrepancies between voice and situation such as I have pointed out indicate a less obvious and simplistic use of discourse than Mieszkowski allows for in her paper. They show that, while Criseyde's voice may be difficult to pin down, it is not an absence but a disruptive

<sup>23</sup>See also her response to her uncle's threats of suicide:

"A, Lord! What me is tid a sory chaunce!  
For myn estat lith in a jupartie,  
And ek myn emes life is in balaunce;  
But natheles, with Goddes governaunce,  
I shal so doon, my honour shal I kepe,  
And ek his lif" (II. 464 - 69)

This exaggerated reply to Pandarus' manipulative threat, couched in sighs and repeated thrice (463) shows Criseyde's awareness of the part she plays with her uncle. She meets his melodrama with her own, mocking the conventions of romance that take such exchanges seriously.

presence. She uses her adeptness with language and discourse in order to assume the roles expected of her by both lover and uncle and, by demonstrating her flexibility with them, exposes them as roles rather than impositions on an otherwise blank slate. She shows the limitations of the two roles offered to her by Troilus and Pandarus in the situations where there is slippage between the discourses. The language of romance and, by association, the idealized role of the lady appear ridiculous and stylized when used in conversation with Pandarus while the language and role of the fabliau woman becomes jarring and exaggerated in connection with Troilus. Criseyde's intermingling of the two discourses and roles delineates their constructedness. She exposes them as representative of male desire rather than roles into which women naturally fall. Her adapting of discourse to situation reveals how closely both roles are linked to the desires and expectations of the male characters for whom they are designed. What may seem at first to be an unthinking parroting of conventional discourses, therefore, is in fact a subversive technique. Criseyde subverts the male control that forces her into such limited roles by rising above the limitations and manipulating them to her own advantage. Her use of male constructions of women transcends the expectations that created them and turns into a tool for survival. Flexibility and proficiency in language allow Criseyde to satisfy male desire while maintaining a certain degree of control over the situations in which she finds herself.

Criseyde's adaptability has been condemned by critics as proof of her passivity and ineffectuality.<sup>24</sup> Her ability to meet the expectations of those around her is read as evidence of her own lack of a solid character. As Arlyn Diamond argues, "In the course of the tragedy, Criseyde undergoes a complex series of identifications and transformations which rise not out of a central core of character that we as critics can identify but out of

<sup>24</sup>See particularly Mieszkowski's article and much of Hansen.

the shifting and contradictory needs of the masculine world she inhabits within and beyond the work" (99 - 100). This observation, while astute in its recognition of the pressures to which Criseyde responds, assumes a passivity in Criseyde that precludes any sort of independent thought or action and places her firmly in the role of the romance heroine. Although she certainly is passive in the sense that she cannot control her destiny as far as it is ordered by the male powers above her, Criseyde is not the typical heroine in her reactions to the crises that surround her. In fact, her actions within the text challenge the romance constructions of womanhood that inform how she is created and interpreted by the male characters and narrator around her.

As I have shown earlier in this chapter, the male characters and narrator attempt to construct and read Criseyde according to the romance model of the ideal woman in order to keep her in a subordinate position under their control. Criseyde, however, does not stay within this model and disrupts male expectations by failing to conform to the passive and helpless role to which she is assigned. She displays more energy and individuality than is required or desirable in a romance heroine and, even more unforgivable, she disrupts the idealized conception of the faithful woman which is essential to the romance myth of womanhood. When Criseyde finally betrays Troilus for Diomedes she also betrays male expectation and desire and her role as a romance heroine. She ceases to be the attractive and helpless woman that Troilus, Pandarus, and the narrator have constructed and read her as and, from her position outside these expectations, she calls into question the validity and appropriateness of romantic images of women.

Her subversion of these expectations does not, of course, rest merely on the fact of her betrayal but on the manner and effect of the betrayal and how 'betrayal' is to be defined. As a simply unfaithful woman, Criseyde would not subvert any expectations that could not be addressed by the antifeminist view of women as wicked, faithless and lustful.



