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Chaucer and Prejudices:
A Critical Study of *The Canterbury Tales*

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Doctor of Philosophy, English Literature

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September 2015

WORK NOT SUBMITTED ELSEWHERE FOR EXAMINATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the reward of any other degree.

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UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

HSIANG-MEI WU

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY ENGLISH LITERATURE

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A CRITICAL STUDY OF *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

SUMMARY

This thesis investigates the prejudices in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. There are thirty pilgrims and twenty-two tales in this grand work. As it is unlikely to discuss all of them in one thesis, I focus my research on four pilgrims—the Miller, the Prioress, the Wife of Bath, and the Pardoner—to demonstrate Chaucer's prejudices in various aspects. The chapter on the Miller analyzes how men and women interact in sexual terms in the public domains and private spaces, investigating the poet's sexual discrimination in his final distribution of punishments for the characters as well as his chauvinistic disregard of the female body and its autonomy; Chaucer's punishment is not entirely of 'poetic justice' as it is dispensed at the cost of class victimization and the vilification of the female body. The Prioress's chapter discusses the poet's prejudices against female religious, exploring how Chaucer is affected by conventional descriptions of courtly ladies and contemporary conception of female religious' sexuality when he contradictorily glosses the Prioress as a romantic beauty; Chaucer's language prejudice and his innuendo of the Prioress's sexual attraction reflect his contempt and mis-evaluation of the Prioress's status, social function, and professional abilities. The chapter on the Wife of Bath examines 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue' as a manifestation of a medieval woman's life education, demonstrating how Alisoun is molded by mercantile marriage transactions, the tradition of misogyny, and the *auctoritees'* ill-meant religious instruction through garbled texts; the Wife's deafness does not signify her resistance or inability to understand men's 'truth', but an undeserved punishment from her frustrated educators. The Pardoner's chapter examines

the Pardoner as a feminized and marginalized figure, exhibiting the narrator's, the Host's, and the Canterbury pilgrims' fear and hate of the 'different', the 'perverse', and the non-heterosexual; the Pardoner is treated as 'Other' of the Canterbury group and is brutally 'Othered' by the pilgrims despite his efforts in heterosexual identity and conformity.

My study of Chaucer's prejudices will naturally extend to the investigations of modern readers' prejudices, particularly critics' false interpretation of the Miller's Alisoun's 'escape', denial of the Prioress's beauty, misconception of Jankyn's violence, and unconscious siding with patriarchy in the 'Othering' of the Pardoner, among others.

ABBREVIATIONS

ANQ	American Notes and Queries
EETS	Early English Text Society
ELH	English Literary History
JEPG	Journal of English and Germanic Philology
MLQ	Modern Language Quarterly
PMLA	Publications of the Modern Language Association

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to investigate Chaucer's prejudices in *The Canterbury Tales*. What is prejudice? According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'prejudice' means a 'preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience', or a 'dislike, hostility, or unjust behavior deriving from preconceived and unfounded opinions'. Specifically, the word is often used to refer to 'preconceived, usually unfavorable, judgments toward people or a person because of gender, political opinion, social class, age, disability, religion, sexuality, race/ethnicity, language, or other personal characteristics'. *The Canterbury Tales* exhibits almost all the aspects of the word indicated. For example, when the Miller at the end of his tale concludes: 'Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf, / For al his kepyng and his jalousie' (I. 3850-51),¹ he is not executing 'poetic justice' as readers often think, but flaunting a prejudice against different class and gender, since he brazenly snubs a 'lewed' husband's marriage right and declares a chauvinistic hostility toward the female body and its autonomy. As indicated above, prejudices commonly exist in cultural, racial, sexual, social as well as religious and legal domains. The Prioress's portrait demonstrates a good example. When the narrator taunts Madame Eglentyne's provinciality by indicating '[f]or Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe' (I. 126), he not only displays a priggish assessment of the Prioress's language ability, but also reveals a preconceived opinion of what a religious woman should/not be. Similarly, when the Host threatens to cut off the Pardoner's 'coilloins', he is not only punishing the Pardoner's vicious offense, but also sexually bullying his seemingly homosexual fellow pilgrim. The existence of prejudice—even in the subtlest way—causes damage, injury, and injustice. The Wife of Bath's loss of hearing is an obvious case. Alisoun's

¹ All quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, ed. Larry D. Benson, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by fragment and line numbers.

deafness does not indicate her inborn deficiency as many critics have alleged—since she was not deaf before forty—but an undeserved, brutal punishment from her frustrated, misogynistic educators. Another well-known instance is the death of the ‘litel clergeon’ in the Prioress’s tale: anti-Semitism, the cause of the death, connotes at least racial and religious prejudices.

Do those prejudices belong to the characters Chaucer creates, or are they mainly Chaucer’s own? When some critics rebuke the Prioress for being anti-Semitic, others might say: even if the prejudices belong to the characters, they (the characters as well as their prejudices) are after all the poet’s creations. The complication of answer may increase when we perceive that the word ‘homosexual’ did not appear until 1892 and that there are more than ten definitions of the measurement ‘spanne’ in medieval times. Namely, in defining the Pardoner’s sexuality and accusing Madame Eglentyne of wearing her wimple too high, modern critics may have revealed prejudices, too. Likewise, when critics maintain that the Wife of Bath’s deafness indicates her inability to understand well or resistance to accept truth, they show prejudices in presuming that whatever the male *auctoritees* say is ‘truth’ and women should listen. Obviously, prejudices are not just unfounded opinions that appear in certain ages or places; they may never change as time goes by or the world turns around, but only draw out more derivatives, causing similar injury and injustice. Since much criticism of *The Canterbury Tales* might also appear biased, this thesis will include examinations of modern scholars’ prejudices as well.

Chaucer shows numerous prejudices in his portraits of the pilgrims and the tales they tell. As the Canterbury pilgrims are from different ‘estates’,² the poet’s prejudices naturally reflect what people generally think and behave in his age. Therefore, my study

² In the Middle Ages, the orders of society are commonly distinguished as the ‘three estates’: the clergy (those who pray), the nobility (those who fight), and commoners (those who work).

of Chaucer's prejudices in effect comprehends explorations of the diverse aspects of culture in Chaucer's time. There are thirty pilgrims and twenty-two tales in *The Canterbury Tales*.³ Since it is impossible to discuss all of them in one thesis, I have focused my investigations on four pilgrims—the Miller, the Prioress, the Wife of Bath, and the Pardoner—to demonstrate my in-depth studies of the prejudices I have observed in this great work and the modern scholarship of it. Certainly, in the course of discussion, other pilgrims and tales will be brought in for parallels, contrasts, or comparisons when necessary.

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At the end of 'The Miller's Tale', Chaucer distributes his punishments for the characters according to their sins: John, the old jealous carpenter, is cuckolded by his young pretty wife and has a broken arm; Absolon, the squeamish parish clerk, is humiliated by a mis-directed kiss; and Nicholas, the scheming 'scoler of Oxenford', is scalded by a hot coultre in his 'ers'. What about Alisoun, the adulterous wife? Shouldn't she also be chastised to make the moral of the tale more poetic?⁴ The hot iron originally aimed at Alisoun is in the end received by Nicholas, and readers are bewildered by Chaucer's clemency towards this unchaste woman. Why does Alisoun get off 'scot free'? Scholars have proposed diverse opinions. Jesse M. Gellrich, for example, maintains: 'Adultery is not punished in the tale. Other human foibles may be—Nicholas's deceit, John's

³ *The Canterbury Tales* is primarily about a group of people running a story-telling competition—the one who tells the best tale, Harry Bailley, the Host, says, will win a big feast at his inn when they return from the pilgrimage. In Chaucer's original project, each pilgrim will tell two tales on the way to Canterbury, and two more on the way back. That is, Chaucer aimed to collect one hundred and twenty tales. But he completed only twenty-two stories and started another two fragments. The pilgrims actually never reach Canterbury.

⁴ Traditionally, Alisoun is considered unpunished. Fredrick M. Biggs and Laura L. Howes thus mistrust the correlation between sin and punishment in the tale; they suggest that since Alisoun remains unpunished, she 'presents the most obvious problem to the theme of justice' in the tale ('Theophany in "Miller's Tale"', *Medium Aevum* 65.2 [1996]: 269-79, at 275).

gullibility, and Absolon's foppery'.⁵ Gellrich's statement has a point, since Chaucer's ancient lascivious husbands all suffer the anxiety of being cuckolded⁶—namely, in Chaucer's narratives, adultery is not punished: it is a punishment. Paula Neuss, investigating the connotations of 'subtlety and secrecy' (*pryvetee*, *queynte*) in the tale, declares that Alisoun goes unpunished because she is the only one character who 'never abuses "pryvetee"'.⁷ By this opinion, Neuss seems to indicate that Alisoun is not punished because she has made good use of her 'private parts'. To some critics, Alisoun's adultery is not just unpunished—it is almost praised. Martin Blum, regarding Alisoun as the 'most successful "man"' in the tale, assures us that Alisoun's not being punished is in fact a 'reward' since she plays her role well 'whereas her male counterparts all receive their individual lessons for failing to fulfill their expected roles as men'.⁸ In other words, Alisoun is 'rewarded' because she is more 'masculine' than the other male characters.

But does Alisoun really get off 'scot free'? Though Chaucer is widely extolled as a 'humanist', a 'liberal thinker', a 'sympathetic' observer of the mundane,⁹ he is not free from prejudices. His treatment of Alisoun is an example: contrary to the traditional concept that a female body should be covered, protected, and cherished, Alisoun's body is stripped, exposed,¹⁰ and 'swyved'. Chaucer's dealing with Alisoun's body reflects his

⁵ See 'The Parody of Medieval Music in the Miller's Tale', *JEGP* 73 (1974): 176-88, at 187.

⁶ Chaucer treats the fear of being cuckolded as married men's major anxiety: John the carpenter in the "Miller's Tale," January in the "Merchant's Tale," and Thomas in the "Summoner's Tale" all show such unease. The Wife's husbands, except the fourth one, also disclose similar worry.

⁷ See 'Double-Entendre in the *Miller's Tale*', *Essays in Criticism* 24.4 (1974): 325-40, at 334.

⁸ See 'Negotiating Masculinities: Erotic Triangles in the Miller's Tale', *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Peter G. Beidler (Cambridge and Rochester, N.Y.: D. S. Brewer, 1998), 37-52, at 37.

⁹ See Chapter 2, n. 22; Chapter 4, n. 25. See also Angela Carter, 'Alison's Giggle', *The Left & the Erotic*, ed. Eileen Phillips (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983), 52-68, at 66; H. P. Weissman, 'Antifeminism and Chaucer's Characterization of Women', *Critical Essays on Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. Malcolm Andrew (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991, rpt. 1996), 111-125, at 121; Richard Rex, "*The Sins of Madame Eglentyne*" and *Other Essays on Chaucer* (Newark, N. J.: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1995), 129; and John C. Hirsh, 'Reopening the "Prioress's Tale"', *The Chaucer Review* 10.1 (1975): 30-45, at 41.

¹⁰ At the outset of the tale, Alisoun is decently and elaborately dressed (I. 3235-43); then she is naked in bed with Nicholas; later, when Absolon requests a kiss outside her bedroom, she 'putte hir hole' out at the

attitude towards the female body and woman's autonomy of it; obviously, the female body, to our humanistic poet, is an object that can be used and abused.¹¹ Alisoun has not at all escaped punishment as readers have traditionally considered. Though she is not physically injured like the other characters, the Miller's gross depiction in the end of his tale visualizes for his audience the process of her body being mistreated, exploited, and stigmatized—that punishment is in fact severer than John's broken arm or Nicholas's branded *ers*.

We cannot attribute the abuse of Alisoun's body to the vulgarity of the Miller or fallibility of the narrator. Chaucer's prejudice against the autonomy of the female body is evident. In other analogues of the 'Miller's Tale', it is the Nicholas-figure who offers his *ers* to Absolon both times. By substituting Alisoun's buttocks for Nicholas's at the first kissing scene, the poet's intention to vilify woman and her body is patent. Actually, Chaucer's prejudice against the female body is not only shown in his punishment of the Miller's Alisoun. His insinuation of the Prioress's 'nat undergrowe' body, his disdain of the Wife of Bath's sexually-experienced body, and his mockery of the Pardoner's probably 'castrated'—and therefore 'effeminate'—body, all manifest to readers the poet's chauvinistic contempt for the female/womanly body.

In the Miller's chapter, two main points will be explored: John's cuckoldry as a consequence of class victimization;¹² and Alisoun's being 'swyved' as a conceptual stigmatization of the female body. The discussion begins with critics' interpretations of

shot-window (I. 3732) for his lips. In a word, step by step, Alisoun is not just stripped to bareness but reduced to merely a 'hole'.

¹¹ Alisoun in fact enjoys the sex with Nicholas (I. 3652-55), but when the Miller says that she is 'swyved' (note the passive form) as a punishment to her husband's 'kepyng and jalousie', it sounds like she has been raped.

¹² Lee Patterson claims that John is too severely punished: 'his wife is "swyved", his arm is broken, and his reputation as a man of probity is ruined' ("No Man His Reson Herde": Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the "Canterbury Tales", *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990], 113-55, at 144); thus, Patterson submits that John's suffering should be treated as 'a distasteful form of class victimization' rather than a moral lesson (ibid. 144).

the notorious phrase ‘An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf / Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf’ (I. 3163-4) in the Miller’s prologue, and then examines Chaucer’s discourse of how men and women interact in sexual terms in public domains as well as private spaces. The contrastive characteristics of *privee* Nicholas and *apert* Absolon will be displayed to reflect men’s hegemonic control and treatment of the woman and the woman’s body they intend to possess. The second section investigates medieval religious parodies/doctrines/activities to elucidate how Nicholas and Absolon satisfy their desires at the expense of the ‘lewed’. The religious elements involved in both Nicholas’s and Absolon’s pursuits of Alisoun will also be explored to manifest these two young men’s profanity of the holy texts as well as their abuse of their inborn talent and acquired privileges. And the third part illustrates Alisoun’s sexual independence as well as her ability to shift between ‘pryvetee’ and ‘apert’ at will. This chapter will conclude how Alisoun is grossly punished because of her sexual autonomy, and how Chaucer is prejudiced in the concept of the ‘class’ when dispensing ‘poetic justice’ for his sinful characters.

The second chapter examines Chaucer’s prejudices in the portraiture of the Prioress from diverse aspects, including Marian worship, foreign language acquisition, moral disciplines, medieval artworks, and so on. Many critics consider the portraiture of the Prioress ambiguous, as it on the one hand describes the Prioress’ piety and devotion, while on the other indicates her class transgression and moral deficiency. Influenced by the poet’s implication, modern criticism chiefly offers negative arguments in the study of the Prioress: i.e., critics often contend whether a nun should have a name meaning ‘sweetbrier’ or ‘wild rose’, a large forehead symbolizing intelligence and even audacity, a well-built body indicating a good/comfortable life, or a French accent in effect exposing provinciality. In a word, the details critics cavil about, as Edward I. Condren

succinctly puts it, ‘fail to meet our expectations for a nun’.¹³ Chaucer’s ambiguity and critics’ censure obviously arise from the conflicts between how the Prioress appears to be and how people think a religious woman should be. Besides the shoulds and should-nots, the Prioress is also criticized for the anti-Semitism she unhesitatingly shows in her tale. The account of the ‘litel clergeon’ is a pious legend; it is also a violent story filled with bloody murder and savage revenge. Some critics wonder why Chaucer assigned the tale to the Prioress—a woman of her position ought to know ‘how unchristian it really is’; others doubt that since the Jews were expelled from England in 1290, if the Prioress, despite all her professionalism, has the ability ‘to understand her life and its context’ (Condren 193). To some critics, the Prioress’s tale even exemplifies the most destructive prejudices in *The Canterbury Tales*, considering the Prioress’s influence on her listeners.¹⁴

The Prioress’s chapter is divided into four sections. The first section, ‘a Rose in the Wild’, investigates Madame Eglentyne’s name in the context of Marian worship. The investigations will show that the name ‘Eglentyne’, often considered an indication of worldliness and vanity by modern critics, is not at all inappropriate for a religious lady, as the flower ‘eglantine’ commonly signifies purity and tenderness in medieval times, and is often used as a symbol of virginity and maternity in the worship of Mary. As Chaucer’s depiction of the Prioress’s appearance evidently follows the conventional descriptions of beauties, this section will also examine Chaucer’s portraiture of the Prioress as his ‘glossing’ of the female religious in general. The second section, ‘Beauty and Piety’, measures the Prioress’s forehead by the medieval standard of beauty observed from various artworks. And the third section, ‘Parlez Vous Francais?’, assesses

¹³ See ‘The Prioress: A Legend of Spirit, a Life of Flesh’, *The Chaucer Review* 23.3 [1989]: 192-218, at 193.

¹⁴ See Allen C. Koretsky, ‘Dangerous Innocence: Chaucer’s Prioress and Her Tale’, *Jewish Presences in English Literature*, eds. Derek Cohen and Deborah Heller (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990), 10-24, at 19-20.

Madame Eglentyne's French speaking ability from the theory of language acquisition. This chapter intends to conclude that Chaucer's satire on the Prioress and modern critics' objection to her unveil many traditional prejudices against the religious,¹⁵ here specifically the female religious, and accordingly a suspicion of their piety.

This chapter will propose several new interpretations in the study of the Prioress. Madame Eglentyne, though 'symple and coy', is not a 'little lady' whom we can 'dismiss so airily' as Hardy Long Frank remarks,¹⁶ but 'a personage of some consequence' (a Mother Superior, head of the convent school, and probably a shrewd manager of the conventual estate), escorted on her travel by a secretary nun and three priests.¹⁷ Obviously, Chaucer does not regard Madame Eglentyne as a simple local religious; considering the narrator's mockery of her well-trained manner and indication of her speaking French too diligently, the Prioress is in fact a potential rival to the observant poet: both have powerful upward mobility on the same social ladder—one 'peyned hire to countrefete cheere / Of court' (I. 139-40); the other made use of good connections and finally strove into the line of aristocracy.¹⁸ Chaucer's prejudice against the Prioress thus reflects not only a biased disbelief of this religious lady's vocation but also an instinct of social/class competition when one encounters his/her rival.

The second section of this chapter will also observe a modern prejudice in the judgment of the Prioress's 'spanne brood' forehead and the way she wears her wimple. Many critics maintain that the broadness of the Prioress's forehead and her wearing the

¹⁵ Anti-fraternal satire is one of the most popular genres in *The Canterbury Tales*. More well-known examples are: 'The Summoner's Tale', 'The Friar's Tale', 'The Merchant's Tale', as well as the portraits of the Pardoner and the Monk.

¹⁶ See 'Seeing the Prioress Whole', *The Chaucer Review* 25.3 (1991): 229-37, at 230.

¹⁷ See William Rothwell, 'Stratford atte Bowe Re-Visited', *The Chaucer Review* 36.2 (2001): 184-207, at 187.

¹⁸ Chaucer has served three kings (Edward III, Richard II, and Henry IV). He was married to Philippa de Roet, a lady-in-waiting to Queen Philippa, and a sister of Katherine Swynford, the third wife of John of Gaunt. His great-great-grandson, John de la Pole, was the Earl of Lincoln and the heir to the throne designated by Richard III before he was deposed. The Chaucer family eventually got themselves into aristocracy.

wimple ‘too high’ indicate her pride and vanity, and thus doubt this religious lady’s piety. Richard Rex, for example, claims that Madame Eglentyne’s ‘unusually large forehead’ is ‘the harlot’s eyebrow’, a symbol of ‘hypocrisy and pride’,¹⁹ and S. T. Knight alleges that the Prioress wears her wimple improperly high ‘for the sake of a totally worldly fashion’.²⁰ By investigating the various definitions of the middle English word ‘spanne’ as well as the female portraits in many medieval artworks (paintings, drawings, statues), the discussion in this part will demonstrate that modern critics’ displeasure at the Prioress’s broad forehead in fact exhibits a deliberate miscomprehension of the traditional standards of beauty, and that miscomprehension consequently leads to a misinterpretation of the relevance between the Prioress’s beauty and her piety. Judged from the many artworks, a broad forehead is a regular standard of beauty in the Middle Ages—and probably in all times. With such a forehead and other qualities (a straight nose, red soft lips, and grey eyes)²¹, Madame Eglentyne is no doubt a beauty. But mistrusting this religious woman’s piety because of her beauty merely indicates a prejudice. Actually, as various medieval artworks have shown, beauty and piety are two essential elements which artists often integrate when they present the devout images of Holy Mary and the female saints. If we extend our observation of artworks in the Middle Ages to those in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we may further propose that, as far as standard of beauty is concerned, not only was Chaucer influenced by his contemporary artists, but he might have also exerted influences on artists of later ages. In a word, Chaucer’s depiction of the Prioress’s appearance is typical rather than unusual. And though Madame Eglentyne might not be as pious as many modern people expect, her probable impiety has little to do with her ‘fair forehead’.

¹⁹ See “*The Sins of Madame Eglentyne*” and *Other Essays on Chaucer* (Newark, N.J.: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1995), at 124 & 126.

²⁰ See ‘Almost a Spanne Brood’, *Neophilologus* 52 (1968): 178-80, at 179. See also Rex, 118, and Eileen Power, ‘Madame Eglentyne, Chaucer’s Prioress in Real Life’, *Medieval People* (New York: Barnes & Noble, repr. 1971), 73-95, at 89.

²¹ ‘Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas, / Hir mouth ful smal, and therto softe and reed’ (GP 152-3).

The third section of this chapter examines Chaucer's language prejudice in his assessment of the Prioress's French speaking ability. By the phrase '[f]or Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe' (I. 126), critics tend to believe that Chaucer is hinting at Madame Eglentyne's 'ignorance and provinciality';²² and with that trait, the Prioress's emulation of the courtly manner appears especially pretentious and vulgar. However, though the Prioress may not speak French with the accent which the Parisian spoke at that time, her French is apparently fluent and good, as the phrase 'she spak Frennsh ful faire and fetisly' (I. 124) indicates. We need not doubt that Madame Eglentyne has a good command of this language, since she needs it to correspond with the bishops, receive prominent visitors, and instruct pupils in the convent school.²³ Hence, evaluating the Prioress's French by her language learning ability instead of her accent and style, the discussion will demonstrate that Madame Eglentyne not only speaks better French than most of her fellow people, but even, considering what kind of French the ruling class spoke at that time²⁴ and how Chaucer acquired his French ability,²⁵ better than the poet himself. Indeed, not all the Parisians speak good French—language performance always depends on class and education, not on where one lives.²⁶ Thus, the fallacy that Parisian French is 'the only true form of French'²⁷ not only leads Chaucer to a prejudiced assessment of the Prioress's language ability, but also exposes

²² See Stephanie Gaynor, 'He Says, She Says: Subjectivity and the Discourse of the Other in the Prioress's Portrait and Tale', *Medieval Encounters* 5.3 (1999): 375-90, at 387. See also Meale, 'Women's Piety', 53-54; and Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), at 38.

²³ See Chapter 2, n. 141.

²⁴ Queen Philippa and her sister Elizabeth of Hainault were both born and reared in Flanders. Muriel Bowden surmises that Elizabeth (who became a nun at the St. Leonard's—adjoining Stratford at Bowe where the Prioress was a nun) 'undoubtedly... spoke with an accent' (see *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, [New York: Macmillan, 1956], at 101).

²⁵ Chaucer might not have acquired his French through strict schooling as nuns and priests usually did at that time. See Chapter 2, n. 139.

²⁶ See William Rothwell, 'Stratford atte Bowe and Paris', *Modern Language Review* 80.1 (1985): 39-54, at 39.

²⁷ Rothwell observes that, to Chaucer, the kind of French the Prioress spoke was perhaps 'no more than a bastard variety of the speech of Paris', and Parisian French was 'the only true form of French' ('Stratford atte Bowe and Paris' 39).

that our poet, by that ridicule, has unwittingly posed himself as a social snob.²⁸ Interestingly, Chaucer's derision of the Prioress's French may explain the reason why he assigned the tale of the 'littel clergeon' to the Prioress—if we regard the anti-Semitism in the tale as the Prioress's, not Chaucer's, since, being limited by provinciality, the Prioress's racialism and lack of humanity seems natural. The prejudice in the portrait of the Prioress is therefore double-layered: Chaucer creates a nun who is racially and religiously prejudiced, while in creating such a nun, our poet also reveals his prejudices against the female religious in general.

The third chapter examines the most intriguing character of Chaucer's pilgrims—Alisoun, the Wife of Bath. Few of Chaucer's pilgrims have received so much attention and criticism as the Wife. Considered ambiguous and even incongruous, this character has been scrutinized variously as a carnal woman, an unconscious confessor, an eloquent preacher, a shrewd businesswoman, a clever linguist, an erudite exegete, a 'proto-feminist', and even a romantic dreamer.²⁹ These incongruities are not the Wife's problem if we treat her as a fictional character instead of a real person.³⁰ By investigating the Wife's prologue as the manifestation of a woman's distorted education, this chapter will demonstrate that Alisoun's incongruities are in fact caused by her creator's incongruous expectations of women and his self-supposed reality of them. In terms of a woman's education, this chapter will also explore how the Wife's concept of marriage is formed by the religious *auctoritees'* mis-guidance through biblical garbling,

²⁸ Derek Brewer straightforwardly calls Chaucer 'a snob' (see 'The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature, Especially "Harley Lyrics," Chaucer, and Some Elizabethans', *Modern Language Review* 50.3 (1955): 257-69, at 267. Michael M. Sheehan, CSB, also indicates that Chaucer's depiction of the Prioress is full of 'snobbish overtone' (see 'The Wife of Bath and Her Four Sisters: Reflections on a Woman's Life in the Age of Chaucer', *Critical Essays on Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. Malcolm Andrew [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991, rpt. 1996], 187-204, at 189).

²⁹ See chapter 3, n. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, & 9.

³⁰ It is a constant argument in the scholarship of the Wife of Bath whether she should be treated as a 'real person' or a 'fictional character'. Esther C. Quinn and Elaine Treharne remind that Alisoun is after all a fictional character, while Mary J. Carruthers and Jill Mann both discuss Alisoun like a real character in the medieval times. See Chapter 3, n. 16.

and how Alisoun's ultimate revolt against Jankyn, her fifth husband, signifies a war against the ill-meant education of the patriarchs rather than a domestic struggle for marital sovereignty. As far as *The Canterbury Tales* is concerned, medieval misogyny and chauvinistic prejudices are nowhere more manifested than in the Wife of Bath's prologue.

The first section of this chapter studies the medieval marriage law and how a marriage is normally contracted in the Middle Ages. Due to her early and multiple marriages, the Wife is often criticized for being 'carnal'. D. W. Robertson, for example, describes Alisoun as an 'icon of carnality', claiming that 'Chaucer meant her to be taken as such, that his audience could take her only as such, and that any other reception of her is self-delusion'—in short, to Robertson, Alisoun is nothing but a carnal woman.³¹ Robertson is said to be the most hostile critic of the Wife, and has intrigued much similar study in later criticism.³² However, the horrid idea that Alisoun gets married at age twelve to satisfy her sexual desire is theoretically and practically untenable: both medical statistics and common understanding of the development of human body negate that assumption. Actually, girls getting married at twelve are not as common as the Canon Law indicates or modern readers have thought. According to Eileen Power, though girls could be married out of hand at twelve, they were 'counted as grown up when they were fifteen in the Middle Ages' (*Medieval People* 78). James A. Brundage also observes: 'canonical minimum age for marriage was set very young—at twelve for girls, fourteen for boys', but the most common age for marriage is around sixteen.³³

³¹ See *A Preface to Chaucer* (N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), at 331. For more discussions of the Wife's carnality, see Donald B. Sands, 'The Non-Comic, Non-Tragic Wife: Chaucer's Dame Alys as Sociopath', *The Chaucer Review* 12.3 (1978): 171-182, at 172-3; Doris Enright-Clark Shoukri, 'The Wife of Bath's Parody of Scholasticism', *Alif* 19 (1999): 97-112, at 109; and Lee Patterson, "'For the Wyves love of Bathe": Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the "Roman de la Rose" and the "Canterbury Tales"', *Speculum* 58.2 (1983): 656-95, passim. See also Chapter 3, note 13 & 40.

³² See Susan K. Hagen, 'The Wife of Bath: Chaucer's Inchoate Experiment in Feminist Hermeneutics', *Rebels and Rivals: The Contestive Spirit in The Canterbury Tales*, eds. Susanna Freer Fein, David Raybin, and Peter C. Braeger (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), 105-24, at 119, n. 1.

³³ See 'Sex and Canon Law', *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, eds. Vern L. Bullough and James A.

Namely, the Wife's over early marriage is the poet's deliberate decision rather than the Wife's own choice. Indeed, evidences also show that Alisoun, being too young, might not have a say in her first marriage transaction and is in effect 'sold' like a commodity in the marriage market.³⁴ Hence, regarding the Wife as a carnal and therefore an immoral woman because of her early marriage, critics not only acknowledge Chaucer's biased depiction of the Wife's role in her marriage transactions, but reveal a negligence of the factual marriage custom in that time. Strictly speaking, to call the Wife getting married at twelve carnal is, as David Aers asserts, not so much as to call her parents/guardians who marry her off at so young an age for exchange of benefits 'coercive but respectable pimps'.³⁵

The second part of this chapter examines the medieval idea and practice of clerkly *glosynge* as well as the true version/teaching of the biblical story 'the Samaritan Woman'. The Wife's concept of marriage mainly comes from the instruction of 'the Story of the Samaritan Woman', and as indicated in the narratives, the purpose of this religious instruction is to educate women on chastity. However, a close reading of the original text in the Bible shows us that the Wife's version of the story is a garbled one. The story is not concerned with any one's marriage; far from that, by the well, the Samaritan woman asks Jesus many questions about the water in the well, and Jesus expounds to her the difference between physical thirst and spiritual thirst—namely, the interlocution between Jesus and the Samaritan woman delivers a profound philosophy

Brundage (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 33-50, at 39. See also Sheehan, 192-3.

³⁴ Similar marriage transactions happen to the Miller's Alisoun and the Merchant's May. However, in both tales, Chaucer only satirizes the cuckoldry of the old husbands because of their ill choice of a mate, but shows no serious reflection on the marriage law/custom itself.

³⁵ See David Aers, 'Chaucer: Love, Sex and Marriage', *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination* (London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 143-173, at 154. To oppose a scholar who accuses the Merchant's May of 'a willing prostitution', Aers asserts: 'most (probably all) marriages in the middle and upper social groups were transactions in which human beings, their labor-power and their sexual-power were sold. In such a situation it would make more sense to call medieval parents, guardians and those holding rights over wards coercive but respectable pimps than to call May, and the women she represents "willing" prostitutes' (154).

upon which much of what we have understood as “Christianity” relies. Yet except that Jesus ‘spak in repreeve of the Samaritan’ because of her multiple marriages and that women ‘ne sholde wedded be but ones’ (III. 13), the Wife learns nothing else from the story. Does the Wife know that the Samaritan woman is the first person to whom Jesus openly reveals himself as Messiah? Obviously, Alisoun’s confessor or the parish priests have not told her that—telling the Wife that the Samaritan woman has married five times and is (thus?) the first person who sees the Messiah would merely contradict their intention of educating her about female chastity. From the Wife’s understanding of the biblical text, the *auctoritees*’ chauvinistic manipulation of women’s religious education is evident. Unfortunately, though Chaucer has successfully exposed the medieval priests’ notorious practice of *glosynge*,³⁶ he has not indicated anywhere the true teaching of the story, and therefore not only misleads his readers by the garbled text, but also makes himself an accomplice of this distorted female religious education for the Wife—and the women she represents.

The third section of this chapter, ‘His Mouth, Her Ears’, explores the dialogue between men (the teaching) and women (the taught) when conflicts occur, including discussions of medieval misogyny through Jankyn’s collection of ‘wykked wyves’, the true significance of the Wife’s loss of hearing, as well as Alisoun’s final revolt against the patriarchs and their ill-meant education. Being garrulous and incongruous, the Wife has been deemed as a muddle-headed speaker. Yet, since she is at the same time eloquent and argumentative, she is also characterized as a woman with independent thinking. This woman, though Chaucer gives her chance to argue face to face with the *auctoritees*, in the end receives nothing but a punch, and because of that impact, one of

³⁶ Chaucer’s ridicule of this priestly liking/habit is also seen in ‘the Summoner’s Tale’ in which Friar John proudly states that ‘glosynge is a glorious thyng, certeyn / For lettre sleeth, so as we clerkes seyn’ (III. 1793-4) and further brazenly proclaims that whenever his needs call, he ‘shal fynde it in a maner glose’ (III. 1920). In a word, since he is one of the *auctoritees*, he will interpret the biblical texts according to his needs.

her ears loses its hearing for good. According to traditional exegetic theories, ears and hearing are equated with the comprehension of truth; Alisoun's deafness is thus often treated as her inability or resistance to such comprehension.³⁷ Actually, equating Alisoun's deafness to her poor understanding is a muddle. For Alisoun is not born deaf; before forty she hears well—in other words, her deafness is not an inborn deficiency, but an imposed physical deprivation. Regarding the Wife's impeded hearing as her inability to comprehend truth indicates another prejudice—i.e., whatever the *auctoritees* force Alisoun to hear is 'truth'. But is the teaching of the priestly glossing truth? Is the instruction of the 'wykked wyves' truth?³⁸ Indeed, unless we agree that what Jankyn has been preaching to Alisoun is 'truth', and what the religious *auctoritees* have instructed her with is nothing but 'truth', the point that Alisoun misunderstands or resists truth because she is deaf cannot be tenable. Believing that whatever men force women to hear is truth is one of the most biased opinions the readers can find in the whole *Canterbury Tales*.³⁹ Chaucer expresses such a prejudice, so do modern critics who willingly take side with the poet. From the aspect of education, Alisoun's final revolt does not indicate a common domestic struggle for marital sovereignty as many critics have alleged,⁴⁰ but a war between the teaching and the taught when conflicting

³⁷ Melvin Storm, for example, remarks that 'if the ear is taken to represent understanding or the means to the perception of truth, deafness must connote an understanding that is in some way impeded' (see 'Alisoun's Ear', *MLQ* 42.3 (1981): 219-26, at 221). W. David Shaw similarly observes: '[I]t is a pity [that Alisoun] could not have heard better, because then she might have been a better listener' (see 'Masks of the Unconscious: Bad Faith and Casuistry in the Dramatic Monologue', *ELH* 66.2 (1999): 439-60, at 451). See also Warren Ginsberg, 'The Lineaments of Desire: Wish-Fulfillment in Chaucer's Marriage Group', *Criticism* 25.3 (1983): 197-210, at 198.

³⁸ The sources of Jankyn's collection are various, as the Wife of Bath states: 'He cleped it Valerie and Theofraste / And eek ther was somtyme a clerk at Rome, / A cardinal, that highte Seint Jerome, / That made a book agayn Jovinian; / In which book eek ther was Tertulan, / Crisippus, Trotula, and Helowys, / ... And eek the Parables of Salomon, / Ovides Art, and books many on, / And alle these were bounden in o volume' (III. 671-681). *The Riverside Chaucer* expounds: 'Jankyn's *book of wykked wyves* is a fictional collection of antifeminist and antimatrimonial works written to encourage young men to choose celibacy. Chaucer most likely created it from his own collection of similar materials, possibly bound in one volume according to the usage of the time' (871).

³⁹ This biased belief will be further examined in Chapter IV, the last section 'Do Al the Peple Lough': when the Host threatens to cut off the Pardoner's 'coillons', the narrator says 'al the peple lough'—obviously, the narrator believes that when men laugh, women must laugh.

⁴⁰ See for example, Manuel Aquirre Daban, 'The Riddle of Sovereignty', *Modern Language Review* 88.2

ideas occur. ‘Men preach, and women listen’ (‘his mouth; her ears’) is the true situation of the dialogue between the Wife and the patriarchs, and the Wife’s loss of hearing is her retribution when she starts to use her mouth. Alisoun’s injury thus exposes the idea that women should listen to what men say, or they deserve to be deaf. Seen from this educational solution, Alisoun’s impeded hearing does not reflect her alleged poor understanding, but a brutal, undeserved punishment from her frustrated educators—the male *auctorites* in general.

The fourth chapter discusses the Pardoner’s appearance, sexuality, and his homophobia, as well as the authenticity of the phrase ‘al the peple lough’ (VI. 961). Because of the narrator’s notorious phrase ‘I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare’ (I. 691), modern critics have offered diverse speculations and findings of this pilgrim’s physical condition and sexuality. Monica McAlpine, for example, asserts that the Pardoner is a homosexual and that his odd sexuality accounts for his vice.⁴¹ McAlpine’s article has inspired a stream of critical discussions, arguing variously whether the Pardoner is homosexual, heterosexual, bi-sexual, or feminoid,⁴² and in what way this quaestor’s sexuality affects his morality. Besides his sexuality, critics show similar interests in the Pardoner’s physical condition. Following Walter Clyde Curry who claims that the Pardoner is a born eunuch (*eunuchus ex nativitate*),⁴³ Jeffrey Rayner Myers studies the

(1993): 273-82; Robert J. Blanch, “‘Al was this land fulfild of fayerye’: The Thematic Employment of Force, Willfulness, and Legal Conventions in Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath’s Tale””, *Studia Neophilologica* 57.1 (1985): 41-51; Susan Carter, ‘Coupling the Beastly Bride and the Hunter Hunted: What Lies Behind Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Tale?’, *The Chaucer Review* 37.4 (2003): 329-45; Donald C. Greene, ‘The Semantics of Power: “Maistrie” and “Soveraynetee” in “The Canterbury Tales”’, *Modern Philology* 84.1 (1986): 18-23; and Susanne Weil, ‘Freedom Through Association? Chaucer’s Psychology of Argumentation in “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue”’, *Pacific Coast Philology* 30.1 (1995): 27-41.

⁴¹ See ‘The Pardoner’s Homosexuality and How It Matters’, *PMLA* 95.1 (1980): 8-22. McAlpine’s article has inspired much discussion of the Pardoner’s homo/sexuality, see for example, C. David Benson (‘Chaucer’s Pardoner: His Sexuality and Modern Critics’, *Medievalia* 8 [1982]: 337-49), Michael A. Calabrese (‘“Make a Mark That Shows”: Orphean Song, Orphean Sexuality, and the Exile of Chaucer’s Pardoner’, *Viator* 24 [1993]: 269-286), and Richard Firth Green (‘The Sexual Normality of Chaucer’s Pardoner’, *Medievalia* 8 [1982]: 351-59).

⁴² See Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, at 344, referenced by many critics).

⁴³ *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (New York: Barnes & Noble, rpt. 1960), at 59.

Pardoner as a ‘female eunuch’—a woman disguised as a man, who belongs to ‘a long tradition of female-to-male cross dressing in the Middle Ages’;⁴⁴ Robert P. Miller treats the Pardoner as a ‘religious/spiritual eunuch’, citing references to eunuchry from the Bible;⁴⁵ and Beryl Rowland, drawing evidences from animal imagery, concludes that the Pardoner is a ‘testicular pseudohermaphrodite of the feminine type’.⁴⁶ Those explorations seem to have confused rather than clarified the Pardoner’s physical condition: for example, Miller’s discussion contrarily proves that the Pardoner, famously greedy and vicious, cannot be a scriptural eunuch;⁴⁷ and Myers’ ‘female eunuch’—as a eunuch is made, not born—makes readers only wonder which part of the Pardoner’s genitalia is removed; not to mention Rowland’s baffling term: under Rowland’s scrutiny, the Pardoner’s physical problem is not just whether he is castrated or not; it involves more complicated anatomical abnormalcy and hence indicates more intricacies of the Pardoner’s psychology.⁴⁸

Though the phrase ‘I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare’ remains enigmatic, this chapter does not intend to suggest more definitions of the Pardoner’s sexuality. My study focuses on the fundamental problems of the sexual definitions mentioned above and the prejudices behind them. The narrator’s innuendo of the Pardoner’s sexual oddity starts from the depiction of this pilgrim’s effeminate appearance and his goat-like voice. Is Chaucer’s depiction merely stereotypical or based on reliable data and observation?

⁴⁴ ‘Chaucer’s Pardoner as Female Eunuch’, *Studia Neophilologica* 72.1(2000): 54-62.

⁴⁵ ‘Chaucer’s Pardoner, the Scriptural Eunuch, and the Pardoner’s Tale’, *Speculum* 30.2 (1955): 180-99.

⁴⁶ See ‘Animal Imagery and the Pardoner’s Abnormality’, *Neophilologus* 48 (1964): 56-60, at 58. Donald R. Howard also regards the Pardoner as a hermaphrodite, and a *male* one (note on the Pardoner, *Riverside Chaucer*, 824).

⁴⁷ For more details, see Chapter 4, n. 31.

⁴⁸ Rowland’s term is not entirely self-created; ‘pseudohermaphroditism’ is a medical term meaning ‘the condition in which an organism is born with primary sex characteristics of one sex but develops the secondary sex characteristics that are different from what would be expected on the basis of the gonadal tissue (ovary or testis)’. The term ‘male pseudohermaphrodite’ is used when a testis is present, and the term ‘female pseudohermaphrodite’ is used when an ovary is present. See O. N. Stern and W. J. Vandervort, ‘Testicular Feminization in a Male Pseudohermaphrodite—Report of a Case’, *The New England Journal of Medicine* 254 (1956): 787-790, at 787. See also *Online Health Encyclopedia* (www.urmc.rochester.edu/Health Encyclopedia). Rowland’s term indicates that the Pardoner is a male pseudohermaphrodite rather than a female one.

How do people's common notions of masculinity and femininity affect modern critics' judgment of the Pardoner's sexuality? By investigating Chaucer's portraiture of the Pardoner in terms of the traditional physiognomy and folklore beliefs as well as modern critics' study of several historical figures, the first section of this chapter, 'How Should a Man Look', will explore people's biased concept of gender images and how they apply these images to the judgment of a person's masculinity and femininity. When it comes to the Pardoner's effeminacy, readers firstly think of the narrator's description of this pilgrim's long stylish hair: 'as yellow as wax', 'smothe it heeng', 'ounces henge his lokkes', 'therwith he hise shuldres overspradde', and 'thynne it lay by colpons oon and oon' (I. 675-9). Dictated by common notions, readers often equate long curly hair with femininity and then homosexuality; these notions are actually groundless. Numerous male portraits in English history demonstrate that having long and even wavy hair is not particular for men, nor does it specifically indicate effeminacy. Many English Kings (e.g., Edward III and Richard II) as well as grave political and literary figures (e.g., Thomas More and John Milton) have long hair; nowadays, men with long hair are often seen on the English streets. In short, long hair is a common hairstyle many English men would choose—and the cold weather in this country probably encourages that choice. Strictly speaking, the Pardoner is a 'type'; he is not the only one character in *the Canterbury Tales* that has this allegedly effeminate hair style: the Squire (I. 81) and the squeamish clerk Absolon in the 'Miller's Tale' (I. 3314-6) are both blond and have long and 'well-pressed' hair. Also, their attentions to colorful and fashionable outfits are similar. But the Squire is described as constantly in love, and Absolon tirelessly pursuing the carpenter John's wife. Namely, their exquisite long hair and interests in making themselves look attractive do not prevent them from being a 'heterosexual predator',⁴⁹ like many young handsome amorous male characters in popular and

⁴⁹ See Greg Walker, 'Rough Girls and Squeamish Boys: The Trouble with Absolon in The Miller's Tale',

influential medieval romances, such as *Roman de la Rose* and *Orlando Furioso*. Chaucer's depiction of the Pardoner's appearance evidently follows the tradition of romantic/courtly literature. And to say that the poet intends to indicate the Pardoner's odd sexuality by such depictions is not so much as to say that he wants to manifest this type of young men who are, as they appear in his eyes, silly, trivial, skin-deep, and having no minds for serious pursuits. Obviously, Chaucer is particular about a person's appearance. How should a man look? He definitely should not look like the Pardoner. Just like how the Prioress should look and what kind of French she should speak or how the Wife of Bath as a woman should be, Chaucer's portraitures of his pilgrims are often based on the code of what he regards as shoulds and should-nots—these opinionated shoulds and should-nots clearly reflect the poet's biased concepts and values.

Although the Pardoner's exquisite hair style has little to do with his sexuality, Chaucer does indicate this pilgrim's sexual oddity and physical abnormalcy by other details: 'glarynge eyen', a high-pitched voice, and beardless cheeks. Because of these traits, our poet mocks: 'I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare'. A 'gelding' literally means a castrated horse; hence, critics probe into the Pardoner's 'fragmented physique' and cogitate that he might be a born eunuch (*eunuchus ex nativitate*), a castratus, or a hermaphrodite. No matter by which term, the Pardoner's 'coillons' are highly concerned: they are either missing, removed, or co-existing with other female genitalia. Beardlessness and high voice, caused by hormonal consequences after castration, are typical characteristics of eunuchs; and since the Pardoner is expressively vicious, greedy, and immoral, his physical condition is thus believed to have significant implications. The second section of this chapter, 'Where Are the Coillons', aims to explore these implications: the purpose, however, is not to discover more significance of the

Pardoner's seemingly missing testicles, but the prejudices revealed by Chaucer's mocking as well as modern critics' suggestions of the non-existence of them. Why does Chaucer consider a person's sexual 'abnormalcy' worth mocking? Why do modern critics, in our time when non-heterosexuality is widely understood and accepted, still hold the opinion that a person's sexuality reflects his moral propensity? The Pardoner's 'coillons' are actually intact. As Robert S. Sturges points out: the Host's threat to cut off the Pardoner's *colloins* 'at least suggests that something may be there to be cut off'.⁵⁰ Besides, the narrator Chaucer often shows omniscience in his narratives; if the Pardoner was a castratus, the narrator would have, as Alastair Minnis observes, 'informed us of that defining moment in his life'.⁵¹ In a word, the Pardoner is not a eunuch, and the narrator knows it. Mocking the Pardoner by indicating that he has no 'balls' is a calculated insult,⁵² and the Canterbury pilgrims, repelled by the Pardoner's 'queerness', think that he deserves this humiliation ('Al the peple lough').

Yet, 'abnormalcy' and public offense are only the surface reasons why the Pardoner is punished. The Host's threat in fact connotes a power struggle between the masculine/heterosexual Host and the effeminate/non-heterosexual Pardoner. The Host strikes back when the Pardoner claims that he is the person 'moost envoluped in synne' and should come first to offer and 'kisse the relikes' (VI. 942-4)—namely, the Host is enraged because the effeminate Pardoner has intended to replace his authority as the masculine leader of the group with false preaching.⁵³ By both how he looks and what he does, the Pardoner has crossed the boundary—committed 'transgression' so to

⁵⁰ See 'The Pardoner Veiled and Unveiled', *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York and London: Garland, 1997), 261-77, at 273.

⁵¹ See 'Chaucer and the Queering Eunuch', *New Medieval Literatures* 6 (2003): 107-28, at 111.

⁵² See Alastair Minnis, 'Chaucer and the Queering Eunuch', 122; Henry Ansgar Kelly, 'The Pardoner's Voice, Disjunctive Narrative, and Modes of Effemination', *Law and Religion in Chaucer's England* (Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2010), 411-444, at 426; and Lee Patterson, 'Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch: Psyche and Clio in Medieval Literary Studies', *Speculum* 76.3 (2001): 638-80, at 661. See also Chapter 4, n. 44.

⁵³ The Pardoner's peddling of 'false pardons' and 'fake relics' is often taken to symbolize his false preaching. For more details, see Chapter 4. n. 68.

speak⁵⁴—and all the Canterbury pilgrims think he needs a thrust to put him back where he should be. This brutal exclusion cannot be called humanistic, though Chaucer is well-known for his humanism.⁵⁵ The collective bully needs to be justified; and by the indication of the phrase ‘I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare’ and the depiction of the Pardoner’s evil character, the Pardoner appears justly punished. Yet, the conflation of physical abnormalcy/sexual oddity and evil character delivers an ingrained prejudice: Chaucer evidently equates physical defects with spiritual flaws, effeminacy with brazenness, and emasculation with sexual perversion. To be more specific, the poet suggests, and modern readers believe, that the Pardoner is vicious, shameless, and non-heterosexual because he is physically deficient, effeminate, and has a high voice and no beard; or to put it the other way round: the Pardoner has no *coillons*, no virility, no abundant hair and no deep masculine voice, and is therefore vicious, impudent, and sexually abnormal. Seen from this logic, the Pardoner is not just a marginal or an effeminate figure; to justify the patriarchs’ prejudice of and contempt for the non-heterosexual and the ‘different’⁵⁶, he is marginalized (ousted by his fellow pilgrims) and feminized (threatened to be castrated) no matter how hard he tries to conform to the mainstream value.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ In his study of the Pardoner’s ‘body’, Robert S. Sturges discovers that in Chaucer’s time effeminacy is condemned as a ‘transgression’ rather than a physical condition (‘The Pardoner’s (Over)-Sexed Body’, *Chaucer’s Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse* [Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000], 36-46, at 37). Seen from this point, the Pardoner commits double transgressions when he preaches with his presumptuous ‘difference’. See also Chapter 4, n. 55.

⁵⁵ See n. 9 above.

⁵⁶ Allen J. Frantzen states that ‘to stigmatize difference as perversity is the first step to demonizing it’, and indicates that the Host has demonized the Pardoner and many modern critics have ‘followed the Host in this act’ (see “‘The Pardoner’s Tale’, the Pervert, and the Price of Order in Chaucer’s World”, *Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections*, eds. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994], 131-48, at 145).

⁵⁷ Whether the Pardoner is marginal or marginalized, critics have different opinions. John M. Bowers and Derek Pearsall both claim that the Pardoner is a ‘marginal’ figure (see “‘Dronkenesse Is Ful of Stryvyng’: Alcoholism and Ritual Voice in Chaucer’s “Pardoner’s Tale””, *ELH* 57.4 (1990): 757-84, at 778; and *The Canterbury Tales* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1985], at 95). For Carolyn Dinshaw and Linda Georgianna, the Pardoner is at first marginal and at the end marginalized (see ‘Chaucer’s Queer Touches / A Queer Touches Chaucer’, *Exemplaria* 7 [1995]: 75-92, at 90; and ‘Anticlericalism in Boccaccio and Chaucer: The Bark and the Bite’, *The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales: New Essays on an Old Question*, eds. Leonardo Michael Koff and Brenda Deen Schildgen [Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press,

As mentioned above, the Canterbury pilgrims are repulsed by the Pardoner's physical abnormalcy and sexual oddity. The repulsion of the Pardoner's 'open secret' unawares reveals a secret of the pilgrims' own. Though critics are still uncertain whether a 'mare' means a homosexual man, some have discovered in the Host's indignation and the pilgrims' laughter 'the operation of medieval homophobia'—i.e., medieval people's fear of the 'unspeakable', the 'unnamable' vice,⁵⁸ which the Church has 'abominated' and 'helped both to create and to perpetuate'.⁵⁹ Robert Sturges, in his study of the Pardoner's erotic practices, demonstrates the fear through the wide-spreading influences of the religious/moral instructions in medieval times, such as the Pearl Poet's discussion of the same-sex eroticism in *Cleanness* and St. Paul's reference to 'the unspeakable vice' in Ephesians 5: 3-12.⁶⁰ Allen J. Frantzen also points out that the Pardoner's sexual characteristics signify the 'pleasure and freedom' which the Church 'feared to let loose in the world' (145). The influences can also be observed in Chaucer's 'Parson's Tale' in which the poet refers to homosexuality as an 'abhomynable synne' and no man 'unnethe oghte speke ne write' (X. 910).⁶¹ In a word, the horror or revulsion of this 'vice' reflects medieval people's attitude towards homosexuality, same-sex erotic practices, or sodomy, which Chaucer's portrayal of the Pardoner implies. The third section of this chapter, 'Who Is the Most Homophobic', will investigate the elements that construct the fear of the 'abhomynable synne' in the Canterbury group, and analyze which of the Canterbury pilgrims suffers the most from the fear of the 'vice'.

Critics often observe that an ambience of homophobia permeates the Canterbury

2000], 148-73, at 168).

⁵⁸ See Monica E. McAlpine, 16; Robert Sturges, 'The Pardoner's Different Erotic Practices', *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), 47-59, at 53.

⁵⁹ See Monica E. McAlpine, 16; Allen J. Frantzen, 140.

⁶⁰ See 'The Pardoner's Different Erotic Practices', 52-57.

⁶¹ See also Chapter 4, n. 62.

group.⁶² Steven F. Kruger, for example, remarks that ‘The Pardoner’s Tale’, by its ‘homophobic construction of male homosexuality’, presents the most obvious medieval homophobia in Chaucer’s narratives.⁶³ Also, as the Pardoner appears ‘queer’ in the pilgrims’ eyes, the pilgrims’ exclusion of him is itself an exhibition of such fear. Seen from this aspect, it might not be too much to say that the Canterbury group is also a homophobic group. When it comes to homophobia, we take it for granted that it is the ‘negative attitude and feelings’ of the heterosexual towards the homosexual. Can a homosexual be homophobic? That is, can the Pardoner be homophobic? It might sound odd, but whether the Pardoner is also infected and affected by that fear which people around him constantly feel in face of a seemingly non-heterosexual like him is the key to our understanding of his primary sexual identity. The Pardoner is described by the narrator as an object frequently exposed to the ‘masculine gaze’ because of his job and of his ‘peculiar’ body.⁶⁴ His preaching and appearance illustrate a curious contrast. Though deemed as effeminate, the Pardoner preaches with such power and forceful gesticulations that, as Kruger recognizes, ‘none of the male pilgrims describes him[self] in such strongly physical terms’ (132). This ‘performative masculinity’, as Sturges puts it,⁶⁵ vividly demonstrates how much the Pardoner endeavors to conform to the masculine/heterosexual norms; namely, by preaching, an enacting of his power to interpret with right/masculine/heterosexual language, the Pardoner wants to prove to others that he is a ‘man’, determined to be a ‘man’, and can be a ‘man’. None of the pilgrims expresses so much approval of the heterosexual values and shows so much concern about heterosexual identity as the Pardoner does. Obviously, he is eager to gain recognition from his peers—but all in vain. The narrator’s unkind mockery, the Host’s

⁶² See Chapter 4, n. 60.

⁶³ See ‘Claiming the Pardoner: Toward a Gay Reading of Chaucer’s Pardoner’s Tale’, *Exemplaria* 6.1 (1994): 115-39.

⁶⁴ See Glenn Burger, ‘Kissing the Pardoner’, *PMLA* 107.5 (1992): 1143-56, at 1147.

⁶⁵ See ‘The Pardoner Veiled and Unveiled’, 272. See also Chapter 4, n. 56.

brutal threat, and the pilgrims' heartless laughter not only publicize their fear but also mirror the Pardoner's of that 'unspeakable vice', by which this 'noble ecclesiaste' (I. 708) cannot avoid the fate of being excluded despite his assiduous conformity.

The Pardoner's homophobia manifests that the world Chaucer depicts is a phallogocentric rather than a logocentric one;⁶⁶ in that world only the heterosexual and the 'real' masculine are accepted, while the non-heterosexual and effeminate, as they indicate deficiency or oddity, will be expelled or marginalized. This chauvinistic bias is not only reflected in the pilgrims' exclusion of the Pardoner but also in the narrator's disregard of the female voice in the notorious laughter at the end of the Pardoner's tale. When the Host threatens to cut off the Pardoner's 'coillons', the narrator says 'al the peple lough'. The fourth section of this chapter will examine the authenticity of the narrator's claim as well as the implication of that skewed observation. Do all the pilgrims really laugh, including the three female pilgrims? If they do, what do their voices signify? Does it matter whether they laugh or not? If it does/not, how do we interpret the narrator's indication of this seemingly 'unanimous' laughter?

Traditionally, 'al the peple lough' is received as the pilgrims' supportive response to the Host's righteous punishment of the Pardoner's presumption and transgression. The narrator's claim and critics' acceptance, however, expose a chauvinistic disrespect for the individuality of female voices. The Canterbury group is not a single-sexed one; there are several female pilgrims: the cynical Wife of Bath, the demure Prioress, and the decent Second Nun. It is hard to believe that these characteristic women would be amused by the Host's abuse of the Pardoner and laugh with the male pilgrims. The Wife

⁶⁶ 'Phallogocentrism' or 'phallogocentrism' is a neologism coined by Jacques Derrida 'to refer to the privileging of the masculine (phallus) in the construction of meaning' (see *Memidex Dictionary/Thesaurus*, www.memidex.com/phallogocentric, and *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu/derrida/). By 'phallogocentric rather than logocentric' I mean the situation in which men's construction of meaning prevails the meaning (of Words) itself, since the Canterbury pilgrims' attention is on the Pardoner's body (men's construction of meaning) rather than on his tale: the teaching of the story of 'the Three Revelers' (the meaning of Words). See also Chapter 4, n. 69.

could not laugh at this, for no one knows better than she does how it is like to be chided and suppressed by the *auctoritees*. If she laughs, then she shows that she has not learned from her lesson when she is made deaf by her husband, the representative of the patriarchs. And the two nuns, though more domesticated by religious education and enclosure of conventual environment, are rarely exposed to offensive behavior and situation. When the Host insults the Pardoner with foul and profane words like ‘Cristes curs’, ‘fundement’, ‘hogges toord’, ‘coillons’, and ‘kutte hem of’, (IV. 946-55), could they forget their religious status and acknowledge the Host’s insult and laugh? If they could, their laughter would be the most incredible one in Chaucer’s narratives. By this arbitrary claim, similar to ‘whatever men say is “truth” and women should listen’, Chaucer reveals another chauvinistic bias: whatever men do (even brutal things), women should applaud. ‘Al the peple lough’ is an untrue observation. And if the narrator has failed to distinguish the lady pilgrims’ voices, it is not because their voices are drowned, but because they have not laughed at all.

Suppose the creator Chaucer does make his female pilgrims laugh on the occasion. Their laughter does not mean the same as the men’s. If the male pilgrims’ laughter signifies a masculine bullying of the effeminate Pardoner, the female pilgrims’ laughter reflects women’s eager identification with and approval of what men have done. The feminized Pardoner and the female pilgrims, in the Host’s and the narrator’s eyes, are in the same category—all need to be taught by men. Hence, the female pilgrims’ laughter also shows that they act as the patriarch’s accomplice mindlessly when they see him oppress and castigate the weaker sex. Making his female pilgrims laugh on the occasion, Chaucer not only denigrates his female characters but also sacrifices his art, for he makes them laugh against the logical characterization of their distinct characters.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Chaucer does not give the Second Nun a portrait in the *General Prologue*; namely, she is not described at all. But from her tale, critics still observe her pious and goodly nature. See Chapter 4, n. 89.

This chapter hopes to conclude that to uphold the Host's vehement threat the Pardoner is feminized and homosexualized. The Pardoner is sentenced as a transgressor because he attempts to assume authority and perform masculinity; in other words, he is considered transgressive because he refuses to stay at the place others define for him. 'Transgression' is primarily a concept the privileged invent to protect their privileges and an excuse to punish those who appear to infringe on them. The narrator imposes the patriarchs' norms of normalcy—heterosexuality, masculinity, authority—upon the Pardoner while at the same denies them to him. The Pardoner's angry silence in the end is not just caused by the Host's insult, but also his own desperate efforts continually thwarted by people's prejudices against him.

* * *

This thesis does not intend to find faults with Chaucer. Cultural recognition and comparisons are the meaning and purpose of this project. There are thirty pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*; they represent different social estates and come from all walks of life. Chaucer's portraits of them vividly display the spectrum of English society and people in his time. Studying Chaucer is no doubt a good way to learn about English culture, customs, and traditions in the Middle Ages. And there are twenty-two tales in *The Canterbury Tales*; they are told in various genres, including romance, fabliau, religious exemplum, hymn, sermon, and so on. However, *The Canterbury Tales* is not just a collection of tales; through the narratives and the characters that tell them, Chaucer provides a huge scope of information for students who take interests in the studies of medieval English language, literature, as well as numerous aspects of culture such as religious belief, art, fashion, trades, marriage transactions, medicine, astrology,

and so on. Chaucerians have also specialized in various motifs, discourses, and cultural aspects presented in *The Canterbury Tales* to deepen and widen our knowledge of the poet's age: for example, Laura F. Hodges blends her interests in medieval literature and the history of costume in her researches, from which we perceive not only Chaucer's use of costume rhetoric, but also the kinds of materials and fabrics people use and wear in medieval times;⁶⁸ Richard Rex, approaching from religious and moral aspects, aims to divulge Madame Eglentyne's sins—through his analyses, medieval people's religious concept and moral values become distinct to us;⁶⁹ and Robert Sturges, focusing on the Pardoner's 'over-sexed' body, offers to us a series of explorations of medieval people's sexual identities and the construction of same-sex eroticism.

In this thesis, I hope to contribute my in-depth studies of the prejudices I have observed (via four representative pilgrims) in *The Canterbury Tales*. As mentioned, cultural recognitions/comparisons are the central concerns of this project; therefore, while discussing the prejudices as they are, my investigations will also comprehend the conceptional evolutions of those prejudices in the process of time as well as some cross-cultural comparisons/contrasts when I evaluate them. I understand that what I regard as prejudices are oftentimes the norms in Chaucer's age—and still in some modern minds; my criticism and analyses may thus appear merely prejudiced in the eyes of those who do not think similarly owing to different genders/ages/cultural backgrounds. However, I believe that there are some values—humanity, equitableness, compassion, and suchlike—that should be deemed as universal rather than modern. And it is meaningful, as cultural comparisons/observations, to recognize that some parts of them were disbelieved, distrusted, unperceived, or even nonexistent in Chaucer's time.

⁶⁸ See Laura F. Hodges, *Chaucer and Array* (New York: D. S. Brewer, 2014).

⁶⁹ See "*The Sins of Madame Eglentyne*" and *Other Essays on Chaucer* (Newark, N.J.: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1995). This book has nine chapters, discussing the Prioress's sins from various aspects.

Chapter 1

The Miller's Tale: Female Autonomy and Class Victimization

As 'prejudice' indicates preconceived opinion or ungrounded belief, it is most easily observed in people's attitudes toward gender and class. The concepts of gender commonly involve opposing opinions of sexualities, and thus, men's sexual autonomy and women's sexual autonomy are often inequitably judged. Likewise, the values practiced by different classes usually appear disagreeable to one another; hence, discords, abuses, and exploitations are unavoidable in human relationships. The Miller's tale deals with both the contempt of the female's sexual autonomy and victimization of the 'lewed' owing to gender and class prejudices. This chapter will investigate how Nicholas, a clever 'scoler', and Absolon, a pompous church clerk, pursue their intended sexual object by making use of the old carpenter's ignorance and lower social status, and how Alisoun's body is misused and her sexual autonomy punished by the prejudiced narrator.

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When the gross Miller¹ proclaims in his prologue that 'An housbonde shal nat

¹ The Miller's appearance (a 'wert' on the nose on which 'stood a toft of herys, / Reed as the bristles of a sowes erys' [I. 555-6], black and wide 'nosethirles' [I. 557], and a mouth 'as greet was as a greet forneys' [I. 559]), his love of 'wrestlynge' (I. 548) and 'rennyng with his heed' at doors to break them (I. 550-1), his drunkenness, his loud music, his discourteous manners, and, especially, his rude insistence on 'quyting' the Knight's tale by intercepting the Monk, have motivated numerous discussions and interpretations on his character. W. C. Curry, from a physiognomical point of view, suggests that the Miller is 'shameless, immodest, loquacious, irascible' and is 'a glutton, a swagger and an impious fornicator' (*Chaucer and Medieval Sciences*, 79, cited by Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estate Satire*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008], n. 57, at 282). However, Mann remarks that we do not need scientific manuals to tell us of the Miller's crudity: his appearance is 'a popular stereotype' (Ibid. 162). Gregory M. Colon Semenza, other than interpreting the Miller's character, maintains that the Miller's love of wrestling and running his head at doors actually reveal a social significance which connotes both class consciousness and class competitions (see 'Historicizing "Wrestlynge" in The Miller's Tale', *The Chaucer Review* 38.1 [2003]: 66-82). Interestingly, the Miller is not an uneducated person: he is able to criticize John for his ignorance of Dionysius Cato and describe the tools which

been inquisityf / Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf' (I. 3163-4),² his lack of knowledge of the female body and his taunting of women's sexual autonomy is manifest. On the surface, the Miller's joke seems to be in 'yoking two forbidden subjects, one unknowable and the other better not known',³ or sacrilegiously linking 'divine knowledge' with 'the knowing of women's secrets',⁴ but since Chaucer's jokes are never just jokes, critics have discovered diverse indications of deeper meaning in this enigmatic proclamation. For example, Fredrick Biggs and Laura Howes claim that by the word 'pryvetee' Chaucer refers 'both to human genitalia and divine secrets', citing Exodus 33. 23 as its source in which God 'refuses to allow Moses to see his face, but does reveal to him his "back parts"'.⁵ Expanding from this, Biggs and Howes further remark that '[i]f so, the description of the fart, "as greet as it had been a thonder-dent" (I. 3807), may too recall the description of the thunder on Mountain Sinai that precedes God's arrival (Exodus 19.16)' ('Theophany' 269). Though profane, this relating of 'Goddes pryvetee' to God's back parts is now a widely accepted interpretation of the Miller's blasphemy. To uphold that interpretation, Louise M. Bishop suggests an even bolder reading—in her own terms: 'even more challenging and terrifying, certainly blasphemous and heretical' (231)—of the Miller's joke, and offers readers a brilliant

Nicholas uses in his astrological activities; he is also a music lover, a bag-pipe player, whose piping 'brought [the pilgrims] out of towne' (I. 565-6); and he is a shrewd businessman who has 'a thombe of gold' (I. 563).

² All quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford 2008). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by fragment and line numbers.

³ See Robert W. Hanning, 'Telling the private parts: "pryvetee" and poetry in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*', *The Idea of Medieval Literature*, ed. James M. Dean and Christian K. Zacher (Newark: U. of Delaware Press, 1992), 108-25, cited by Fredrick M. Biggs and Laura L. Howes, 'Theophany in the "Miller's Tale"', *Medium Aevum* 65.2 (1996): 269-79, at 271.

⁴ That is, to elevate Alison's private parts and their unknowability to the level of God's. See Louise M. Bishop, "'Of Goddes Pryvetee nor of His Wyf': Confusion of Orifices in Chaucer's Miller's Tale", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44.3 (2002): 231-46, at 240.

⁵ See 'Theophany in the "Miller's Tale"', 269. A number of critics have connected 'pryvetee' to 'private parts', for example, Paula Neuss, 'Double Meanings: Double-Entendre in the *Miller's Tale*', *Essays in Criticism* 24.4 (1974): 325-40; D. Thomas Hanks, "'Goddes Pryvetee" and Chaucer's Miller's Tale', *Christianity and Literature* 33 (1984): 7-12; and Thomas J. Farrell, 'Privacy and the Boundaries of Fable in the "Miller's Tale"', *ELH* 56.4 (1989): 773-95. For more articles on this, see 'Theophany', n. 4 & 5.

analysis of the ‘Miller’s Tale’ using words like ‘God’s private parts’, ‘God’s genitalia’ to expose a generic lack of bodily knowledge in the ‘Tale’ and other traditional fabliaux.

The Miller’s joke also provides clues to some critics who infer from the ‘Tale’—a fabliau in which cuckoldry is the leitmotif—and find in the joke a display of an erotic triangular relationship between God, Joseph, and Mary. For instance, Roy Peter Clark maintains that the tale also ‘concerns God’s sex life (His private love affairs)’ and points out: ‘Chaucer suggests that, in the comic mode, God cuckolded the old, *senex* Joseph. God has made Mary pregnant. He is Mary’s lover’.⁶ Numerous studies of medieval mystery plays (especially those of the annunciation) similarly highlight this triangular relationship. In his essay ‘Nicholas’s “Angelus ad Virginem” and the Mocking of Noah’, John B. Friedman observes: ‘That Joseph believed himself a cuckold at first upon seeing his pregnant wife was an important part of the apocryphal legends about him which circulated in the Middle Ages’.⁷ The divine family composed of God, Mary, and the Holy Infant with Joseph standing beside or behind as a cuckold is thus a common element of religious parodies in medieval mystery plays—which also accounts for the source of the Miller’s joke.⁸

Such humor (as Haskins remarks: ‘by a degree of irreverence for which the modern reader is unprepared’),⁹ however, does not seem so offensive to the people in medieval

⁶ See ‘Christmas Games in Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale”’, 285.

⁷ ‘Nicholas’s “Angelus ad Virginem” and the Mocking of Noah’, *Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992), 162-80, at 167. See also Thomas W. Ross, ‘Notes on Chaucer’s Miller’s Tale, A 3216 and 3320’, *English Language Notes* 13 (1976): 256-8; Beryl Rowland, ‘The Play of the *Miller’s Tale*: A Game within a Game’, *The Chaucer Review* 5.2 (1970): 140-6, at 143, and ‘Chaucer’s Blasphemous Churl: A New Interpretation of the *Miller’s Tale*’, *Chaucer and Middle English Studies*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Unwin, 1974), 43-55, at 45; and Melvin Storm, ‘The Miller, the Virgin, and the Wife of Bath’, *Neophilologus* 75.2 (1991): 291-303, at 297.

⁸ In his essay, John B. Friedman provides nine medieval religious paintings (including a wall painting and a tapestry) illustrating various scenes of Annunciation; one of which he describes as ‘obscene’ (figure 7), and another ‘mocking’ (figure 9). The blasphemy in the paintings is not rare. Beryl Rowland also observes: ‘Throughout the Middle Ages scenes and incidents from the Vulgate Bible, the apocryphal books and various services of the Church were subject to merciless burlesque...’ (‘Chaucer’s Blasphemous Churl’ 43).

⁹ Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1927; rpt. New York 1957), at 184, cited by Beryl Rowland, ‘Chaucer’s Blasphemous Churl’, at 43.

England as to us in the modern world. The reason is not just because of the ‘juxtaposition of the brutal or obscene and the spiritually beautiful’,¹⁰ but also because the mystery pageants eventually convey a Christian message or religious moral after all. Namely, the parodic mode is merely the means; the religious or moral messages are the true ends. When the medieval audience heard the ‘Miller’s Prologue and Tale’, they would surely expect both of these, too. Indeed, when the Miller satirically warns that ‘An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf / Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf’, and announces that he ‘wol telle a legende and a lyf / Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf’ (I. 3141-2), his fellow pilgrims (and audience outside the text) would immediately anticipate a profane parody based on St. Joseph (as the conflation of the words ‘legende’—which refers to a story of a saint—and ‘carpenter’ indicates), the Virgin Mary, and God-lover, involving the theme of Annunciation, problem of cuckoldry, and religious messages as well as moral lessons in the tale.¹¹ Given the parody and the religious allusions and symbolism, the ‘Miller’s Tale’ therefore is not simply a fabliau but a religious exemplum,¹² a tale meant ‘more than an occasion for laughs’.¹³

The most intriguing word in the Miller’s joke that has caused so much discussion is no doubt ‘pryvetee’. According to Gila Aloni’s count, ‘pryvetee’ and its derivatives (‘privy’ and ‘prively’) ‘appear thirteen times in the course of the tale’¹⁴—i.e., about ‘eight times more than the *Knight’s Tale*’, according to Thomas J. Farrell.¹⁵ This

¹⁰ Beryl Rowland, ‘Chaucer’s Blasphemous Churl’, 44. Roy Peter Clark suggests that such blasphemy reflects ‘the misrule of the holiday season’ (‘Christmas Games’ 285).

¹¹ Besides the knowledge of the mystery pageants, medieval people were not unfamiliar with these themes. Critics suggest that stories like the ‘Miller’s Tale’ might be a dirty joke extended for ‘the titillation of upper-class minor nobility and court hangers-on’ (Robert Graybill, ‘Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale”: “Exemplum of Caritas”’, *Essays in Medieval Studies* 2 [1985]: 51-65, at 51); or might often be told in holiday seasons (‘Christmas Games in Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale”’, *passim*).

¹² See Robert Graybill, *passim*.

¹³ See Mark Miller, ‘Naturalism and Its Discontents in The Miller’s Tale’, *ELH* 67.1 (2000): 1-44, at 8.

¹⁴ See ‘Extimacy in The Miller’s Tale’, *The Chaucer Review* 41.2 (2006): 163-84, at 163.

¹⁵ See ‘Privacy and the Boundaries of Fabliau in the “Miller’s Tale”’, *ELH* 56.4 (1989): 773-95, at 774. Since the ‘Miller’s Tale’ is for *quiting* the ‘Knight’s Tale’, these two tales are often juxtaposed for comparison, and the ‘Miller’s Tale’ is widely accepted as a parody of the courtly love in the ‘Knight’s Tale’.

persistent repetition, as Farrell states, ‘demands a global response’ (‘Privacy and Boundaries’ 774). Scholars have discovered numerous definitions and implications of the word. Besides ‘private parts’, ‘genitalia’, ‘secrets’, and ‘private love affairs’ mentioned earlier, Biggs and Howes explicate that through the use of ‘pryvetee’, Chaucer develops a theme inherent in the Exodus story: ‘the limits to human knowledge, primarily of God but also of other humans’ (‘Theophany’ 269). To Farrell, the ‘Tale’, through the word ‘pryvetee’, ‘creates and sustains an atmosphere of privacy... ranging from Nicholas’s mastery of “deerne love” (I. 3200) to the isolation of its central characters in separate tubs’ (774). In other words, the major part of the tale proceeds privately, which not only reveals the presumptuous side of human nature but also foretells the characters’ several punishments due to their self-regarding ‘secrecy’.

‘Pryvetee’ has also been examined from the point of view of its antonym ‘apert’; both words connote and denote a spatial characteristic. To John, Alisoun is his ‘private’ possession, which he tries to keep ‘narwe in cage’ (I. 3224). To Nicholas and Absolon, she is a public object still current in sex market;¹⁶ both of them want to obtain her—one ‘queynte’ (secretly, i.e., by sly ways), and the other publicly: ‘by meenes and brocage’ (go-betweens and an agent)—for their own ‘private’ needs. Examined from their desires to control the woman they love/pursue, the spatial characteristic indicated by the word ‘pryvetee’ encompasses not only a physical but also a psychological dimension¹⁷ which manifests the inmost parts of the three male characters.¹⁸ With the same approach but different perspective, Gila Aloni explores this similar spatial element of ‘pryvetee’ by

¹⁶ Martin Blum states: ‘While John has been comparatively easy to deal with, Alison shows a great deal of dexterity as an independent player in the market-place of erotic exchanges’ (‘Negotiating Masculinities: Erotic Triangles in the Miller’s Tale’, *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Peter G. Beidler [New York: D. S. Brewer, 1998], 37-52, at 43-4).

¹⁷ See E.D. Blodgett, ‘Chaucerian “Pryvetee” and the Opposition of Time’, *Speculum* 51.3 (1976): 477-93, at 482.

¹⁸ Blodgett puts it well: “‘Pryvetee’, “privee” and “prively” are all positions and modes of behavior accepted as a norm by the (male) characters, according to their particular biases, as they focus on Alisoun and her possibilities’ (482).

redefining its traditionally close connection with the concept of intimacy. She argues that ‘the category of privacy’ (*pryvetee*, *privy*, *prively*) should not be discussed as ‘opposed to the category of the public, but rather as a part of a structure in which inside and outside always turn into one another’; it is then ‘extimacy’—the presence of what is ‘Other’—that defines privacy ‘at the place thought to be most intimate’.¹⁹ Namely, without the presence of ‘Other’, there is no need to define ‘pryvetee’; or to put it another way: only when the presence of ‘Other’ starts to emerge can ‘pryvetee’ be recognized or needs of privacy exist. Hence, ‘pryvetee’ does not necessarily imply an enclosed space, such as Nicholas’s room. It is when John begins to enquire into Nicholas’s ‘secrets’ that Nicholas’s room starts to connote a sense of ‘pryvetee’; and when Nicholas pretends to disclose to John ‘Goddess pryvetee’, both of them in turn become the ‘Other’ to God and His space.

Although scholars have provided diverse interpretations of the Miller’s satirical warning, especially of the word *pryvetee*,²⁰ and how the implications of the joke affect and control the narrative, some questions still remain untouched upon. For example, many critics have analyzed Nicholas’s and Absolon’s characters,²¹ but none has treated these two suitors as reflections of Alisoun’s ambivalent desires—that is, Absolon

¹⁹ See ‘Extimacy in the Miller’s Tale’, 163.

²⁰ Besides the critics mentioned earlier, see also Karma Lochrie, ‘Women’s “Pryvetees” and Fabliau Politics in The Miller’s Tale’, *Exemplaria* 6 (1994): 287-304; Kathryn Walls, ‘The Significance of “Arca” and “Goddess Pryvetee” in “The Miller’s Tale”’, *Notes and Queries* 42.1 (1995): 24-6; and David Lorenzo Boyd, ‘Seeking “Goddess Pryvete”: Sodomy, Quitting and Desire in “The Miller’s Tale”’, *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson*, eds. Peter S. Baker and Nicholas Howe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 243-60.

²¹ Critics agree that Absolon is a much more interesting figure than Nicholas; hence, Absolon has traditionally attracted more discussions. See for examples, Peter G. Beidler, ‘Now Deere Lady: Absolon’s Marian Couplet in the Miller’s Tale’, *The Chaucer Review* 39.2 (2004): 219-22; Theodore I. Silar, ‘Chaucer’s Joly Absolon’, *Philological Quarterly* 69.4 (1990): 409-17; Raymond P. Tripp, ‘The Darker Side to Absolon’s Dawn Visit’, *The Chaucer Review* 20.3 (1986): 207-12; Greg Walker, ‘Rough Girls and Squeamish Boys: The Trouble with Absolon in The Miller’s Tale’, *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts*, ed. Elaine Treharne (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), 61-91; John B. Friedman, ‘Nicholas’s “Angelus ad Virginem” and the Mocking of Noah’, *Year Book of English Studies* 22 (1992): 162-80; and Beryl Rowland, ‘The Play of the Miller’s Tale: A Game Within a Game’, *The Chaucer Review* 5.2 (1970): 140-6.

satisfies Alisoun's need of 'public gaze'²² while Nicholas her 'private joy'. Given the consideration, when Alisoun accepts Nicholas and rejects Absolon, is her choice, besides the reason of 'proximity',²³ affected by any concern of public morals? If yes, then Alisoun's choice not only indicates an integration of public morals and private desires, but also initiates a discourse between 'pryvetee' and 'apert' in which Alisoun no doubt dominates the board. When contrasting Nicholas, who exists mainly in 'pryvetee',²⁴ and Absolon, who shows up in diverse public places,²⁵ critics often neglect that Alisoun actually shifts deftly between these two spaces. Can the universally-praised description of Alisoun's sumptuous clothes be merely a delightful accident? Evidently, it is a fabulous contrast to her 'naked ers' (I. 3734), by which Chaucer enhances Alisoun's abilities in belonging to and controlling of the two opposite spatial arrangements. These two spatial arrangements, however, do not exclude each other, but rather, as Gila Aloni demonstrates, co-exist 'as part of a structure in which inside and outside always turn into one another' (163). Therefore, when Alisoun puts her 'hole' out the 'shot wyndowe'—an acrobatic exhibition of her dexterity in shifting between 'pryvetee' and 'apert'²⁶—for Absolon's 'ful drie' lips to kiss, the spaces metaphorized by 'pryvetee' and 'apert' hilariously merge (almost like the encounter of

²² Several critics have looked at Alisoun from the point of view of a 'gazer', see for example, Kara Virginia Donaldson, 'Alisoun's Language: Body, Text, and Glossing in Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale"', *Philological Quarterly* 71.2 (1992): 139-53; H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., 'Newer Currents in Psychoanalytic Criticism and the Difference "It" Makes: Gender and Desire in the "Miller's Tale"', *ELH* 61.3 (1994): 473-99; and William F. Woods, 'Private and Public Space in "The Miller's Tale"', *The Chaucer Review* 29.2 (1994): 166-78. Leicester has extended his discussion to the interaction between the 'gazer' and the 'gazed': 'There are two moments in the portrait where [Alisoun] is presented not merely as an object to be observed..., but as aware of being looked at... Her eye frankly returns the desire of the gazer, and no doubt is thought of as inviting' (484-5).

²³ See Gerhard Joseph, "'Game—Earnest" and the "Argument of Herbergage" in the *Canterbury Tales*', *The Chaucer Review* 5 (1970): 83-96, at 89, cited by Gila Aloni when explicating the 'spatial arrangement' in the tale: 'The proximity of one player and the distance of the other from Alisoun are almost more important than characterization as an index of who "deserves" her' ('Extimacy' 170). The Miller also makes clear the fact: 'Alwey the nye slye / Maketh the ferre leewe to be looth' (I. 3392-3).

²⁴ He is described as 'sleigh and ful privee' (I. 3201) and hardly seen out of his door.

²⁵ The narrator says: 'And as wel koude he pleye on a giterne. / In al the toun nas brewhous ne tavern / That he ne visited with his solas...' (I. 3333-5).

²⁶ Louise M. Bishop looks at this from an ergonomic angle: 'Alison's sense of balance would have to be rather remarkable were she to hang only her anus, and not her vagina, out the shot window' ('Of Goddes Pryvetee' 240).

the third kind) for a magic moment by that misplaced kiss—the summit of the discourse. This funny encounter—the way internal desire and external desire ‘turn into one another’—exactly reveals people’s curiosity towards the unknowable as well as the communicability of their desires. Namely, secrecy is always tempting (whether Goddes prevetee or a wyf’s) to men’s desire for probing, while one’s undue desires will eventually be exposed into the public. The encounter also displays how Absolon’s intentional control of Alisoun in the ‘apert’ is snubbed by the ‘privy’ parts of her body.

This discourse between ‘pryvetee’ and ‘apert’ cannot be properly scrutinized without the recognition of Alisoun’s domination. It is the best way to echo the latter part of the Miller’s proclamation: a man should not be ‘nosy’²⁷ about his wife’s ‘pryvetee’—to most critics, her ‘private parts’ as well as her ‘private business’²⁸, or, we may emphasize, her ‘private business’ in using her ‘private parts’.²⁹ But surely it is not the reason why Alisoun is not punished in the end of the story. Some critics attest Alisoun’s escape from the narrator’s distribution of ‘poetic justice’ by praising her being ‘more masculine’ than the other three male characters,³⁰ her never ‘abusing “pryvetee”’,³¹ her female body being sanctified by the narrator,³² or her ‘keeping her hands on the reins of her own life’³³. Does Alisoun really get off ‘scot free’? My argument will prove the opposite. Alisoun is without doubt punished, and severely. Chaucer seems to give this woman abilities for the purpose of knocking her down. This chapter will then conclude with a discussion of Alisoun’s sexual independence to

²⁷ See Paula Neuss, 330.

²⁸ Like most critics, Paula Neuss also maintains that by ‘nor of his wyf’ the Miller is referring to a wife’s private parts as well as her private business, or ‘perhaps more precisely a combination of the two’ (331).

²⁹ The most candid definition I have read is by David Lorenzo Boyd: ‘[a] wife’s private (sexual) affairs’ (‘Seeking “Goddes Pryvetee”’ 245). Most scholars seem shy to pin it down forthrightly; yet, without a down-to-earth definition, John’s cuckoldry cannot be fully interpreted to reflect the Miller’s joke.

³⁰ Martin Blum, ‘Negotiating Masculinities’, *passim*.

³¹ Paula Neuss, ‘Double Meanings’, 334

³² That is, the limited knowledge of the female body is elevated to that of God’s (see Louise M. Bishop, especially 231 and 241).

³³ Angela Carter, ‘Alison’s Giggle’, *The Left & the Erotic*, ed. Eileen Phillips (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983), 52-68, at 58.

manifest her punishment and the poet's prejudices against the female body and female autonomy.

I. *Privee* Nicholas and *Apert* Absolon

Before the narrator Chaucer starts to 'reherce' the 'Miller's Tale', he warns that it is a 'cherles tale' and therefore 'whoso list it nat yheere' had better 'turne over the leef and chese another tale'; if the reader still 'chese amys', he suggests that he then should not take it seriously, for 'men shal nat maken ernest of game' (I. 3176-86). In this passage, the poet has made it clear that the 'Miller's Tale' may sound indecent to some people (indeed, early in the twentieth century, there were still critics who considered this tale 'objectionable' and 'not fit to be read in mixed company'³⁴). However, in spite of Chaucer's warning, scholars in the recent decades have dug out much 'ernest' out of the 'game'.³⁵ Perhaps, there is no point in arguing whether Chaucer was only being playful (or even obscene³⁶) when relating the tale, or merely being modest when describing the tale as 'churlish', or was actually, 'subtile and queynte' (I. 3275), a clerk himself, challenging the reader 'to find *ernest* in *game*' as Biggs and Howes have claimed. The fact is, the 'Miller's Tale' is filled with religious allusions and symbolism that suggest 'the principal doctrines of the Christian faith' (Roy Peter Clark 287). Therefore, even Chaucer did not intend to make the 'Miller's Tale' a serious story, he has evidenced, via this tale, that religious doctrines and religious activities are a fundamental part of the secular life in his time, and that due to this fact a reconciliation/integration of public

³⁴ See Thomas J. Farrell, 'Privacy and the Boundaries of Fabliau', 789.