However, Criseyde's betrayal is not one that can be easily explained by any of these qualities. Her modesty, her reluctance to become involved in any sort of romantic relationship in the first place, and her subjection to the social and political pressures that govern her actions all defend her from accusations that she is simply another 'wicked wife' in a long tradition of faithless women. She is far from pitiless as is pointed out in Kate Bauer's article "Criseyde's Routhe." In fact, Bauer argues that 'routhe,' along with fear, is one of Criseyde's most defining qualities and its influence guides many of her actions:

Fear alone does not move Criseyde to accept the attentions of Troilus, however. As she considers her uncle's frightening words and observes the 'sorwful ernest of the knyght' (II.452), Criseyde begins to feel compassion: 'She gan to rewe' (II.455). Her fear moves her to exactly the *pitee* which Pandarus has held out to Troilus as a basis for hope. (6)

Her 'compassion' alone makes reading her in terms of the antifeminist view of traitorous women suspect. Her responses to the pressures put on her by her uncle and lover indicate a more complex and sympathetic character than the antifeminist tradition could encompass.

Neither does her betrayal fall within those typical of the courtly romance. The adulterous woman is hardly a stranger to the romance tradition, which includes such women as Iseut and Guinevere, but the motive for these betrayals is a transference of love. R. Howard Bloch describes the dominance of illicit affairs in courtly literature but his many examples are centred on the power of a 'secret' love (113 - 142) and, most commonly a woman who is torn between her conflicting loves for two men. Criseyde's betrayal, however, has little to do with love and is not caused as far as we know by an emotional shift between the two men who love her. Just as her reluctance to engage in the affair with Troilus is overcome by political and self-preservational considerations, her

affair with Diomedes is sparked by an unwillingness to offend a knight in a hostile camp. She responds to his declarations of love in a way that flatters him but promises nothing:

But natheles she thonketh Diomedes  
 Of al his travaile and his goode cheere,  
 And that hym list his frendshipe hire to bede;  
 And she accepteth it in good manere,  
 And wol do fayn that is hym lief and dere,  
 And tristen hym she wolde, and wel she myghte,  
 As seyde she; and from hire hors sh'alighte.

(V. 183 - 89)

There is no sign of a grand passion in Criseyde's interactions with Diomedes which would be acceptable as a reason for betrayal in the romance model. Her move to Diomedes from Troilus carries little hint of a transference of love from one to the other and as such falls outside the romance tolerance for faithlessness in situations of passion.

Criseyde's actions thus cannot easily be condemned in terms of the antifeminist tradition but neither can they be excused by the romantic tradition of illicit affairs. Instead, her betrayal calls into question the validity of the constructions of women in both traditions by exposing the social and political pressures that govern women's lives. Criseyde is not drawn to betray Troilus by an inherent female trait that makes her incapable of faithfulness and neither is she easily swayed by male declarations of affection. Her actions cannot be explained by the limited models that male constructions of femininity provide, models which do not recognize women as having any significant place within male society. Instead, Criseyde's predicament reveals a more 'real' picture of the position of women in a male-dominated society as she is forced to adapt her life to the changing demands of the men around her. Her speeches are riddled with the language of compromise, noncommittal but inoffensive to the men who pressure her into dangerous situations:

"I say nat therfore that I wol yow love,  
 N'y say nat nay; but in conclusioun,  
 I mene wel, by God that sit above!"  
 (V. 1002 - 4)

Her rather pathetic claim that she 'means well' shows the impossibility of the situation in which she is trapped. Neither her continued faithfulness to Troilus nor her switch to Diomedes will protect her from male displeasure. Her rejection of Diomedes while in the Greek camp would place her in immediate physical danger while her betrayal of Troilus would (and does) lead to her future condemnation by the world, a prediction she makes herself in Book V. 1051 - 71). The complexity of her position exposes the usually unacknowledged pressures that make up women's experience of patriarchal society and makes her betrayal disruptive to a male economy.