³⁵ See, for example, Fredrick M. Biggs and Laura L. Howes: 'By questioning the validity of his narrator's judgment, Chaucer the poet challenges the reader to find *ernest* in *game*' ('Theophany' 276); and E. D. Blodgett: '...it suggests the existence of an "ernest" beyond the "game"...' ('Chaucerian "Pryvetee" and the Opposition to Time' 483).

³⁶ See Louise M. Bishop, 239; Robert Graybill, 51; and Beryl Rowland, 'Chaucer's Blasphemous Churl', 44.

morals and private desires is something that people constantly need to cope with. To demonstrate this coping in the ‘Miller’s Tale’, I will start with two contrasting characters: Nicholas and Absolon; both are clerks—one a student, the other a cleric—and suitors to Alisoun, the old carpenter John’s young wife. As indicated earlier, they will be treated not only as two distinct characters in the ‘Tale’, but more significantly as reflections of Alisoun’s ambivalent desires.

The first point that distinguishes Nicholas from Absolon is their respective ‘spatial characteristic’. While Nicholas is rarely seen outside his room, Absolon never appears inside his dwelling. Nicholas, a ‘poure scoler’ of ‘Oxenforde’, is a lodger in the old carpenter John’s house. We meet him in two major episodes: one when he is gazing at the star (‘kiked on the newe moone’, I. 3445) in his ‘chambre’; the other having sex mirthfully (‘Ther was revel and the melodye’, I. 3652) with Alisoun in the carpenter’s bedroom. In the former scene, he is pretending a ‘secret knowledge’, and in the latter, enjoying a ‘deerne love’. Obviously, what Nicholas does in these two episodes must be performed in enclosed spaces, and in ‘pryvetee’.

By contrast, we encounter Absolon in various public places. He is a parish clerk, ‘sensynge the wyves of the parish’ with a ‘sencer’ on ‘the haliday’ (I. 3340-1); he is also a barber-surgeon (‘Wel koude he laten blood, and clippe and shave’, I. 3326),³⁷ and a part-time lawyer who helps people ‘maken a charter of lond or acquitaunce’ (I. 3327). In addition, he is extremely enthusiastic about community activities: he dances skillfully (‘In twenty manere koude he trippe and daunce’, I. 3328); takes part in mystery pageants³⁸ (‘pleyeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye’, I. 3384); and being good at musical

³⁷ Kathryn Walls points out that the ‘explicit statement that Absolon is a barber-surgeon is contained within [this] single line’ which lists ‘three kinds of cutting’ (that is, ‘laten’, ‘clippe’, and ‘shave’). However, Walls also notes that in the Middle Ages ‘clerics were prohibited from shedding blood’ and so Absolon as barber ‘owes his license to let blood to the very prohibition which meant that Absolon as parish clerk should not’ (see ‘Absolon as Barber-Surgeon’, *The Chaucer Review* 35.4 [2001]: 391-8, at 392-3).

³⁸ It makes sense that Absolon acts in a mystery play—being a barber-surgeon, he is a ‘tradesman, and therefore a guild member’ (‘Absolon as Barber-Surgeon’ 395).

instruments, often entertains people, especially merry barmaids, with music and songs in pubs ('as wel koude he pleye on a giterne, / In al the toun nas brewhous ne tavernne / That he ne visited with his solas', I. 3333-5)—in short, Absolon is quite a kind of 'public entertainer' as Paul A. Olson terms him, 'for the Oxford folk on any day when he is asked'.³⁹ The Miller calls Absolon 'a myrie child' (I. 3325). This probably indicates that he is a hyperactive young man, for this 'myrie child' can busy himself with public affairs all day and still go serenading under Alisoun's 'shot wyndowe' after the midnight. He seems to go from place to place but never goes home. And what he does is either in a public spot, in the open, or outside his beloved's bedroom window.

The spatial differences contrasted above are fundamentally of a physical dimension. Yet the opposition of 'pryvetee' and 'apert' between Nicholas and Absolon also displays a psychological aspect. Nicholas, a student who 'had lerned art', has a particular interest in astrology: '... al his fantasye / Was turned for to lerne astrologye, / And koude a certeyn of conclusiouns, / To demen by interrogaciouns' (I. 3191-4). This subject, as John J. O'Connor remarks, was 'the most "practical" of medieval sciences', and 'for all its fantastic complexities and absurdities, a matter of vital interest to the people of the age'.⁴⁰ Evidently Chaucer was familiar with this contemporary pagan learning, for the setting of the 'Miller's Tale'—Oxenforde—was virtually a historical reference to this study. Beryl Rowland also sustains, 'Oxford was noted for the activity of its astrologers... the right place for predictions such as those of Nicholas'.⁴¹ What O'Connor and Rowland have observed help make sense Nicholas's specialty and why Chaucer put his story in Oxford. But the most interesting part of astrology in the 'Miller's Tale' is this: the study of constellations is by its definition aiming at 'conclusiouns' by 'interrogaciouns'—namely, the divining of 'Goddess pryvetee'. As it is,

³⁹ Paul A. Olson, 'Poetic Justice in the *Miller's Tale*', *MLQ* 24.3 (1963): 227-36, at 232.

⁴⁰ See 'The Astrological Background of the *Miller's Tale*', *Speculum* 31.1 (1956): 120-5, at 124.

⁴¹ See 'Chaucer's Blasphemous Churl', 49.

Nicholas's interests in probing 'pryvetee'—God's first, and later Alisoun's⁴²—appropriately explicates his situation of always living in 'pryvetee' ('Allone, withouten any compaignye', I. 3204), and also reflects his character which is 'sleigh and ful privee' (I. 3201).

As far as appearance is concerned, both Nicholas and Absolon are pretty young men. Nicholas is 'lyk a mayden meke for to see' (I. 3202) and 'as sweete as is the roote / Of lycorys or any cetewale', while Absolon has 'crul heer' which 'shoon as the gold' as well as rosy complexion and 'eyen greye as goos' (I. 3314, 3316). These feminine descriptions by no means hint at any sexual deviation; on the contrary, in fabliaux, as Walker points out, 'the femininity of the hero is part of his lustiness, what marks him out as attractive to the women he pursues'.⁴³ Indeed, Chaucer's emphasis on feminine qualities only enhances Nicholas's and Absolon's charm; for in the course of the 'Tale', these two young men evidently do not have difficulties in the role of 'heterosexual predators' (Greg Walker 66). Although Nicholas and Absolon are similar in having feminine looks, only Absolon's appearance is depicted in elaborate details, literally head to toe. Scholars observe that Chaucer has alluded to the biblical Absalom, also renowned for his abundant hair and handsome head, in his description of Absolon's luxuriant hairdo ('strouted as a fanne large and brode; / Ful straight and evene lay his joly shode', I. 3315-6); and all suggest that Absolon's hair, like that of his namesake in the Bible, reveals his personal vanity, excess, and pride.⁴⁴ Absolon's dress, shoes, and

⁴² David Lorenzo Boyd writes: "[P]ryvetee"... suggests a powerful relationship between sexuality and the probing attempts to penetrate another's secret (p)arts' (245). See also Geoffrey Cooper, "'Sely John" in the "Legende" of the *Miller's Tale*', *JEPG* 79 (1980): 1-12, at 9.

⁴³ Greg Walker, 'Rough Girls and Squeamish Boys', 66. Walker also points out that 'femininity in a young man is a conventional feature of the successful heterosexual lovers of medieval literature' and reminds us of other similar characters in the *Canterbury Tales*, such as the Squire ('A lovyere and a lusty bachelor' who has 'lokkes as they were leyd in press' and wears clothes 'embrouded... as it were a meede / Al ful of fresshe floures, whyte and reede' [I. 80-1, 89-90]) and Aurelius in the 'Franklin's Tale' ('That fressher was and jollyer of array, / ... than is the month of May' [V. 927-8]) (66).

⁴⁴ The most known discussion on Absolon's hair is by Paul Beichner, 'Absolon's Hair', *Mediaeval Studies* 12 (1950): 222-33. See also Cornelius Novelli, 'Sin, Sight, and Sanctity in the Miller's Tale: Why Chaucer's Blacksmith Works at Night,' *The Chaucer Review* 33.2 (1998): 168-75, at 169; Kathryn Walls,

the colors and style of them are also striking:

With Poules wyndowe corven on his shoos,
 In hoses rede he wente fetisly.
 Yclad he was ful smal and proprely
 Al in a kirtel of a light waget;
 Ful faire and thikke been the poyntes set.
 And therupon he hadde a gay surplys
 As whit as the blosme upon the rys. (I. 3318-3324)

Shoes with holes carved out like the windows of St. Paul's, red stockings, blue tunic thickly laced, white surplice, plus his groomed golden hair⁴⁵—Absolon is a colorful picture which he assiduously and meticulously paints to attract public eyes. By contrast, Nicholas does not crave for public attention, and therefore does not need fancy clothes—or any clothes at all; indeed, the only time we encounter his body is his naked 'ers' which he hangs out of the window (I. 3380-2)—in a sense, into the 'apert'. To manifest this clerk's clever and scheming character, Chaucer instead gives details to his properties in his private room: Almagheste (Ptolemy's treatise on astrology) and a shelf of books, an astrolabe, 'augrym stones' (counters for use on an abacus), and a psaltery. On the contrary, as Absolon constantly roams about in public places and participates in various communal activities,⁴⁶ he accouters his self-romanticized appearance in every way he could.

Absolon's much concern about the public eye reflects a narcissistic nature; thus, to

'Absolon as Barber-Surgeon', at 392-3; and Greg Walker, 'Rough Girls and Squeamish Boys,' at 75.

⁴⁵ Kathryn Walls points out that parish clerks were supposed to be 'tonsured'; hence, Absolon's curly, blonde, shining hair, while 'recalls the hair of angels in medieval paintings', indicates 'its unchecked luxuriance and inappropriate worldliness on the head of a parish clerk'; but 'being well groomed as it clearly is ('Ful streighte and evene lay his joly shode', I. 3316)', 'it is more appropriate to Absolon's role as a barber' ('Absolon as Barber-Surgeon' 392). Walls's study of Absolon's other trade as a barber-surgeon offers a brilliant explication of the significance of Absolon's later applying a burning brand onto Nicholas's *ers*.

⁴⁶ William F. Woods calls him 'an active, highly visible child whose family is the community at large' ('Private and Public Space' 170).

say that he cares how people look at him is not so much as to say that he cares how he looks in people's eyes—namely, to him the public eye is mainly a mirror in which he sees his own image, and he cherishes, indulges, and enjoys looking at it. This nature not only reveals what was mentioned earlier about Absolon's character—vain, excessive, and proud—but also explains his volte face after the misplaced kiss. As Raymond P. Tripp analyzes: in Absolon self-love meets its most subtle and dangerous enemy: 'the ego and its vanity', which, because it 'exists only as a self-image', cannot 'brook the slightest crack in the mirror'.⁴⁷ In sum, Absolon's revenge is not urged by an unrequited love, as it appears, but forced by a hurt ego. Absolon loves no one, but himself, and Alisoun, with her 'unkempt pubic hair',⁴⁸ unknowingly puts up a mirror to crudely reflect his true nature which is vainglorious, fastidious, affected, and 'squaymous'—a personality most fit to represent public pomposity. Absolon's resort to a hot coulter, in fact a 'murderous weapon',⁴⁹ thus accidentally exposes the 'pryvee' side of the perfect image which he tries so hard to present otherwise in 'apert'—a dramatic irony itself and a contrast to Nicholas's exposure of his 'naked ers'. In a way, the chaos at the end of the tale is created by the double confusions of the 'spatial characteristics' which Nicholas and Absolon represent: namely, while 'privee' Nicholas unwittingly exposes his private parts into the *apert*, 'myrie' Absolon secretively converts his open pageantry into dark revenge.⁵⁰ This exchange of spatial qualities demonstrates the dialogue between 'pryvetee' and 'apert', and at the same time actualizes the poet's distribution of punishment for these two adulterous young men.

⁴⁷ 'The Darker Side to Absolon's Dawn Visit,' *The Chaucer Review* 20.3 (1986): 207-12, at 211.

⁴⁸ 'Rough Girls and Squeamish Boys', 75. Walker ironically contrasts Alisoun's 'rough', 'unkempt' pubic hair to Absolon's well combed, crimped golden hair.

⁴⁹ Raymond P. Tripp remarks: 'The hot coulter, for all its appropriate sexual symbolism, is a murderous weapon intended for the woman Alisoun... And the fact remains that branding someone with a red hot piece of iron is a violent and hateful act... and the case of a man attacking a woman, even darker...' (211).

⁵⁰ When Gerveys the blacksmith asks Absolon what he will do with the 'hoote kultour', Absolon replies that he will tell him 'to-morwe day', and then 'Ful softe out at the dore he gan to stele' (I. 3782-6).

The discourse of ‘pryvetee’ and ‘apert’ not only involves the contrast between Nicholas and Absolon in terms of their ‘spatial characteristic’; it is also enhanced by these two characters’ religious knowledge and the religious songs they sing in pursuit of Alisoun. Both Nicholas and Absolon play instruments and sing well. As introduced earlier, Nicholas has a ‘sautrie’ (psaltery) among his personal properties; upon this instrument he ‘made a-nyghtes melodie / So swetely that all the chambre rong’; he sings *Angelus ad Virginem*, and after that ‘Kynges Noote’ (I. 3214-7). The narrator says that he is blessed with a ‘myrie throte’ (I. 3218). The *Angelus* is an Annunciation hymn of purest piety;⁵¹ according to John B. Friedman’s study, it was popular for vernacular audiences and was ‘part of the liturgy in Chaucer’s day’.⁵² The opening lines of the hymn are:

Angelus ad virginem
 Subintrans in conclaue,
 Virginis formidinem
 Demulcens inquit, “Aue!”

(The angel, entering by stealth the chamber of the virgin, allaying [lit., stroking caressingly] the virgin’s fear, said, “Hail!”)⁵³

As Friedman claims: ‘It is hard not to see these opening lines...as amatory’ (165).⁵⁴ The carpenter John might not perceive the undertone of Nicholas’s song, since ‘his wit was rude’ (I. 3227), but the narrator’s immediate audiences (the Canterbury pilgrims and Chaucer’s contemporaries) would probably have no difficulty in recognizing

⁵¹ See Thomas W. Ross, ‘Notes on Chaucer’s Miller’s Tale’, 256.

⁵² See ‘Nicholas’s “Angelus ad Virginem”’, 165.

⁵³ The passage and the modern translation of it are from Thomas W. Ross, 256-7.

⁵⁴ See also Thomas W. Ross, 257; and Beryl Rowland, ‘The Play of the *Miller’s Tale*’, 144.

Nicholas's seductive intention. Critics often observe that the first 'erotic triangle'⁵⁵ in the 'Miller's Tale' is a parody based on the familiar Mystery plays and medieval religious travesties. For example, Thomas W. Ross notes:

There is a familiar and persistent medieval tradition that Carpenter Joseph was old and jealous, that he suspected his young wife Mary of taking a lover who was "fresher abedde" than he. This is the Joseph of the "Cherry-Tree Carol" tradition. When the medieval audience heard the title of the Annunciation hymn, some of them no doubt would have made the connection between the two carpenters, Joseph and old John.⁵⁶

Beryl Rowland observes another point in this parodic tradition: a familiar scene in which the angel Gabriel visits Mary and

Mary was supposed to have been abashed at the Annunciation because a young man had "made hym lyk an angyl" with the Devil's help and seduced maidens on pretext of a similar errand.⁵⁷

Rowland speculates that '[t]he travesty was probably not new to Chaucer's audience'.⁵⁸

The travesty which Rowland has mentioned refers to a text in the *Festial* of John Mirk, a parodic Annunciation whose theme John B. Friedman pins down directly: 'a diabolic figure through magic appears to be Gabriel with the intent of seducing women'

⁵⁵ Martin Blum explicates that there are two 'erotic triangles' in the 'Miller's Tale': the first is composed of Nicholas, Alisoun, and John; the second of Nicholas, Alisoun, and Absolon ('Negotiating Masculinities, passim). Greg Walker argues from another point of view: 'if the classic relationship in both chivalric and fabliau competition is the erotic triangle, two men in pursuit of a single woman, then Absolon is already geometrically excessive and surplus' ('Rough Girls and Squeamish Boys' 64).

⁵⁶ 'Notes on Chaucer's Miller's Tale', 257. See also Beryl Rowland, 142-3. In fact, not only the medieval audience outside the text would have made the connection between Joseph and John; Oswald the Reeve (used to be a carpenter) also makes the connection between himself and the other two carpenters—as he soon 'quits' the Miller with an equally obscene story on a miller whose wife and daughter are enjoyed for free because of his greed.

⁵⁷ That is, 'God's purpose' ('Kynges Nootes') ('The Play of the *Miller's Tale*', 144). For detailed explanation of the pun on *note*, see Beryl Rowland, *ibid.*, n. 26. Rowland has provided another reference to Boccaccio: 'In the second story of the fourth day... a clerk... pretended to be Gabriel in order to seduce a young married woman...' (*ibid.*).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

(‘Nicholas’s “Angelus ad Virginem”” 162-3). Clearly, the story of Annunciation is not an uncommon theme in medieval religious parodies, which critics have generally supposed that Chaucer’s audience must have been familiar with.⁵⁹ Given the points, the structure of Chaucer’s parody is apparent: Nicholas is playing the angel Gabriel who tries to seduce the young wife (Mary) of his host, the old carpenter John-Joseph who is jealous and fearful of being cuckolded.

That Chaucer has likened Nicholas to the angel Gabriel can be further observed in another two aspects: his appearance (which ‘resembles the somewhat effeminate-looking angel’: ‘lyk a mayden meke for to see’), and his ‘myrie throte’ (an attribute for which Gabriel ‘was especially renowned in the Mystery plays: he sings divinely’).⁶⁰ Certainly, when Nicholas sings *Angelus ad virginem*, he is not playing the angel on ‘God’s purpose’, but the ‘diabolic figure’ who assimilates his song with a secret erotic message to arouse his ‘toothsome’ hostess. And as what works ‘wickedly later on’⁶¹ proves, Alisoun perceives the message fully (though her husband does not). Alisoun’s conscious response is not only because she is more sensible than John is. In his study of the word ‘joly’, Theodore I. Silar remarks that Chaucer’s description of Alisoun conveys ‘the carnality of the rutting season, and a woman so ripe for love as to be almost “in heat”’.⁶² Namely, Alisoun is not only more sensible; her marital condition and her youthful, energetic physicality also suggest that she is susceptible to sexual arousal.

The erotic message ‘prively’ conveyed via the Annunciation hymn from Nicholas’s

⁵⁹ See also Glenn Burger, ‘Erotic Discipline...or “Tee Hee, I Like My Boys to Be Girls”: Inventing with the Body in Chaucer’s ‘Miller’s Tale’, *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, eds. Jeffrey Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York and London: Garland, 1997), 245-60, at 245; Melvin Storm, ‘The Miller, the Virgin, and the Wife of Bath’, *passim*; Robert Boenig, ‘The Miller’s Bagpipe: A Note on the “Canterbury Tales” A 565-566’, *English Language Notes* 21 (1983): 1-6; Roy Peter Clark, ‘Christmas Games in “The Miller’s Tale”’, *passim*.

⁶⁰ See Beryl Rowland, ‘The Play of the *Miller’s Tale*’, 144.

⁶¹ Thomas W. Ross, 257.

⁶² See ‘Chaucer’s Joly Absolon’, 411.

isolated upstairs room is contrasted by Absolon's open serenading beneath Alisoun's bedroom window. Both young men equate their object of desire, Alisoun, though a married woman, to the Virgin Mary. But while the seductive note of Nicholas's song is only implied (*Angelus ad virginem* is after all a religious hymn), Absolon's appropriation of the Marian lyrics is blunt and forthright. Absolon sings two songs in the course of the tale. The first one is when Alisoun is in bed with her husband:

Now, deere lady, if thy wille be,
I praye yow that ye wole rewe on me. (I. 3361-2)

It seems incredible that John is not suspicious when he hears Absolon serenade his wife outside their window.⁶³ For he may not be sensible enough to perceive the sexy undertone of *Angelus ad virginem*, he cannot be so 'rude' and 'sely'⁶⁴ that he does not suspect at all the intention of the serenader who sings right outside his bedroom window. Peter G. Beidler proposes that John does not suspect—though the carpenter is 'jealous' and holds his wife 'narwe in cage'—because 'he hears Absolon's couplet to his "deere lady" as a song to the Virgin asking for her mercy' (219). This suggestion has reversed the logic of 'cause and effect'. A better explication is that John does suspect Absolon's amorous intention—that is why he is jealous and fearful of being cuckolded. As a crafty artisan, John is often sent for by the abbot to work at Oseney Abbey (I. 3666-7); constantly in contact with the church people, he must have known or heard of notorious clerics such as Chaucer's Friar. Besides, Alisoun goes to the 'paryssh chirche'—'Cristes owene werkes for to wirche' (I. 3308)—where Absolon serves as a parish clerk. Putting

⁶³ Peter G. Beidler observes: 'Teachers of the *Miller's Tale* have sometimes been challenged to explain why John is not suspicious when he hears Absolon serenade his lovely young wife' ('Now Deere Lady: Absolon's Marian Couplet in the *Miller's Tale*' 219).

⁶⁴ The word 'sely' is used five times in reference to John. Mary Brookbank Reed offers a thorough discussion of the medieval definitions of 'sely' in her essay, 'Chaucer's Sely Carpenter,' *Philological Quarterly* 41.4 (1962): 768-9. See also Geoffrey Cooper, "'Sely John" in the "Legende" of the *Miller's Tale*', especially 11-12.

these together, it does not make much sense that when Absolon serenades outside John's window, the old carpenter merely considers that the dainty clerk is only praising the Virgin to himself. In fact, John perceives it immediately when he is awakened by Absolon's singing: 'What! Alisoun! Herestow nat Absolon, / That chaunteth thus under oure boures wal?' (I. 3366-7).⁶⁵ John hears it; so does Nicholas, no doubt, up in his room; and probably many neighbors, too (Oxford being a close-knit community⁶⁶). The word 'thus' reveals that John feels incredible about it: he cannot believe that this parish clerk would woo his wife at midnight so openly and so boldly. 'Absolon's presence from the outside disturbs John's possession of Alisoun as his private object', Gila Aloni remarks.⁶⁷ It is no wonder that John has to hold Alisoun 'narwe in cage'; what he does is just to protect his private possession from entering the 'circulating market'. And Absolon's bold pursuit, despite the presence of the woman's husband, displays the clerk's taking advantage of his own social status as the 'authority' and the ignorance of the old carpenter—a situation only 'class victimization' can explain.⁶⁸ John must understand that he is unable to quarrel with a clerk; indeed, as the final event proves, no matter how he explains, 'no man his reson herde' (I. 3844).

The second time we see Absolon serenade Alisoun is when Nicholas and Alisoun

⁶⁵ From this sentence, that John 'protests not at all when Absolon serenades his wife' (see Stewart Justman, "'The Reeve's Tale' and the Honor of Men", *Studies in Short Fiction* 32.1 (1995): 21-7, at 22) is not true.

⁶⁶ Judging from the many activities which Absolon is involved in, the fact that Nicholas needs to be 'privy' (from the view of 'extimacy'), and when John falls from the roof neighbors—bothe smale and grete—run in to 'gauren on' him (I. 3826-7), Oxford is obviously a very closed community. Several critics also explore the sense of community and how it affects the narrative in their discussions, for examples, Gila Aloni, *passim*; William F. Wood, 169-70; Martin Blum, 41; and Stewart Justman, *passim*. Justman relates John's plight to his milieu by pointing out: '[T]he cuckold is not simply a man married to an untrue wife. He is a man *known* to be married to an untrue wife, and therefore a figure of derision to the community' (21).

⁶⁷ 'Extimacy in the Miller's Tale', 167.

⁶⁸ Lee Patterson analyzes John's punishment from the aspect of social construction: 'It is John who is most severely punished at the end of the *Miller's Tale*: his wife is "swyved", his arm broken, and his reputation as a man of probity is ruined... his punishment, however merited, is...enacted in the distasteful form of class victimization' ("No Man His Reson Herde": Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the "Canterbury Tales", *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990], 113-55, at 144).

have made their own ‘melodye’ in John’s bed while John slumbers in a tub tied up to the rafters of his house:

What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,
 My faire bryd, my sweete cynamome?
 Awaketh, lemman myn, and speketh to me!
 Wel litel thynken ye upon my wo,
 That for youre love I swete ther I go.
 No wonder is thogh that I swelte and swete;
 I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete.
 Ywis, lemman, I have swich love-longynge
 That lik a turtel trewe is my moornynge.
 I may nat ete na moore than a mayde. (I. 3698-3707)

In this song, Absolon calls Alisoun with various epithets used in the traditional romance by courtly lovers and absurdly compares his longing for her to the mourning of a lamb after the ‘tete’. In addition to his appropriation of the Marian lyrics in his first song, Absolon’s second one—a combination of courtly language and allusions to the love songs in the Bible—only further proves that he is ‘a most disingenuous young man’.⁶⁹ R. E. Kaske in his ‘The Canticum Canticorum in the Miller’s Tale’⁷⁰ has made a thorough study of the parallels between ‘Absolon’s pseudo-courtly wooing and the sublime passion of the Song of Songs’⁷¹. Kaske’s most significant point is this:

The basic allegorical significances of the *Canticum* are commonplaces: the *Sponsus* signifies Christ; the *sponsa* is the Church, the individual Christian soul, or the Virgin; the love of the *Sponsus* for the *sponsa*, and the sexual love to which he exhorts her, is the spiritual perfection of *caritas*.⁷²

⁶⁹ Raymond P. Tripp, 210.

⁷⁰ R. E. Kaske, ‘The Canticum Canticorum in the Miller’s Tale’, *Studies in Philology* 59.3 (1962): 479-500.

⁷¹ Cornelius Novelli, 169.

⁷² R. E. Kaske, 480. See also Beryl Rowland, who observes that Absolon’s song is a ‘parody of love songs from *Song of Songs*’ (‘Chaucer’s Blasphemous Churl’ 50).

That is, Absolon by this song elevates his love for Alisoun to the level of the divine love for the Virgin Mary. This prideful *caritas* is a common characteristic in medieval romance and traditional courtly love poems in which the lover often worships his lady like a goddess or equates her to the Virgin Mary by using a language mixed with ‘religion and eroticism’⁷³. But the situation in ‘The Miller’s Tale’ is that Absolon is not a courtly lover, nor is Alisoun a courtly lady. Kara Virginia Donaldson succinctly explicates Absolon’s problem from this aspect:

Absolon, a non-courtly parish clerk with courtly pretensions, appropriates the authoritative language of the courtly lover in order to seduce Alisoun without recognizing that the controlling social context is not a courtly one. (139)

Alisoun’s response to this ‘silly love song’⁷⁴ is blunt and almost surreal in the pseudo-courtly atmosphere which Absolon has tried so hard to create: ‘Go fro the window, Jakke fool’ (I. 3708).⁷⁵ Such an unladylike answer does not discourage Absolon since he is more in love with his own affected image than with any supposed object of desire. A ‘no’ is a ‘yes’, as Susan Griffin explains, in the politics of seduction and rape.⁷⁶ Alisoun’s acrid answer only encourages Absolon to indulge further in his posturing, and he presses for a kiss.

Absolon’s ‘perverse’⁷⁷ insistence not only exposes his profane nature, but also

⁷³ See Kara Virginia Donaldson, 145.

⁷⁴ See Mark Miller, ‘Naturalism and Its Discontents’, 5.

⁷⁵ The exchange between Absolon and Alisoun is one of the funniest episodes in the ‘Miller’s Tale’; the humor is partly created by what Robert Lewis has said about fabliau humor: Much of it ‘comes from the juxtaposition of the courtly and artificial language on the one hand (spoken by a non-courtly character) and the colloquial, natural, realistic language... on the other’ (see ‘The English Fabliau Tradition and Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale”’, *Modern Philology* 79.3 (1982): 241-55, at 252 (also cited by Kara Virginia Donaldson, 139).

⁷⁶ *Rape: The Politics of Consciousness*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Harpercollins, 1986), at 6, qtd. by Kara Virginia Donaldson, at 146.

⁷⁷ Mark Miller, 5.

reveals some historical and exegetical meanings. In his study of the social background of the ‘Miller’s Tale’, Lee Patterson expounds:

...the *Song of Songs* was an especially provocative text to medieval exegetes, challenging them to rewrite a Hebrew love song into the dogmatic terms of church doctrine... Absolon’s misuse of the *Song of Songs* is a characteristically clerical misappropriation: what exegetes typically do to the *Songs of Songs*, Absolon here seeks to do to Alisoun *by means of* the *Song of Songs*.⁷⁸

In short, how Absolon misappropriates popular religious hymns to satisfy his amorous pursuit reflects how the medieval exegetes (mostly clerks) misappropriate the *Song of Songs* for dogmatic purposes. Absolon’s conceit in his controlling of the authoritative language also manifests itself in his being unable to take Alisoun’s answer as it is. His ‘deafness’⁷⁹ to Alisoun’s language is caused by the same arrogance that characterizes Friar John in the “Summoner’s Tale”. ‘In a maner glose’ (III. 1920), as Friar John pridefully puts it, is how medieval clerics abuse their privilege and expertise in glossing the holy texts.⁸⁰ Absolon, likewise, refuses, from his ‘position of authority’, to acknowledge Alisoun’s language and willfully glosses it to ‘fit his own courtly love code of behavior’.⁸¹ But as the story unfolds, Absolon’s persistent attempt to gloss Alisoun’s words by a ‘monological discourse’⁸², loudly processed in public, eventually

⁷⁸ “‘No Man His Reson Herde’”, 132-33. The exegetes’ misappropriation is similar to the notorious priestly ‘glosyng’ in the Middle Ages. See Chapter 3, n. 74.

⁷⁹ Kara Virginia Donaldson agrees with Cixous that when a woman speaks, ‘her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine’ (Helene Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, *Signs* 1.4 [1976]: 875-93, at 880-1, qtd. by Donaldson, at 146). There is an interesting contrast between Absolon’s ‘deafness’ and the Wife of Bath’s.

⁸⁰ For more detailed discussion of medieval priestly glossing, see Chapter 3, section 2, ‘the Garbling of the Story of the Samaritan Woman’.

⁸¹ Donaldson, 139. Donaldson further signifies Alisoun’s linguistic inferiority by referring to Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination*: The language Alisoun uses is the ‘internally persuasive word that is denied all privilege backed by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society’ (139).

⁸² Donaldson observes: ‘Absolon’s courtly gloss of Alisoun is an attempt to explain and control her, and his use of monological discourse, the word of the father, to gloss Alisoun reduces her to a text by admitting no dialogue with “the Other”’ (140).

draws its own humiliating rebuttal from the most private place—the lower mouth—of Alisoun’s body.

II. Public Moral and Private Desire

Although many scholars have discussed Nicholas’s and Absolon’s characters, none has compared them thoroughly by contrasting them from the view of ‘pryvetee’ and ‘apert’,⁸³ or in terms of spatial characteristics and religious symbolisms. The contrast between Nicholas and Absolon also figures Alisoun’s concept of public moral and her implementation of private desire. As mentioned, Alisoun is the only character that shifts between ‘pryvetee’ and ‘apert’ at will. While her husband John is a puppet of the space—his busy ‘in’ and ‘out’ are totally manipulated by others—Alisoun shows control and domination of her own spatial quality; and while Nicholas and Absolon are mainly contained by their respective spatial elements, Alisoun moves between public and private milieus as freely as she pleases.

Chaucer uses almost forty lines (I. 3233-3270) to describe Alisoun’s appearance and characteristics; one point in these descriptions, however, is barely noticed by scholars: they strongly appeal to our five senses.⁸⁴ We are told how Alisoun looks (‘gent and smal’, ‘long as a mast’, ‘upright as a bolt’, ‘a likerous ye’), how she sounds (‘loude and yerne as any swalwe sittynge on a berne’), how she feels (‘softer than the wolfe is of a wether’), how she tastes (‘sweete as bragot or the meeth’, ‘hoord of

⁸³ William Woods’ idea in ‘Private and Public Space in the “Miller’s Tale”’ is close to mine, but his emphasis is on the interplay of domains between public and private, self and society, and society and nature.

⁸⁴ In contrast, the ‘sound’ and the ‘smell’ of the blinding fart are often mentioned by critics, for example, Nicholas Royle, “The Miller’s Tale” in Chaucer’s Time’, *Postmodern Across the Ages: Essays for a Postmodernity That Wasn’t Born Yesterday*, eds. Bill Readings and Bennet Shaber (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 63-71, at 67; Louise M. Bishop, 238; and William F. Woods, 167 (Woods ingeniously calls it ‘Nicholas’s fart-music’).

apples'), and how she smells ('a prymerole, a piggesnye').⁸⁵ This purely sensual portrait—a projection of men's ideal rather than a realistic image of women⁸⁶—is apparently created for Absolon the parish clerk's gaze (he casts 'many a lovely look...on this carpenteris wyf. / To look on hire hym thoughte a myrie lyf' [I. 3342-44]) and the readers' as well. From one angle, this passive role (as a gazee) seems to have diminished⁸⁷ Alisoun to a text for the purpose of clerkly glossing as Kara Virginia Donaldson has demonstrated in her essay. But from another angle, Chaucer has made Alisoun use herself and her body as tools to manipulate clerkly attentions and services. Namely, clerks (both medieval and modern) think they can gloss Alisoun and her body for intellectual or amative purposes from a superior stance, while virtually Alisoun commands and engages their intellectual and sexual fantasy from a panoptic position.⁸⁸

Chaucer's descriptions of Alisoun's appearance have won unanimous praise from critics. As they are abundant in images of wild flowers, juicy fruits, as well as sleek and tender animals, it is not hard to imagine Alisoun as lush, delicious, vivacious, and powerful and energetic in sexuality. However, such desirability and sexual energy are covered up by demure clothes. Many scholars have noticed Absolon's bright colors, but

⁸⁵ The descriptions are mostly related to the scenes in mother nature; Lee Patterson's point is worth noting when he observes that the values of the vitality and resourcefulness of the natural world are 'embodied in Alisoun, whose vernal beauty serves to elicit the male desire that motivates the *Tale*' ('No Man His Reson Herde' 130).

⁸⁶ Kara Virginia Donaldson observes that 'Chaucer, the narrator, and the Miller create Alisoun from the literary tradition of the clerics, just as Hanning says Alisoun of Bathe "exists as a literary creation of men, a system of texts and glosses"' (141). Robert W. Hanning, 'I Shal Find It in a Maner Glose': Versions of Textual Harassment in Medieval Literature', *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Cornell University Press, 1987), 27-50; Donaldson's quote is at 48.

⁸⁷ Frances K. Barash notes that the description of Alisoun as 'so gay a popelote or a wench' (I. 3254) anticipates 'the "painted puppet" which served Reformation writers as a metaphor for "whore"... or "counterfeit" human'; Alisoun is thus 'twice diminished by her association with the performing puppet and the "wench", that is, a woman of lower class' ('Shakespeare and the Puppet Sphere', *English Literary Renaissance* 34.2 (2004): 157-75, at 159-60). Treating Alisoun as 'a woman of lower class', Chaucer's punishment of Alisoun is thus also a case of 'class victimization', similar to Absolon's taking advantage of John's ignorance.

⁸⁸ By approaching the 'Miller's Tale' from a postmodern point of view, Nicholas Royle points out that the 'holes' existent everywhere in the tale reflect the logic of 'panopticon', by which all of the secrets in the tale 'are made visible'—'Everything is revealed' (66). As Alisoun ably shifts between 'pryvetee' and 'apert' and shows control of her 'hole' in the course of the tale, she apparently commands a good panoptic view of whatever spaces she is in.

only Kathryn Walls has observed that Alisoun's clothes are in black and white,⁸⁹ a deliberate contrast to Absolon's colorful outfit. If Absolon's clothing is evidence of his 'blatant vanity and luxury', as Walls remarks (393), then Alisoun's black and white well symbolize her discretion and self-control. Nevertheless, her accouterments are not at all dull: her belt is striped with silk; her milk white apron is fully flounced; her white smock is embroidered 'bifoore' and 'eek bihynde'; her collar is of coal-black silk 'withinne and withoute', so is the ribbon of her cap; and her headdress is also made of silk (I. 3235-43). In short, Alisoun's clothes, though in tranquil and simple colors, are fine and sophisticated enough to attract any one's gaze in public.

Looking at the deliberate delicacy of her dress,⁹⁰ Alisoun is almost as luxurious as Absolon—after all she is married to a rich husband who can afford it; but her keeping low profile (by choosing sober colors) makes her manipulation of public attention appear guiltless. Indeed, she has done nothing to arouse Absolon (except that she has a 'likorous ye')—she is in black and white and sits among the 'parisshe wyves'. Yet her demureness and youthfulness ('She was so propre and sweete', I. 3345) beguile this parish clerk's glossing propensity and capability. He mis-reads her and deems her timid and easily attainable: 'if she hadde been a mous, / And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon' (I. 3346-7). Absolon, like the typical male in patriarchal literature, regards himself as a hunter and Alisoun the hunted⁹¹—that is, treating her as 'a prey to be caught'.⁹² In order to woo Alisoun, Absolon tries various means: he plays his 'gyterne' and sings outside her window at nights with trilling voice 'as a nyghtyngale'; he woos her by go-betweens and agents, swearing that he 'wolde been hir owene page'; he sends her

⁸⁹ See 'Absolon as a Barber-Surgeon', 393.

⁹⁰ Kara Virginia Donaldson regards the Miller's dressing Alisoun 'from head to toe in sumptuous cloth and rich detail' as the Miller's way of 'glossing' Alisoun (142).

⁹¹ For the metaphor of the hunter and the hunted, see Susan Carter, 'Coupling the Beastly Bride and the Hunter Hunted: What Lies Behind Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale?', *The Chaucer Review* 37.4 (2003): 329-45.

⁹² Lee Patterson, 'No Man His Reson Herde', 130.

gifts: ‘pyment, meeth, and spiced ale’ and cake ‘pipyng hoot’ out of the fire; and since she is ‘of town’, he even sends her money (I. 3352-80). In brief, as ‘som folk wol ben wonnen for richesse, / And somme for strokes, and somme for gentillesse’ (I. 3381-2),⁹³ Absolon tries every possible way to pursue his object of desire.

Absolon spends his life as a performer, and ‘lover’ is, so to speak, one of his roles. His bold pursuit of Alisoun evidently appeals to a public audience, and as can be imagined, the close Oxford community is not deaf, nor blind to it. Alisoun, wisely, does not respond; the reason is not because she is married or she ‘loveth so this hende Nicholas’ (I. 3386), but because it is the best way to remain ‘in control’.⁹⁴ Tracey Jordan maintains that ‘Alisoun’s animal nature, her lack of verbal existence in the tale, emphasize that her importance is primarily biological’.⁹⁵ Yet, Alisoun’s negotiation with Nicholas and her ‘Tehee!’ (I. 3740) towards the end of the tale actually prove that she is not without a verbal existence or abilities to control situations. For if a ‘no’ is a ‘yes’ in the politics of seduction, then Alisoun’s no response would be the best response in the politics of amorous ambiguity—for people like Absolon.⁹⁶ ‘Noes’ and ‘no response’ are both characteristic gestures which courtly ladies use to encourage lovers; they thus cleverly suit the need of Absolon’s postured role. Besides, although Alisoun loathes Absolon (‘He ne hadde for his labour but a scorn’, I. 3388), she might not mind being pursued by a parish clerk—probably even enjoys it. Furthermore, Absolon’s persistent pursuit has other practical functions: it not only arouses John’s jealousy but

⁹³ ‘What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren’ (III. 905) is the question that sends the knight in the ‘Wife of Bath’s Tale’ on the quest. To answer the question, Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, has provided a similar but much longer list than the Miller’s.

⁹⁴ Looking at the Miller’s Alisoun as the novice version of the Alisoun of Bath, I find these two women have one thing in common: they both want ‘sovereynete’ (i.e., to be their own mistresses). Gila Aloni also states that woman ‘is always foreign to the (patriarchal) system that destines her, and considers her, to be its own’ (178). Hence, since both Alisouns will not be given what they want in the patriarchal society, to remain ‘in control’ is the only way to obtain it.

⁹⁵ ‘Fairy and Fabliau: Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale”’, *Studies in Short Fiction* 21.2 (1984): 87-93, at 88.

⁹⁶ As later events show, Absolon’s sexual fantasy vanishes after Alisoun starts to respond. If not for that misdirected kiss, his ‘monological discourse’ (see n. 82) with the language of his own affected ‘love-longynge’ (I. 3705) could have been going on and on.

accelerates Nicholas's wily plan (which happens right after the wooing show in the course of the narration); it also serves to be a distraction and diversion for Nicholas and Alisoun's sexual intrigue—namely, it distracts the community's notice of the affair between Alisoun and Nicholas like a smoke-screen; and it becomes a good jape for Nicholas and Alisoun to make fun of when their private pleasure is disturbed by this apparent 'extimacy'.

Alisoun's abilities in controlling situations are displayed in her manipulation of a blatant public wooing and her management of her secret liaison with her lodger. As we remember, before she enters the 'apert' to exude her sexual charm, she has just settled a 'situation' with Nicholas. Absolon and Nicholas are a contrast in many aspects as discussed earlier. Their ways of approaching Alisoun are polarized, too. While Absolon is as palpable and as loud as he could be, Nicholas contrarily shuns the public ways. Considering the same object they appeal to, we may propose that while Absolon flatters Alisoun's spiritual vanity, Nicholas satisfies her physical desires.⁹⁷ The narrator states that Nicholas is good at 'deerne love'⁹⁸ and 'solas' (I. 3200); this characteristic indicates that he knows better than Absolon what a woman like Alisoun needs. In the 'Wife of Bath's Prologue', the aged Alisoun explains her amorous propensity by stressing that she is the daughter of Venus and that Venus governs her amorous inclination: 'Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse' (III. 611). The Miller's Alisoun, a

⁹⁷ W. F. Bolton argues that Chaucer implies a moral by creating allegorical figures in Nicholas, John, and Absolon who stand respectively for 'carnality, temporality, and flattery' (see Harold F. Mosher, Jr., 'Greimas, Bremond, and the "Miller's Tale"', *Style* 31.3 (1997): 480-99, at 481-2). Paul A. Olson, by quoting Pierre Bersuire, suggests from another angle that 'a man may have three "wives": carnality, avarice, and pomposity. Alisoun serves for all three' ('Poetic Justice in the *Miller's Tale*' 233). Critics often observe that John 'cannot satisfy Alisoun' (Geoffrey Cooper, 8; Raymond P. Tripp, 210), but are vague about who can; hence, Alisoun is constantly treated as a woman who satisfies men's diverse desires rather than as a woman who, like the male characters around her, also has desires to be satisfied.