Criseyde fails to fit into any of the male classifications of womanhood that are designed to limit women's roles in society and, instead, subverts these male expectations while maintaining the submissive role appropriate to the ideal romantic heroine. As a heroine who is at the same time an 'anti-heroine,' she poses considerable problems to the narrator's attempts to contain his story within romance parameters. Although the narrator continually attempts to erase the qualities of Criseyde's character that do not fit into the romance model, he must eventually face the fact that Criseyde does not and cannot remain in the idealized role he has constructed for her. His inscription of his ideals on her body cannot over-write the implications of her final act of betrayal and so he must find some way of reducing the disruptive effect of her move to Diomedes on the the images of womanhood and the male structures of control that he attempts to uphold throughout his narrative. In order to minimize Criseyde's part in the disintegration of the male chivalric model, the narrator uses the concept of Fortune as a controlling force governing the

actions of all of his characters.<sup>25</sup> He attempts to neutralize Criseyde's personal ability to effect changes in male lives and the disruptive potential of her betrayal by transferring the power to Fortune. At the beginning of Book IV, he constructs a parallel between Criseyde and Fortune by describing Criseyde's actions in terms of Fortune's wheel:

From Troilus [Fortune] gan hire brighte face  
 Away to writhe, and tok of hym non heede,  
 But caste hym clene out of his lady grace,  
 And on hire whiel she sette up Diomed;

(IV. 8 - 11)

In this passage, Criseyde's name could easily replace Fortune's.<sup>26</sup> The Fortune metaphor, however, displaces Criseyde from an active role in events. It is Fortune rather than Criseyde who has caused Troilus' move from bliss to despair, cancelling Criseyde's disruptive potential. Rather than merely being placed in the object position again, Criseyde is entirely written out of the equation. The story becomes one about the whims of Fortune, with the actions of humans, particularly women, portrayed as insignificant. All of the characters are subject to Fortune's wheel and from that position lose the ability to act independently. The narrator shows a willingness to sacrifice the agency of all of his characters here in order to keep the unruly Criseyde contained within the 'male' narrative.

In Book V, however, the narrator is forced to recognize Criseyde's acceptance of Diomedes as her lover and the unsuitability of the romance ideal with which he has attempted to imprint her. The exposure of the political and societal pressures that surround Criseyde's betrayal of Troilus shatters the romance framework of the text and weakens the narrator's control over the text and the woman. In an effort to regain control, he resorts to writing Criseyde as a physical presence out of the story completely by line

<sup>25</sup>See Kitteredge, Curry, and Bloomfield for explorations of the Fortune metaphor in the text.

<sup>26</sup>See Cook for a further discussion of how the narrator forms textual links between Criseyde and Fortune.

1633 and retreating to the safely patriarchal ground of Christianity for the final stanzas of the work. While some critics do argue for the importance of the ending to the narrative and its Boethian connections, the reader cannot help but notice a change of tone in the writing. The narrative becomes frenzied with extended exclamatory repetitions which disrupt the poetic meter and suggest a movement away from the carefully controlled stanzas of the previous books:

Swich fyn hath, lo, this Troilus for love!  
 Swich fyn hath al his grete worthynesse!  
 Swich fyn hath his estat real above!  
 Swich fyn his lust, swich fyn hath his noblesse!  
 Swych fyn hath false worldes brotelnesse!

(V. 1828 - 32, see also V. 1849 - 54)

The narrator jumps back and forth between Roman and Christian mythologies in his description of Troilus' ascension to the eighth sphere which gives his account a disjointed quality that suggests panic or a lack of control. Following as closely upon Criseyde's final defection as this passage does it is not difficult to see a connection between them. When the narrator loses control of his heroine and watches her shatter his carefully constructed image of ideal womanhood, he also loses control of his narrative and the chivalric morals with which he attempts to encode his story.<sup>27</sup> The structures of male infallibility and dominance that support his narrative collapse with Criseyde's betrayal and her exposure of the unacknowledged pressures that male society places on women. Criseyde disrupts the narrator's attempts to confine her within the limited role of a romance heroine and, by seeming to conform to the male expectations that demand her compliance and showing how those expectations force a betrayal of her role, she also disrupts the construction of

<sup>27</sup>The ending of this poem shares some features with the ending of the *Clerk's Tale* which I discuss in Chapter Three. In both works, the narrative dissolves into chaos in a response to the narrator's inability to control the female force disrupting the text.

femininity imposed on her. She shows that romance conventions do not recognize the pressures of male expectations on women and how, even when complying with the roles forced upon them, women are doomed to facing the consequences of male displeasure.