⁹⁸ 'Deerne love' means that the love is 'not noble, not an expression of *fin amor*, but, rather, a low love, one illicit and sinful' (See Edmund Reiss, 'Chaucer's "deerne love" and the Medieval View of Secrecy in Love', *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives: Essays Presented to Paul E. Beichner*, eds. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy [Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979], 164-79, at 171). So when the narrator remarks that Nicholas is good at 'deerne love', he is foretelling that this clerk will commit adultery.

‘younger version’ of the Wife of Bath, is also ‘likerous’, and to handle ‘such a woman’, as Paul A. Olson puts it, ‘a knowledge of astrology would be a convenience’ (231).⁹⁹ As John cannot match Alisoun in sexuality, Nicholas, by his ‘secret knowledge’ and close observation, seduces Alisoun in a way that appears starkly ‘bawdy and physical’ (Kara Virginia Donaldson 143): ‘[He] caughte hire by the queynte/... And heeld hire harde by the haunchebones’ (I. 3276-79). From the view of a lecher,¹⁰⁰ this might be the most direct and effective way to handle ‘such a woman’. However, the process and the outcome seem to be more than Nicholas ‘has bargained for’ (Martin Blum 44). For Alisoun

sproong as a colt dooth in the trave,
 And with hir heed she wryed faste away,
 And seyde, “I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey!
 Why, lat be!” quod she. “Lat be, Nicholas,
 Or I wol crie ‘out, harrow’ and ‘allas’!
 Do wey youre handes, for youre curteisye!” (I. 3282-7)

Nicholas’s approach to Alisoun, As Blum remarks, ‘is coarse, violent, and threatening, which makes his advances look more like the attack of an animal than the wooing of a lovesick suitor’ (43). But Alisoun’s ability in settling situations for herself is no where better demonstrated than when she resolutely resists Nicholas’s sexual assault;¹⁰¹ her

⁹⁹ Annabelle Kitson notes that Chaucer’s writings ‘are permeated with astrology’ and that ‘[t]he Miller associates this secret knowledge with Nicholas’s discreet sexual successes’ (‘Astrology and English Literature’, *Contemporary Review* 269 (1996): 200-208). The Wife of Bath’s analysis of the ‘fall’ and ‘reyse’ of ‘Mercurie’ and ‘Venus’ (III. 697-705) also reveals that Chaucer was familiar with this ‘clerical culture’.

¹⁰⁰ Some critics doubt whether Absolon is really lecherous, since he makes the ‘means his end’—i.e., ‘instead of being a lover, he derives his satisfaction from impersonating one’ (Martin Blum, ‘Negotiating Masculinities’, 44). But Nicholas is no doubt a lecher. Paul A. Olson notes: ‘Nicholas is a professional lecher; as a man, he has surrounded himself with the emblems of his trade: “lycorys” which suggests lechery (the pun is on ‘likerous’)’ (229). Also, the Miller introduces Nicholas as a man who is capable ‘[o]f deerne love ... and of solas’ (I. 3200), indicating that lechery is this clerk’s ‘specialty’.

¹⁰¹ Nicholas’s sexual assault—especially, ‘caughte hire by the queynte’ (i.e., Alisoun’s pudendum, see *Riverside*, n. 3276, p. 69)—can be treated as a contrast or a parallel to Absolon’s intentional attack with a hot coulter originally aimed at Alisoun’s *erse*. Amourously or vengefully, both these two male characters directly appeal to Alisoun’s private parts—as if she had no other parts—for getting reward or bestowing

response makes Nicholas change his attitude immediately, and ‘forces him into a negotiation which takes her own wishes into account as a condition for granting him her sexual favors’ (Martin Blum 43). Compared to John, who is easier for Nicholas to deal with, Alisoun shows ‘a great deal of dexterity as an independent player in the market-place of erotic exchanges’, and her resistance as well as her taking an active part in a relationship prove that she is not a passive role who is ‘passed from one man to another’ (Ibid. 43-4).

As mentioned earlier, Absolon and Nicholas are reflections of Alisoun’s ambivalent desires: one satisfies her public vanity, and the other her private needs. But choosing a mate is always a matter of sense and sensibility. The Miller tells us that the reason why Alisoun chooses Nicholas is because of his ‘proximity’: ‘Alwe the nye slye / Maketh the ferre leewe to be looth’ (I. 3392-3). This reason makes good sense; however, it only appeals to the ‘distance’ but neglects the ‘spatiality’ which an adulterous relationship commonly demands. Paula Neuss explicates Alisoun’s choice from the angle of ‘what a woman wants’: ‘Alisoun is a woman who ... “wants privacy and pleasure together”, and Nicholas can provide her with both’ (‘Double-Entendre’ 329). Yet to Alisoun, privacy and pleasure are not two things; the fact is that adulterous pleasure usually can only proceed in ‘privacy’. Therefore, Nicholas does not ‘deserve’ Alisoun because of the merit Paula Neuss has observed; for to say that Nicholas can provide both privacy and pleasure is not so much as to say that he is more ‘convenient’ to provide them if we take spatial elements into account—he is only in this aspect a better choice for Alisoun’s situation.¹⁰²

Alisoun’s choosing Nicholas may also involve moral concerns: i.e., religious

punishment.

¹⁰² Absolon is affected; Nicholas is brutal. As far as characterization is concerned, Alisoun’s choice is indeed not a matter of who ‘deserves’ her, but of which ‘spatial arrangement’ is more convenient and advantageous.

doctrines, public opinions, as well as generally accepted moral standards. The ‘Miller’s Tale’, to put it simple, is about an old carpenter’s youthful wife who has two young suitors. Hence, the issue we encounter immediately is an adultery rather than a cuckoldry. About this adultery, Chaucer does not seem as critical as modern readers would have thought, though widely recognized as a moral poet himself.¹⁰³ Kathryn Jacob offers a persuasive analysis of this liberal attitude from a historical point of view. In her study of British marriages, she observes that medieval marriages entailed ‘a double obligation, enforceable in two different courts: the ecclesiastical courts... [and] the temporal law courts’, which practically ‘amounts to two different contracts: a marital contract, and a business one’.¹⁰⁴ If a husband fails to perform the latter—e.g., sexually, like the carpenter in the ‘Miller’s Tale’—Jacob states that adultery may not appear a bad thing to Chaucer (Ibid. 339-40). It is not only ‘an acceptable response to breach of contract’, Jacob further remarks, but even ‘a restorative one’ (Ibid. 344). Namely, if the conditions of husband and wife are not balanced—in age or sexuality, such as that of John and Alisoun—an extramarital relationship might help redress an unbalanced marriage. ‘Thanks to it (adultery)’, Jacob refers to the ‘Shipman’s Tale’, ‘the wife and the merchant are reunited on common ground’ (Ibid. 344). If we consider the harmonious combination of Nicholas and Alisoun’s ‘melodye’ when they ‘revel’ in John’s bed and the friars’ singing of ‘the Divine Office of Lauds’ in the nearby chancel—a marvelous juxtaposition recognized by Robert Graybill as *caritas* (54) and ‘poetic’ by Jess M. Gellrich¹⁰⁵—we have to agree that Chaucer’s attitude towards adultery is a rather benevolent one.

¹⁰³ Many scholars consider Chaucer a moral poet, for example, Beryl Rowland, ‘Chaucer’s Blasphemous Churl’, 44; and Patterson, 113, 130.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Rewriting the Marital Contract: Adultery in the “Canterbury Tales”’, *The Chaucer Review* 29.4 (1995): 337-47, at 337.

¹⁰⁵ Jesse M. Gellrich, ‘The Parody of Medieval Music in the Miller’s Tale’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 73 (1974): 176-88, at 188. Gellrich remarks that ‘adultery is not punished in the tale’, though ‘[o]ther human foibles may be’ (187).

Certainly, it would not be true to say that our poet encourages adultery. The truth would be closer to what Kathryn Jacob concludes in the end of her essay: ‘Chaucer does not critique the marriage law of his day; instead, he embraces the intent of the law, and uses it to critique accepted moral standards’ (346). Hence, Alisoun’s relationship with Nicholas can be regarded as a way which she seeks to balance her unbalanced marriage. Still, Chaucer is not all for it. When we examine how Alisoun manages her public vanity and private desires, we find that Chaucer is actually very careful in embracing ‘the intent of the law’ to critique ‘accepted moral standards’. As explicated above, Alisoun’s response of ‘no’ to Absolon’s wooing is the best response. But this ‘no response’ may also signify Alisoun’s concern, if not respect for the moral standards of her world—mostly authorized by religious doctrines in that age. Compared to Absolon, a parish clerk who should know better that seducing a married woman is a deadly sin but still seduces her anyway, Alisoun seems to care more about societal morals and behave accordingly at least in public. Neglecting Absolon is a wise way to pronounce that she is a decent married woman and has a husband’s honor to keep. Besides her proper behavior in the eyes of the community, Alisoun’s choice of wearing demure clothes also shows her concern for public opinions: the simple, grave colors fit well her marital status; the rich and luxuriant details tell people that she is well provided for, and that enhances her husband’s honor.¹⁰⁶

Because of the ‘poetic justice’ distributed at the end of the tale, scholars agree that the ‘Miller’s Tale’ is not just a fabliau but also a moral exemplum.¹⁰⁷ John is cuckolded,

¹⁰⁶ In the ‘Shipman’s Tale’, the narrator says that a man clothes his wife richly for ‘his owene worshipe’ (VII. 13) and ‘honour’ (VII. 421). This code may also apply to the rich carpenter in the ‘Miller’s Tale’, since he loves his wife ‘moore than his lyf’ (I. 3322).

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, John B. Friedman, 179; Greg Walker, 62; Paula Neuss, 328; Harold F. Mosher, 481; Paul A. Olson, 230; Lee Patterson, 130. Moral exhortations, serious or mock serious, are not uncommon in traditional fabliaux. Robert Lewis points out that ‘some two-thirds of French fabliaux have an explicit moral attached to them’; the number of medieval English fabliaux is not large (twenty-five to thirty, including those by Chaucer), and many of them are from French sources (see ‘The English Fabliau Tradition and Chaucer’s “Miller’s Tale”’, *Modern Philology* 79.3 [1982]: 241-55).

the Miller concludes, '[f]or al his kepyng and his jalousye' (I. 3851). This judgment seems to indicate that John has no right to guard his wife as a dutiful husband should, or that he should not be jealous when there are wild young men coveting his lovely wife right out his window and in his hearing. Actually, John is often called away for business to Oseney for 'a day or two' (I. 3668), and has a young handsome lodger living upstairs in his house. About this household situation, he does not seem to show any suspicion or jealousy in the course of the tale. Therefore, that John deserves cuckoldry because of his 'kepyng and jalousye' can hardly be accepted as a 'moral'. Besides, by the Miller's pronouncement, Chaucer is obviously indicating to his audience that a 'healthfully sexual'¹⁰⁸ wife like John's should still be available to any men that desire her, and should the husband get jealous, cuckoldry is his due punishment. Such punishment is not a 'justice', but a prejudice.¹⁰⁹ Considering 'the religious context of the tale', as Fredrick Biggs and Laura L. Howes suggest, John's jealousy is hardly a sin (274). Indeed, when John is jealous, he is not coveting what others have, as the medieval religious instructions of Seven Deadly Sins have condemned, but rightfully guarding his own possession of a 'private object' (Gila Aloni 167).

An elderly man unwittingly married to a young wife is destined to be a cuckold: it is a theme, a characteristic commonly seen in the traditional fabliau.¹¹⁰ In the 'Miller's Tale', likewise, jealousy may not be the reason why John suffers, but the foolishness which he reveals in his ill choice of a mate. At the outset of the tale, the narrator tells us: 'He knew nat Catoun, for his wit was rude, / That bad man wedde his simylytude. / Men sholde wedden after hire estaat, / For youthe and elde is often at debaat' (I. 3227-30).

¹⁰⁸ Robert Graybill, 54.

¹⁰⁹ Some critics, however, accept that 'kepyng and jalousye' is one of the reasons why John is punished in the end of the tale (see, for examples, E. D. Blodgett, 482; and William F. Woods, 172).

¹¹⁰ See Beryl Rowland, 'Chaucer's Blasphemous Churl', 45; Lee Patterson, 'No Man His Reson Herde', 144; Geoffrey Cooper, 7; Thomas J. Farrell, 'Privacy and the Boundaries of Fabliau', 779.

Some critics, nevertheless, assert that John is ‘not stupid, but anti-intellectual’,¹¹¹ which might be true, since ignorance often derives from an attitude against scholastic activities rather than a defect of mind.¹¹² Aside from ‘he knew nat Catoun’, John’s remarks on Nicholas’s astrological interests further evidence his disagreement with intellectual exploration: ‘A man woot litel what hym shal bityde. / ... Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee. / Ye, blessed be alwey a lewed man / That noght but oonly his bileve kan! / ... Me reweth soore of hende Nicholas. / He shal be rated of his studyng...’ (I. 3449-63). This passage shows that John is not only ignorant, but ‘even proud of his ignorance’ (Mosher 483). John J. O’Connor also notes in John’s character this element of ‘pride’, ‘always present in the anti-intellectual’, which makes John’s final downfall ‘pitiful’ rather than ‘pitiable’(12).¹¹³

It is John’s pride and ignorance—his two major faults—that Nicholas plays upon to beguile him. In order to enjoy a night with Alisoun, Nicholas starts to carry out a fantastic scheme. First he hides in his chamber for two days gazing into the roof, and when John breaks into his room out of concern and curiosity, he includes John into a prophecy of ‘Goddes Pryvetee’: a flood bigger than Noah’s is pending. John quickly identifies himself with Noah, also a carpenter, and believes that he can save himself and his ‘deere wyf’ with a similar method. He sends his servants away, prepares three tubs with food and drinks in them, and hangs the tubs to the rafters of his roof—doing all

¹¹¹ See John B. Friedman, 179; John J. O’Connor, 124-5.

¹¹² I borrow this idea from Francis Bacon’s essay ‘Of Studies’: ‘Crafty men contemn studies’ (see Francis Bacon, ‘Of Studies’, *Francis Bacon: The Essays*, ed. John Pitcher [New York: Penguin Books, 1985], 209-210, at 209). John might not be crafty, but, as a carpenter, he is no doubt a man of craft.

¹¹³ According to Alan J. Fletcher’s study, John is not arrogant or anti-intellectual, but merely the product of ‘the curriculum of Church teaching’ in Chaucer’s time: ‘A second policy was to encourage a healthy regard for utter simplicity in matters of faith’; namely, what John reveals is the faith of a ‘simple man’ (‘The Faith of a Simple Man: Carpenter John’s Creed in the “Miller’s Tale”’, *Medium Aevum* 61.1 [1992]: 96-105, at 97). But Chaucer, judging from his mockery (can the Miller know Catoun?) and his punishment of John in the end of the tale, obviously has no sympathy for this simple man or his simple faith. H. P. Weissman describes Chaucer’s treatment of John in the tale’s apocalyptic conclusion with an appealing oxymoron: ‘a remarkable cruelty’ (‘Antifeminism and Chaucer’s Characterization of Women’, *Critical Essays on Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, ed. Malcolm Andrew [Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1991, rpt. 1996], 111-25, at 118).

these without any man's *purveiaunce* according to Nicholas's instruction. John's gullibility seems incredible. But as a biblical parody, the complex elements that work out together so well in the tale have revealed more human nature than reasonable facts (such as: John should not be so credulous, or he should verify the rising water before he cuts the rope, etc.).¹¹⁴ That John should believe that he is a party to 'Christ's counsel' and 'Goddess pryvetee' (which he obviously opposes at first) and that he would be lord of the new world when the flood has passed aptly echoes his 'complacent ignorance and unthinking arrogance' as Geoffrey Cooper describes (9). Many critics have given insights into the origin or significance of Noah's flood in the Miller's Tale;¹¹⁵ therefore I do not intend to add any more opinion to it here. What I have observed, rather, is a paradox which Chaucer's parody displays. As a craftsman, and therefore a member of the guild, John is no doubt familiar with Noah's story from the mystery pageants.¹¹⁶ But his insufficient knowledge of the story—in the end of the biblical narrative, God promises that he will never destroy the world again with water (Genesis ix. 12-7)—exposes a breach between the ecclesiastical instruction and the tradition of popular beliefs in Chaucer's time. As M. F. Vaughan notes: 'Despite the Divinity's biblical promise never again to destroy mankind by flood, there was in the Middle Ages a prominent and popular tradition which indicated a later, perhaps quiet, reversal of that historic promise' (119).¹¹⁷ An ignorant person like John is presumably more susceptible to popular tradition than to dogmatic instructions.¹¹⁸ His gullibility in the second flood

¹¹⁴ See Peter G. Beidler, 220.

¹¹⁵ See for example, Gila Aloni, 156-7; Fredrick M. Biggs and Laura L. Howes, 273; E. D. Blodgett, 484; Geoffrey Cooper, 9; Roy Peter Clark, 278; Beryl Rowland, 'The Play of the *Miller's Tale*', 145; and John C. Hirsh, 'Why Does the Miller's Tale Take Place on Monday?', *English Language Notes* 13 (1975): 89-90.

¹¹⁶ For a thorough study of the medieval tradition drawn from Noah's Flood, see John B. Friedman, 'Nicholas's "Angelus ad Virginem" and the Mocking of Noah'; and M. F. Vaughan, 'Chaucer's Imaginative One-Day Flood', *Philological Quarterly* 60.1 (1981): 117-23.

¹¹⁷ More significant for this argument is that 'God will destroy the world again, at the Last Judgment—only then he will use fire' (Fredrick M. Biggs and Laura L. Howes 273).

¹¹⁸ John's insufficient knowledge of the biblical story reflects the Wife of Bath's miscomprehension of the story of the Samaritan Woman. Both are the victims of priestly garbling of the holy text; the difference

scheme thus appears comprehensible, since what Nicholas pretends to disclose and appeals to is merely his ‘bileve’.

Critics often regard the intricacy of Nicholas’s scheme as superfluous or unnecessary. Indeed, considering the proximity and John’s frequent absences, Nicholas and Alisoun seem to have plenty of opportunities to do what they want. If Nicholas merely covets Alisoun, ‘why does he do so many things which displace copulation from the centre of the tale’, asked John B. Friedman, who further observes: ‘he seems to enjoy mocking John even more than swiving his wife’ (162). Friedman solves this question by first examining ‘Nicholas’s somewhat filial presentation’ and John’s ‘fatherly concern’ through the paradigm of ‘Attic comedy’, where ‘unseating and horning of fathers is an intrinsic part of the plot’ (162). Namely, Alisoun is not Nicholas’s object but the reward he takes after he successfully overthrows his father-landlord. From this aspect, ‘how’ to take down the old man, rather than ‘what’ he can get, is the center of Nicholas’s scheme. Friedman then relates John-Nicholas relationship to Noah-Ham¹¹⁹ relationship. As Nicholas’s second flood scheme is based on Noah’s Flood, Friedman examines the parallel details between these two narratives, especially the part in which both the younger rebel against the older by a sexual humiliation (163).¹²⁰ Looking from this father-son conflict, one can modify Friedman’s point by changing the flood scheme from ‘Attic comedy’ to Oedipal tragedy—in which defeating the father, taking over his power, and enjoying what originally belongs to the old man are the essential elements of this John-Alisoun-Nicholas relationship (though it

between these two characters is that John is content with the notion that ‘blessed be alwey a lewed man’ while Alisoun of Bath protests against what she has been taught.

¹¹⁹ Ham (or Cham, as he was known to the Middle Ages) was Noah’s third son, a ‘bad’ one. For a thorough discussion of Noah’s conflict with this bad son before and after the flood, see John B. Friedman, especially 163-4 & 175-8.

¹²⁰ Ham’s sexual humiliation of his father is traditionally understood as this: Noah was once drunk, and while sleeping in his tent, his uncovered body was seen by Ham who told this to Noah’s other sons; when Noah awoke, he cursed Ham. More recently, some scholars suggest that Ham may have had intercourse with his father’s wife. Judging from the John-Nicholas-Alisoun relationship, Chaucer (and his contemporaries) may already have had this second perception of this biblical story.

may appear too typical in the psychoanalysis).¹²¹

By excessive ruses, Nicholas successfully displaces John from his own bed, and eventually expels him out into the street. His wicked trickery deserves, justifiably, a scolding ‘in the towte’ (I. 3853). But Nicholas is punished not only for his trickery but also for his exploitation of what he is given. To satisfy his desire, Nicholas willfully turns down what opportunity has already offered and, evilly, wants to prove that he, a clerk, can beat John, a carpenter, with tricks: ‘A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle, / But if he koude a carpenter bigyle’ (I. 3299-3300). Nicholas repays his landlord’s concern and trust with humiliation and deception, and by doing so, abuses his God-given intellectuality. As Raymond P. Tripp maintains, ‘[h]e may deceive John, but he also succeeds in deceiving himself into thinking he has won what in fact fate and nature’s abundance have freely given’ (210). Nicholas’s problem, therefore, is not just lecherous or wickedly tricky; ‘his existential sin’, Tripp further remarks, ‘is really ungratefulness’ (210). Nicholas’s desire to fool John indicates his intellectual arrogance; it also exposes his adulterer’s psychology. As Angela Carter points out: adultery is no less than ‘an existential challenge’ (‘Alison’s Giggle’ 65). ‘Catch me if you can’ and narrow escapes always stimulate the adrenal glands and enhance sexual hilarity and excitement. Duping the husband, therefore, is not just the foreplay for a clever man like Nicholas; by the trickery, he also wants to prove that he is biologically and intellectually superior to the cuckold, which justifies his right of enjoying the old man’s young pretty wife. In order to survive like an ‘adult’ (being able to perform ‘adult-ery’), Nicholas acts wickedly and consciously against both moral and religious decrees of his time. The hot

¹²¹ H. Marshall Leicester has done a thrilling psychoanalytical reading of the ‘Miller’s Tale’ in his ‘Newer Currents in Psychoanalytic Criticism and the Difference “It” Makes: Gender and Desire in the “Miller’s Tale”’. His discussion extends to the Miller’s revenge on the Host who has urged the Miller to let some better man tell a tale—a kind of social- and class-suppression which the Miller has counterattacked with his dirty story.

coulter¹²² poked at his *ers* therefore rightfully leaves on him a branding stigma resembling the ‘scarlet letter’ in a future novel. From another aspect, the ‘sealing off’ of Nicholas’s ‘wayward male body’ is not merely for maiming his willful character or, metaphorically, his arrogant intellectuality; the branding, according to Glenn Burger’s analysis, also serves to ‘remasculinize’ Nicholas’s ‘potentially effeminate behavior’ (the loss of control of the body) and, looking from ‘the hierarchized relationship of reason and body’, indicates that he should ‘rededicate his body to the proper pursuit for which it is intended’ (‘Erotic Discipline’ 246-9).

Compared to Nicholas, who commits adultery in ‘pryvetee’, Absolon seduces Alisoun brazenly in the open; obviously, besides affecting the role of a lover, Absolon also delights in acting the role of a social rebel, the type which fashionable youths like to assume. However, his affected rebellion,¹²³ lacking a significant aim, only turns into vengeful spirits when his pretentious wooing is rebuffed. Absolon’s misplaced kiss confuses him at first when he is stunned about what he has kissed: ‘... he kiste hir naked ers / Ful savourly, er he were war of this. / Abak he stirte, and thoughte it was amys, / For wel he wiste a woman hath no berd. / He felte a thyng al rough and long yherd, / And seyde, “Fy! Allas! What have I do?” Then Alisoun ‘clapte’ the window with a ‘Tehee!’ Before he ‘gooth forth a sory pas’ from outside the window, Absolon hears Nicholas taunting from inside the window: ‘A berd! A berd!’ Absolon angrily bites his

¹²² When Absolon goes to Gerveys the smith to borrow the ‘kultour’, the smith joshes him about the early hour at which he is out in pursuit of some *gay gerl*. Absolon does not care for the joke: ‘no word again he yaf; / He hadde moore tow on his distaff / Than Gerveys knew’ (I. 3773-5). ‘To have tow on one’s staff’ is traditionally interpreted as ‘to have business on hand’. But Revard Carter points out that ‘the phrase would have had a very sharp and particular meaning to Chaucer’s London audience, for the carrying of a distaff with tow on it was statutory punishment for persons guilty of crimes of sex and violence, as we see in regulations in the *Liber Albus*, Book III, Part IV, which specify punishments for panders, bawds, harlots, and brawlers and wranglers...’ (see ‘The Tow on Absalom’s Distaff and the Punishment of Lechers in Medieval London’, *English Language Notes* 17 [1980]: 168-70, at 168).

¹²³ It is a contrast to Alisoun’s truer one. Alisoun’s rebellion—against masculine control/gloss—is generally recognized and discussed by critics, see for example Kara Virginia Donaldson, 148-9; Glenn Burger, ‘Erotic Discipline’, 254; Martin Blum, 44; and H. Marshall Leicester, 484-6.

tainted lips, once so pure,¹²⁴ and says to himself: ‘I shal thee quyte’ (I. 3735-46)—he will repay violence with violence.¹²⁵ This dandy’s¹²⁶ mortification and revenge have attracted as much attention as his squeamish character. Kara Virginia Donaldson, treating Absolon as a patriarchal glossator, remarks:

When Absolon’s reading of himself and the world is destroyed by Alisoun’s rebellious body, his only choice to reorder his world is to gain control of Alisoun’s body through violence and redomesticate it. He must punish her for her transgression, for her breach of what he understands as the social and sexual contract. Therefore, he chooses to reclaim her body as a text he can gloss through branding and torture. (148)

Although the hot coulter poking at Nicholas’s buttocks creates the most comical scene in the Miller’s Tale, it is actually, as Raymond P. Tripp stresses, a ‘murderous weapon’ (211) that causes pain and wound on human flesh. Choosing a murderous weapon as his rod, Absolon proves that he never loves the woman he woos but his own wooing image and reveals the darkest intention of a vengeful act—not just to punish, but to torture.¹²⁷ ‘Torture forms part of a ritual,’ as Foucault explains.¹²⁸ Referring to Foucault, Donaldson further explicates:

In order to regain power over Alisoun, Absolon attempts to use the ritual of

¹²⁴ To purify his lips, Absolon acts almost like a neurotic; he ‘rubbeth’ and ‘froteth’ his lips with ‘dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes’ (I. 3747-8). Katie Louise Walter expounds that in medieval medical treatment, ‘frotynge’ refers to ‘rubbing or scraping the lips, gums or palate of the mouth in order to remove dead or diseased flesh and growths’; hence, ‘frotynge’ is ‘a fitting course of action for Absolon’, since he ‘further to being a parish clerk, is a barber-surgeon and as such possesses particular knowledge about the pathology and remedy of the mouth and its parts’ (see ‘The Middle English Term “Froten”: Absolon and Barber-Surgery’, *Notes and Queries* 53.3 [2006]: 303-5).

¹²⁵ Glenn Burger remarks that laughter like Alisoun’s ‘tehee’ is ‘symbolic violence’ (‘Erotic Discipline’ 246).

¹²⁶ Kelsie B. Harder calls Absolon ‘a dandy’ (‘Chaucer’s Use of the Mystery Plays in the *Miller’s Tale*’, *MLQ* 17.3 [1956]: 193-8, at 195); Roy Peter Clark, ‘the long-haired, squeamish dandy’, 277; Cornelius Novelli, ‘the small town dandy’, 169; Lee Patterson, ‘the narcissistic, inefficient dandy’, 132.

¹²⁷ Raymond P. Tripp has observed that the heart of this darkness is ‘the savage survival of the self’ (211); Absolon’s intention to ‘torture’ Alisoun fully reflects the other side of this ‘savage’ desire.

¹²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York 1979), 34-35, qtd. by Kara Virginia Donaldson, 148.

branding. He tries to mark her body to bring her back within his semiotic system. Since glossing Alisoun with the language of courtly love is not powerful enough to control her, he chooses a more powerful symbol to gloss her in a way that will visibly show his control over her. Not able to “inscribe” his meaning on her body through language, he attempts to inscribe his gloss upon her physically. (149)

The mortification Absolon suffers through the misplaced kiss is an equitable punishment. By singing Marian hymns, sinners pray for mercy from the Virgin Mary; however, Absolon sings the holy songs to ‘get Alisoun to join him in lechery’ (Peter G. Beidler 220). Like Nicholas who sings *Angelus ad Virginem* with profane implication, Absolon’s songs are false prayers which show that he is not only adulterous but also sacrilegious—considering especially that he belongs to the clerical orders. Since Absolon is spiritually sinful, a spiritual castigation is therefore more equitable than physical ones like Nicholas’s and John’s. Paradoxically, this horrid experience of arse-kissing at the same time leads to a permanent cure for Absolon’s love-sickness’: as John M. Bowers remarks, the trauma ‘has acted like aversion therapy to produce an almost pathological retreat from the possibility of heterosexual attachment’¹²⁹ (‘Fro that tyme that he hadde kist hir ers, / Of paramours he sette nat a kers,... / Ful ofte paramours he gan deffie’, I. 3755-8). And like a fragile person whose weak mentality cannot cope with aggravation, Absolon’s never-too-big masculinity is eventually dwindled into an infantile level despite the fact that he was actually able to fight back like a ‘man’: every time he reminisces on this sexual humiliation, he weeps like a beaten child (‘And weep as dooth a child that is ybete’ [I. 3759]¹³⁰). As far as initiation to love

¹²⁹ See ‘Chaste Marriage: Fashion and Texts at the Court of Richard II’, *Pacific Coast Philology* 30.1 (1995): 15-26, at 21.

¹³⁰ P. H. Cullum observes that in the Middle Ages, the clergy were generally regarded as ‘being not fully masculine’ as well as ‘not fully socially adult’ (194). Absolon is twice described as a child (I. 3325, 3759). Cullum also points out that the clergy were forbidden to let blood and carry weapons; therefore, Absolon’s affecting a lover (indicating his sexual activity), using a hot coulter (weapon), and being a part-time barber-surgeon, symbolize his ‘transgression’ into or ‘struggle’ for masculinity (see ‘Clergy, Masculinity and Transgression in Late Medieval England’, *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. D. M.

is concerned, Absolon's lesson is a mere failure, as he never recovers from the horrid experience or learns what love of others is. Strictly speaking, Absolon's pretension is crushed by his own foolery. And if we perceive his snooty wooing of Alisoun as an exhibition of clerkly pomposity towards the 'lewed', this ruin of his pride may be treated as Chaucer's apology for the clerkly arrogance—like the branding of Nicholas's 'towte'. Both young men are punished, and Chaucer seems to have redressed his prejudices against and victimization of the 'lewed' and the ignorant for the moment.

III. Alisoun's Punishment

According to the distribution of 'poetic justice', the three male characters in the 'Miller's Tale' are all rightfully punished in the end. John, gullible, proud, and ignorant, suffers cuckoldry, ridicule, and a broken arm; Nicholas, scheming, profane, and adulterous, receives a branding on his buttock; and Absolon, squeamish, affected, and sacrilegious, is traumatized by a most distasteful experience of arse-kissing. What about Alisoun? Does she really 'get away scot free' as Raymond P. Tripp claims (207)? Critics have agreed on the positive answer. In his refutation of the correlation between sin and punishment in the tale, Fredrick M. Biggs claims that Alisoun 'presents the most obvious problem to the theme of justice'—since 'she remains unpunished even though she performs the same actions as Nicholas' (274-5). Angela Carter, although she does not specify that Alisoun should deserve some kind of lesson, stresses that even if Absolon is a 'ninny', most people would think that Alisoun has 'gone too far' by tricking him into kissing her backside (54). Indeed, critics not only agree that Alisoun is unpunished, but even celebrate her being free from the poet's censure. Martin Blum, for example, asserts that Alisoun is not merely unpunished, but 'rewarded for being the

most successful “man” of the tale’—i.e., she is the most ‘masculine’ character of all—whereas ‘her male counterparts all receive their individual lessons for failing their expected roles as men’ (37). One of Blum’s points is that masculinity is not ‘exclusively tied to the male gender’ (51), in which his argument is persuasive, but he neglects to explain why ‘masculinity’ is the principle of rewarding in the tale (or any tale?). That thesis is obviously a prejudice. If the three male characters are punished for failing their expected roles as men, it seems that Alisoun should be punished for failing her expected role as a woman. Or to put it the other way round: if Alisoun, a woman, is rewarded for being masculine, the three male characters, it seems, should be rewarded for being feminine.

Alisoun is termed as masculine in that she is independent, resistant, and capable of manipulating situations. But her ‘masculinity’ also reveals the abhorrent side of her character. When she thrusts her ‘hole’ with its ‘berd’ (I. 3732) out the window—into the ‘apert’, she acts as crudely as any vulgar person can. Interestingly, if presenting a ‘pseudo-beard’ to an unwelcome suitor is part of a woman’s ‘masculinity’, it is nevertheless quite educational—it inspires the man’s potential masculinity. In his study of men’s ‘becoming male’, Glenn Burger explicates, ‘the *symbolic* violence... generalizes and institutionalizes [a] process of remasculinization’ (‘Erotic Discipline’ 246). After getting ‘a mouthful of hair’ (Louise M. Bishop 240) from Alisoun’s ‘private parts’, Absolon decisively pays back with a hot coulter. Although he misses his true aim, his retaliation is by all definitions a masculine one. With that thrust, he seems to declare—in the way H. Marshall Leicester puts it, ‘I defy you. I have a penis!’ (488)—that he does have manhood.

From the ‘negotiation of masculinity’ between Alisoun and Absolon, we discover the logic of punishment in the ‘Miller’s Tale’. It works in a chain: John is duped and cuckolded by Nicholas; Nicholas is branded by Absolon; Absolon is humiliated by

Alisoun; and Alisoun—who does not get off scot free at all—is objectified, anatomized, and vilified by her creator. From this angle, the bite and the bitten not only form the correlations between the four characters in the narrative but also construct the narration of the tale. That is, to complete the chain, Alisoun must be punished despite all the capabilities Chaucer has bestowed upon her. And to achieve his art, Chaucer sacrifices his human concerns when he makes ugly Alisoun’s body.

As mentioned, Blum considers Alisoun’s masculinity praiseworthy. Alisoun’s ‘tenacity not to accept Nicholas’s terms’, her ‘determination to change the rules of the game’, and her ‘dexterity as an independent player in the market-place of erotic exchanges’ (43)—Blum, in his richly textured essay, has generously demonstrated Alisoun as the most ‘masculine’ character in the ‘Miller’s Tale’, and concluded that it is for that reason that she is leniently spared. However, Alisoun’s masculine attributes cannot prevent her from being (not as the object but) objectified¹³¹ by the male desire in the tale. Critics celebrate Alisoun’s abilities in taking an active part in Nicholas’s sexual intrigue (Martin Blum 44), her enjoyment of sex as her natural right (Theodore I. Silar & Kathryn Jacob, *passim*; Angela Carter 64), and her bravado to give annoying Absolon a ‘Tehee!’ after humiliating him (Louise M. Bishop 241; Angela Carter 54). But when the Miller concludes ‘thus swyved was the carpenteris wyf’, the passive mood reveals an appalling opinion—an extremely misogynistic one. Angela Carter admits that ‘the use of the passive mood is striking’, but congratulatorily remarks: ‘...at least Alison managed to get herself fucked by the man of her choice, to her own satisfaction and with no loss of self-respect or the respect of her male creator, which is more than a girl like her will be able to do again, for almost more than half a millennium’ (63-4).¹³²

¹³¹ ‘Being an object’ and ‘being objectified’ are two different notions: the former presents Alisoun as an independent individual at the other end of any male-female relationship; the latter subdues Alisoun into a mere object reachable within the male’s self-regarding superiority.

¹³² ‘A girl like her... for almost more than half a millennium’ indicates the French novelist Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette (1873-1954).

Carter's 'at least' indicates that it is unusual for a fourteenth-century male author to create a sexy while at the same time masculine female character, and after that he is still able to laugh 'at the pretensions of his own sex' (Ibid. 68). But the passive mood discloses that woman is after all an object to 'be swyved' by men; and that thought is well hidden by the poet until almost the end of the tale and then all of a sudden unwittingly slipped via the crude tongue of the crude Miller to expose all 'the pretensions of his own sex'. The thought is especially unbearable when we realize that Alisoun is being 'swyved' as a punishment to her husband—it sounds almost like raping her in front of her husband's face.

Perhaps characterizing Alisoun with masculine traits is not Chaucer's 'pretension' or intention, but merely an accident. Glenn Burger has noted: 'In terms of gender, the masculine is to the head and nobility as the feminine is to the lower limbs (especially the genitalia) and baseborn churls'.¹³³ Looking from this perspective, Alisoun's performance in the latter part of the tale not only presents her femininity (and a bad kind)¹³⁴ rather than masculinity, but also reveals the narrator's intention—given that what he mainly relates is Alisoun's genitalia—to objectify her and make her ugly. By the unseemly exposure of Alisoun's body, Chaucer, though he has punished Nicholas and Absolon for their clerkly arrogance, unfortunately cannot curb his own. As mentioned, the Miller spends about forty lines on describing Alisoun's clothes, by which he manifests all her loveliness and desirability; yet, when Alisoun is stripped, the gross Miller, surprisingly, spends only a few words on her naked body. Namely, as far as Alisoun's nakedness is concerned, the Miller not only neglects to display to his audience a sensual, desirable body, but instead only depicts some ungraceful private

¹³³ 'Erotic Discipline', 248.

¹³⁴ In comparing the 'Knight's Tale' and the 'Miller's Tale', Burger observes that the 'good' femininity refers to the female body 'seeking the guidance and control of a properly masculine will', while 'bad' femininity indicates either the female body 'left untended' or male bodies 'sliding into effeminate confusion because of improper desire' ('Erotic discipline' 249).

'parts'. Indeed, Alisoun is anatomized into mere parts when she is bare; more incredibly, her limbs and her head (symbol of masculinity) seem to be chopped off and discarded, and what is left of her is only her 'hole', 'naked ers', and 'nether ye' (I. 3732, 3734, 3852). These orifices all define Alisoun as a sexual recipient. Her loveliness and desirability no more exist; she is dwindled into sheer animality. Louise M. Bishop maintains that by yoking 'Goddess pryvetee' with that of a 'wyf', the Miller himself 'reveals his confusion about, and maybe even his ignorance of, female anatomy', as well as—to that I want to add—female autonomy; '[t]he Tale thus hints at the impossibility of a man knowing a woman's private parts, as well as her secrets' (240). Yet the contrast between Alisoun's loveliness and desirability when she has her clothes on and the animality and vulgarity when she has her clothes off is too striking. The Miller actually does not care to know about women's body or 'secrets' at all, since all his attention is focused on the 'hole' only. The Miller has made this point clear in his prologue:

I have a wyf, pardee, as wel as thou;
 Yet nold I, for the oxen in my plogh,
 Take upon me moore than ynogh,...
 An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf
 Of Goddess pryvetee, nor of his wyf. (I. 3658-3164)

That is, as long as he has his 'due', the Miller does not care to know about his wife's 'pryvetee'—either her 'private parts' (anatomy) or her 'secrets' (autonomy). Why should he care? What he knows is that woman is the recipient of male desire—that is the best function of a woman, and that is 'ynogh' for him. And it also explains why the Miller is so frivolous and gross when he punishes Alisoun by making her 'swyved'—an obvious contempt of the woman's body. Seen from this perspective, John is not

punished for his 'jalousye' and keeping his wife 'narwe in cage' as the Miller says. Old John is punished because he loves his young wife 'moore than his lif' (I. 3322); that sentiment is unnecessary and contrary to the Miller and the poet's attitude toward the female body and female autonomy.

The Miller's intention to defile Alisoun becomes manifest in the second part of the tale; it begins with the sex scene and when Alisoun starts to really act 'like a man' (H. Marshall Leicester 488). After John falls into slumber in his tub up in the rafters, Alisoun and Nicholas stalk down of the ladder and quickly go to bed; then the Miller describes:

Ther was the revel and the melodye;
And thus lith Alison and Nicholas,
In bisynesse of myrthe and of solas,
Til that the belle of laudes gan to ryng,
And freres in the chauncel gonne synge. (I. 3652-56)

The friars sing lauds while the sex melody plays. Critics often point out that Chaucer uses musical imagery 'to characterize persons and passions' (Jesse M. Gellrich 178); this is especially true in the 'Miller's Tale': not only Nicholas and Absolon both play musical instruments and sing with sweet voices, the Miller himself is a kind of musician, too: 'A bagpipe wel koude he blowe and sowne, / And therwithal he broughte [the pilgrims] out of towne' (I. 565-6).¹³⁵ Since the Miller takes interest in music, his tale is aptly inlaid with music and songs. There are five episodes in the tale, and each 'begins with one of the characters leaving or having left the house... Each time, the following

¹³⁵ As the bagpipe produces loud and 'boorish' sound (and 'emblematically obscene because it resembles the male genitals'), critics consider the bagpipe a perfect match for the Miller's 'coarse manners and loud speech'; on the other hand, the bagpipe also had civilized connection in the Middle Ages—specifically 'celestial, ecclesiastical, and courtly'—for instance, it was a common instrument 'played by angels in paintings, manuscripts, sculptures, and stained glass windows' (see Robert Boenig, 'The Miller's Bagpipe', 1-6).

interaction ends with a kind of music...' (William F. Woods 167). The contrast between the religious music/songs and the secular emotions of its players/singers is one of the elements that creates the parodic mood in the 'Miller's Tale'. Namely, by the juxtaposition of the sex 'melodye' and the friars' lauds singing, the narrator manages skillfully to establish, as Jesse M. Gellrich puts it, a 'comic incongruity between spirituality and carnality' in the 'Tale' (176). Chaucer's denigration of Alisoun and her body begins from this contrast of 'spirituality and carnality'.

When Alisoun starts her adulterous relationship, she loses all the loveliness and desirability ascribed to her in the beginning of the tale. After the sex scene, her behavior is depicted in a most crude and vulgar way. The manner she hangs her *ers* out of the window for Absolon to kiss appears not only gross but shameless.¹³⁶ A male exposing his genitalia in the open might symbolize phallic worship in uncivilized times, but for a woman to expose hers in any age the scene is not just 'unladylike' as Peter G. Beidler describes (93), but dreadful and obnoxious. In other analogues of the 'Miller's Tale', it is the Nicholas-figure who offers his *ers* to Absolon both times. Beidler explicates that by substituting Alisoun for Nicholas in the first window scene, the narrator achieves two aims: on the one hand, the Miller presents a realistic counterpart of the idealized heroine Emelye in the 'Knight's Tale' to which his tale means to 'quyte'; on the other, the Miller wants to punish Absolon, the 'dandyish, fastidious, effeminate, squeamish parish clerk', who deserves such contempt ('Art and Scatology' 93). Namely, Chaucer makes the Miller requite the Knight's tale and insult Absolon at the expense of a woman and her body. To H. Marshall Leicester, the displacement of roles in effect creates a 'weird breakdown of the boundaries between characters and narrator, here and there, story-world and pilgrim-world', and thus expresses fully 'the tale's impulses toward

¹³⁶ Critics remark that John is cuckolded and shamed (John B. Friedman 178); Absolon is humiliated and shamed (H. Marshall Leicester 487); but Alisoun is never accounted with the concept of 'shame' by any critic.

transgression, boundary crossing, and confusion or dissolving of distinctions' (488). Leicester's explication illustrates well the 'weird breakdown of the boundaries' at the end of the tale, but neglects to point out that the effect is achieved by vilification of the female body. Partly similar to Leicester, Martin Blum maintains that '[b]y substituting a woman for a man, Chaucer has once more upset the conventional expectations of male and female behavior' and again stresses that 'Chaucer has invested Alison with a degree of power usually reserved for the male characters of the tale, and she thus acts in a way far more masculine than any of the other males present' (47). I find it hard to accept that hanging one's *ers* out of the window is a display of masculinity—if it is, it is a 'bad' kind, and Alisoun could not possibly be spared at the end because of this crude pseudo-masculinity. At any rate, whatever the poet's purpose of the displacement is, the process and the consequence are the denigration of Alisoun's womanhood. After all Alisoun does not own a penis. By making Absolon kiss Alisoun's 'castrated' private parts, the Miller punishes Absolon and at the same time defiles Alisoun. Does Alisoun get off scot free? She may not be punished by a physical injury or an emotional humiliation; but being reduced to only a 'hole', regarded as 'the object of [men's] swiving', and presented as a woman who is 'an invitation to masculine laughter and contempt' (Leicester 494), Alisoun is eternally stigmatized by the author in the Miller's tale—worse than John's broken arm or Nicholas's branding *towte*.

IV. Conclusion

Treating Alisoun as 'the woman' instead of 'a woman', the stigmatization then is not simply intended for Alisoun, but for any woman who dares seek sexual autonomy like Alisoun. The pilgrims' response at the end of the Miller's tale justifies this moral prejudice. When the Miller ends his story, except the Reeve, all the other pilgrims

‘hadde laughen at this nyce cas / Of Absolon and hende Nicholas’ (I. 3855). What irritates the Reeve is not the concern of any woman’s name or fame, but the Miller’s innuendo and his own imaginary cuckoldry (like John he was a carpenter). And though Chaucer apologizes at the beginning of the narrative for the ‘cherles tale’ which he has to relate, emphasizing that it is by no means his ‘yvel entente’ (I. 3169-74), he shows no reflection at all on the Miller’s prejudice in the course of the narrative. So, is this misogynistic attitude toward the female body and its autonomy merely the Miller’s or also the narrator Chaucer’s own? Actually, when the Miller warns that ‘an housbonde shal nat been inquisityf / Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf’, he already indicates to his audience that what he aims to expose is a *wyf’s pryvetee* (her private parts). The construct of the tale indeed is built upon the deconstruction of Alisoun’s body and her autonomy. It is a truth that Chaucer’s glossing of the female body enforces too much patriarchal values/interests—which he also shows in his glossing of the Prioress’s ‘nat undergrowe’ body and the Pardoner’s effeminate body—and comprehends too little the more compassionate and humane concerns which modern readers would appreciate in a great author. The Miller’s joke is a nasty one: it definitely does not appear funny to women as to men.

Chapter 2

Ther Was Also a Nonne: Chaucer's Prejudiced Observation of the Prioress

'Prejudice' is oftentimes a cultural phenomenon; it commonly exists in racial, social, sexual, as well as religious and legal domains. The Prioress's portrait, prologue, and tale present many examples. For instance, Chaucer's portraiture of the Prioress is traditionally regarded as ambiguous, as it is too pretty, too romantic for a religious woman, and too affected, too 'provincial' for a courtly lady. The ambiguity actually is caused by the narrator's prejudices against women and the religious, and the Prioress happens to be both. The Prioress's tale is also known for its racial and religious prejudices. Whether the anti-Semitism in the tale is Chaucer's or the Prioress's, the bloody conflict between the Christians and the Jews is the consequence of the prejudiced concept of treating the 'different' as 'Other' and the savage intention of 'Othering' it. Prejudice inevitably leads to misconception and misjudgment. Chaucer's mockery of the Prioress reveals his distrust of the Prioress's religious status and professional abilities; hence, the Prioress's 'fetish' French is but 'schoolgirl' French,¹ and her graceful deportment imitation of courtly manners. Some critics' misconception of the Prioress's beauty and misinterpretation of it incidentally disclose modern readers' prejudices in the judgment of the Prioress's moral character: despite the medieval standards of beauty, the Prioress's broad forehead paradoxically becomes a symbol of audacity, and her 'nat undergrowe body' an indication of gluttony. This chapter will examine how Chaucer is influenced by the traditional descriptions of medieval romance

¹ See Robert W. Hanning, "From Eva and Ave to Eglentyne and Alisoun: Chaucer's Insight into the Roles Women Play", *Signs* 2.3 (1977): 580-99, at 587.

heroines and his contemporaries' imagination of religious women's sexuality when he glosses the Prioress to reveal Chaucer's patriarchal and chauvinistic attitudes towards his female counterparts. The discussion will also include how the poet's prejudices and modern critics' reinforce each other in the traditional studies of this religious lady, especially the criticism of the Prioress's beauty and French ability.

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There are only three female pilgrims whom Chaucer joins for the journey to Canterbury: the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, and the Second Nun. Since Chaucer does not give the Second Nun a portrait in the General Prologue, we know little about her, except for some clues from her tale. The ones left to be conveniently compared then are the Wife of Bath and the Prioress, Madame Eglentyne. These two female pilgrims are both distinguished ladies, as Robert W. Hanning calls them: 'two of the most memorable women in medieval literature' ('From Eva and Ave' 582). With the trend of feminism, readers may consider that the Wife has traditionally intrigued more critical interests than the Prioress. Yet surprisingly, the Prioress, who tells the shortest tale of all the Canterbury tales,² not only surpasses the Wife but stands out foremost among all the Canterbury pilgrims in kindling spirited discussions and extreme debates among scholars.³ Madame Eglentyne's 'ful symple and coy' (I. 119)⁴ smile outclasses the Wife of Bath's 'gat-tothe' 'laugh and carpe' (I. 468, 474); her fair forehead, 'almoost a

² The Prioress's tale has only 238 lines, 'the shortest of the completed *Canterbury Tales*', observed Maureen Hourigan (see 'Ther Was Also a Nonne, a Prioress', *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims in the "Canterbury Tales"*, eds. Laura C. Lambdin and Robert T. Lambdin [London: Greenwood, 1996], 38-46, at 39).

³ Florence H. Ridley remarks: 'The Prioress has attracted more critical commentary and controversy than almost any other character in the General Prologue' (see her explanatory notes to the Prioress's portrait in *Riverside Chaucer*, 803).

⁴ All quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by fragment and line numbers.

spanne brood' (I. 155), outshines the Wife's 'reed', 'boold' face; and even her beads of 'smal' coral (I. 158-9) outdo the Wife's large hat and weighty 'coverchiefs' (I. 453-4, 470-1).⁵ Critics have examined and debated what the details of the Prioress's Portrait denote and connote—her romantic name, her broad forehead, grey eyes, straight nose, red and soft lips, her elegant cloak, gold brooch, pet dogs, her tender heart, conscience, as well as the way she speaks French, the manner she drinks and reaches for meat (I. 118-62)—in short, almost every detail given by the poet has attracted enormous critical attention. Opinions are quite polarized. Hardy Long Frank defends Madame Eglentyne's character and profession with two widely cited articles. In 'Chaucer's Prioress and the Blessed Virgin',⁶ he discusses the Prioress from the view of the cult of the Virgin Mary, regarding Madame Eglentyne as the Virgin's 'handmaiden *par excellence* whose foibles and virtues reflected the Queen of Heaven whose *amor vincit omnia*' (346). Frank emphasizes that only by reading the Prioress 'thus' (i.e., from the view of Marian worship) can we 'make a significant connection between the Prioress and her tale' and 'appreciate in all its true richness the spirit of her characterization and of her tale' (Ibid. 346). Twelve years later, Frank stresses in another article, 'Seeing the Prioress Whole',⁷ that during the two decades (1970s to 1980s) critics who have tried to interpret the 'ambiguity' of the Prioress's portrait, either by courtly allusions, Marian allusions, Scriptural allusions, or ceremonial allusions, all failed to 'grasp that whole—the poet's full fledged characterization of a thoroughly competent, shrewd professional woman of the late fourteenth century' (229). Frank asserts that Madame Eglentyne, as the head of a relatively prosperous convent (with a household of probably thirty nuns),⁸ is 'an

⁵ A comparison of this pair is not what I intend to do in this chapter. But generally speaking, critics tend to discuss the overall image of the Wife of Bath's portrait and specific details of the Prioress's.

⁶ 'Chaucer's Prioress and the Blessed Virgin', *The Chaucer Review* 13.4 (1979): 346-62.

⁷ 'Seeing the Prioress Whole', *The Chaucer Review* 25.3 (1991): 229-37.

⁸ In a number of studies, the Prioress 'is associated with an actual Benedictine nunnery, St. Leonard's, adjoining *Stratford ate Bowe*, about two miles from London': the nunnery was 'not so aristocratic as Barking', but 'relatively prosperous, with thirty nuns in 1354 (including Elizabeth of Hainault, sister of Queen Philippa) and probably at least that many when Chaucer was writing'; Chaucer 'had gone there as

important and responsible official of the Church with a multitude of functions': she is probably

a mother superior charged with both the spiritual and the physical well being of the inhabitants of her convent; a constant and generous hostess to her fine neighbors and to the travelers—rich and poor—who frequently sought lodging at her door; quite probably the head mistress of the convent school for the children of the gentry; certainly a source of alms for the poor and balms for the ill; and eminent representative, spokesperson, and fund-raiser for her establishment (Ibid. 230).

In brief, the worldly nun 'whom we dismiss so airily was in fact an estate manager', not just some merely 'little lady' (Ibid. 230).⁹ Accepting the Prioress as a 'career woman'—not to mention a 'professional' one—seems difficult for many modern readers; from the way Chaucer mocks, he seems to have such difficulty, too.

While Hardy Long Frank's admiration of the Prioress's capacity and ability appears on one end of the critical balance, Richard Rex stands at the farthest opposition of it. Quite a few critics hold a harsh view of the Prioress,¹⁰ but none has discussed and condemned her sins so thoroughly with a whole book like Rex. In his "*The Sins of*

a boy when the Countess Ulster and her husband, Prince Lionel, visited the Prince's aunt' (see *Riverside Chaucer*, 803. See also David Wallace, 'Nuns', *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, eds. Brian Cummings and James Simpson [New York: Oxford University Press, 2010], 502-523, at 511). Wallace specifically points out that the priory was 'a house of middling prosperity that attracted the daughters of London guildsmen'; this statement explains why St. Leonard's was lacking 'the deeply rooted, royal pedigree of nearby Barking Abbey' and corresponds to the speculation of some critics that Madame Eglentyne is probably just a merchant's daughter, not of gentle or noble birth—a 'fact' that incurs much attack on the Prioress's painstaking simulation of the 'cheere of court' (I. 139-40).

⁹ Looking from this view, the Prioress's capability as an independent, resourceful individual is similar to that of the Wife of Bath. Both women, one takes over her husbands' business, and the other much of God's, worth more exploration as a pair; they also need modern readers' recognition as 'another type of women' (not as aberrant or deviant women) whose image is merely different from the more traditional image—domestic, docile, submissive—of medieval women. Namely—I suggest—they should be treated as 'one' of the types, not 'none' of the types.

¹⁰ Florence H. Ridley observes that 'many critics today take a much harsher view of the Prioress than did Robinson, Lowes, and Kittredge' (*Riverside Chaucer* 803). Hardy Long Frank also points out that 'by our own cultural prejudices to the reality of [the Prioress's] professional role', 'we have tended to judge her by a far more rigorous standard than her contemporaries would have applied' ('See the Prioress Whole' 235).

Madame Eglentyne” and *Other Essays on Chaucer*,¹¹ Rex approaches the Prioress’s ‘sins’ from various aspects, exploring in full length (nine chapters) and citing widely to persuade the reader that every detail of the Prioress’s portrait indicates an aspect of her evil character. Under Rex’s scrutiny, Madame Eglentyne is not just unerringly sinful; she is *the* incarnation of evil.

Besides the polarized arguments mentioned above, most readers tend to be mild—though still more critical than complimentary—in the examinations of the Prioress’s portrait. Critics generally recognize that there is something wrong about Madame Eglentyne; but it seems hard to determine whether she is innocent¹² or diabolic¹³, pious or romantic¹⁴, religious or sacrilegious¹⁵—the Prioress is, in a word, an ‘ambiguous’¹⁶ figure as many scholars have remarked. The primary cause for this

¹¹ “*The Sins of Madame Eglentyne*” and *Other Essays on Chaucer* (London: Associated University Press, 1995). Rex is perhaps the most hostile critic of the Prioress’s portrait.

¹² Hardy Long Frank, ‘The Prioress and the Blessed Virgin’, 355; Allen C. Koretsky, ‘Dangerous Innocence: Chaucer’s Prioress and Her Tale’, *Jewish Presences in English Literature*, eds. Derek Cohen and Deborah Heller (London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990), 10-24; and Lawrence Besserman, ‘Chaucerian Wordplay: The Nun’s Priest and his “Womman Divyne”’, *The Chaucer Review* 12.1 (1977): 668-73, at 71. However, by citing John Gardner’s comment on *The Prioress’s Tale* (*The Poetry of Chaucer* [Illinois University Press, 1977], 306), Koretsky emphasizes that ‘innocence doesn’t necessarily make virtue’ (Ibid. 24).

¹³ Most critics are certain that the Prioress is sinful in some ways, but quite reserved about just how sinful she is.

¹⁴ A large number of critics point out that the name ‘Eglentyne’ is more typical for romance heroines than for female religious, see for examples, Joel Fredell, ‘Late Gothic Portraiture: The Prioress and Philippa’, *The Chaucer Review* 23.3 (1989): 181-91, at 185; Muriel Bowden, *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 94; John Finlayson, ‘Chaucer’s Prioress and Amor Vincit Omnia’, *Studia Neophilologica* 60.2 (1988): 171-74, at 172; Joseph P. McGowan, ‘Chaucer’s Prioress: *Et Nos Cedamus Amori*’, *The Chaucer Review* 38.2 (2003): 199-202, at 200; Sheila Delany, ‘Chaucer’s Prioress, the Jews, and the Muslims’, *Medieval Encounters* 5.2 (1999): 198-213, at 198; Richard Rex, ‘Madame Eglentyne and the Bankside Brothels’, “*The Sins of Madame Eglentyne*” and *Other Essays on Chaucer*, 78-94, at 79; and Robert W. Hanning, 586. Both Fredell and Bowden refer to J. L. Lowes’s ‘Simple and Coy: A Note on Fourteenth Century Poetic Diction’, *Anglia* 32 (1910): 440-51. Of course, there are critics who hold different views. This point will be further explored later.

¹⁵ The argument is mainly over the motto on the Prioress’s brooch: *Amor vincit omnia* (‘Love conquers all’). The phrase is from Virgil’s tenth Eclogue, which originally concerned ‘profane’ love, not love celestial (see Muriel Bowden, 97; Joseph P. McGowan, 200; John Finlayson, 172; John B. Friedman, ‘The Prioress’s Beads “Of Smal Coral”’, *Medium Aevum* 39 [1970]: 301-5, at 301; Stephanie Gaynor, ‘He Says, She Says: Subjectivity and the Discourse of the Other in the Prioress’s Portrait and Tale’, *Medieval Encounters* 5.3 [1999]: 375-90, at 386).

¹⁶ See, for example, Edward I. Condren, ‘The Prioress: A Legend of Spirit, a Life of Flesh’, *The Chaucer Review* 23.3 (1989): 192-218, passim; William Orth, ‘The Problem of Performance in Chaucer’s Prioress Sequence,’ *The Chaucer Review* 42.2 (2007): 196-210, at 199; Marie Borroff, “‘Loves Hete” in the Prioress’s Prologue and Tale’, *The Olde Daunce: Love, Friendship, Sex, and Marriage in the Medieval World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 229-35, at 230; Karma Lochrie, ‘Far from

ambiguity is essentially that our poet's tone and attitude toward the Prioress are themselves ambiguous—namely, Chaucer's 'air of innocent admiration' is partly responsible for the haziness, and thus, as Helen Cooper puts it, 'what remains unsaid' of the Prioress's portrait is no less than what has been said.¹⁷ Critics have various doubts about the Prioress's portrait, her Prologue and Tale: for example, why 'would Chaucer choose an anti-Semitic tale';¹⁸ why is Madame Eglentyne 'nat undergrowe';¹⁹ why does Chaucer satirize the Prioress's provincial accent in speaking 'Frenssh';²⁰ why does Chaucer 'choose to portray a Prioress who conformed to a stereotype familiar from a well-defined and essentially satirical literary tradition';²¹ and so on and so forth. The list of questions is too long to be fully displayed here, but one question is never touched upon. That is—since most critics agree that the portrait of the Prioress is an ambiguous one—why does Chaucer make the portrait ambiguous? The Prioress is ambiguous because her creator's attitude toward her is ambiguous. So why is Chaucer ambiguous? Is he being ambiguous accidentally or intentionally? Chaucer is often considered a humanist,²² 'gentle' in mockery,²³ but is his ambiguity intended fairly? Might

Heaven: Nuns, Prioresses, and Lollard Anxieties', *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 47-70, at 60; John Finalyson, 173; Maureen Hourigan, 44; and Allen C. Koretsky, 10.

¹⁷ Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), at 38. Edward I. Condren puts the similar idea in a different phrase: 'it [is] easier to say what the Prioress and her tale are not, than what they are' (192).

¹⁸ Denise L. Despres, 'Cultic Anti-Judaism and Chaucer's "Litel Clergeon"', *Modern Philology* 91.4 (1994): 413-27, at 414.

¹⁹ Richard Rex, 'The Sins of Madame Eglentyne', 125.

²⁰ Charles Moorman, 'The Prioress as a Pearly Queen', *The Chaucer Review* 13.1 (1978): 25-33, at 30.

²¹ Carol M. Meale, 'Women's Piety and Women's Power: Chaucer's Prioress Reconsidered', *Essays on Ricardian Literature: In Honour of J. A. Burrow*, eds. A. J. Minnis, Charlotte C. Morse, and Thorlac Turville-Petre (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 39-60, at 51.

²² See John C. Hirsh, 'Christianity and the Church', *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Corinne Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 241-60, at 41; Daniel F. Pigg, 'Refiguring Martyrdom: Chaucer's Prioress and Her Tale', *The Chaucer Review* 29.1 (1994): 65-73, at 66; Allen C. Koretsky, 11; and Richard Rex, 129. However, Pigg questions the notion rather than confirm it: 'That its presence (i.e., anti-Semitism) at all calls into question the long-held conception of Chaucer as the consummate medieval humanist'.

²³ See for example, William Rothwell, 'Stratford ate Bowe and Paris,' *Modern Language Review* 80.1 (1985): 39-54, at 39; Anne Marie D'Arcy, "'Cursed Folk of Herodes Al New": Supersessionist Typology and Chaucer's Prioress', *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts*, ed. Elaine Treharne (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), 117-36, at 118; Carol M. Meale, 44; and Charles Moorman, 30. Contrarily, there are critics who believe that Chaucer's judgment of the

Chaucer's ambiguity indicate that he was actually not certain about what stance he should hold towards a nun like the Prioress? Madame Eglentyne is not just a religious, like the Friar, the Summoner, or the Pardoner, whom Chaucer forthrightly attacks in the texts; nor is she just a woman, like the Wife of Bath, whom the misogynistic tradition, of which Chaucer was inevitably a part,²⁴ endeavors to denigrate. The Prioress is a woman and a religious at the same time. Considering the ecclesiastical and social ambience in Chaucer's time, it seems quite impossible to condemn her simply as a religious without scrutinizing her sex and sexuality as a woman,²⁵ or vice versa.

It may be hard to believe that the father of English Literature would have had any difficulty in holding a distinct position toward his own creation. If we see how critics defend Chaucer by putting all the censure on the Prioress for the anti-Semitic element in her tale (some blame her as if she were a real personality and not a fictional character)²⁶ while praising the poet's originality in describing the litel clergeon's mother as the

Prioress is distinct and thus not at all gentle. Richard Rex points out: 'In this searing and highly moral portrait, Chaucer, with biting satire, exposes the Prioress for what she is, and there is nothing gentle or ambivalent about it' ('The Sins of Madame Eglentyne' 129). See also John Finlayson, 171; and Brian Abel Ragen, 'Chaucer, Jean de Meun, and Proverbs 30:20', *Notes and Queries* 35.3 (1988): 295-96.

²⁴ In the Wife of Bath's Prologue, Chaucer seemingly wants to defend the Wife against the traditional misogyny; but via the garrulous, blatant, and eloquent mouth of the late-middle-aged Alisoun, he only further corroborates the Wife as exactly the kind of woman the medieval clerks like to denounce in their texts; namely, Chaucer consciously criticizes the evil of the misogynistic tradition while unconsciously reveals that he is, after all, a part of the tradition, a member nurtured by it (see Sheila Delany, 'Difference and the Difference It Makes: Sex and Gender in Chaucer's Poetry', *Florilegium* 10 [1988-91]: 83-92).

²⁵ As David Wallace has observed: '...whereas the priestly corpus might supposedly exchange sexuality for depersonalized public functions, the body of the nun remains fully sexualized (in or out of the cloister)' ('Nuns' 503).

²⁶ Earlier critics (especially those between 1950s and 1970s—see Frank, 'Chaucer's Prioress and the Blessed Virgin', 355) discussed the anti-Semitism of the Prioress's tale as part of Chaucer's characterization of the Prioress; that is, it is the Prioress who is anti-Semitic, not Chaucer the general narrator. John C. Hirsh also remarks: 'it is unfortunate that in recent years [the Prioress's] whole character has been defined by her attitude towards Jews' ('Reopening the "Prioress's Tale"', *The Chaucer Review* 10.1 [1975]: 30-45, at 31). Carol M. Meale also observes that many modern readers 'have been reluctant to accept that Chaucer himself could have subscribed to the particular brand of religious and racial bigotry...' (39). Meale refers to Richard J. Schoek and Gloria Cigman as two examples for the expression of this view in her n. 2. See also Helen Cooper: 'One is reluctant to father such characteristic on Chaucer, and the Prioress, with her sentimentality over trapped mice and attention more to the manners of religion than to its substance, provides an obvious escape route...' (*Oxford Guides* 292). And Allen C. Koresky: '[T]he anti-Semitism of the Prioress' Tale... disturbs the cherished modern view of Chaucer as a genial, human author. Consequently, the anti-Semitism of the Tale has been either completely ignored,... or excused, explained, or palliated in a number of ways' (10-11).

‘newe Rachel’ (VII 627)²⁷—in brief, guilt goes to the Prioress and credit goes to the poet—we really need to be more careful about any presumption that Chaucer could have slipped in holding a definite stance toward the Prioress. Nevertheless, Chaucer was not only a poet, a philosopher; he was also a courtier and a diplomat. Being ambiguous and pleasant was logically part of his career and life;²⁸ besides, even though he had a lucid judgment according to his conscience or contemporary values, he did not need and perhaps did not want to make it too clear. What Chaucer’s ambiguity indicates is, therefore, not just his likely uncertainty about his own attitude toward the Prioress, but probably his tactic to avoid accusations from his audience. Still, as mentioned, Madame Eglentyne is not just a religious, but a female religious. Even if Chaucer is free from the accusation of being anti-Semitic, he cannot escape the accusation of putting an anti-Semitic tale—and a very cruel one—into the mouth of a female religious. So, is Chaucer misogynistic or anti-Semitic, or both? However careful (or ambiguous) he tries to be, he unwittingly shows prejudices via one of these two stances.

The ambiguity in the Prioress’s portrait mainly occurs between how the Prioress appears to be and how people (Chaucer, his contemporaries as well as modern critics) think a religious woman should be.²⁹ Opinions based on shoulds and should-nots cannot be righteous opinions, but merely prejudices. Approaching from these two opposite angles of shoulds and should-nots, this chapter will examine Chaucer’s

²⁷ Compared to its presumed source, the Prioress’s tale includes a number of original variations: ‘an infantilizing of the boy martyr..., a description of the Jews’ collective resentment of the little clergeon’s hymn, a dilation on the anxiety of the widow/mother and her pathetic appeal to the Jews, two narrative defamations of Jews, the Prioress’s praise for the child’s chastity, and finally the juxtaposition of the cruel hanging of the Jews and the child’s funeral ending in the mother’s swooning like a “newe Rachel” (See Karma Lochrie, 67). See also Carol M. Meale: ‘[Chaucer’s] depiction of the child’s mother, of the agony of her search for him, is deeply compassionate and more convincingly rendered than, for example, in the Vernon legend’ (57).

²⁸ Derek Brewer has a subtle and brow-raising observation: ‘Chaucer is writing for a courtly audience. He is a snob’ (‘The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature, Especially “Harley Lyrics,” Chaucer, and Some Elizabethans’, *Modern Language Review* 50.3 [1955]: 257-69, at 267).

²⁹ As Chauncey Wood typically puts it: ‘No single detail is necessarily satirical; yet each one seems not to be what we expect in the description of the nun’ (‘Chaucer’s Use of Signs in His Portrait of the Prioress’, in *Signs and Symbols in Chaucer’s Poetry*, eds. John P. Hermann and John J. Burke [University: University of Alabama Press, 1981], 81-101, at 87). See also n. 133 below.

ambiguity in portraying the Prioress and how the ambiguity is constructed by the author's prejudices. Further, as part of the ambiguity is caused by modern readers' miscomprehension and misinterpretation of certain medieval standards and values, such as the standards of beauty, the definitions of measurements, the concept of the 'female professional', and so on. Therefore, this chapter will also include examinations of modern critics' prejudices in the judgment of the Prioress, especially the arguments about the Prioress's name, her forehead, her 'size', and her provinciality.

I. A Rose in the Wild

Ther was also a Nonne, a Prioress,
That of hir smylyng was ful symple and coy;
Hire gretteste ooth was but by seinte Loy;
And she was cleped madame Eglentyne. (I. 118-21)

Speaking of the Prioress's portrait, the first concern is usually whether the portrait is modeled on romance heroines or conventioal images of female saints and pious ladies. Two points are traditionally controversial: the Prioress's name and title, 'Madame Eglentyne', and the sexual charm of her appearance. Many scholars observe that the name 'Eglentyne'—meaning 'sweetbrier' or 'wild rose'—is a typical name for medieval romance heroines rather than for a professed nun.³⁰ Joel Fredell notes that the Prioress's choosing 'her own new name when taking her vows' 'may reveal the Prioress's desire for a romance heroine's identity' (185). Fredell has a point, since the Prioress endeavors to imitate courtly manners ('peyned hire to countrefete cheere / Of court' [I. 139-40]): her self-chosen name, 'Eglentyne', a name with connotations of fragrance, purity, and natural beauty, thus appears consistent for a seeming social aspirant like her. It is also

³⁰ See n. 14.

presumed that upon entry to religion, the Prioress is supposed to choose a Christian name—and so, ‘we should expect a saint’s name, not “Madame Eglentyne”’, claimed Priscilla Martin.³¹ The Prioress’s ‘highly-charged romantic name’³² indeed runs against many modern readers’ expectations and her title ‘Madame’ is widely regarded as an exhibition of her pride and vanity.³³ What kind of name is appropriate for a female religious, and what title? Some critics seem indignant to find that the Prioress, though a religious and the head of an abbey, should deserve such a title, despite the fact that *Madame* or *Dame* was merely ‘the courtesy title always given to a nun’ in medieval times.³⁴ In fact, Chaucer only tells that the Prioress ‘was cleped Madame Eglentyne’ (I. 121); he never indicates in any way that the Prioress *wants to* or *likes to* or even *demands* that she be called by the title *Madame*. Indeed, if the Prioress *wants to* or *likes to* or even *demands* that she be called by the title *Madame*, the cynical narrator doubtlessly would not hesitate to point that out to enhance his mockery of this religious woman. Therefore, by introducing the Prioress to his audience as ‘Madame Eglentyne’, Chaucer was just adopting the common usage of how the female religious were generally called in his time. It is not inappropriate to call the Prioress Madame Eglentyne.

Compared to her title, the Prioress’s name ‘Eglentyne’ has drawn even more negative criticism. A Christian name, or better a saint’s name, seems more proper and acceptable to modern readers. ‘Eglentyne’ is too feminine, too fragrant, too tender, too

³¹ See ‘Two Misfits: the Nun and the Wife’, *Chaucer’s Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 30-9, at 33. J. L. Lowes was the first to point out ‘the exquisite incongruity of the nun’s self-chosen, unecclesiastical, flower-like name’ (referenced by Hardy Long Frank, ‘Chaucer’s Prioress and the Blessed Virgin’, 349).

³² Joseph A. Dane, ‘The Prioress and Her “Romanzen”’, *The Chaucer Review* 24.3 (1990): 219-22, at 219. Dane actually tries to overturn the tradition, started by J. L. Lowes, of recognizing Madame Eglentyne as a romance heroine.

³³ Richard Rex observes the Prioress’s vanity by referring to G. G. Coulton’s *Five Centuries of Religion*: ‘...“many nuns who have more vanity than piety,” who are indignant if you call them *Sister* instead of *Madame*’, and *The Morarche and Other Poems of Sir David Lyndesay*: ‘the seilye Nun [who] wyll thynk gret schame, / Without scho callit be Madame’ (see ‘The Sins of Madame Eglentyne’, 119-120).

³⁴ Eileen Power, ‘Madame Eglentyne, Chaucer’s Prioress in Real Life’, *Medieval People* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), 73-95, at 79.

pretty, too pure, and a little too free or wild in nature. Scholars often recognize that these characteristics are typically owned by medieval romance heroines. Actually, these characteristics are not just applied by romance writers to their female protagonists but also by hagiographers and medieval lyric poets to the Mother of God. Hardy Long Frank remarks that the eglantine was ‘like many another flower, a common symbol for the Virgin’ and further observes that ‘its blossom’s five petals were said to represent her Five Joys, to which St. Thomas a Becket and, through him, all of England were specially devoted’.³⁵ As praising Mary with the images of flowers (‘fresh rose, lily flower, blossom of eglantine’³⁶) has a much longer history than the creation of romance heroines, and as romantic knights traditionally extol their ladies by equating the admired ones’ qualities to those of Mary, it is more likely that the Prioress is named after the symbol of the Mother of God, a model to which Christian nuns aspire and are encouraged to emulate, rather than that of a romance heroine.³⁷ Besides, according to Henry Ansgar Kelly, ‘the custom of assuming a saint’s name on entry to religion is post-medieval’.³⁸ Hence, we may presume that though the Prioress has been called *Madame Eglentyne* since the time she took the veil at, probably, the age of fifteen,³⁹ she has been Eglentyne all her life—i.e., it is her given name, not a name she chooses for herself upon becoming a nun.⁴⁰ As far as the symbol of name is concerned, it would

³⁵ ‘Chaucer’s Prioress and the Blessed Virgin’, 349. See also Chauncey Wood, ‘Chaucer’s Use of Signs’, 82.

³⁶ ‘Chaucer’s Prioress and the Blessed Virgin’, 349.

³⁷ Henry Ansgar Kelly maintains that ‘there never was a custom of assuming names from romances upon becoming a nun’ (‘A Neo-Revisionist Look at Chaucer’s Nuns’, *The Chaucer Review* 31.2 [1996]: 115-32, at 118). Joseph A. Dane also observes: ‘The romantic fantasy is not [the Prioress’s] at all, but rather one of twentieth-century Chaucerians’ (‘The Prioress and Her Romanzen’ 219).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁹ Eileen Power explicates: ‘girls counted as grown up when they were fifteen in the Middle Ages; they could be married out of hand at twelve, and they could become nuns for ever at fourteen’. So Eglentyne supposedly ‘would have to remain a novice for some years (if she was sent to the nunnery at a very young age)... for girls often did not enter the convent until they were old enough (i.e. fifteen) to decide for themselves whether they wanted to be nuns’ (*Medieval People* 78).

⁴⁰ In most orders, a nun *receives* rather than *chooses* a Christian name upon taking the veil. The university where I teach was founded by Sisters of Providence whose foundress is Mother Theodore Guerin (1798-1856). Mother Theodore was born Anne-Therese; she was given the religious name Sr. St. Theodore when she professed her first vows. Modern scholars question the reason why the Prioress did

be more significant to ask why the poet gives a religious woman this name than calling her proud and vain because of having such a name.

What the name 'Eglentyne' reveals is actually not so much the indication of the name itself as how the narrator glosses the Prioress's person as a religious and a beautiful lady. This name is said to commonly exist in medieval romances and songs,⁴¹ and Chaucer is supposed to be familiar with it since he is well-read in contemporary works, local or foreign.⁴² Like the name Alisoun, which is suitable for country lasses and girls of middle-class birth in medieval times,⁴³ 'Eglentyne' seems a good choice for a young lady, of gentle birth, who enters the convent with an aspiration to imitate the Virgin Mary—tender, pure, and beautiful, just like the eglantine in the sight of worshippers. In short, 'Eglentyne' is a conventional and popular choice for a woman like the Prioress. Not only is Chaucer's choice of the Prioress's name influenced by contemporary works, his depiction of the Prioress's appearance—a broad forehead, a straight nose, gray eyes, and a small red mouth—apparently also follows the conventional formulaic descriptions of ladies in popular texts.⁴⁴ Chaucer's application of the formula, however, does not create for the Prioress an image a female religious

not choose a saint's name, yet actually she may only receive rather than choose her new name—if 'Eglentyne' is a new name. Besides, if 'Eglentyne' is inappropriate because it is romantic, then a male saint's name (e.g., St. Theodore) should be considered more inappropriate for a nun (in some orders it is a tradition to give a nun a male saint's name).

⁴¹ Joseph A. Dane points out: 'Lowes noted that the name "Eglentyne" is a variant of names found in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century French poems edited by Bartsch under the title *Romanzen und Pastourelen*'. Dane argues that '[n]one of these songs is what we would call a romance, although they are sung by characters in a romance' ('The Prioress and her "Romanzen"' 219). Though Dane does not agree with the point that the name Eglentyne is commonly a romance heroine's name, he does not deny that it appears often in romance. Dane has not specified any literary works in which the name Eglentyne or variants of it appears; but Muriel Bowden provides two literary examples which she thinks the fourteenth century audience would be familiar with: 'Se sist bele Eglentine (Raynaud's *Recueil de motets*) and the romance of 'Bele aiglentine et le quens Henris' (see *A Commentary on the General Prologue*, 94).

⁴² It is believed that a portion of *Roman de la Rose*, a medieval French poem, was translated by Chaucer.

⁴³ Alisoun is a popular name in the Middle Ages; Chaucer seems to like it quite much. The Wife of Bath is called Alisoun, so is her 'gossib' to whom she tells all her secrets (III. 529-531), so is the old carpenter's young wife in the 'Miller's Tale'. The heroines of several Middle English texts also have the same name, for example, the well-known lyric 'Alison'.

⁴⁴ As Thomas B. Clark observes: 'Chaucer's description of the Prioress might have in every detail come from any fourteenth-century lover's description of his mistress' (see 'Forehead of Chaucer's Prioress', *Philological Quarterly* 9 [1930]: 312-4, at 314).

should have ‘in the sight of worshippers’, but produce an ambiguous and incongruous combination of piety and sensuality. Chaucer’s portraiture of the Prioress thus reveals his singular ‘glossing’ of the female religious in his time.

Many critics have observed that in the portrait of Madame Eglentyne Chaucer displays both the Prioress’s sex and sexuality.⁴⁵ Considering the poet’s particular interests in the female/effeminate body,⁴⁶ his glossing of the Prioress’s person indeed reveals certain erotic indications: his eyes, like the modern X-ray, not only scrutinize every inch of the Prioress’s ‘nunly body’,⁴⁷ but probe into the innermost part of it (her desire, conscience, and tender heart), and there inspect her feminine power and potential as a woman rather than a religious. Jill Mann, in tracing the source of Chaucer’s Prioress, quotes a profane passage from Nigel of Longchamps:

Beneath black veils they all conceal their heads,

Beneath black skirts they hide their lovely legs.⁴⁸

Similar to Nigel of Longchamps, Chaucer also combines a pious image with eroticism to manifest the sexual attraction/potential of the female religious. In his portrait of the Prioress, the narrator has not imagined the Prioress’s ‘lovely legs’, but he definitely has stared at her ‘brest’ (upon which no morsel ‘drope ne fille’, GP 130-1), measured her size and shape (her forehead is ‘almoost a spanne brood’, and her stature ‘nat

⁴⁵ See Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), at 130-1; and Timothy D. O’Brien, ‘Seductive Violence and Three Chaucerian Women’, *College Literature* 28.2 (2001): 178-96, at 192.

⁴⁶ See discussions in Chapter 1, section 3, ‘Alisoun’s Punishment’.

⁴⁷ David Wallace, ‘Nuns’, 503.

⁴⁸ Nigel de Longchamps was an English satirist and poet of the late twelfth century. The lines quoted above are from his *Speculum Stultorum* (*A Mirror of Fools*) (see *Estates Satire*, 131 and n. 25). The poem was very popular for centuries, and under the title ‘Daun Burnel the Asse’, it is quoted by Chaucer in the ‘Nun’s Priest’s Tale’ (l. 15328).

undergrowe' (GP 153-5),⁴⁹ and fantasized about her 'smal mouth' ('softe and reed', GP 153;⁵⁰ it seems the narrator not only sees it but—for 'a moment of quite inappropriate fantasy!' as Priscilla Martin exclaims⁵¹—tastes it). In a word, though pretending a nonchalant look, the pilgrim Chaucer actually pores over the Prioress from head to toe with sharp observant eyes. If the Prioress is as sensible as she is 'sensitive',⁵² she would no doubt feel that fellow pilgrim's relentless scrutiny. Stephanie Gaynor also points out that the depiction of the Prioress's eating habits 'may best illustrate [the narrator's] fascination of her physicality', and the pilgrim Chaucer's 'dogged attentiveness' creates 'perhaps the most powerfully satiric, potentially disgusting, and hilarious moment in the portrait' ('He Says, She Says' 385-6). Indeed, though Chaucer did not expose the Prioress's 'carnality' or rip off her 'fetys cloke' (GP 157), as he grossly did to the other female bodies in the *Tales* (the old and young Alisouns, for example), he has in effect, judging from our modern views, sexually harassed the Prioress with his discourteous

⁴⁹ Many scholars interpret 'nat undergrowe' as a measurement of size rather than of height. For example, Helen Cooper argues that this phrase cannot mean 'well-proportioned' and claims that '[t]he Prioress is a large woman' (*Oxford Guides* 38). Chauncey Wood elucidates that 'Chaucer meant us to think of the Prioress as corpulent' ('Chaucer's Use of Signs' 96). Gordon H. Harper, in 'Chaucer's Big Prioress' (*Philological Quarterly* 12 [1933]: 308-10), states that Chaucer gives the Prioress 'unusually large physical proportions', and that 'she was fat in fact' (308). Richard Rex maintains that the Prioress is 'simply fat', and her obesity is 'a sign of her gluttony' ('The Sins of Madame Eglentyne' 125). These scholars are probably influenced by the archetypal caricature in modern cartoons or comic books which usually depict nuns and godmothers as fat ladies, or conceive through mere imagination, as Thomas J. Farrell remarks: 'It is clear that readers have rather freely imagined "nat undergrowe" in terms that suit their own fancies' ('The Prioress's Fair Forehead', *The Chaucer Review* 42.2 [2007]: 211-21, at 218). No matter which, a short, obese romance heroine or Virgin Mary is an absurd image. In my opinion, 'nat undergrowe' indicates height rather than size; namely, the Prioress is a tall lady. Chaucer gives the Prioress a good stature to match her beautiful features (grey eyes, straight nose, fair forehead, and red soft lips—the characteristics of ideal beauty in Chaucer's time), and by that completes the graceful image of his nun—whether modeled after the image of romance heroines or that of the Virgin Mary. Derek Brewer also maintains that heroines are usually tall (e.g., Helen, Emilia, Criseyde), as short stature is an 'unthinkable quality for the aristocratic medieval heroine' ('The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature' 264-5).

⁵⁰ Poleman and Adamantius agree that 'a small mouth means effeminacy'. In medieval physiognomy (according to Walter C. Curry [*Chaucer and Medieval Sciences*, New York, 1927]), beautiful lips are said to be 'sweet, gracious, small and laughing, soft and pleasant to kiss, and in color red or ruddy' (Thomas Blake Clark 314). Derek Brewer also observes that 'small mouth' is the 'usual type' of an ideal beauty in the Middle Ages ('The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature', 259).

⁵¹ Priscilla Martin, 'Two Misfits', 33.

⁵² The Prioress shows strong feelings toward small animals: 'She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous / Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde... / Of smale houndes hadde she... / But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed, / Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte; / And al was conscience and tendre herte' (GP 144-150).

gaze.