Not surprisingly, Criseyde comes amazingly close to predicting the critical reception to her story hundreds of years later when she complains:

"Allas, of me, unto the worldes ende,  
Shal neyther ben ywritten nor ysonge  
No good word, for thise bokes wol me shende."

(V. 1058 - 60)

The discomfort that critics feel with her inconsistencies and contradictions and her disruption of romance conventions has often turned into a judgemental frustration. Many critics resort to the language of condemnation when they discuss her behaviour in the poem with phrases like, "the ugly truth of her surrender," "faithless behavior," and "She shows no real sympathy for the poor boy at all."<sup>28</sup> The flexibility of her voice and the fluctuations of her 'trouthe' have provoked many critics to condemn her as manipulative and cold-hearted.<sup>29</sup> They attempt to reconcile the contradictions of her character but, in so doing, ignore the effects of the societal pressures that provoke her contradictions and cause her disruption of the romance narrative and ideal.<sup>30</sup> Due to her resistance to

<sup>28</sup>In order, Stokes (29), Cook (191), and Robertson (487).

<sup>29</sup>I have noticed that most critics attempt to interact with Criseyde as if she were a real person rather than a character. Their attempts to reconcile the contradictions that make her heroine and anti-heroine cause them to engage in the text in a more personal way than is typical of critical writing and are interesting for that reason. I believe that these critics are responding in some way to Criseyde's transgressions of the romantic tradition which force an acknowledgement of a sort of 'reality' for women in a patriarchal world. Her reactions to societal pressures create a dimension of her character which transcends the constructedness of the roles imposed upon her and makes it difficult to interact with her as a character in a constructed text.

<sup>30</sup>There have been many attempts to create a psychological profile of Criseyde which resolves all of her contradictions into a unified character. The effect is often rather strained as can be seen in Greenwood's condensed description which attempts to explain the many facets of Criseyde:

Criseyde, the widow, has the prevaricating approach to love and sex of one who has tried it before. She knows enough to keep up appearances as a properly sad widow and aloof lady, but her merriness with intimates suggests that she is secretly desirous of renewed love-relations.

classification, Criseyde becomes the object of an attempted critical silencing. Critics who condemn her for her contradictions (like Mieszkowski for example) try to dismiss her as insubstantial which, in turn, becomes an erasure of her potential for agency and of her disruptions of the text. Their readings are disrupted by her shifting discourses and intentions and so, like the narrator, they effectively write her out of the story, ignoring how her reactions to the male societal pressures that place her in a submissive role challenge the very structures that demand her consistency within that role.

In their struggles to find a coherent and cohesive Criseyde, critics have glossed over the disruptive nature of her responses to male expectations that distinguish her from a typical romantic or tragic heroine. Their readings of her, however, are for the most part informed by the same male-dominated moral systems of romance that encode the poem. In discussing the depth of Criseyde's love, her integrity and her 'betrayal' of Troilus, they are judging her from an unexamined position of patriarchal values, the values to which Criseyde responds with her contradictions in the first place. They want to read her as a romance heroine, just as the narrator, Troilus, and Diomedes do, and are unsettled by her failure to conform consistently to this ideal. Donaldson quite openly admits to his initial attraction to her character:

... she has almost all the qualities that men might hope to encounter in their first loves. This is perhaps the same as saying that she is above all feminine. ... She is lovely in appearance, demure yet self-possessed, capable of both gaiety and gravity. ("Commentary," 46 - 47)