Chaucer's incongruous portraiture of Madame Eglentyne (adding eroticism to a pious image) reflects not only the influence of popular literature but also that of contemporary prejudices against the female religious. In her exploration of Lollard anxieties on chaste women,⁵³ Karma Lochrie quotes a passage from the Eleventh Conclusion:

The eleventh conclusion is shameful to speak of, that a vow of continence made in our church by women, who are fickle and imperfect by nature, is the cause of bringing the most horrible sin possible to mankind. For although the slaying of children before they are christened, abortion, and contraception by medicine are very sinful, yet having sex with themselves or an irrational beast or with a creature bearing no life surpasses those sins in worthiness to be punished by the pains of hell. (*Heterosyncrasies* 48-9)

What the Eleventh Conclusion pleads against is female celibacy imposed by the Church, but the causes (shameful to speak of) the author of it pleads consciously enhance what medieval people have imagined of nuns and their perverse sexualities. Chaucer must have read or heard of the Eleventh Conclusion,⁵⁴ since his imagination of the Prioress's sensual 'physicality' obviously displays the influence of it—and in turn, paradoxically, reinforces its influence.

Critics point out that Chaucer's willful glossing may also indicate medieval male's anxiety about 'the phenomenon of the independent single woman',⁵⁵ or specifically, the

⁵³ In 1395, when Parliament was in session, an anonymous list of Twelve Conclusions appeared on the doors of Westminster Hall; this anonymous document condensed the Lollard critique of the medieval church (*Heterosyncrasies* 47). Lochrie's discussion, however, focuses on the contents of the Eleventh Conclusion which 'addresses women's vows of chastity for the multitude perversions the monastic life for women entails' (48).

⁵⁴ Chaucer is known to be familiar with Lollardy and might even have associated with the Lollards (see Alcuin Blamires, 'The Wife of Bath and Lollardy', *Medium Aevum* 58 [1989]: 224-42).

⁵⁵ Karma Lochrie expounds: 'Female chastity in late medieval Europe was already charged, but anxiety about the phenomenon of the independent single woman was new. It is no coincidence that the issue of female celibacy arises at a time when single women represented almost one third of the population of adult women in England' (*Heterosyncrasies* 49).

single career/professional woman. It is also observed that the tale of the 'littel clergeon' in a way discloses the Prioress's suppressed,⁵⁶ frustrated,⁵⁷ and even wasted sexual potential and maternal desire. Hence, by putting this anti-Semitic tale into the mouth of the sexually attractive Prioress, Chaucer not only reveals his mistrust or disbelief of this religious lady's sensibility and resourcefulness as a professional woman, but also reflects his contemporaries' biased concept of the female professionals. To some critics, the Prioress's insensibility to the cruel bloodshed and prejudiced racism of her own tale even manifests a syndrome of religious women's 'perversions'.⁵⁸ When it comes to the judgment of the female religious, people always tend to emphasize their sexuality and perversity rather than their physical abstinence and spiritual aspiration. Chaucer is no exception. His glossing of Madame Eglentyne thus fails to justify his name as a known humanist: depicting the Prioress by the conventional descriptions of beauties and sexual insinuations of nuns, Chaucer has not just intentionally ignored the Prioress's social standing, function, and ability which Hardy Long Frank has observed, but only enhanced his contemporaries' prejudices against the female religious in general. The influential power of prejudice is far and wide. The discussion in next section will show how modern critics are affected by Chaucer's prejudices in the judgment and interpretation of the Prioress's physical characteristics, especially her forehead and her 'size'.

II. Beauty and Piety

Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas,

⁵⁶ John Finlayson, 173.

⁵⁷ Edward I. Condren, 194; Colin Wilcockson, 'A Note on Chaucer's Prioress and Her Literary Kinship with the Wife of Bath', *Medium Aevum* 61 (1992): 92-96, at 94.

⁵⁸ William Orth remarks that the Prioress's 'symple and coy' smile, indicating an 'affecting reserve', is a performance of perversity ('The Problem of Performance' 199). The Prioress's other perversions accused by critics include idolatry, excessive materiality in devotion, and gluttony.

Hir mouth ful smal, and therto softe and reed.
 But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;
 It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe. (152-5)

Besides a red small mouth, another extraordinary attraction of Madame Eglentyne is her fair forehead. Many wonder at its breadth and what that breadth really signifies. Chaucer tells us that the Prioress's forehead is white and almost 'a spanne brood'. The usual definition of a 'span' was seven to nine inches⁵⁹—the distance from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the little finger when the hand is fully extended,⁶⁰ or 'the whole length of the hand from the wrist to the finger-tips'.⁶¹ This breadth seems over large in some critics' opinion. Helen Cooper remarks: 'A wide forehead is an attribute of beauty, but eight inches is too much'. Judging from the phrase 'nat undergrowe'—'a litotes, like Rome being no mean city or death no small thing'—Cooper concludes that the Prioress is a *large* woman (*Oxford Guides* 38). Namely, unless the breadth of the Prioress's forehead is out of normal proportion to her stature, Madame Eglentyne cannot be a slender woman. To Richard Rex, the Prioress's wide forehead not only implies her having an obese figure (caused by her gluttonous diet) but also indicates her pride and hypocrisy:

...it seems likely that Chaucer intended the Prioress's size to suggest sensuality and gluttony, just as her prominent forehead suggests hypocrisy and pride.⁶²

Rex also proposes a 'plausible explanation' which he observes abundant in 'biblical and moral significance': Madame Eglentyne's 'unusually large forehead' is 'the harlot's

⁵⁹ See Colin Wilcockson, 95; Helen Cooper (*Oxford Guides*), 38; and Joel Fredell, 184.

⁶⁰ See Joel Farrell, 212.

⁶¹ S. T. Knight, 'Almoost a Spanne Brood', *Neophilologus* 52 (1968): 178-80, at 179.

⁶² 'The Sins of Madame Eglentyne', 126.

eyebrow—which at Jer. 3:3 is a figure for the hypocrisy of unrepentant sinners: “The forhed of a strumpet womman is maad to thee; thou woldest not shamen” (“The Sins of Madame Eglentyne’ 124). It is interesting to note that, though the medieval poet only hints at the Prioress’s dubious sexuality with her fair forehead, the modern critic assures us that she, having a broad brow, must be corpulent and sexually promiscuous.

Although both Cooper and Rex⁶³ accept that a broad forehead is a standard of feminine beauty in the Middle Ages, they doubt that Chaucer sincerely wants to describe the Prioress as a beauty. Thomas J. Farrell argues that Madame Eglentyne’s fair forehead ‘offers no meaningful foothold for objecting to her’, and ‘readers are overreacting when they criticize the Prioress on the basis of its “spanne”’.⁶⁴ I agree with Farrell more, but my opinion is simpler: unless the innocent pilgrim Chaucer is being foolish, a fat, and therefore ridged, forehead cannot appear ‘fair’ in any audience’s eye (medieval or modern). And Chaucer the author, ‘by no means discontented with the rhetorical tradition’ according to Derek Brewer’s comparison of him with his forerunners and contemporaries (264), could not have sacrificed his art just for the sake of being comic or satiric. Actually, a person’s forehead appears not so large if his/her cheeks are plump; this is a matter of visual effect and proportion. In his study of Gothic portraiture and Queen Philippa’s sculptural portrait,⁶⁵ Joel Fredell notes: ““broad” signifies the proportions typical of high Gothic female faces....: as if the face were an egg standing on its narrow point, with the forehead being the widest breadth in the ovoid form... High gothic sculptural conventions dictated an ideal feminine forehead to

⁶³ See also Chauncey Wood and Gordon H. Harper.

⁶⁴ Thomas J. Farrell, ‘The Prioress’s Fair Forehead’, *The Chaucer Review* 42.2 (2007): 211-21, at 218.

⁶⁵ Philippa of Hainault (1314-69), Queen consort of King Edward III of England. Her funerary portrait was carved by Jean de Liege in c. 1367. The effigy, in addition to broad forehead, straight nose, and small mouth, has ‘a voluminous triple chin’, plump drooping cheeks, and a prominent abdomen. Joel Fredell observes that Philippa’s portrait shows the ‘type’ of beauty (including the triple chin, plump cheeks, and large abdomen) in that age (182). However, the corpulent parts of the portrait may only be a truthful reflection of the aged queen, for Philippa’s other portraits (her younger images) do not show these signs of ‘obesity’.

be broad in proportion to the rest of the face' (184). Indeed, whether one's forehead is large or not is not an absolute measurement but a comparative one. If the Prioress is a fat lady, her plump and flabby cheeks would only make her forehead appear smaller and narrower. Or to put it another way, the Prioress's face is rather thin—or to use a litotes, not fat at all as most critics have thought, and that condition, plus the phrase 'nat undergrowe', make the Prioress a tall and slender lady.⁶⁶

The ambiguity created by the breadth of the Prioress's forehead is not just caused by modern critics' negligence of proportions, but also by the varied definitions of the word 'span'. Some ancient measurements appear quite inexact, such as foot, cubit, and span. The measurement foot is originated from the length of a human foot—despite the different sizes of human feet. Cubit is the distance from elbow to the tip of the middle finger—again the length would vary accordingly (eighteen to twenty-two inches). But the definition of span is perhaps the most diverse of the three. For example, Thomas J. Farrell has discovered more than ten different definitions of measurements all called by the word 'span', and one of which is: 'four fingers equal a span' ('The Prioress's Fair Forehead' 215-6). Even a span indicates 'measure of the hand' (the texts in which the word is found cover the period from 1000 to 1483), the hand could be measured in 'either its longitude or its latitude' (Ibid. 214). Furthermore, how to read Chaucer's 'spanne' adds variables to the definitions. Most scholars interpret 'almoost a spanne brood' as the distance from temple to temple. S. T. Knight, however, proposes a different reading of the phrase. By referring to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which says a span is 'a measure of length, equivalent ... to the breadth of the hand..., i.e. about three to four inches',⁶⁷ Knight suggests that Chaucer's 'spanne' may indicate the

⁶⁶ William Rothwell also agrees that Chaucer gives the Prioress a 'well-developed', 'pleasing physique' ('Stratford atte Bowe Re-Visited' 186).

⁶⁷ See 'Almoost a Spanne Brood', 179.

height (not the traditional width) of the Prioress's forehead.⁶⁸ A forehead of three to four inches high is still very large—unless the Prioress's hair-line is plucked back.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, I find that if we read S. T. Knight's suggestion of height with Thomas J. Farrell's definition of 'four fingers', the Prioress's forehead then is large, but not too large or unusually large. Certainly, the techniques of measurement also count. Farrell points out that 'an average contemporary woman's head, measured at its widest point, is ... 5.67 inches broad... Even a measurement along the arc of the forehead... would barely reach six inches...' ('The Prioress's Fair Forehead' 212). Namely, measuring by calipers (point to point) and by linear measurement (across the curve space) cause different results. If the Prioress, looked at from the front view, appears to have an eight-inch wide forehead, she would indeed look 'grotesque' (to borrow Farrell's word); but if that eight inches means the linear measurement from temple to temple, or the linear measurement of the forehead is about the length of a palm,⁷⁰ then Madame Eglentyne's forehead just has a good size and is not at all 'too much' as some critics have thought.⁷¹

When the pilgrim Chaucer exclaimed 'It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe', he was merely showing his wonderment at the Prioress's white, smooth, broad, beautiful forehead, and the tag 'I trowe' indicates that he had just used a hyperbole. Actually, imagining the Prioress's forehead to be over-large only spoils the linguistic congruity and narrative unity of our poet's depiction of the Prioress's faultless features. And

⁶⁸ Eileen Power has the same opinion: 'high foreheads happened to be fashionable among worldly ladies, who even shaved theirs to make them higher...' (*Medieval People* 89).

⁶⁹ S. T. Knight notes that 'many Madonnas, many portraits of beautiful ladies who show the high forehead, who even show a forehead which looks curiously bulbous because the hair-line has been plucked back' (179). However, similar to Helen Cooper, Richard Rex, and many other critics, Knight likewise regards the Prioress's high forehead as an appropriate correspondence to her 'considerable size' (179).

⁷⁰ *The Oxford English Dictionary* shows that the word 'span' is 'constantly glossed in the Middle English Period as *palmus*', which means 'a hand-span in our modern sense' (S. T. Knight 179).

⁷¹ Perhaps oriental people's heads are larger (and faces flatter), a forehead of eight inches is merely a good size to the proportion of their faces. I did an investigation in a class of about sixty students, and only twenty-three of them have foreheads slightly smaller than 20 cm. (about 7.87 inches).

Chaucer certainly needs not sacrifice his poetic renown for an inconsistent satire. Despite his intentional glossing, Chaucer has no doubt created an impeccable appearance rather than an ugly one for this religious lady—which could be proved by the following line that describes the Prioress's tall and slender body. After his wonderment at the Prioress's beautiful forehead, the narrator's imagination moves from her face to her 'nat undergrowe' figure, and after that to her gold brooch on which there was a crowned capital 'A' followed by a motto *Amor vincit omnia*. Evidently, Chaucer was being unfair to Madame Eglentyne: he describes her as a traditional courtly beauty but gives her a status as a religious, and then, combining these two, doubts her religiosity and fantasizes about her sexuality, as the last phrase 'Love conquers all' so obviously and paradoxically implies.

In fact, modern critics are not so much displeased by the Prioress's large forehead as *why* she exposes that 'expanse of skin'. Most scholars, either referring to the Middle English *Ancrene Wisse* or the Benedictine Rule, stress that a nun's wimple should cover her whole forehead. For example, in her *Medieval People*, Eileen Power states: 'The nuns were supposed to wear their veils pinned tightly down to their eyebrows, so that their foreheads were completely hidden... If [the Prioress] had been wearing her veil properly, [her forehead] would have been invisible' (89). In Power's opinion, that the Prioress 'could not resist lifting up and spreading out' her veil indicates her worldly character: namely, Madame Eglentyne happened to be blessed with a 'fair forehead' and she could not help exposing it because high foreheads were 'fashionable' in that age (Ibid. 89). Similarly, S. T. Knight, referring to Muriel Bowden, specifies that the Prioress's wimple should at least cover her forehead 'in company', and recognizing the 'sharply ironical point' made by the poet, observes the Prioress's problem more directly: '[The Prioress's] wimple is improperly high, and further, it is improperly high for the sake of a totally worldly fashion' ('Almoost a Spanne Brood' 179). Richard Rex's

opinion is again severer than the others'. He maintains that the fact that Madame Eglentyne 'does not cover her forehead' should be interpreted 'in a metaphorical or biblical rather than a literal sense': that is, by exposing the Prioress's 'fair forehead', Chaucer aims to describe 'the sinful state of nuns who have forsaken devotion for hypocrisy and pride' ('The Sins of Madame Eglentyne' 125).

Besides why, *how* the Prioress displays her forehead is also closely scrutinized by modern critics. Chaucer tells us: 'Ful semyly hir wymple pynched was' (GP 151), which means that the Prioress's wimple ('a head dress that covers all but the face'⁷²) is 'properly pleated'⁷³. It is interesting to note how the Prioress, from modern critics' point of view, pleats her wimple properly in order to expose her forehead improperly. On the well-pleated wimple, Jill Mann remarks: 'The author of the Middle English *Ancrene Wisse* warns religious women against rings, brooches, girdles, gloves, and attention to their wimples. Pleating or "ipinchunge" of the wimple is specifically disapproved of' (*Estates Satire* 130). Recognizing 'pynched' as 'pleated', Chaucer's Prioress, Mann points out, 'with an elaborate manner of dress ill-fitted to [her] professions of humility', fits easily into the tradition of estates satire (Ibid.). Mann's discovery proves further how Chaucer was affected by his contemporaries and the tradition of his age in depicting a female religious. Critics also tend to regard Madame Eglentyne's pleated wimple as a manifestation of her vainglorious character. For example, Rex observes that 'a pleated, or "semeliche", wimple was considered a sign of vanity', and, alluding to the *Book to a Mother*⁷⁴ stresses: '... religious were not expected to emulate secular fashions... if pleated garments were indicative of vanity when worn by secular persons, the pleated wimple of a nun was a veritable badge of her continued devotion to the

⁷² See note on page 25, *Riverside Chaucer*.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ I am not able to find this book. According to Richard Rex, *Book to a Mother* was a late fourteenth-century devotional treatise, written by 'an unknown priest to instruct his mother (about to become a nun) and other lay people on the reasons for conventual life' ('The Sins of Madame Eglentyne' 117).

world's vanities' ('The Sins of Madame Eglentyne' 118).

Before discussing the dubious ideas caused by referring to treatises such as *Ancrene Wisse* or *Book to a Mother*, I would like to examine first the style of wimples and ways of wearing wimples in relation to the wearer's character. Nowadays, most nuns do not wear wimples; for those who still do, the style of it has become very simple: it only covers the hair, but not the whole forehead and usually not the ears (nuns also need to work; they need to hear well). Medieval nuns wear medieval habits; modern nuns wear modern clothes—that is a plain logic.⁷⁵ We must note that Madame Eglentyne does not wear a wimple because she is a nun; the Wife of Bath also wears a wimple ('Ywympled wel', GP 470). Wimples were merely part of medieval women's customary outfit.⁷⁶ In fact, the most important function of a wimple is not to distinguish a female religious from a lay woman, but to keep the head, the neck, and the chin warm. If the illustration on the front cover of Helen Cooper's *Oxford Guides* is reliable,⁷⁷ women were not the only sex that wore 'wimples' in the Middle Ages. At least two figures (obviously male)⁷⁸ in the cover picture of Jill Mann's *Estates Satire*⁷⁹ wear a head dress which looks similar to what the figure wears on the other book—to keep warm, surely, since pilgrimages usually start in April and England is still very cold in

⁷⁵ My statement is not based on any academic reference. It is an understanding from my close association with Catholic sisters since college days (I attended a Catholic university as a student and have been working in another Catholic university as a teacher). The style of religious wimple also alters in accordance with weathers and regions: e.g., Catholic sisters in the Philippines do not wear heavy veils or high collars because of the tropical weather.

⁷⁶ Numerous paintings, drawings, miniatures, and illustrations from the Middle Ages depict women of different estates wearing wimples both indoors and outdoors. In Franco Zeffirelli's movie *Romeo & Juliet*, Juliet's nurse (a widow) at all occasions wears a wimple and a veil exactly like a nun's, which shows that what we think nowadays as a Catholic sister's headdress is actually a customary outfit for medieval women.

⁷⁷ The words on the back cover indicate that it is 'a woodcut of the Wife of Bath'; but since a long rosary hangs from the right hand of the figure and the figure's facial expression is 'ful symple and coy', I judge that the character presented in the woodcut is the Prioress, not the Wife of Bath (besides, Chaucer never mentions anything hanging from the Wife's hand).

⁷⁸ See also the illustration on the cover page of Eileen Power's *Medieval People*: the head dress of the man is little different from that of a nun's.

⁷⁹ The picture, taken from Lydgate's *Troy Book* in the British Museum, depicts 'a group of fifteenth-century pilgrims'.

that month.⁸⁰ Critics dislike the way Madame Eglentyne's wimple was 'semyly pynched'—which is because most of them construe 'semyly pynched' as prettily pleated. However, 'pynched' does not necessarily mean *pleated*, though it is glossed so in the *Riverside Chaucer* (also widely accepted by scholars), and 'semyly' (meaning 'properly') does not much indicate *prettily* or *nicely*⁸¹—although when a wimple is properly pinned, it may look nice or even pretty. The phrase 'semyly pynched' should more appropriately mean 'tightly or properly pinned' (i.e. pinched tightly/properly by pins).⁸² If a lady does not want her wimple to fall loose or be blown apart by cold winds when riding abroad in company, her wimple certainly should better be 'pinched properly'. The Wife of Bath is also 'ywympled wel'; as this line follows closely the line 'upon an amblere esily she sat', it clearly indicates that the Wife also wears her wimple properly⁸³ so that it does not get loose or fall open during riding. In short, when Chaucer states 'ful semlyly hir wymple pynched was', he is emphasizing that the Prioress is an extremely neat and orderly person rather than implying that she is vain and trying to emulate the worldly fashions.⁸⁴ This reading is closer to facts if we perceive the placement of this line. It is between the description of the Prioress's 'conscience and tender herte' and that of her perfect features. Seen from this perspective,

⁸⁰ The average temperature in London in the springtime nowadays is from 4 °C. to 10 °C.

⁸¹ Chauncey Wood maintains that 'semyly pynched' suggests the 'seemliness or nicety of its pleating' ('The Use of Signs' 151). Richard Rex also indicates that the pleating of clothing is 'after the fashion of secular women' ('The Sins of Madame Eglentyne' 118).

⁸² The lady in the painting titled *A Woman* by Robert Campin (c. 1375-1444) wears a typical medieval wimple on which two pins are clearly visible. The functions of the pins are obviously to hold the several thicknesses of cloth together—hence, the woman's wimple is, so to speak, 'semyly pynched' (tightly and properly pinched) by the pins.

⁸³ The *Riverside* glosses 'ywympled wel' as 'wearing a *large* wimple' (see note 470, p. 31; italic mine). 'Well' is usually the adverb of 'good' or 'fine', but hardly of 'big' or 'large'. Interpreting 'well' as 'large' is apparently influenced by Chaucer's following depiction of the Wife's broad, shield-like hat: 'on hir heed an hat / As brood as is a bokeler or a targe' (GP 470-1). From this line, the wimple is obviously not the outmost headgear for medieval people as the cover picture of *Estates Satire* also shows). At any rate, it is hard to imagine the Wife wearing a huge hat over a large wimple—that clumsy image only marks down Alisoun's taste in fashion and her estheticism as a successful cloth-maker.

⁸⁴ William Rothwell also stresses that 'semyly' cannot possibly be used as a 'debased form of language'; hence, 'ful semlyly hir wymple pynched was' should be seen as complimentary rather than ironic ('Stratford atte Bowe Re-Visited' 187).

Madame Eglentyne's meticulousness⁸⁵ in pinching her wimple properly not only echoes her conscientious emotionality in the previous lines but also naturally leads forward to the description of her exact, flawless features in the following lines. If the line was mainly for indicating the Prioress's vanity, as many critics have argued, it not only is misplaced but interrupts the linguistic congruity of the passage (lines 148-54).

The Prioress is not vainglorious; she is just over-trained by her profession. Her fastidious behavior is obviously part of the elements that have enhanced our narrator's fancy of a religious woman's sexual propensity, like her faultless features and 'nat undergrowe' figure discussed earlier—what a waste that such a handsome and demure lady has become/been a nun! Enclosed and intangible, but she must have some innate desires and sexual potentials—like those of any normal women (The merchant's wife in the 'Shipman's Tale', the Miller's Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, the Merchant's May, even the Knight's Emelye—which woman is not, in the male narrator's eye?)—to be explored and released into the public! Going on pilgrimages is one of the poet's imagination of her desires to see the world; displaying her inborn beauty and contrived education to the motley public is another (to see and to be seen,⁸⁶ as the Wife of Bath declares). As already mentioned, critics have expressed much displeasure at seeing the Prioress's broad forehead: the largeness of it and the way it is showed off. But in fact, no matter how much the Prioress tries to expose herself to the world outside the convent, her forehead, in my opinion, is not unduly revealed, nor does she need to reveal all of it—her wimple 'improperly high', as S. T. Knight stresses⁸⁷—to let her observers perceive that she has a good forehead. Most scholars accept that, according to the Benedictine Rule or the guidance in *Ancrene Wisse*, nuns should pin their wimples

⁸⁵ Rothwell's 'Chaucer's meticulous portrayal of Madame Eglentyne' indicates that the meticulousness is rather on the poet's part (Ibid. 185).

⁸⁶ Alisoun of Bath is also described as a woman with such desire: 'And for to se, and eek for to be seye / Of lusty folk' (III. 552-3). To Chaucer, this is women's principal desire, whether she be religious or lay.

⁸⁷ See 'Almoost a Spanne Brood', 179.

‘down to their eyebrows’. Quite a few portraits from the Middle Ages, however, show that the rule might just be taken as suggested guidelines rather than moral decrees. The painting *Saint Veronica with the Sudarium* (ca. 1420)⁸⁸ presents St. Veronica with a fully exposed forehead and the inner cloth of her wimple ‘well pleated’ and pinched by a pin under her chin. St. Veronica’s face looks pious and solemn; her high forehead does not at all suggest the boldness of ‘the harlot’s brow’ as Richard Rex accuses Madame Eglentyne of. Several more examples can be seen in Eileen Power’s book *Medieval Women*. Number 40 of the illustrations depicts ten nuns in the choir; all of their foreheads are ‘brood’ and well visible.⁸⁹ Another one in the same book (no. 41), *Nunnery Officials*, presents, in the bottom row, eight nuns walking and singing in procession:⁹⁰ at least five of them have high and wide foreheads ‘almost a spanne brood’ and the rest’s are also clearly shown. The nuns (six of them) walking behind the priests are all tall and slender (‘nat undergrowe’), and look very graceful and ‘ful symple and coy’. Chaucer may or may not have seen the pictures.⁹¹ If he had, his depiction of the Prioress is merely conventional (as emphasized in the previous section) and thus does not connote so much sarcasm or criticism as most critics are inclined to think. If Chaucer had not, then the similarity between his depiction and that of the pictures reflects more the general nuns’ appearance in the Middle Ages than our poet’s deliberate configuration of his Prioress.

Besides the paintings and the pictures mentioned above, the medieval Madonnas give us even more recognition of the standardized image of female piety (as far as the

⁸⁸ Nothing is known about the painter except that he worked in Cologne in the early years of the fifteenth century. Because of this painting *Saint Veronica with the Sudarium*, he is named Master of Saint Veronica.

⁸⁹ Eileen Power, *Medieval Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 86. See Page 99: *Nuns in Choir*, miniature of Poor Clares from the ‘Psalter of Henry VI’, French, fifteenth century.

⁹⁰ See page 87. It is a miniature from ‘La Sainte Abbaye’, French, c. 1300 (99).

⁹¹ In Chaucer’s depiction of the Prioress’s facial expression, Priscilla Martin notes that ‘the visual arts contribute to the effect’ because the Prioress’s *symple* smile is ‘fashionable in the spiritual sphere: the tender smile on the face of the Madonna develops in the sculpture of the fourteenth century’ (‘Two Misfits’ 34).

correlation between the wimple and the forehead is concerned) in Chaucer's age. The most frequently portrayed lady in the Middle Ages is none but the Virgin Mary. Though not a professed nun, she is constantly depicted as the model of female piety, with or without veils. For example in *The Wilton Diptych*, Mary and the female saints around her and the Holy Infant all have bare foreheads⁹²—though in wimples—high, broad, and even bulbous as S. T. Knight has observed.⁹³ Many more paintings with the titles *Madonna and Child* or *The Virgin and Child* also present Mary with a large, smooth forehead, such as the ones by Masaccio⁹⁴, Don Silvestro Dei Gherarducci,⁹⁵ Giotto di Bondone,⁹⁶ Antoniazio Romano,⁹⁷ and Adriaen Isenbrandt,⁹⁸ as well as many a work by Leonardo da Vinci⁹⁹—to name but a few.¹⁰⁰ It might be mentioned as well that the Mary of Michelangelo's world-famed *Pieta* has a well exposed forehead, too, high and broad, just like, though with a woeful face, that of any traditional beauty. I have not read any rebuke of immodesty or impropriety on those medieval artworks concerning women's exposed foreheads, not even on those with Madonnas baring a feeding breast.¹⁰¹

Besides the Virgin Mary, female saints are also prevalent figures for theme of piety

⁹² See also the one by Master of the St. Lucy Legend (1480-1510), *Virgin Surrounded by Female Saints*, c. 1488, and the one by Gerard David, 1460-1523, *Virgin and Child with Female Saints*.

⁹³ See n. 69.

⁹⁴ Masaccio, 1401-1428, was the first great Italian painter of the Quattrocento period of the Italian Renaissance. He is best known for recreating life-like figures and movement.

⁹⁵ Don Silvestro Dei Gherarducci, 1339-99, was an Italian painter and illuminator; he became a monk and later a prior in Florence where he started work on illustrations for manuscripts.

⁹⁶ Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337), better known simply as Giotto, was an Italian painter from Florence. His masterwork is the decoration of the Arena Chapel in Padua; the fresco depicts the life of the Virgin and the life of Christ.

⁹⁷ Antoniazio Romano, 1430-1510, was an Italian Early Renaissance painter, the leading figure of the Roman school during the fifteenth century. His Madonna's forehead is high, round, and radiant.

⁹⁸ Adriaen Isenbrandt, 1480 (?) -1551, was a Flemish Northern Renaissance painter. His Madonnas have extremely high, broad, and bulbous foreheads.

⁹⁹ Leonardo da Vinci, 1452-1519, an Italian polymath, is widely considered one of the greatest painters of all time. The well-known Mona Lisa's smile is typically 'ful symple and coy'.

¹⁰⁰ Appreciate also the paintings by Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), Cosimo Rosselli (1440-1507), and statues by many anonymous medieval sculptors. Botticelli has painted many Madonnas; all look 'ful symple and coy' and have beautiful foreheads.

¹⁰¹ Adriaen Isenbrandt, Leonardo da Vinci, Jan Provost (1465-1529), and many artists have painted this subject.

in the medieval arts. In Adriaen Isenbrandt's painting *St. Mary Magdalene Reading*,¹⁰² the female saint is presented with a high, broad, and smooth-looking forehead; because of an undersized wimple and delicate coloring, the figure looks tender and pious and the ambience of the picture solemn and tranquil. Figures of saints often appear on the church windows, too. Three panels (dated to about 1340) currently in the south aisle east window of St. Nicholas Church, Stanford-on-Avon, present three saints in wimples (one is captioned as the figure of St. Agnes and the other two unidentified); all of the three figures have high and broad foreheads fully exposed to the viewers.

Judged from the artworks mentioned above, there is evidently no correlation between piety and the exposure of forehead, and that in medieval times a religious/pious woman's uncovered forehead did not at all signify impropriety, pride, or vanity. Actually, the Prioress does not need to expose all her forehead in order to let her observer perceive that she has a fine-looking one—so, the traditional opinion that the Prioress is wearing her wimple too high may probably be mistaken. In addition to the many fully exposed and well presented foreheads referred to above, there are numerous artworks that draw Madonnas, saints, or pious women with partly covered foreheads. When Chaucer shows his wonderment at the Prioress's good-sized brow, he does not mean to insinuate that the Prioress has unduly exposed that 'expanse of skin' against the conventual rule (since it was not uncommon or inappropriate to reveal foreheads in that time) or that he has seen the whole of the Prioress's forehead. Indeed, by even just half or one third of the brow revealed, Madame Eglentyne's observer can still appreciate—and measure as well—the shape of her beautiful forehead. In Rogier Van

¹⁰² Scholarship in the late 20th and early 21st century comes to recognize that historical tradition has misidentified Mary Magdalene (or Mary of Magdala) as a repentant prostitute, and wrongly depicted her in art as a weeping sinner wiping Jesus' feet with her hair. Mary was the leader of a group of women disciples who were present at the cross and the burial, a devoted follower of Jesus, accompanying his travels and following him to the end. According to the Christian New Testament, she was the first person to see the resurrected Christ. Mary Magdalene is considered by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches to be a saint, with a feast day of July 22nd.

Der Weydon's renowned *The Magdalen Reading*,¹⁰³ Magdalen is depicted with a wimple covered down to two thirds of her forehead. The proportion of the forehead to the face and the shape of it (round and large), however, are well expressed. Several paintings by Italian painter Pietro Lorenzetti (1280-1348) depict Madonnas with wimples partly covering the foreheads which, nevertheless, still appear wide and even protruding to the viewers, for example the works entitled as *Madonna Enthroned with Angels* (1340), *Madonna col Bambino*,¹⁰⁴ and *Madonna of the Sunset* (c. 1330).¹⁰⁵ Duccio¹⁰⁶ also has several paintings in which Madonnas' foreheads, though covered to almost the eyebrow, can be detected as wide and broad. Judging from those paintings and many others from the same period, I think the situation might be this: covered or uncovered, Chaucer does not need to see the whole of the Prioress's forehead to decide that she has a good-looking one. With a number of contemporary paintings, drawings, and statues around him, portraying the Virgin Mary with a high, wide, smooth, and radiant forehead, Chaucer could simply give Madame Eglentyne a comparable one without exposing too much of that controversial span of skin. By this postulation, I would like to propose that Chaucer was not only influenced by his contemporary artists' depictions of pious women when he created the Prioress, but also exerted influence upon artists of later generations that continue to work on female images of piety. For example, Raphael's Madonnas all have large foreheads, some of which are so round and

¹⁰³ Rogier Van Der Weydon, 1399-1464, known as the third (by birth date) of the three great Early Flemish artists, was considered one of the most profound and influential painters of the fifteenth century. He is famous for religious triptychs and altarpieces. *The Magdalen Reading* (before 1438) is a fragment, 62.2x54.4 c.m., cut from an altarpiece.

¹⁰⁴ Libero Video offers a video (6:59) titled *Madonna col Bambino in Arte*, presenting hundreds of Madonnas painted in the medieval times and early Renaissance. Interestingly, only a few Madonnas have covered or partly covered foreheads.

¹⁰⁵ Pietro Lorenzetti, an Italian painter who introduced naturalism into Sienese art with his younger brother Ambrogio, was a prolific painter on religious themes. Most of his Madonnas have fully exposed foreheads.

¹⁰⁶ Duccio di Buoninsegna, c. 1255- c. 1318, was born in Siena, Tuscany, and one of the most influential artists of his time. He is known for many important works in government and religious buildings, and is considered to be the father of Sienese painting and, along with a few others, the founder of Western art.

high that they look obviously more than a ‘spanne brood’;¹⁰⁷ a number of Giovanni Bellini’s Madonnas have big foreheads, too, uncovered or partly covered;¹⁰⁸ the Spanish painter Murillo¹⁰⁹ also presented his Madonnas with good-sized foreheads which make the figures look only more soft, tender, and beautiful. It is hard to say whether those Renaissance painters have read Chaucer’s Prioress (very likely they have), but it is not irrational to conclude that a broad, radiant, and smooth-looking forehead is definitely a sign of beauty for both the medieval and Renaissance periods (and probably for all times). Therefore, modern critics’ opinion that Madame Eglentyne’s large forehead indicates her excessive diet and obesity is hardly persuasive; and that the Prioress flaunts her forehead in public by wearing her wimple too high is also feebly grounded.

Apparently, medieval people do not regard exposing forehead as a sign of pride or vanity. But modern critics do. They refer to rules as well as doctrinal treatise and allege that the Prioress’s character is fatally flawed, since her bare forehead either indicates that she is against conventual rules or that she is vain to follow secular fashions. In fact, whether rules and doctrinal treatise are absolute criteria that a religious must obey and observe is questionable. The decree of rules or guidelines is often for convenience of management and discipline; the rules and guidelines themselves are not necessarily truths. For example, to prevent the contact between the nuns and the secular persons, bishops in the medieval times, according to Eileen Power, ‘greatly disapproved of boarders and were always trying to turn them out’, but they never succeeded in putting the edict into force because nunneries were often ‘hard up and wanted the boarders’

¹⁰⁷ Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, 1483-1520, better known simply as Raphael, was an Italian painter and architect. Raphael was enormously productive; for the very large and bulbous foreheads of the Virgin Mary, appreciate for example his *Madonna with Christ Child Blessing and St. Jerome and St. Francis*, c. 1502, *Madonna and Child with the Book*, c. 1503, *Madonna and Child with the Infant Baptist*, c. 1509, *Madonna of Foligno*, c. 1511, and many others.

¹⁰⁸ Giovanni Bellini, 1430-1526, an Italian Renaissance painter, has painted a large number of Madonnas.

¹⁰⁹ Bartolome Esteban Murillo, 1617-1682, though also produced many paintings of contemporary women and children, was best known for his religious works.

fees' (*Medieval People* 83). Although the conflict between the houses' insufficient funds and primary needs forced the bishops to enforce with one eye shut, the edict documentarily dipped the nuns into the infamy of disobedience, and modern people deem it true. Another failure of the Church is the authorities' constant attempt to keep the nuns shut up. In 1298, Pope Boniface VIII published *Periculoso*, ordering that 'nuns should never, save in very exceptional circumstances, leave their convents and that no secular person should be allowed to go in and visit them, without a special license and a good reason' (*Medieval People* 93).¹¹⁰ This decree of strict enclosure, likewise, could not be successfully put into force since on the one hand 'neither the Benedictine nor Augustinian rules speak of perpetual *clausura*' and on the other 'a watertight convent could hardly perform those acts of almsgiving and hospitality that these rules do require' (Wallace 508).¹¹¹ *Periculoso*, similar to many other rules, exposes the Church leaders' blindness to facts and realities that the nuns need to encounter and perform daily. The result of the proclamation is: 'many nuns refused subjection to restrictions that had formed no part of their original religious confession' (Wallace 509). Actually the nuns' rebellious outcries are much louder than the contemporary bishops or modern readers could have expected. At one nunnery in the Lincoln diocese, Eileen Power states, 'when the bishop came and deposited a copy of the Bull in the house and ordered the nuns to obey it, they ran after him to the gate when he was riding away and threw the Bull at his head, screaming that they would never observe it' (*Medieval People* 93). 'Through the Middle Ages', Power further writes, 'council after council, bishop after

¹¹⁰ See also David Wallace, 508; Maureen Hourigan, 42; and Diana Webb, 'Freedom of Movement? Women Travelers in the Middle Ages', *Studies on Medieval and Early Modern Women: Pawns or Players*, eds. Christine Meek and Catherine Lawless (Dublin and Portland, Ore: Four Courts, 2003) 75-89, at 80.

¹¹¹ Religious houses are, as Hardy Long Frank describes, 'a source of alms for the poor and balms for the ill'. David Wallace equally notes that the English houses were 'of considerable local importance', for the nuns, observant of their Benedictine or Augustinian rules, did 'count themselves obliged to offer hospitality and alms' ('Nuns' 504). Wallace also refers to a line by Andrew Marvell, which I think worth mentioning here, in which he imagines the Appleton House doorway adorned by 'a stately frontispiece of poor' (504).

bishop, reformer after reformer, tried in vain to keep [the nuns] shut up' (*Medieval People* 92). It seems the Church authorities have nurtured a whim: they can simply lock up their female counterparts as they want, in spite of realities—*Periculoso* is merely the culmination of that whim.¹¹² When modern readers accuse Madame Eglentyne of leaving her convent at will, it is obvious that they also cherish that whim, and ignore the fact that (as bishops soon perceived the unfeasibility of 'total *clausura*') 'one visit per year to friends and family was soon allowed again, and then two; lodgers could be readmitted to help impoverished convents; recreations and relaxations were to be encouraged' ('Nuns' 509).¹¹³ The more liberal rule was decreed in 1318, only twenty years after the proclamation of *Periculoso*, by Archbishop Melton—Chaucer could not have been unconscious of it when he was creating Madame Eglentyne.

If a papal bull could be discarded due to realistic circumstances, modern critics need not cling to doctrinal guidelines such as those in *Ancrene Wisse* or a dubious treatise like *Book to a Mother*, and judge according to them that the Prioress has revealed too much of her forehead, pinched her wimple too properly, or that she has acted against the rule of *clausura*. It is quite inappropriate to evaluate the Prioress by referring to those treatises, actually. *Ancrene Wisse*, composed by an anonymous churchman (or an Augustinian canon)¹¹⁴ in the early thirteenth century, was a monastic

¹¹² Rigid rule of cloister was actually against the Rule of St. Benedict. Henry Ansgar Kelly disagrees with Eileen Power on the point that 'the Bishops were quite clear in their minds that pilgrimages for nuns were to be discouraged'—that is, Kelly observes, not all bishops forbade nuns to travel. Yet, church authorities seem whimsical about changing rules. Kelly has a succinct summary of that fickleness in the Middle English Period: 'It began in England with legatine constitutions that Cardinal Ottobono issued at a council held in London in 1268. But in 1281, Archbishop Peckham and the Convocation of Canterbury at Lambeth explicitly allowed nuns to travel... However, in 1298 Pope Boniface VIII extended the rule of cloister to nuns throughout the universal Church in his decretal *Periculoso*. But efforts to enforce it in England were not successful... Even before *Periculoso*, pilgrimage had been prohibited to religious (males included) only in the diocese or province of York, in 1195, by an archbishop of Canterbury on a legatine visitation, after similar legislation had been stymied in the Canterbury province' ('A Neo-Revisionist Look at Chaucer's Nuns' 119-120). Apparently, the whim is not whether the nuns should remain cloistered or not, but a vain display of political/religious power which successors always want to manifest over their predecessors.

¹¹³ It is for the sake of 'sanity and hygiene'. David Wallace has observed: 'Even the Carthusians, a strict monastic order, were required to walk on Mondays beyond their cloister' ('Nuns' 509).

¹¹⁴ Scholars' opinions of the authorship are various.

manual intended for three sisters who had decided upon entering the contemplative life. Madame Eglentyne, though a nun, is not an anchoress who is supposed to remain secluded in a cell; she is a religious lady of some consequence (escorted on her travels by three priests and a nun chaplain), and the ‘manager’—probably a ‘shrewd’ one—of her establishment. ‘Estate matters, legal matters, church matters’, as Hardy Long Frank notes, ‘all might take Chaucer's Prioress up to London, even perhaps down to Canterbury’.¹¹⁵ ‘A prioress was not uncommonly upon the road’¹¹⁶—the Church could not practically shut them up, no matter how hard some of the authorities have tried. The decree of *clausura*, thus, reveals certain distorted human relationships: men constantly want to shut up their female counterparts—priests want to shut up nuns, husbands want to shut up wives,¹¹⁷ fathers want to shut up daughters,¹¹⁸ and even sons want to shut up their mothers (as the treatise *Book to a Mother* shows). The rule set for nuns is a reflection of this distortion. It would not mean much for us to adopt this piece of male psychology and apply its prejudice to the judgment of the Prioress because she has a good forehead, pinches her wimple properly, and is away from her priory. Furthermore, if the Prioress herself and her pilgrimage do ‘not seem matter for surprise or concern to the rest of the party’,¹¹⁹ why should we express so much disbelief and deprecation when we encounter her on the way to Canterbury?

III. Parlez Vous Francais?

¹¹⁵ ‘Seeing the Prioress Whole’, 232.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Chaucer offers two extreme examples: Jankyn, the young husband in the ‘Wife of Bath’s Prologue’, preaches to his Wife every evening with ridiculous stories on the ground that ‘men shal nat suffre his wyf go roule aboute’ or ‘to go seken halwes’ (III. 639-57), and the old husband, John, in ‘the Miller’s Tale’, held his young wife ‘narwe in cage’ (I. 3224).

¹¹⁸ I am thinking of the many heroines put away in high towers by their wicked uncles or wards.

¹¹⁹ Henry Ansgar Kelly, 120. This, however, does not indicate that the Prioress is entirely welcome (even though the narrator says that she is ‘ful pleasaunt, and amyable of port’ [GP 138]). The Nun’s Priest’s tale is an account of the ‘irreducible core of antifeminism’, and Lawrence Besserman attributes that to the Nun’s Priest’s ‘resentment of his subordination to the Prioress’ (‘Chaucerian Wordplay’ 68)

And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly
 After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,
 For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe. (I. 124-6)

The narrator has noticed that the Prioress speaks French clearly and elegantly, but not the kind of French the Parisians speak—namely, despite all her ‘greet desport’ (I. 137) and pains to ‘countrefete cheere / Of court’ (I. 139-40), Madame Eglentyne’s pretty French is unfortunately marked by an *unpretty* local accent. Critics agree that ‘for Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe’ is Chaucer’s ‘gentle mockery’ of the Prioress’s ‘ignorance and provinciality’.¹²⁰ From this view, Madame Eglentyne’s vanity, it seems, is not only manifested in her pleated wimple, her bare forehead, and her tale,¹²¹ but also her ability to speak the language of the court (though not *in the manner* of the court). In Charles Moorman’s opinion, the Prioress’s insistence on ‘speaking [French] at every opportunity’—since the dominant language of a country is a symbol of its political and class power—proves the view that she is a ‘social climber’, which, ‘if not vulgar’, is how one tells that she is ‘an East Londoner, a Cockney’.¹²² Unfortunately, the Prioress’s eager demonstration of her language ability, in the eyes of the narrator and modern critics, merely reflects provincialism and even vulgarity of her character. Carol M. Meale has observed a similar condescension on our poet’s part from his depiction of the five guildsmen who are said to be associated with ‘a great fraternitee’ (I. 361-2, 364),

¹²⁰ See Stephanie Gaynor, ‘He Says, She Says’, 387. See also Carol M. Meale, ‘Women’s Piety’, 53-54; and Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides*, 38.

¹²¹ Many critics observe that Madame Eglentyne is a woman of ‘fashion’, and her tale (a Christian boy murdered by a *cursed* Jew in an Asian city) partly reflects that. For example, Sheila Delany points out that “‘Asia’ was a fashionable topic among the nobility with which [the Prioress] identifies” (‘Chaucer’s Prioress, the Jews, and the Muslims’ 205). Hardy Long Frank explains that the reason why the Prioress tells such a tale is because it is ‘particularly fashionable’ and would ‘strike pleasantly on the monied burghers and ambitious courtiers whose patronage she might attract to her convent’ (‘Seeing the Prioress Whole’ 233). Carolyn P. Collette also expounds that the story the Prioress tells is ‘preeminently suited to her own outlook and to the religious fashion of the time’ (‘Sense and Sensibility in the “Prioress’s Tale”’, *The Chaucer Review* 15.2 [1980]: 138-150, at 148).

¹²² See ‘The Prioress as a Pearly Queen’, 27. Somehow, Moorman’s prejudice is not just against the Prioress, but against all the ‘East Londoners’.

described as self-important, who ‘goon to vigilies al bifore’ with mantles ‘roialliche ybore’ (I. 374-8), and whose wives ‘gloried in their claims for social precedence and in their right to be addressed as “madame” (a title open to the wives of the individuals who became aldermen of parish guilds or fraternities)’—in a word, the depictions of the five guildsmen, Meale stresses, place them ‘securely in the same category as Dame Eglentyne—that of the aspirant lower middle class’ (54-5). In the course of her discussion, Meale also refers to an investigation¹²³ which finds that the majority of ‘the office-holders amongst East Anglian female religious’ were drawn from ‘the ranks of the lower gentry, rather than from those of the upper gentry and the nobility’ (54). Judging from the historical evidences and Chaucer’s usage of ‘the tradition of estates satire’, Meale proposes that Chaucer’s target for the satire against the Prioress was ‘class-, rather than gender-, specific’ (53).

The efforts of the wealthy middle class to emulate the manners and styles of the nobility always appear ‘vulgar’ in the eyes of the latter. On the surface, the reason why the upper class are repulsed is the *transgression* of the lower class; but the true reason might be that the lower class’s efforts, indicating powerful upward mobility and intellectual competence, are too threatening to the upper class. We know that Chaucer was a wine merchant’s son who became well established among the upper gentry through his services to the ruling households.¹²⁴ Could Chaucer mock the Prioress who was from the lower gentry¹²⁵ because he himself was from the upper gentry? If yes,

¹²³ The investigation referred to is ‘Aristocracy or Meritocracy? Office-Holding Patterns in Late Medieval English Nunneries’ (Marilyn Oliva, *Women in the Church*, eds. W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood [Oxford: D.S. Brewer, 1990], 197-208).

¹²⁴ Chaucer, in his early teens, was placed by his father as a page in the household of the countess of Ulster, one of the great aristocratic households of England—the countess was married to Prince Lionel, the second son of Edward III. Chaucer later became a courtier, a diplomat, and was a loyal civil servant to three kings: Edward III (1327-77), Richard II (1377-99), and Henry IV (1399-1413).

¹²⁵ A number of scholars indicate that the Prioress is merely ‘a merchant’s daughter’. For example, Charles Moorman points out that in Chaucer’s time Stratford was ‘a prosperous village, largely because of the Stratford bakeries and the slaughter houses...’ (29). See also Muriel Bowden, 101, and Carol M. Meale above. However, some other critics assert that Madame Eglentyne is at least a gentleman’s or a wealthy merchant’s daughter, since putting a daughter in the nunnery costs a large sum of money (in

while Chaucer was enjoying an ‘amused condescension’¹²⁶ towards the Prioress, might not the reader at the same time be amused by his seeming condescension? For that kind of condescension is exactly an emulation of the nobility’s customary attitude toward the lower classes—it thus reveals a paradoxical situation which our poet has unwittingly trapped himself into: his emulation of the upper class is no less than that of the Prioress. Obviously, Chaucer and Madame Eglentyne are of the same kind. The only difference is probably that Chaucer has been in the court since his early teens and owing to that has more naturally and easily acquired the manners and skills of the nobility, while the Prioress, who probably never sees the court herself, has to take pains to counterfeit.¹²⁷ Actually, from historical and literary evidences, Chaucer, like the Prioress, was also a social climber—and a very successful one.¹²⁸ Hence, I suggest that our poet’s mockery and condescension be read as a gesture to strike the Prioress, an outstanding competitor, to kick her off the social ladder—as many people of the similar status would do to each other. Seen from this aspect, the Prioress’s efforts in counterfeiting the ‘cheere of the court’, her meticulous eating habits, and her grasping every chance to speak the language of the ruling class, then, should not be deemed as a display of her vanity but an intended performance,¹²⁹ which she purposely demonstrates, like in a competition, to counteract that observant fellow pilgrim who studies her features and molests her

addition to a two-hundred-pound entrance fee, the father also needs to pay for the furniture, habits, feasts on important occasions, and so on [Eileen Power, *Medieval People*, 78]). Poor girls of lower classes were never found in nunneries, Power stresses, because families of these classes ‘needed no special outlets for their women’ and ‘could not afford the dowry required to get [them] into a nunnery’ (‘Nunneries’ 82).

¹²⁶ William Rothwell, ‘Stratford atte Bowe and Paris’, 43.

¹²⁷ A number of critics, however, suggest that the Prioress is ‘rather aristocratic’ (see John Finlayson, ‘Chaucer’s Prioress and *Amor Vincit Omnia*’, 171).

¹²⁸ Chaucer was married to Philippa de Roet, a lady-in-waiting to Queen Philippa. His wife was also a sister of Katherine Swynford, who was the third wife of John of Gaunt, Chaucer’s friend and patron. Chaucer’s marriage must have brought him much convenience in social *climbing*. His son, Thomas Chaucer, was chief butler to four kings, envoy to France, and Speaker of the House of Commons, and his great-great-grandson, John de la Pole, was the Earl of Lincoln and the heir to the throne designated by Richard III before he was deposed. In short, the Chaucer family, typical middle-class as we are told, eventually got themselves into aristocracy.

¹²⁹ William Orth remarks that scholars ‘have long approached Madame Eglentyne as a performer’—the ways she smiles, eats, speaks indicates that she is conscious of an audience (199). But no critic has treated the Prioress’s *performance* as a gesture of competition.

physique with a relentless gaze¹³⁰—a deliberate disrespect she must have felt. The Prioress, via her ‘performance’, is telling her rival: ‘Don’t think you can intimidate me!’ She obviously owns more spiritual strength and professional abilities than the chauvinistic and cynical narrator has deemed.

It seems not only the nobility loathe the lower class’s transgression, but people from the lower class also detest it—sometimes even more. The Prioress’s case shows to us the narrator’s unfriendly attitude toward a career woman of his similar status and capabilities. His satire against the Prioress is, therefore, not just ‘class-, rather than gender-, specific’ as Carol M. Meale suggests, but ‘class- as well as gender-specific’ as the discussion above has demonstrated. It is hard to say which is more vulgar (according to Charles Moorman’s definition): emulating the nobility (e.g., the Prioress) or competing in the emulation of the nobility (e.g., the narrator Chaucer). But compared to the Prioress who is ‘ful plesaunt, and amyable of port’ (I. 138), the narrator is apparently more snobbish¹³¹—always pretending a nonchalant look and in the end tells the most insincere and most distasteful tales of all.¹³² Many modern readers do not care to be so subtle. They perceive Chaucer’s condescension and mock together with the poet. This shows that people often forget that most of us are social climbers; it also discloses a paradox: we despise the matter ‘moving upward’ while doing it. Indeed, ‘moving upward’ is a ‘vulgar’ thing, if we look at it as one’s loss or lack of self-identity (which is also critics’ general explanation of why Chaucer mocks the Prioress’s *transgression*: she should not forget her middle-class background and status as a religious¹³³). However,

¹³⁰ See the discussion on pages 94-5.

¹³¹ See n. 28.

¹³² At first he chants a rhyme for which the Host has no patience and has to rudely stop: ‘Namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee,/... for thou makest me/ So wery of thy lewednesse’ (VII. 920-21), and then ‘The Tale of Melibee’—a hugely lengthy tale of ‘almost unsurpassed dullness’. But it is recognized that Sir Topas—the fictive narrator—offers up one of the funniest moments in *The Canterbury Tales*: the narrator’s image is rather clownish, and Chaucer’s intention to make his audience laugh is clear.

¹³³ See for example Priscilla Martin: ‘But is she not altogether too charming? ... the suggestion is ... unbecoming to a religious’ (‘Two Misfits’ 33); Richard Rex: ‘The portrait is notable for what it does not say. Chaucer does not refer to the Prioress’s religious qualities ... but concentrates on social attainments

moving upward may also signify a person's higher self-esteem and realization of potentials, such as the case of the Prioress who demonstrates capabilities in management (as head of a large household), aspiration to discover the outside world, and abilities in language learning (speaking a foreign language 'ful faire and fetisly').

Most critics agree that although the Prioress 'peyned hire to countrefete cheere of court', she speaks French with a local accent, which exposes not only her 'provinciality' but her 'ignorance' of the true form of the language. Britons speaking French with an English accent is a common theme in satires; as Muriel Bowden remarks, 'at what time in the history of England has the French of the average English middle class citizen not been a standing joke?'—considering the Prioress's embarrassment, 'this was true in Chaucer's day'.¹³⁴ If the Prioress's speaking French 'after the scole of Stratford atte Bowe' indicates that she speaks French with a provincial accent¹³⁵ and is therefore laughable, we then suppose that people in the court must have all spoken perfect Parisian French. However, the truth is, in English history, many rulers speak with 'imperfect' accent (whichever language) owing to the grounds of intermarriages.¹³⁶ In discussing how the Prioress may have learned to speak French the way she did, Muriel Bowden surmises: '[u]ndoubtedly, Elizabeth of Hainault spoke French with an accent'—and if the Prioress took her veil at the St. Leonard's (adjoining Stratford atte Bowe) where Elizabeth was a nun,¹³⁷ she 'would have been content to copy the great

and external appearance' ('The Sins of Madame Eglentyne' 99); and many a 'what a female religious should/not do': 'nuns were not supposed to keep pets'; 'nuns were supposed to wear their veils pinned down tightly to their eyebrows'; 'religious were not supposed to go on pilgrimages'; 'religious were not expected to emulate secular fashions', and the like.

¹³⁴ See *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, 101. Interestingly, French people speaking English with a peculiar accent are hardly ridiculed. In Kenneth Branagh's movie *Henry V*, the scene in which Catherine of Valois, the princess of France (by Emma Thomason), counts A, B, C, and one, two, three in English with a funny accent, is presented in a very lovely way.

¹³⁵ Earlier interpretation of 'after the schole of Stratford atte Bowe' is that Madame Eglentyne speaks French 'with the accent she had learned in her convent'. More recently, *The Riverside Chaucer* suggests that the Prioress's French is 'marked by more than just its accent'; the phrase should be interpreted as: 'she speaks French in the manner of Stratford atte Bowe' (rather than that of the royal court) ('Stratford atte Bowe Re-Visited' 184).

¹³⁶ It is said, for example, that Queen Victoria (1819-1901) spoke English with a German accent.

¹³⁷ See n. 8.

lady' (101); as Queen Philippa and Elizabeth were sisters (both were born and reared in Flanders), it is not unreasonable to suggest that Edward III's Queen also spoke the language with an accent. Chaucer no doubt saw Queen Philippa constantly and heard her talk.¹³⁸ Did he notice that Madame Eglentyne, though probably never saw the court herself, actually spoke the 'Queen's French'? For Chaucer, perhaps, Parisian French was 'the only true form of French', and the kind of French the Prioress spoke was 'no more than a bastard variety of the speech of Paris' ('Stratford atte Bowe and Paris' 39). Yet, as Rothwell observes, the Prioress's French was virtually the kind of French which Chaucer's audience lived and worked 'day in and day out' because it was 'an integral part of their environment' ('Stratford atte Bowe Re-Visited' 201), we may suppose that the Prioress's French was actually the kind of French which our poet had first learned to speak. Chaucer's French might not have been acquired through strict academic trainings, at least not in his earlier days, like the way some high-rank nuns and priests were known to have received.¹³⁹ Even if the poet had acquired his French through prudent lessons, his daily French would be at the most the kind of French Madame Eglentyne spoke (as Parisian French was 'largely unfamiliar to the general run of educated English people' ['Stratford atte Bowe and Paris' 39]). Chaucer is certainly not ignorant of 'Frenssh of Parys' since he had been sent abroad by kings for diplomatic missions (a number of times) and worked long years at the customs (twelve years)—but these historical evidences do not sufficiently prove that the poet can thus speak 'Frenssh of Parys' 'ful faire and fetisly'.

At any rate, there seems no reason for Chaucer to mock the Prioress as an ignorant religious because she speaks French 'ful faire and fetisly' after 'the scole of Stratford

¹³⁸ See n. 128.

¹³⁹ The following is a passage from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (8th ed., vol. 1): 'Chaucer was the son of a prosperous wine merchant and probably spent his boyhood in the mercantile atmosphere of London's Vintry, where ships docked with wines from France and Spain. Here he would have mixed daily with people of all sorts, heard several languages spoken, become fluent in French, and received schooling in Latin' (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, at 214).

atte Bowe', but he has done that, unwittingly, following the tradition of satires as the following phrase '[f]or Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe' shows. Actually, readers can evaluate Madame Eglentyne's French from another aspect—we can focus our scrutiny on the Prioress's language ability rather than her seemingly provincial accent. No matter what kind of French the Prioress speaks, her talent and achievement in language acquisition is well demonstrated by her ability to speak it and the way she speaks it: 'ful faire and fetisly'. That phrase is obviously a compliment, and the narrator does not seem insincere in his praising.¹⁴⁰ Speaking good French does not prove that the Prioress wants to show herself off; it only indicates that the Prioress has a good command of this language. Indeed, French is the language which the Prioress is, as many critics agree, 'expected to use... on a regular basis by reason of her position in society' ('Stratford atte Bowe and Paris' 39): she needs it to correspond with the bishops, receive her prominent visitors and fine neighbors, and instruct her pupils in the convent school.¹⁴¹ Madame Eglentyne must have a good command of this language in both its written and spoken forms, and that ability, no doubt, was one of the reasons that she was elected head of her convent. Thus, 'Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe' is not a mockery of the Prioress's provinciality or ignorance as critics have traditionally claimed,

¹⁴⁰ William Rothwell argues that '[i]t is simply not possible to use the adverb "ful faire" and "fetisly" of a debased form of a language... nor can they be regarded as ironic' ('Stratford atte Bowe Re-Visited' 187).

¹⁴¹ Eileen Power remarks that some nunneries, besides providing for boarders, fulfilled another function for the upper class—'that of select boarding schools for children' (*Medieval Women* 83). Charles Moorman also points out: 'Stratford-atte-Bow had a high reputation as a fitting school for the daughters of London citizens' ('The Prioress as a Pearly Queen' 31). See also Hardy Long Frank ('Seeing the Prioress Whole' 230). Henry Ansgar Kelly is more specific about the Prioress's background and teaching career: 'Chaucer maybe speaking literally when he refers to the school of Stratford at Bow; there is evidence of a school at the priory in 1346'; to the Prioress's performance, Kelly then reviews from an educational perspective: '... many of Madame Eglentyne's concerns—religious devotion, French, table manners, deportment, and good behavior—were major elements in the aristocratic female curriculum'—and thus, perhaps, we should think of the Prioress as 'a headmistress advertising her educational program' ('A Neo-Revisionist Look at Chaucer's Nuns' 118). According to William Rothwell, the religious institutions played an important role 'to ensure the survival of French in what was increasingly an Anglophone country' since French is a necessary skill for educated people in Chaucer's time ('Stratford atte Bowe Re-Visited' 191). Actually, the tradition of learning French in a religious institute never dies in English literature; for example, Jane Eyre picks up her French skill at Lowood School and later, as a governess at Thornfield, demonstrates it remarkably to impress Mr. Rochester and the reader.

but merely a realistic reflection of a well-trained female religious who tries to speak a foreign language in its best, standard ways. Every language has its refined and crude forms. ‘Frenssh of Parys’ only means that it is the kind of French the Parisians speak; it does not specify that it is the best kind of French that most cultivated Parisians would speak.¹⁴² Even the royals, as mentioned above, may speak the courtly language with an accent because of different household pedigrees. In short, ‘Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe’ indicates that the Prioress’s French is rather of an academic kind: i.e., she speaks the language according to the standard rules (due to strict academic training), untainted by colloquial usages such as rude vocabulary, slangs, abbreviations, and the like. This is, in my opinion, a more accurate understanding of the phrase ‘ful faire and fetisly’—indeed, one cannot speak a foreign language with a provincial accent ‘fetisly’ (elegantly): that is a mere paradox. And this is also a more reasonable interpretation of how/why Madame Eglentyne speaks French ‘after the scole of Stratford atte Bowe’—‘after the scole’ meaning not just ‘in the manner of’¹⁴³ but literally after the ‘schooling’ of Stratford at Bowe.

Proving that the Prioress speaks good and accurate French does not save Chaucer from his awkward accusation of the Prioress’s language ability, but only manifests how the poet contradicts himself for the sake of following the tradition of satires. Seen from this point, Chaucer may not be a linguist, but merely a man of ‘cultural conceit’. Actually, the kind of French the Prioress speaks has its linguistic merits in the

¹⁴² As a foreign language learner of English myself, I often observe that English native speakers commonly speak with diverse accents. Most people just speak colloquially; some even speak with an unintelligible accent. It seems only the very prominent stage actors and actresses (for example, Dame Judy Dench and the late Richard Harris) speak distinctly and beautifully as far as pronunciation and accent are concerned. (I also notice that many westerners speak Mandarin, as a second language, with an even more articulate pronunciation than native Chinese do.) William Rothwell, in his investigation of the English people who were able to speak French in Chaucer’s time, similarly observes: ‘Many of those who used French in England were highly skilled in the handling of a sensitive and complex linguistic system, no less skilled, perhaps, than all but a small minority of literate and articulate native Frenchmen and far more skilled than the mass of the common uneducated people in France’ (‘Stratford atte Bowe and Paris’ 42); hence, the Prioress, though ‘Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe’, has ‘little to be ashamed of’ in her handling of ‘the essential core of the language’ (Ibid. 43).

¹⁴³ See n. 135.

development of the English language. William Rothwell observes well:

The standing of Anglo-French may well improve once it is viewed not as a peripheral dialect, the inferior linguistic medium of a transplanted culture, destined to disappear after a few centuries, but as an efficient vehicle of a highly-developed civilization, a language that did not really disappear but was absorbed into English, transforming the latter in the process... ('Stratford atte Bowe and Paris' 45)

If Chaucer were aware that the charm of his language was partly attributed to the kind of French the Prioress speaks, perhaps he would not have showed that subtle contempt. As Rothwell concludes in his study: 'Chaucer himself and all his successors who speak and write English... would be much the poorer were it not for the humble French of Stratford atte Bowe' (Ibid. 54).

IV. Conclusion

Chaucer's satire on the Prioress and modern readers' general objection to this character disclose a traditional prejudice against the female religious and a bigoted suspicion of their piety.¹⁴⁴ If the Prioress was not called Madame Eglentyne and was simple, homely, not so neat, and unable to speak French, would she look more like a prioress to readers? No, of course; that kind of depiction would fit even less to our imagination/expectation of a religious woman, for it only denigrates the goodly image

¹⁴⁴ Eventually, religious communities throughout England were destroyed by King Henry VIII during the English Reformation. Monastics were forced to either live a secular life or leave the country; many nuns fled to France. Not until the early 19th century, with the rise of the Catholic Revival and Oxford Movement, did the interest of 'religious life' revive in this country. Between 1840 and 1860, several religious orders for nuns were again founded.

of a nun. Chaucer understands this; hence, his prioress is not just fine-looking but also distinguished. Yet, our poet must find fault. To him, Madame Eglentyne is good, but not that good; indeed, she has travelled much in England, but for sure never really seen the world (that is what ‘Frenssh of Parys to hire unknowe’ truly implies). Teasing this meticulous, well-mannered, and pretty little nun who speaks French too well a little causes no harm but only liveliness and some fun spirits in the pilgrimage to Canterbury. But, has the author really caused no harm? Inspecting the Prioress closely, I find that she has no vice—only some weaknesses.¹⁴⁵ Depicting the Prioress as a woman while expecting her to be a saint is the core of the poet’s rhetorical problem in the portraiture of the Prioress. Prevented by misogyny and prejudices against the religious in general,¹⁴⁶ Chaucer did not give the Prioress’s appearance a consistent description, nor her character and achievement a righteous evaluation. Strictly speaking, the Prioress is a better human being than most of the Canterbury pilgrims, including the cynical narrator. She tries harder than any of her fellow pilgrims to look decent, behave properly, act amiably, and speak graciously; her efforts at least show that she is vigilant in guarding her name as a maid to and a follower of the Virgin Mary. Chaucer’s ‘gentle mockery’ thus betrays that he is not only influenced by contemporary prejudices against religious

¹⁴⁵ Some critics might not agree with this. The Prioress shows sympathy toward trapped mice and beaten dogs. Paul G. Remley observes that in medieval times there were traditions that ‘associate[d] mice with evil’ and the Prioress who weeps at the sight of a trapped mouse ignorantly ‘sympathizes with icons of her own vice and calls into question the judgment of God’ (“Muscipula diaboli” and Medieval English Anti-feminism’, *English Studies* 70.1 [1989]: 1-14, at 13). Richard Rex also remarks that giving food to lap-dogs ‘is not largess, but vice’, and claims that ‘similar comments occur throughout late medieval homiletic literature’ (‘The Sins of Madame Eglentyne’ 102). By contrast, some other critics do not treat the Prioress’s lavishness as reflection of her vicious character; for example, Robert Hanning regards the Prioress’s tears as her ‘heightened awareness of helplessness in others (even mice!)’ and her ‘identification with small, helpless things, trapped and punished in a world ruled by men who smite “with a yerde smerte”’ (‘From Eva and Ave’ 588-9). To Carolyn P. Collette, mice and dogs respond to the ‘littel clergeon’ in the Prioress’s tale—i.e., the Prioress focuses on the ‘physical, tangible, often diminutive—mice, dogs, and little children—as objects of her “tendre herte” and symbols of her understanding of Christian doctrine’ (‘Sense and Sensibility’ 138). In my opinion, the Prioress’s lavishness is a ‘misdirected generosity’ (to borrow Stephanie Gaynor’s words, ‘He Says, She Says’, 385), and therefore more of a weakness than a vice.

¹⁴⁶ Except for the Parson, Chaucer attacks almost all the other clerics in *the Canterbury Tales* (both the pilgrims and the characters in the tales): the Monk, the Friar, the Pardoner, the Summoner, the Monk in the Shipman’s tale, the Friar in the Summoner’s tale, the summoner in the Friar’s tale, etc.

women, but also a stronghold of them.

Chapter 3

‘The Wife of Bath’s Prologue’:

A Manifestation of a Medieval Woman’s Distorted Education

The Wife of Bath’s portrait, prologue, and tale present the narrator’s prejudices in many aspects, especially in the dealings of domestic violence, religious instruction, and marriage law. Prejudice often results in damage, injury, and injustice. In the Wife of Bath’s tale, the knight takes a strange woman’s maidenhood ‘maugree hir heed’ (against her will); the rapist knight, however, is not only unpunished for his crime but rewarded with a trophy wife in the end. Chaucer’s casualness toward the female body and contempt of its sexual autonomy are nowhere more manifest than in the Wife’s tale. The Wife’s deafness is another example. Although many critics consider the Wife’s impediment her own deficiency, it is actually the consequence of a domestic struggle. Jankyn willfully vexes his wife with repellent preaching, but his wife pays the price of being vexed, and both the narrator and many modern critics declare that the Wife deserves to be deaf since she does not listen to men’s ‘truth’. The Wife’s alleged ‘carnality’ again displays both the poet’s and modern critics’ prejudices in the interpretation of medieval marriage law and the judgments of men’s and women’s right. When an old man marries a young wife, the old man is considered foolish while the young woman ‘carnal’. Social expectations of men and women in marriage transaction are obviously different and inequitable. Chaucer’s prejudices against women are most evidently revealed in the Wife of Bath’s prologue. The intentional garbling of the sacred texts and the church authorities’ ‘glosynge’ of them expose the patriarchs’ manipulation of women’s education. This scheme not only impairs the Wife’s self-esteem as a woman but also distorts her understanding of God’s Words and injures her hearing ability. This chapter will explore Chaucer’s prejudices in the aspects of domestic violence, women’s

education, marriage law, medieval misogynistic tradition, and religious education as well as the significance indicated by the damage, injury, and injustice they cause.

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The character of Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, is widely recognized as multi-sided. She has been regarded and discussed as a wicked wife,¹ a shrewd businesswoman,² an unconscious confessor,³ an eloquent preacher,⁴ a clever linguist,⁵ an erudite exegete,⁶

¹ This idea is mainly inspired by Jankyn's collection of 'wikked wyves' (see Peggy A. Knapp, 'Alisoun Looms', *Chaucer and the Social Contest* [New York and London: Routledge, 1990], 114-28, at 120).

² See Mary Carruthers, 'The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions', *PMLA* 94.2 (1979): 209-22; Peggy Knapp, 'Alisoun Weaves a Text', *Philological Quarterly* 65.3 (1986): 387-401, and her 'Alisoun Looms'; W. David Shaw, 'Masks of the Unconscious: Bad Faith and Casuistry in the Dramatic Monologue', *ELH* 66.2 (1999): 439-60, at 451 ('...she will brook no rivals in either speech or business'); Priscilla Martin, 'The Man with the Book, or "Who Painted the Lion?"', *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives and Amazons* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 1-13. Both Carruthers and Knapp actually consider the Wife bigger than just a 'businesswoman'—they observe that Alisoun is no less than an 'entrepreneur'.

³ See T. L. Burton, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Hag: The Real Meaning of the Wife of Bath's Tale', "*Seyd in Forme and Reverence*": *Essays on Chaucer and Chaucerians in Memory of Emerson Brown, Jr.*, eds. T. L. Burton and John F. Plummer (Provo, Utah: Chaucer Studio Press, 2005), 75-80, passim; Peggy Knapp, 'Alisoun Looms', especially 117-25; Priscilla Martin, 'The Merchandise of Love: Wives and Merchants', *Chaucer's Women*, 84-105, at 102; Wim Tigges, "'Lat the Womman Telle Hire tale": A Reading of the "Wife of Bath's Tale"', *English Studies* 73.2 (1992): 97-103, at 100; and Susanne Weil, 'Freedom Through Association? Chaucer's Psychology of Argumentation in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue"', *Pacific Coast Philology* 30.1 (1995): 27-41, at 33. Notable are several other studies: for examples, W. David Shaw explores Alisoun's confession as a representation of 'dramatic monologue'; Beryl Rowland ('On the Timely Death of the Wife of Bath's Fourth Husband', *Archiv*, 209.2 [1973]: 273-82) and Dolores Palomo ('The Fate of the Wife of Bath "Bad Husbands"', *The Chaucer Review* 9.4 [1975]: 303-19), deducing from Alisoun's 'inadvertent confession', allege that Alisoun has connived with Jankyn and killed her fourth husband.

⁴ See Priscilla Martin, 'The Merchandise of Love', 93; Elaine Treharne, 'The Stereotype Confirmed? Chaucer's Wife of Bath', *Writing Gender & Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts*, ed. Elaine Treharne (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), 93-115, at 113; Mel Storm, 'Speech, Circumspection, and Orthodontics in the Manciple's Prologue and Tale and the Wife of Bath's Portrait', *Studies in Philology* 96.2 (1999): 109-26, at 124; and Alcuin Blamires, 'The Wife of Bath and Lollardy', *Medium Aevum* 58 (1989): 224-42, at 230.

⁵ See Mary Catherine Davidson, 'Code-Switching and Authority in Late Medieval England', *Neophilologus* 87.3 (2003): 473-86, at 475-6; Ralph Hanna, 'Jankyn's Book', *Pacific Coast Philology* 21.1 (1986): 30-36, at 30; and Elaine Treharne, passim. Nevertheless, Treharne argues pointedly that the Wife's 'linguistic acuity' is all Chaucer's.

⁶ See Peggy Knapp, 'Alisoun Looms', 114, 125; Alcuin Blamires, 'The Wife of Bath and Lollardy', 236; Mary Carruthers, 'The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions', 211; Susan Crane, 'Alison's Incapacity and Poetic Instability in the Wife of Bath's Tale', *PMLA* 102.1 (1987): 20-8, at 20; H. P. Weissman, 'Antifeminism and Chaucer's Characterization of Women', *Critical Essays on Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. Malcolm Andrew (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991, rpt. 1996), 111-25, at 120.

a well-informed traveler,⁷ a 'proto-feminist',⁸ and even a romantic dreamer.⁹ Looking at these terms, the characterization of the Wife seems incongruous and contradictory.¹⁰ Indeed, the incongruity/contradiction is one of the most examined traits of the Wife's character. Many critics consider it of important function especially when the significance of the Wife's argument and Chaucer's narrative skills are concerned. For example, Donald B. Sands, in his study of David Parker's essay 'Can We Trust the Wife of Bath',¹¹ alleges that making Alisoun incongruous is how Chaucer creates ironies in the Wife of Bath's prologue.¹² Doris Enright-Clark Shoukri also observes the relevance of incongruity and irony, though emphasizes that it mainly exists 'between the

⁷ See Mary Carruthers, 'The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions', 210; D. S. Biggins, 'Chaucer's General Prologue, A 467', *Notes and Queries* 7.4 (1960): 129-30; Wayne Shumaker, 'Alisoun in Wander-land: A Study in Chaucer's Mind and Literary Method', *ELH* 18.2 (1951): 77-89, *passim*.

⁸ A long list of critics have regarded Alisoun as a feminist or a 'proto-feminist', see for example, John Finlayson, 'The Wife of Bath's "Prologue"', LL. 328-336, and Boccaccio's Decameron', *Neophilologus* 83.2 (1999): 313-16, at 315; Patricia Clare Ingham, 'Pastoral Histories: Utopia, Conquest, and the Wife of Bath's Tale', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44.1 (2002): 34-46, especially 40-41; Douglas J. Wurtele, 'The "Double Sorwe" of the Wife of Bath: Chaucer and the Misogynist Tradition', *Florilegium* 11 (1992): 179-205, *passim*; Gloria K. Shapiro, 'Dame Alice as Deceptive Narrator', *The Chaucer Review* 6.2 (1971): 130-41, at 140; Doris Enright-Clark Shoukri, 'The Wife of Bath's Parody of Scholasticism', *Alif* 19 (1999): 97-112, *passim*; Peggy Knapp, 'Alisoun Weaves a Text', especially 388-98; H. P. Weissman, *passim*; Elaine Treharne, *passim*; Priscilla Martin, *passim*; Susan Crane, *passim*; and W. David Shaw, 452.

⁹ See Britton J. Harwood, 'The Wife of Bath and the Dream of Innocence', *MLQ* 33.3 (1972): 257-73; Arthur Lindley, "'Vanysshed Was This Daunce, He Nyste Where": Alisoun's Absence in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale"', *ELH* 59.1 (1992): 1-21; Warren Ginsberg, 'The Lineaments of Desire: Wish-Fulfillment in Chaucer's Marriage Group', *Criticism* 25.3 (1983): 197-210, at 198; Dolores Palomo, 305; Gloria K. Shapiro, 139-41; Priscilla Martin, 'The Merchandise of Love', 102; and Patricia Claire Ingham, 35.

¹⁰ Alisoun's incongruities/contradictions are manifold. Priscilla Martin, for example, points out that Alisoun's prologue is 'a strange record of contradictions': 'a story of the woe that is in marriage and a confession of the desire for it, an exhibition of attitudes to sex both generous and mercenary, a history of a woman's struggle for and surrender of mastery, an apology for realism and a yearning for the ideal' (102). Peggy Knapp explores the Wife's incongruities/contradictions by the 'women's roles' this 'garrulous and refractory figure' has played—i.e., she examines Alisoun as 'an exegete and commentator on exegesis', 'an entrepreneur, feminist, temptress, and sociopath', as well as a 'story-teller' and a 'weaver' of discourses (114). W. David Shaw investigates the Wife's prologue as a 'dramatic monologue', alleging that "the Wife's subversive love of contradictions and antinomies...identifies her as a practitioner of double irony" (451). In discussing Alisoun's narrative transition 'between satire and romance', Susan Crane maintains that Alisoun's tale reveals several involuntary shifts from 'queenly power to proverbial foibles [and] from fairy illusion to all-too-solid flesh' (23); Crane also observes the Wife's 'metamorphoses' in the many roles she identifies: from 'antifeminist creation to romancer to clerical scholar and back to militant wife' (26). For more comments on Alisoun's incongruities, see also T. L. 'The Wife of Bath's Fourth and Fifth Husbands and Her Ideal Sixth: The Growth of a Marital Philosophy', *The Chaucer Review* 13.1 (1978): 34-50, at 46; Donald B. Sands, *passim*; and H. P. Weissman, 120.

¹¹ David Parker, 'Can We Trust the Wife of Bath?', *The Chaucer Review* 4.2 (1969): 90-8.

¹² Donald B. Sands, 'The Non-Comic, Non-Tragic Wife: Chaucer's Dame Alys as Sociopath', *The Chaucer Review* 12.3 (1978): 171-82, at 176.

speaker (i.e., Alisoun) and the tone of what she says' (106). To these critics, Alisoun's incongruity reflects the maneuver of our poet's rhetorical skills through which our reading should not be confused but directed to a certain understanding of the narrative purpose.

In addition to the writing strategy mentioned above, some scholars attribute the problem of the Wife's incongruity to various sorts of deficiencies. Melvin Storm, for example, treats the Wife's deafness as her inability to understand well, and by that point explicates why Alisoun's 'polemical prologue' is 'a doctrinal and intellectual muddle' ('Alisoun's Ear' 222). Gloria Shapiro, similarly examining the Wife's argument as a 'muddle', more fairly suggests that Alisoun's misunderstanding of the Scriptures results 'not from a "flawed intelligence"', but rather a lack of training and the inaccessibility of texts (137). To some other critics, Alisoun's 'deficiencies' involve not just the physical aspects, but also the spiritual ones. D. W. Robertson (probably the severest of all Alisoun's critics¹³), forthrightly reproaches the Wife for her lack of morality and asserts that it is Alisoun's 'carnality' that leads her 'to avoid deliberately the spiritual implications of the texts she cites'.¹⁴ By his observation, Robertson seems to propose that Alisoun argues garrulously not to persuade others but herself—a state of mind implied in the construction of a 'dramatic monologue', and a point strangely unobserved by W. David Shaw in his discussion of Alisoun's 'dramatic monologue'.¹⁵

Not every critic puts the blame on Alisoun—as if she were a real character¹⁶—or

¹³ Susan K. Hagen comments: 'Robertson presents probably the most familiar condemnation of the Wife of Bath as a representation of "carnality, with reference both to the Scriptures and to life generally" (*Preface*, 331)' ('The Wife of Bath: Chaucer's Inchoate Experiment in Feminist Hermeneutics', *Rebels and Rivals: The Contestive Spirit in The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Susanna Greer Fein et al [Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991], 105-24, at 119, n. 1).

¹⁴ *A Preface to Chaucer* (N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), 321-22.

¹⁵ See W. David Shaw's discussion of Alisoun's 'dramatic monologue' in his 'Masks of the Unconscious: Bad Faith and Casuistry in the Dramatic Monologue', *ELH* 66.2 (1999): 439-60.

¹⁶ It is a constant argument in the scholarship of the Wife of Bath whether she should be treated as a "real person" or a "fictional character." Esther C. Quinn, in her response to Susan Crane's 'Alison's Incapacity and Poetic Instability in the Wife of Bath's Tale', points out that the failure of Crane's argument is that she treats Alisoun as a 'real person' instead of a fictional character ('Forum Response to Susan Crane's

shies away from naming her creator's faults. Some scholars argue that the incongruity inevitably occurs because Alisoun as 'a real woman' does not exist¹⁷—that is, the Wife, as Arthur Lindley puts it, is just 'a drag act, a female impersonation, a "creature of the male imagination", ... [and] what men produce when they think about women' (4); or, as Donald B. Sands concludes from Robert Pratt,¹⁸ a 'botched-up medieval panorama', inspired variously by 'the anti-matrimonial and anti-feminist heritage of the time, ... folklore and astrological learning, and, on occasion... actual observation of the low comedy in marital adjustment', which is 'magnificent, to be sure, but patchwork all the same' (177). In short, although the Wife of Bath's 'absence'¹⁹ was not specified until Lindley's investigation, scholars have often observed that the Wife is more of an 'unstable combination'²⁰ than 'a character in the modern sense'.²¹

Several critics not just attribute Alisoun's incongruities to the absence of a real character 'in the text', but further explore those incongruities as essentially the poet's presentations of diverse discourses. Peggy Knapp, for example, considers the Wife not only a cloth-maker but a weaver of texts and remarks that '[r]eaders over the centuries have claimed to have a distinct image of Alisoun... which must mean that the various discourses she makes use of are woven persuasively together' ('Alisoun Looms' 124).

"Alison's Incapacity"', *PMLA* 102.5 [1987]: 835)—though Crane herself does not neglect to maintain that Alisoun is 'but a fiction who tells a fiction' (20). However, Mary J. Carruthers and Jill Mann both discuss Alisoun like a real character in medieval times: the former treats her as an emerging entrepreneur (see 'The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions') and the latter as a woman typical of her 'estate' (see 'The Wife of Bath', *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Class and The 'General Prologue' to The 'Canterbury Tales'* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973, rpt. 1987, 121-7]). See also n. 17 below.

¹⁷ Arthur Lindley states: 'The absence of a real woman in or behind this text... is the single most significant fact about [Alisoun's performance]' (3); and Elaine Treharne: 'It is precisely because Chaucer adopts... the stratagem of replicating women's speech that critics and students are so frequently momentarily beguiled into believing they are reading the real words of a real woman' ('The Stereotype Confirmed?' 115).

¹⁸ See *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Albert Croll Baugh*, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961, pp. 45ff) (from Sands, n. 27).

¹⁹ Arthur Lindley maintains: 'Alisoun is a text whose salient feature is incompleteness. If the text can be said to be "about" any single thing, that would be absence of Alisoun herself' (3).

²⁰ Peggy Knapp, 'Alisoun Looms', 123.

²¹ D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer*, 330 (qtd. by Peggy Knapp, 'Alisoun Looms', 120).

Similarly, R. Howard Bloch, by referring to passages from *Roman de la Rose* (cited almost by ‘every misogynist writer of the Middle Ages’), also discovers in Alisoun’s incongruities an exemplification of traditional misogyny ‘reaching back to the Old Testament as well as to Ancient Greece and extending through the fifteenth century’.²² In sum, via the Wife of Bath’s mouth and her arguments against the *auctoritees*, Chaucer in effect displays a discourse on the misogynistic tradition of his time.

In the twenty-first century, critics continue to argue over whether the Wife’s character is a natural presentation or just a patchwork. Actually, it is odd to claim that the Wife as a character ‘does not exist’ or to interpret the Wife’s ‘existence’ by the idea of her ‘absence’. The assumption of discussing the Wife as a ‘non-character’ is not merely in conflict with the concept of characterization but is itself a contradictory thesis against the whole idea of discussing ‘her’. Of course, it is similarly odd to examine Alisoun as a certain real woman in medieval times as if Chaucer simply duplicated a figure he had known from other literary works²³ or real life²⁴ without incorporating any personal insight or innovation. No matter from which aspect, the Wife *is* a character—and a very distinct one.²⁵ Her incongruities, treated as the consequence of a woman’s life education (influenced by a variety of incongruous ideas, such as parental guidance, marriage experience, religious instruction, social/cultural ambience, and so on), are actually presented quite congruously.

This chapter intends to examine the Wife of Bath’s prologue as a manifestation of a

²² See ‘Medieval Misogyny’, *Representations* 20 (1987): 1-24, at 1.

²³ It is often maintained that the Wife is obviously characterized after La Vieille in *Roman de la Rose* (see Edgar S. Laird, ‘The Astronomer Ptolemy and the Morality of the Wife of Bath’s Prologue’, *The Chaucer Review* 34.3 [2000]: 289-99, at 293; Lee Patterson, ‘For the Wyves Love of Bathe: Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the “Roman de la Rose” and the “Canterbury Tales”’, *Speculum* 58.2 [1983]: 656-95, at 666; and Susanne Weil, 30).

²⁴ In a different opinion, Wayne Shumaker, by examining passages closely, especially Alisoun’s travels, believes that the description of Alisoun is ‘drawn from a living original’ (‘Alisoun in Wander-Land’ 79). See also Haldeen Braddy, ‘Chaucer, Alice Perrers, and Cecily Chaumpaigne’, *Speculum* 52.4 (1977): 906-11.