Though rich and independent she worries about her social position as the daughter of a defector, and relies heavily on masculine support and advice. She is persuaded by her uncle to take as her over a prince of the ruling family, Troilus, whom she comes to love sincerely, but not so passionately that when her circumstances change she is not prepared to give him up. She is the epitome of the young woman whose maturity consists of self-interest. (169)

He sees her the way the narrator would like her to remain, "above all feminine," as it is defined in a male-dominated society. As such, she poses no threat to the privileged position men hold in the romance or chivalric world-view. Even the critics who seem sympathetic to Criseyde, commenting on her intelligence and pragmatism, end up attempting to justify her actions and judge her according to romance codes. Their moral standing assumes a male dominance and Criseyde becomes praiseworthy merely for her ability to adapt to male expectations.

What Criseyde really achieves in the poem, however, is a subversion of the conventions that she seems to accept. She exposes the limitations of the male expectations that attempt to construct her and disrupts the primacy of the romance narrative. She forces an examination of the political pressures under which women exist and which go unacknowledged in the male economy. As a 'betrayal' of men in reaction to their own demands, she disrupts the fundamental tenets of romance convention and calls into question the whole structure out of which they arise. Her actions and her responses to the social system that imposes itself upon her body and life demand a re-evaluation of women's roles in society and love. Her subversions even speak through the layers of silencing by those who would negate the threat she poses to the status quo. The narrator and the critics who attempt to erase her importance in the text or to construct her as a passive and uncomplicated mirror to male desire have not succeeded in covering up her voice or actions. Even vilified and defamed, she remains the centre of interest in Chaucer's text. The contradictions, inconsistencies, and shifting 'trouthe' that have provoked condemnation or attempted erasure have instead ensured her infamy. Her subversion of male expectation, subtle and contradictory as it is, is effective in frustrating the male characters, narrator, and critics' attempts to confine her. She leaves the text as one who,



while subject to male control and power, challenges and resists that control by assuming the roles imposed upon her and revealing their limitations in a male economy.

## Conclusion

### Disrupting Constructions:

#### Situating the Female Body Within the Male-Authored Text

The preceding pages contain close readings of female characters in four Chaucerian texts: *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, the *Miller's Tale*, the *Clerk's Tale*, and *Troilus and Criseyde*. Each of these texts contains a central female character who in some way disrupts 'male' narratives and causes a questioning of the patriarchal constructions of womanhood that inform her text. The Wife of Bath, Alisoun, Griselda, and Criseyde all subvert the constructions that attempt to define and limit them to objectified roles in different ways but, at the same time, all of their disruptions are linked to their gendered positions within the texts. It is as 'women' that they challenge the 'male' structures that confine them. Their female bodies act as the locus of resistance to the impositions of male expectation and desire that attempt to objectify women.

The female character's disruptive potential is not confined to her presence as a 'woman' in a male-authored text, however, nor is the female body inherently disruptive (as has been argued by Helene Cixous, for example<sup>1</sup>). Rather, the character's gender provides a location from which to challenge the differently gendered structures of the text. The gendered significance of the bodies of the Wife, Alisoun, Griselda, and Criseyde situates them in opposition to the 'male' text but their subversions occur within discourse, whether it be verbal or physical. All of these women challenge the male readings and inscriptions that are imposed on their bodies by their male narrators, fellow characters, and Chaucerian critics by speaking or acting in ways that, while overtly conforming to male expectation, covertly disrupt it: the Wife of Bath's mimetic appearance as an antifeminist caricature cloaks a rhetorical proficiency that undermines the validity of antifeminist portraits of

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, "The Laugh of the Medusa."

women; Alisoun's youthful lustiness attracts the male characters in the *Tale* and her narrator but covers a physicality that does not conform to the sanitized images of women preferred by these men; underneath Griselda's superhuman obedience lies a critique of male oppression; and Criseyde fluctuates between ideal womanhood and its antithesis, by turns satisfying and horrifying male expectations inside and outside the text. These characters' subversions of male expectations depend on their gendered positions within the texts but cannot be simply equated with those positions.

The argument for a common gendered textual position among these female characters does not imply that they share a sort of essential femininity but that their positions in the texts are signed as female. They are constructed as female within the ideologies of the text and the reader interprets them according to this construction. However, when a character does not conform or only partially conforms to the male expectations that inform her character, she forces a questioning of the validity of the construction. The female characters that I examine in this thesis all operate within structures of male expectation which derive from constructions of womanhood from the antifeminist, fabliau, and romance traditions. The Wife of Bath and Griselda, in many ways, occupy the polar opposite images of womanhood as they are defined by the antifeminist tradition: the wicked wife and the passive martyr. Alisoun plays the lusty young wife common to fabliau plots, and Criseyde, the ideal romance heroine. None of these traditional roles sit comfortably on the characters who play them and it is through their deviations from the expected roles that 'male' narratives are disrupted.

The structures of these literary traditions of antifeminism, fabliau, and romance permeate Chaucer's texts and define the basic roles for women within medieval, patriarchal ideology. All of these roles objectify women by placing them under the control of male desire and positioning them as 'other' to a male centre. As readers, our unexamined

acceptance of the traditional and limited roles women are assigned in medieval literature makes us complicit in enforcing the oppressive structures governing these women. We share our expectations of conformity to these roles with the male characters and narrators and add our own layers of limitation and oppression to those already surrounding the female character in the male-authored text.

Therefore, in order to see the challenges to 'male' narratives that the Wife, Alisoun, Griselda, and Criseyde pose, it is essential that we be aware of the constructions of womanhood that inform their depiction in their respective texts. Once we acknowledge how the constructions of womanhood present in the text influence our reading and our expectations of these female characters, we can begin to see how they resist the expectations the text raises. The 'male' structures of the text draw us into reading the text from a 'male' perspective which assumes male dominance in the text and defines womanhood in relation to that dominance. We must, however, resist identifying with the 'male' perspective and situate ourselves in such a way that the structures and constructions of the 'male' text become apparent rather than invisible. From a situated feminist position, we can examine the limitations of 'male' constructions of femininity and read against the expectations and assumptions of the text, seeing where and to what degree female characters conform to or resist these constructions imposed upon them.

But unlike E. Jane Burns, who examines similar issues in old French Literature, I am unwilling to define this relationship to medieval texts as primarily the application of a reading strategy. In her conclusion to *Bodytalk*, Burns summarizes her enterprise as follows:

Bodytalk, as I have explained above, is not something that authors make their characters do. It is a reading strategy that enables us, as contemporary feminists, to acknowledge the difference that the rhetorical woman's body might make in our potential readings of fictive women's speech. (241)

She argues for the centrality of the reading strategy to subversions of the textual woman and implies that the real disruption of the narrative occurs in the act of reading rather than within the text. In the case of the four texts that I have examined in this thesis, however, the disruption is also textual. In the *Miller's Tale*, the *Clerk's Tale*, and *Troilus and Criseyde*, the actual narrative disintegrates or dissolves into chaos as the narrators attempt to contain the actions of their central female characters. The discomfort that all four women characters have provoked in critics also suggests that, even without a reading strategy directed at uncovering female resistance in a male-authored text, these women have a disruptive effect on 'male' narratives and on the act of reading.

It is the combination of a reading strategy that draws attention to constructions of womanhood that inform the representations of women in male-authored texts and the presence of female characters who challenge 'male' expectations in the texts that makes it possible to identify sites and forms of resistance and subversion in those texts. In the case of Chaucer, an awareness of how women are constructed according to the antifeminist, fabliau, and romance traditions that inform his texts allows us to pinpoint the 'trouble-spots' where his female characters disrupt 'male' narratives and cause critical discomfort. The Wife of Bath, Alisoun, Griselda, and Criseyde all problematize the constructions of femininity that inform their respective texts and disrupt the 'male' structures that attempt to confine them. These subversive actions, while identifiable through a sympathetic reading strategy, are not created in the act of reading. The disruptions these female characters cause are textual in nature and indicate the subversive potential of the female body and voice in the male-authored text.

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