²⁵ As Elaine Treharne remarks: Alisoun is ‘one of the most memorable of all female literary characters’ (‘The Stereotype Confirmed?’ 97).

medieval woman's distorted education. The discussion will be conducted in three parts: the first part explores the Wife's first marriage and her 'carnal' nature in terms of the medieval marriage law and marriage transaction; the second part investigates the garbling of 'the story of the Samaritan Woman' and women's manipulated religious education in medieval times; and the third part treats the fight between Alisoun and Jankyn as a woman's war against the *auctoritees*, and the Wife's deafness as an undeserved punishment from her frustrated educators.

I. The Medieval Marriage Law, and the Wife's 'Carnality'

Experience, though noon auctoritee
 Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
 To speke of wo that is in mariage;
 For, lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age,
 Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve,
 Housbonds at chirche dore I have had fyve—
 (III. 1-6)²⁶

The narrator tells us that the Wife has travelled extensively²⁷ (she is, so to speak, a 'seasoned traveler'²⁸), which indicates that her life education is not confined within

²⁶ All quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by fragment and line numbers.

²⁷ 'And thries hadde she been at Jerusalem;/ She hadde passed many a straunge strem; / At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne, / In Galice at Seint-Jame, and at Coloigne. / She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye' (GP, 463-467). Mary Carruthers, judging from Alisoun's career and financial status, remarks that '[h]er extensive travels at home and abroad are appropriate to her business as well as to her pleasure' ('The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions' 210). However, both Dolores Palomo and Mary Hamel ('The Wife of Bath and a Contemporary Murder', *The Chaucer Review* 14.2 [1979]: 132-39) speculate that Alisoun's pilgrimages (especially the last one to Jerusalem and the one in the text to Canterbury) are penitential journeys possibly suggested by the Church because of the murder of her fourth husband (see also n. 3 above & n. 78 below).

²⁸ See D. S. Biggins, 129. However, Biggins finds it hard to believe that the passage (GP 463-67) simply means that the Wife had travelled abroad frequently, and argues that '[m]oral aberration is surely implied', especially in the last phrase of the passage: 'She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye' (129). I agree that 'she koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye' has an erotic implication, but regarding it as 'moral aberration' is obviously a comment from the patriarchal/chauvinistic point of view since it indicates that sexual adventure is men's privilege. Namely, while sexual experience is usually recognized as a part of a male's growth into manhood (which is the reason why the rapist knight in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale' is not

rooms or communities but comprehensive and diverse at home and abroad. Yet somehow, Alisoun barely touches upon what she has learned from her far-reaching travels.²⁹ In her long preamble,³⁰ she talks mainly of two things: her marriage experience and her quarrels with the misogynistic *auctoritees*. Alisoun's multiple marriages intrigue almost every scholar; they are criticized, mocked, and even scorned. Marrying five husbands, even in the modern open society, is a rare case. Perhaps because of this rarity, many critics merely notice the times of Alisoun's marriage (five), and neglect the age of her first marriage (twelve).

In most modern countries, a twelve-year-old girl is still regarded as a child;³¹ if an adult discovered to have copulated with her, with or without her consent, he will be charged and sentenced. Looking at the Wife's case, what strikes the reader about her first marriage is thus not just the age, but that the age was judicially sanctioned by the Church at that time. James A. Brundage, in his studies of medieval sexuality, states: 'Canonical minimum age for marriage was set very young—at twelve for girls, fourteen for boys'.³² Namely, what we define as illegal and immoral nowadays was commonly accepted as lawful in medieval Europe.³³ The number twelve is probably a

just pardoned but rewarded with a beautiful wife in the end), the Wife's 'wandrynge by the weye' has been judged as immoral.

²⁹ The fact that Alisoun's travels eventually are of no account exposes that travel as part of woman's education—as important as that of man's—is slighted by Chaucer.

³⁰ The Wife of Bath's 'Prologue' is notoriously long; it is actually the longest (856 lines) of all the Canterbury pilgrims' prologues and only two lines shorter (if the Pardoner's query and the squabble between the Summoner and the Friar as interruptions included) than the narrator's 'General Prologue' (858 lines).

³¹ In Europe, she would have just entered the secondary school. In most countries in Asia, she is still in the elementary, year six.

³² See 'Sex and Canon Law', *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, eds. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 33-50, at 39. See also Michael M. Sheehan, CSB, 'The Wife of Bath and Her Four Sisters: Reflections on a Woman's Life in the Age of Chaucer', *Critical Essays on Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. Malcolm Andrew (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991, rpt. 1996), 187-204, at 192-3. A number of scholars have also mentioned this minimum age for marriage, though not discussed the significance of it, for examples, Dolores Palomo (316), Mary Hamel (138), Donald B. Sands (178), and Britton J. Harwood (265).

³³ In ancient China, child marriage was not uncommon, but usually for poorer families: destitute parents who could not afford too many daughters would give one or two away as child brides, but this child bride would be raised like a daughter in her new family and grow up to marry the son or one of the sons of the family. The legal age for marriage was subject to change: it was minimized to fifteen for men and thirteen for women due to the frequent warfares during the 4th-7th centuries as the dynasties need men source,

physiological definition. Michael M. Sheehan, in his study of five representative medieval women and their different stages of life,³⁴ expounds that '[a]t age twelve, young women began to enter their majority....: Valid marriage became a possibility with the completion of the twelfth year' (192). The first stage of majority refers to the time when girls start their periods³⁵. Thus, a girl at twelve is termed marriageable because from then she is considered able to breed.³⁶ Whether a twelve-year-old girl is able to take up the responsibilities as wife and mother is obviously not the concern. In ancient society, women are basically regarded as child bearing machines,³⁷ and the medieval canon law which sets the minimum age for women's first marriage at twelve provides another piece of evidence to the fact.³⁸ Interestingly, most scholars, when discussing Alisoun's marriage life, only impart their knowledge of that law but hardly examine its significance. Perhaps because the law was endorsed by the Church, people tend not to doubt its soundness—even the 'humanistic' Chaucer seems also mindless of its impropriety.

while in Chou Dynasty (mid-11th century to 256 B.C.), it was as late as thirty for men and twenty for women. Nevertheless, besides these two extremities (one for women, the other for men), the minimum age for marriage in ancient China was most commonly twenty for men and sixteen for women.

³⁴ Sheehan categorizes medieval women into five groups: 1) those who were 'landed and free'; 2) those who were from wealthy merchant families (represented by the Wife of Bath); 3) those who were among the peasantry; 4) those who lived in town but of a lowly estate; and 5) those who chose to change their state and became religious (188-9). The different stages of life which Sheehan examines are 'birth', 'childhood', 'girlhood', 'majority', 'marriage', 'widowhood', and 'death and burial'.

³⁵ As research evidence shows, the average age at menarche in medieval Europe is 12-14 (see Darrel W. Amundsen and Carol Jean Diers, 'The Age of Menarche in Medieval Europe', *Human Biology* 45.3 [1973]: 363-369).

³⁶ Very young mothers did not seem unusual in medieval royal/prominent families; John McLaughlin provides a list of them in his study of medieval child marriage: for examples, Bianca of Savoy, Duchess of Milan, was married at age 13 (1350) and gave birth to her eldest son at age 14; St. Elizabeth of Portugal was married to King Denis of Portugal at age 13 and gave birth to three children shortly thereafter; Caterina Sforza was betrothed at age 9, married at age 14, and gave birth at age 15 (see 'Medieval Child Marriage: Abuse of Wardship?' [Paper delivered at Plymouth State College, Conference on Medieval Studies, April 1997]). Notably, although all married at a very young age, none of these real people on the list was married at 'twelve'.

³⁷ See David Aers: 'Marriage was primarily a transaction organized by males to serve economic and political ends, with the woman treated as a useful, child-bearing appendage to the land or goods being exchanged' ('Chaucer: Love, Sex and Marriage', *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination* [London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980], 143-173, at 143).

³⁸ That function needs to be fully utilized in the Middle Ages since Black Death wipes out at least one fourth (some studies say one third or even half) of the population in Europe (see Peggy Knapp, 'Alisoun Looms', 121).

Critics appalled by the narrator's nonchalant tone when mentioning 'sith I twelve yeer was of age' via the loquacious mouth of the Wife usually focus on the problem of Alisoun's character rather than on the problem of the marriage law itself—namely, scholars do not criticize the law which allows a girl to marry at twelve but query the moral character of the Wife who marries at twelve. A number of critics allege that the manifestation of marrying at such young age testifies to the Wife's amorous propensity: getting married so early reveals the Wife's enormous sexual appetite and proves that she is by nature a carnal woman³⁹, a nymphomaniac⁴⁰. Further, Alisoun's huge 'appetite', her being 'gat-tothed' (GP. 468), and her having a 'coltes tooth' (i.e., youthful tastes, III. 602) and a predilection to wander 'by the weye' (GP. 467), to many readers, thoroughly indicate her promiscuity⁴¹ and moral aberrance⁴² as well as her strong desires to control⁴³ and combat⁴⁴. In a word, a long sexual history, in many critics' opinion,

³⁹ See D. W. Robertson (*Preface*, 331); Doris Enright-Clark Shoukri, 109; Donald B. Sands, 173; and Lee Patterson, "'For the Wyves love of Bathe'", *passim*.

⁴⁰ See Britton J. Harwood, 267; and Beryl Rowland, 'Chaucer's Dame Alys: Critics in Blunderland', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 73 (1972): 381-95, at 393 (referenced by T. L. Burton, 'The Wife of Bath's Fourth and Fifth Husbands and Her Ideal Sixth', 34; and Donald B. Sands, 173). By the words 'carnal' and 'nymphomaniac', critics offer various interpretations on Alisoun's sexuality. For example, D. W. Robertson considers Alisoun 'an icon of carnality': 'Chaucer meant her to be taken as such, that his audience could take her only as such, and that any other reception of her is self-delusion' (see Donald B. Sands, 172-3); for Doris Enright-Clark Shoukri, the Wife's 'unabashed, if jolly, carnality' was the poet's intention to 'reject as absurd the attempt to condemn the entire sex by allegations from Authority' (109); Beryl Rowland adduces that the Wife, being 'frigid', 'acts out the role of nymphomaniac in an unconscious attempt to prove sexual normality' (see T. L. Burton, 'The Wife of Bath's Fourth and Fifth Husbands and Her Ideal Sixth: The Growth of a Marital Philosophy', 34; and Donald B. Sands, 173); and Britton J. Harwood demonstrates that the 'welle' from which the Samaritan woman draws water symbolizes the Wife 'thirsts for innocence'—because she is like every nymphomaniac, 'whispering in the dark, "Love me a little"' (266-7). Lee Patterson regards Alisoun's carnality as a rhetorical strategy: in the Wife's version of the story of King Midas, Patterson observes: '[T]he ears have a crucial significance. They are Midas's punishment for his foolish incapacity as a listener: called upon to judge between Pan's satyr songs and Apollo's divine hymns, he all too eagerly chose the carnal before the spiritual, the body before the mind. In discovering the full dimensions of Ovid's original, the reader comes to understand the Wife's strategy'—namely, Alisoun's carnal language is strategically designed for the purpose of exposing men's carnality and their lack of self-knowledge ("For the Wyves love of Bathe" 658).

⁴¹ Most critics take on Alisoun's own words and regard her as promiscuous. T. L. Burton, on the contrary, argues that there is no 'concrete evidence' to show that Alisoun commits adultery, and her boast of sexual qualities 'is a sign of insecurity, particularly with people past their prime, who, recognizing the onset of age and the decline of their faculties, take to basking in embroidered reflections of the feats they can no longer perform' ('The Wife of Bath's Fourth and Fifth Husbands and Her Ideal Sixth', 38-9).

⁴² See D. S. Biggins, 129-30; Edgar S. Laird, 296; and John B. Friedman, 'Alice of Bath's Astral Destiny: A Re-Appraisal', *The Chaucer Review* 35.2 (2000): 166-81, at 171.

⁴³ Alisoun's desire to control signifies in two ways for critics: her determination to gain *sovereynete* in marriage as well as the power of interpreting the biblical texts (see Peggy Knapp, 'Alisoun Looms', 114).

sufficiently implies carnality and dissoluteness, and the Wife, by getting married so young (and later so many times⁴⁵), has left in most readers' minds an ineradicable image of an unchaste, carnal woman. Considering Alisoun's own declaration that she loves sex and that she must have sex ('In wyfhood I wol use myn instrument / As frely as my Makere hath it sent / ... An housbonde I wol have.../ Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral, / And have his tribulacion withal / Upon his fleshh...' [III. 149-57]),⁴⁶ critics thus tend to associate her getting married so young with carnality and neglect the vice of the law.

Carnality actually plays no role in Alisoun's first marriage. In the text, no evidence shows that the Wife's first marriage is urged by a precocious sexual impulse, nor is it indicated anywhere that her first marriage is of her own decision or her first husband her own choice. Alisoun's initial sex education comes from her mother: as several instances show, she is much influenced by her dame in that aspect. For example, when she relates how she affected to Jankyn that she had been enchanted by him, she tells her audience: 'My dame taught me that soutiltee' (III. 576); several lines later when she recalls how she pretended to Jankyn that she had dreamed of him all night, she reveals to her fellow

⁴⁴ Critics often observe that the Wife is the female counterpart of the Knight: her appearance (a hat 'as brood as is a bokeler or a targe' [GP. 471]) and her belligerent spirits strongly suggest a parallel between these two characters (see Lee Patterson, "For the Wyves love of Bathe", 680; Warren Ginsberg, 198; Priscilla Martin, 93; and Dolores Palomo, 318). In addition to this, I want to observe one point: as far as the distance and times of travel ('thries hadde she been at Jerusalem') are concerned, the Wife is no less a crusader than the Knight. Nevertheless, critics' evaluations of these two characters in this aspect are simply inequitable: while the Knight, after the tempering of wars, enjoys the privileged image of a perfect man ('That fro the tyme that he first bigan / To riden out, he loved chivalrie, / Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.../ And evere honoured for his worthynesse' [GP 44-50]), the Wife, after the trials of five marriages, is only regarded as a carnal woman and 'a figure of evil' (Arthur Lindley 14).

⁴⁵ Life in medieval times offers few alternatives for unmarried women (maiden or widow) and they are unappealing. As Sheila Delany points out, 'outside the convent there was little room in medieval Europe for the single woman'; therefore, if Alisoun does not want to take the veil lamenting her deceased husband for the rest of her life, taking another mate—'however repulsive' he is as long as the match is 'profitable'—is actually an inevitable choice ('Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath and *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*, eds. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson [London: Routledge, 1994], 72-87, at 74).

⁴⁶ Since Alisoun emphasizes her 'wyfhood' and that she must have a husband (to enjoy sex), she is not as promiscuous as many critics have claimed (see n. 40 above). Gloria K. Shapiro also remarks: 'The qualification "in wyfhood" is central (149-50) ... it is abundantly clear that for Dame Alice sexual activity is made possible only by marriage' (ibid. 136).

pilgrims that ‘al was fals’: she was merely following ‘[hir] dames loore’ (III. 582-3). Alisoun’s skills in ‘how to catch a husband’, as the instances illustrate, were initiated by her mother, and she remembers her ‘loore’ so well that even at the age when her ‘flour is goon’ (III. 477) she still remembers to attribute that capability to her mother’s instruction. Social values also contribute to this womanly education. As Dolores Palomo suggests, the dream of becoming a bride, the advantages of being a wife, the bliss of having children, and so on—Alisoun’s mother must have filled her little daughter’s tender brain with all kinds of fancies about marriage⁴⁷ so that she could easily marry her off with her innocent consent⁴⁸ upon her immediate completion of the twelfth year. Thus, the Wife, as Peggy Knapp succinctly puts it, ‘was virtually forced to take up wifhood as a career’, ‘like a typical girl of her time’,⁴⁹ rather than pursuing a mate prematurely because of having a carnal nature.

Attributing the Wife’s early conjugation to her carnality—i.e., imagining that Alisoun at twelve craves sex and her elderly mate could well satisfy her—is unrealistic. In fact, Chaucer never believes that sexual harmony could possibly exist between age-gap couples. Via the mouth of the Miller, Chaucer has expounded: ‘Men sholde wedden after hire estaat, / For youthe and elde is often at debaat’ (I. 3229-30). In ‘the Merchant’s Tale’, likewise, the poet has January warned by friends with many examples of ill-matched marriage when January at age sixty suddenly wants to marry. As the stories show, Chaucer punishes these husbands who forget their ‘estaat’ by making them cuckolds.⁵⁰ Could Chaucer admonish his audience that old men should not marry

⁴⁷ Dolores Palomo observes that ‘romantic stories of Arthurian Knights’, ‘old tales of “fayerye” and the elfin’, ‘the legend of the incubus’, and even ‘the custom of St Valentine’s Day’ as well as ‘the vigil of St. Agnes Eve’, and so on (these are also part of Alisoun’s education from her world) may have also contributed to the young girl’s dream of becoming a wife (304-5).

⁴⁸ Michael M. Sheehan, in discussing the validity of marriage in medieval times, stresses that ‘the stereotype of the young woman forced to marry against her will does not stand... [I]t must be understood that...she would have to consent to that union for it to occur’ (194). Namely, Alisoun’s first marriage cannot be legal without her consent even if she was just twelve.

⁴⁹ See ‘Alisoun Weaves a Text’, 392.

⁵⁰ In ‘the Miller’s Tale’, Alisoun sleeps with Nicholas; in ‘the Merchant’s Tale’, May has sex with

young women (because they cannot satisfy them sexually) while at the same time make the Wife marry an old husband at twelve to indicate her carnal desire? At any rate, it is unreasonable to indicate that a twelve-year-old girl would marry an old man for sex; it is more unreasonable to indicate that she would take pleasure in copulating with that old husband. In fact, if the purpose of the Wife's early marriage was to satiate her carnal desire, Chaucer should have made her choose a strong young man instead of an 'elderly impotent dotard'.

Alisoun has not particularized her sexual relationship with her first husband as she mentions the first three collectively. But her situation in her first marriage would not be much different from that of May in 'the Merchant's Tale' or that of her namesake in 'the Miller's Tale'. Indeed, Alisoun's situation could only be worse since she is younger than the other two juvenile brides.⁵¹ Sidney E. Berger, in his discussion of sex in the medieval fabliaux, elucidates May's situation from two aspects: within and without.⁵² 'From without', he writes, 'her situation is amusing... The picture of a young, beautiful, ripe girl sitting in bed watching her ancient husband prepare to take her is quite funny; May herself might have laughed' (169). Surely the audience has laughed, but one doubts whether May is able to laugh. If the Wife's first husband is as old as January, the picture is not at all amusing, or funny, as Berger describes. Listening to that dotard's 'crowing and singing', seeing 'the slack skin on his neck wobble' (Berger 169),⁵³ and watching him prepare to take his twelve-year-old bride—that picture would only make Alisoun tremble. As May and January are characters in a fabliau, their conjugal interaction is

Damyan.

⁵¹ The Miller's Alisoun is eighteen ('Of eighteteene yeer she was of age', I. 3223). We are not certain of May's age, but when looking for a virgin wife, January insists that his bride 'shal nat passe twenty yeer, certayn' (IV. 1417). Since May is able to dupe a husband who has been profligate since youth (IV. 1249-50), she should be much older than just twelve.

⁵² See 'Sex in the Literature of the Middle Ages: The Fabliaux', *Sexual Practices & the Medieval Church*, eds. Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage (New York: Prometheus, 1994), 162-175, at 169.

⁵³ 'The slakke skyn aboute his nekke shaketh / While that he sang, so chaunteth he and craketh' (IV. 1849-50).

purposefully designed to titillate the audience. Even so, looking ‘from within’, Berger admits that May’s situation is ‘dreadful’ since she is doomed to face her ‘senile, wrinkled, cackling lecher... for the rest of his life’ (169). No doubt, the same terrible fate awaits the Wife when she is first married. But few critics consider Alisoun’s getting married at twelve dreadful, and many, disregarding the undertone of her marriage *wo*, treat her declaration of marriage experience as a mere boast of sexual prowess.⁵⁴ The Wife is not as carnal as she appears: she actually considers sex in her first marriage(s) distasteful (‘I tolde of it no stoor’ [III. 203]). Critics who quote Alisoun’s words ‘I laugh whan I thynke / How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke... / I sette hem so a-werk, by my fey, / That many a nyght they songen “weilawey”!’ (III. 201-216) to prove her unrestrained lustful desire simply ignore the vehement tone of this passage. Those blatant words do not imply an enormous sexual appetite but a vengeful mocking of the old husbands’ impotence. Dolores Palomo illustrates Alisoun’s plight and contempt with lucid metaphors:

Just as the pleasurable hallucination imagined in the encounters with the incubus has been replaced by the sordid realities of lecherous friars ... [and] spiritualized erotic fulfillment with either a shining white knight or a good lusty yeoman [by] clumsy copulation with a rich old man ... (304)

Considering the Wife’s mockery of and disillusionment with marriage, her ‘carnality’ has really been over-emphasized.

As marriage often entails the economy of two, or even more families, Alisoun’s early conjugation, besides the vice of the marriage law, also reflects multiple cultural aspects concerning marriage customs in medieval times. The economical duty which Alisoun as a young bride may signify is quite beyond modern people’s conception.

⁵⁴ See for example T. L. Burton, *passim*.

Strictly speaking, the Wife's getting married at twelve is a result brought about by the marriage law and her guardians' considerations of economic interests meant by an early marriage. Although by the medieval law Alisoun is not termed a 'child bride',⁵⁵ her first marriage at twelve is in fact not as common as what we think the law implies. Michael M. Sheehan, in his study of medieval women's marriage, points out: being married at twelve 'was probably not uncommon' for the upper classes, but 'a first union in the mid- or late teens would be more usual' (193). Namely, women being married at twelve, though legal, were not as common as critics have traditionally believed when discussing the Wife's case, and it was especially true to women of the middle or lower classes. According to historians, there are two main reasons why women of the middle or lower classes were more usually married in their mid- or late teens rather than at earlier ages: 1) women from these classes do not need to marry for dynastic considerations;⁵⁶ and 2) their existence within the family is usually regarded as an advantage. Daughters of middle/lower middle class families can help run the family business, do household chores/farm work, or bring in however small incomes they can by being servants, nurses, barmaids, and so on (Michael Sheehan 193-6).⁵⁷ Hence, parents of these classes would normally keep their daughters for a couple of more years before they should find husbands for them—unless the prospective son-in-law promises larger benefits. In sum, for a middle class family, economy is usually the primary concern for the arrangement

⁵⁵ In his discussion of 'child marriage', John Mclaughlin emphasizes that the Wife of Bath's first marriage cannot be seen as a case. He remarks that in the medieval Canon Law, 'child is meant a male or female human being above the age of seven—for either gender—and below the age of fourteen for males, and twelve for females' (See 'Medieval Child Marriage'). By this definition, Alisoun is a young bride (since she has completed her twelfth year), but not a 'child bride'.

⁵⁶ In medieval Europe, political or dynastic consideration is one of the most common reasons (family inheritance is another) for people to marry early. From numerous records, royalties or prominent families 'often arranged their children's marriage at even earlier ages'; for example, in 1396, the widower King Richard II of England married the seven-year-old Isabella of France with a thought to end the Hundred Years War (See 'Medieval Child Marriage'). Eileen Power also points out that weddings 'were often arranged and sometimes solemnized when children were in their cradles' (see *Medieval Women*, 39). See also n. 36 above for more cases of early marriages.

⁵⁷ Alisoun of Bath, being clever, pretty, and shrewd, is even held up as a profitable object by parents in the marriage market (see Sheila Delany, 'Sexual Economics', 74).

of a daughter's marriage. Chaucer's Wife of Bath provides a typical example; her case plainly signifies two possible economic conditions. Firstly, if Alisoun is from a lower middle class family,⁵⁸ like May and the Miller's Alisoun, her marrying a rich dotard means that she will greatly improve her family's economy and secure herself a comfortable life—during her husband's life and after his decease.⁵⁹ Such a match is undoubtedly welcomed by the parents. If it were the case, Alisoun is probably 'sold', as Dolores Palomo observes (316), by her parents in the marriage market for a return of a handsome sum of money or some foreseeable benefits.⁶⁰ Secondly, if Alisoun is from a well-off merchant family, the marriage bargain has to be more appealing since it involves more considerations. Besides her being young, pretty, and clever, Alisoun might have already 'involved in her father's business' (as she is obviously able to read and count⁶¹), like most merchants' daughters (Michael M. Sheehan 192). Being an important asset to her family and with a large inheritance herself, why should her parents want to lose her to an aged man upon her immediate completion of the twelfth year if not for an even larger benefit or satisfactory settlement of inheritance in the marriage transaction?⁶² In either case (Alisoun's seems more likely to be the former),

⁵⁸ Alisoun is definitely not from the upper class. But whether she is of the upper middle or the lower middle, scholars hold different views. Gloria K. Shapiro, when examining Alisoun's character, observes that she is 'sophisticated in her lower-middle class way' (141), while Michael M. Sheehan, judging from the Wife's craft, remarks that the Wife, being successfully involved in the cloth trade, must have 'enjoyed a position within the upper levels of urban society' (188). My opinion is that since she is probably 'sold' by her parents in the marriage transaction, she is from the lower middle but is later elevated to the upper middle because of marrying three rich husbands. In Alisoun, as in the Prioress, we see how medieval women upgrade their social status: one by marriage, the other by becoming religious.

⁵⁹ For women's inheritance rights, see Michael M. Sheehan's 'The Wife of Bath and Her Four Sisters', especially 194-8, the section on widows.

⁶⁰ Sheila Delany elucidates in her 'Sexual Economics': 'It is not only parents who profited from the marriage of their offspring but also the legal guardian, who held the custody or wardship of the marriageable person in return for a fee or tax upon marriage: a form of feudal privilege conferrable by the king' (74).

⁶¹ In discussing the 'young women of the Wife of Bath's group', Michael M. Sheehan observes that in Chaucer's time 'many city women were literate', and at least had learned 'some mensuration' (192). Alisoun says she can read (III. 868), and judging from her knowledge, she appears to have read widely. Anyhow, though not educated in the way the Prioress and the Second Nun have been, Alisoun is definitely not 'an unread widow' as Doris Enright-Clark Shoukri mistakenly calls her (103).

⁶² If Alisoun has no brother, her parents would have to find her a husband who could succeed to the family business (Michael M. Sheehan 194), but in that case, an old husband who is likely to die earlier himself would not be an ideal choice for the family.

economic profit is the parents' primary concern. Compared to the other two young brides (May and the Miller's Alisoun) and from the marriage custom mentioned above, the Wife's getting married at twelve is exceptional, which strongly indicates that Alisoun's parents want to make the most of it when they arrange their daughter's marriage. Judged from this, Alisoun's *wo* does not only reveal her disillusionment and suffering in marriage, but more, on recalling her misused youth (as she sentimentalizes: the 'flour is goon'), her resentment in realizing how she has been regarded merely as a piece of investible commodity,⁶³ handled and bargained by her parents and that prospective husband (whatever his age). Chaucer does not seem unaware of the vice of the marriage law (though it did not prevent him from making profits from it himself)⁶⁴, since he makes Alisoun declare war against the religious *auctoritees* right after her lament. Chaucer's sympathy, however, is ephemeral. He shows his humanistic understanding of the Wife's predicament, but at the same time cannot help taunting 'such a woman'. The little sympathy he shows his Wife eventually makes her become as garrulous as the preachers and clerks around her, and as mercantile as those people who bought and sold her. As far as education is concerned, Alisoun learns well from her lessons/experiences; but in Chaucer's narratives, her demonstration of her education, set off in the context of misogynistic tradition, only turns her into an object of derision to men who have considered women adopting survival skills contemptible.

As the narrator indicates, Alisoun is a successful businesswoman; she is not just

⁶³ Sheila Delany remarks that Alisoun's parents invested her as a 'choice piece of sexual capital' ('Sexual Economics' 74). From another aspect, Priscilla Martin observes: a young, pretty, and fashionable wife is not a waste 'in the merchant's economy' ('The Merchandize of Love' 85). Chaucer in 'the Merchant's Tale' expresses a similar opinion: a merchant clothes his wife richly 'al for his owene worshiþe' (VII 13) and his 'honour' (VII 421)—namely, wives are regarded as investible commodity.

⁶⁴ Sheila Delany elucidates that Chaucer himself was also a beneficiary of the marriage custom at that time in that he had been 'granted the custody of the lands and marriage of the heirs of Edmund de Staplegate', and thus involved in similar transactions and 'made substantial profit on the marriage market' ('Sexual Economics' 74). This historical fact explicates why Chaucer shows little sympathy towards Alisoun's first marriage: although he often poses to attack the customs of his time, he is after all nourished by that culture and to the later generations a representative of it.

good at the art of ‘the olde daunce’ (i.e., ‘remedies of love’, GP 477-8) as the poet mocks at the end of her portrait, but recognized by all a thriving cloth-maker who exports quality fabrics to the two most important cities for textile trade in Flanders (‘Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt, / She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt’, I. 447-48). Mary Carruthers, in her study of the medieval cloth-making industry in England, maintains that clothiers like the Wife of Bath ‘were able to underprice their European competitors to the point of contributing a severe depression in Flanders’ (‘The Painting of Lions’ 210).⁶⁵ Being a ‘capitalist clothier’, as Carruthers calls her (Ibid. 210), the Wife should not surprise the reader by talking of business or talk in a businesslike way. The Wife’s professional propensity, however, is repulsive to many critics. For example, her most quoted statements toward marital sex (‘If that I felte his arm over my syde, / Til he had maad his raunson unto me; / Thanne wolde I suffre hym do his nycetee... For wynnyng wolde I al his lust endure’ [III. 410-16])... ‘Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle; / With empty hand men may none haukes lure’ [III. 414-5]) have always been regarded as ‘vulgar’⁶⁶ and ‘mercantile’⁶⁷. The passage actually indicates that Alisoun was indeed ‘sold’ and ‘bought’ in the marriage transaction and that she knows well the foul play of it, but critics only reproach the Wife’s vulgar mercantilism and disregard who and what initiate her into it. Attacked by critics’ revulsion of this ‘marketplace mentality’ (H. P. Weissman 112) and traditional misogyny, the Wife is traditionally condemned by the clerks’ habitual antagonism towards trades/traders and womankind—Alisoun as a successful businesswoman happens to be both.

⁶⁵ Some other critics do not think so highly of Alisoun’s success; for example, Sheila Delany claims that the Wife is ‘in no position to rival the textile magnates of her time’ and remarks that she is ‘a middle-sized fish in a small pond’ (‘Sexual Economics’ 72). The note in *The Riverside Chaucer* also observes that ‘Chaucer’s praise of the Wife’s weaving is exaggerated... since West-country weavers were not in good repute; a statute of Richard II notes that some of their cloth was so bad that English merchants abroad were in danger of their lives’ (p. 818).

⁶⁶ See Gloria K. Shapiro, *passim*.

⁶⁷ See John B. Friedman, 167; Patricia Claire Ingham, 35; and Priscilla Martin, 97.

The way Alisoun handles marital sex like running a business is no doubt the poet's harshest satire on the Wife's 'mercantile' character. Most scholars, as above-mentioned, believe that it was Chaucer's manifest purpose. However, the satire might be itself a satire; for Chaucer's scoffing not only denigrates women in general by the common belief that women control their men by sex, but also displays the patriarchs' traditional reprobation of women's sexual initiative—and thus unwittingly exposes men's frustration and aversion in face of a sexually independent woman. To solve this situation, imposing intentional (even distorted) moral education on women is a common strategy.⁶⁸ Submission, obedience, and chastity are specified as female virtues, and women are taught to show them no matter under what circumstances, otherwise they will be labeled as 'vicious'. Such is the Wife's quandary: even though her old husbands marry her for sex, she is still expected by all to repay them with love and respect and yield to their desire without grudge because 'St. Paul said so'⁶⁹. If we recognize that the Wife has been judged by men-designated virtues, then it is not hard to understand why she is traditionally condemned—mostly by male critics—as a 'wicked', 'carnal', 'unchaste', and 'immoral' wife.

Actually, the Wife is 'mercantile' only in dealing with her first three old husbands; her attitude toward the last two is totally different. But the difference is oftentimes ignored. Alisoun is shrewd about give and take when she deals with lustful dotards, as

⁶⁸ This is often seen in the medieval deportment books (which will be discussed in the second part of this chapter).

⁶⁹ Chaucer makes the Wife dispute Paul's warning on the danger of carnal pleasure but agree with his explanation of 'dette' in marriage—i.e., the spouse's obligation to give sexual relief and solace. Interestingly, the Wife only considers her husbands' debt to her, not hers to them. Critics point out that this is one of the Wife's everlasting contradictions: on the one hand, she will not give her old husbands sex unless they pay the 'raunson', while on the other she will have a husband who 'shal be bothe [hir] dettour and [hir] thral' and she will have 'his tribulacion withal / Upon his flesh...' (III. 155-7). This point shows that while Chaucer presents Alisoun as a woman who constantly learns from experience, scholars treat her only as a flat character. In fact, Alisoun's sexual triumph in the first three marriages and frustrations in the fourth and the fifth ones are conspicuously contrasted by the narrator. Namely, though she 'in bacon nevere hadde delit' (III. 424) in her first three marriages, she is rather crazy about her fourth and fifth husbands. Treating the Wife's desire as something that never changes/grows in different stages/ages of life reveals a lack of understanding of the female body.

Priscilla Martin succinctly explains:

‘She wants from them (the old husbands) sexual pleasure which they cannot give and financial profit which they can. So she is reduced to trading sex for money: these marriages would otherwise be a double loss to her’. (97)⁷⁰

But Alisoun is not avaricious; if she had a choice, ‘raunson’ would not be her priority. Her fourth and fifth husbands are not rich—she even gives all her property to her fifth husband Jankyn because of love. Alisoun’s generosity is not the kind her old husbands have had for her (a widow’s inheritance) or to exchange for Jankyn’s love; what she gives away is, as Mary Carruthers puts it, ‘the extravagant gift of an extravagant sentiment’ (‘The Paintings of Lions’ 215)—for a canny business woman and the value of her class, ‘the most romantic gesture she can afford’. Alisoun is not a born merchant; nor is she mercantile in the presence of love. And though she is mis-educated by the marriage law and her marriage transactions, she never loses heart in love and marriage (‘Welcome the sixte’, III. 45).

II. The Garbling of the Story of ‘the Samaritan Woman’

But that I axe, why that the fifthe man
 Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?
 How manye myghte she have in mariage?
 ...
 By God, he smoot me ones on the lyst
 For that I rente out of his book a leef,
 That of the strook myn ere wax al deaf. (III. 21-3, 634-6)

⁷⁰ Mary Carruthers also remarks on Alisoun’s ‘business’ from a similar aspect: ‘This bald exchange may strike us as cynical, vulgar, and immoral, but we must remember that by the standards common to her class Alisoun’s behavior is simply shrewd business’ (‘The Painting of Lions’ 211).

The Wife's education is manifold; besides marriage experience, religious instruction and the misogynistic tradition, ubiquitous in medieval times, are also the essential parts of her lessons. In this section, the discussion will focus on two points: the priestly glossing of 'the Story of the Samaritan Woman' and Alisoun's power of understanding. The former concerns Alisoun's education from the contemporary religious doctrines, and the latter what the male *auctoritees* think she should learn.

It is worth noting that the Wife is not married four times, or six times, but five times,⁷¹ exactly the same number as the marriage record of the 'Samaritan Woman' in John 4. The number is not a coincidence but a detail the poet deliberately chooses for Alisoun to argue about how many times a woman can be married. Traditionally, critics think that by referring to this biblical story Chaucer is hinting at the Wife's unchastity since 'Jhesus... spak in repreeve of the Samaritan' (III. 15-6) about her multiple marriages. But if we read the passage in the Bible closely, we will find that the story has been garbled—by Chaucer or the clerkly *auctoritees* Chaucer means to represent. Jesus actually never spoke 'in repreeve of' the Samaritan woman as the Wife is taught to believe. According to John 4:

4:16 Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' 4:17 The Woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 4:18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' (John: 4: 16-18)

This passage shows that Jesus, as far as the concept of marriage is concerned, is liberal

⁷¹ R. F. Fleissner offers a quite philosophical explication of the symbol of the number five in marriage: 'The reason why the Wife of Bath had five husbands may well be then that Chaucer recognized in the Pythagorean endorsement of five... the symbol, not just of the fleshly or earthly love, but of marriage, a point established by Plutarch and derivative from the notion that five was the sum of the first female digit, two, and the first male digit, three' ('The Wife of Bath's Five', *The Chaucer Review* 8.2 [1973]: 128-32, at 130).

and open-minded: he not only regards the five husbands (i.e., with formal marriages) the Samaritan woman has had as her ‘husbands’ but also the one living with her (without formal marriage) her husband, too. Jesus does not at all criticize the Samaritan woman’s marital status, let alone ‘spak in repreeve of’ her; it is the Samaritan woman herself who feels inappropriate (or shameful)—probably made to feel so often—to call the man she is then living with her husband, and Jesus commends her honesty without any moral judgment. In fact, there is even an undertone of apology in Jesus’ commendation, since ‘you are right’ indicates ‘I am wrong’—namely, Jesus frankly admits his mistake after the Samaritan woman’s explication. Yet, from what Alisoun says about the story, it is evident that she never reads the whole story herself, and the parish priests have merely instructed her with selected passages out of the context:

Biside a welle, Jhesus, God and man,
 Spak in repreeve of the Samaritan:
 ‘Thou hast yhad fyve housbondes’, quod he,
 ‘And that ilke man that now hath thee
 Is noght thyn housbonde’, thus seyde he certeyn. (III. 15-19)

Without knowing the context, Alisoun, via the story of the Samaritan woman, is taught to understand one thing only: she ‘ne sholde wedded be but ones’ (III. 13). The garbling of the text no doubt has achieved its educational purpose; but since our poet shows no sympathy for the Wife’s ignorance nor indicates the true meaning of the biblical story anywhere in the narrative, the garbled text therefore exposes the grim thoughts hidden behind the rationale of the religious education for the Wife—and, perhaps, medieval women in general.

If Alisoun had read John 4 herself, she would have discovered that she has missed the entire point of the story. The chapter on the ‘Samaritan woman’ is not at all about

marriage or how many times a woman can be married. Jesus tells the Samaritan woman ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband’ to show that he knows about her (i.e., he is a prophet), not at all to accuse her of having too many husbands. At the beginning of the story—before Jesus’ prophetic statement—the Samaritan woman already asks him some questions (she is as inquisitive as the Wife), and Jesus expounds to her the distinction between physical thirst and spiritual thirst:

Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life. (John 4: 13-14)

The Q-&-A interlocution between the Samaritan woman and Jesus does not concern any one’s marital status; far from that, it carries a profound philosophy upon which much of what we have understood as ‘Christianity’ relies. Yet, except the Samaritan woman’s five marriages, Alisoun learns nothing else about the story. Does she know that the Samaritan woman is the first person to whom Jesus openly reveals himself as Messiah? Alisoun’s confessor or the parish priests obviously have not taught her that. Why? They had better not tell her that, of course: telling the Wife that the Samaritan woman has married five times and is (thus?) the first person who sees the Messiah would simply contradict their intention of educating her about female chastity.⁷²

Some readers might doubt that Alisoun’s misunderstanding is probably the consequence of the provincial priests’ own ignorance of the Holy Scripture. Indeed, critics have often observed that, in medieval times, many parish priests’ education was only slightly better than that of the illiterate: among them, many were unable to read in

⁷² Chaucer’s adoption of the story of the ‘Samaritan Woman’ accidentally presents a contrast between how Jesus treats a woman who has married five times and how the religious *auctoritees* treat the Wife of Bath who also has married five times.

Latin and even not fully familiar with the holy texts.⁷³ Chaucer also mocks such clerics in his narratives, for example the Pardoner and Friar John in ‘the Summoner’s Tale’—both like to tag their speeches with Latin or French words without knowing what they really mean. In the Wife’s case, however, the local priests’ ignorance is not what our poet intends to attack, at least not in the beginning of the Wife’s prologue, since the narrator clearly indicates that those whom the Wife defies are the *auctoritees* (III. 1)—i.e., the clerics who have power to decide what people should learn about the holy texts. Alisoun’s understanding of the story of the ‘Samaritan Woman’ manifests that her religious education is manipulated by those who want her to believe what they want her to believe, and, by the inculcation of the garbled story of the ‘Samaritan woman’, what they want her to believe is: ‘remarriage is unchaste’. Medieval clerks and priests are notorious for their liking of *glosynge*—i.e., twisting or garbling the scriptural texts for instructional purposes or personal needs.⁷⁴ The interpretation of the ‘Samaritan Woman’ the way Alisoun perceives is a distinct example. Does Chaucer know the whole story of the ‘Samaritan Woman’? Or like the Wife, his knowledge of the scriptural texts, at least part of it, is also manipulated by the religious *auctoritees* of his time—namely, the Wife’s version of this biblical story is actually also his? Certainly, it is hard to believe that Chaucer, a clerk himself, never read the whole biblical text. But, if Chaucer knows

⁷³ Peggy Knapp points out that in Chaucer’s age ‘many parish priests knew no Latin beyond the Pater Noster and had to rely on crude vernacular redactions for their preaching and teaching’ (‘Alisoun Looms’ 121). See also Tom Shippey, ‘Bilingualism and Betrayal in Chaucer’s Summoner’s Tale’, *Speaking in the Medieval World*, ed. Jean Godsall-Myers (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 125-44, *passim*. In a way, those provincial priests are, like the Wife, also the victims of improper/insufficient scriptural education.

⁷⁴ In Middle English, ‘to gloss’ means ‘to interpret’, but may also mean ‘to falsify’ or ‘to flatter and deceive’. For detailed discussion on ‘gloss’ in medieval connotation and denotation, see Lawrence Besserman, ‘Glosynge Is a Glorious Thyng’: Chaucer’s Biblical Exegesis’, *Chaucer and Scriptural Tradition*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Ottawa, 1984), 65-73, and Jill Mann, ‘Anger and “Glosynge” in *The Canterbury Tales*’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 76 (1990): 203-23. Alisoun has mocked twice to show her contempt for this clerkly propensity: no matter how the clerks gloss up and down (‘Men may devyne, and glosen up and down’ [III. 25]; ‘glose whoso wole, and seye bothe up and down’ [III. 119]), they are simply deceptive and self-deceiving. In Alisoun’s opinion, the clerks’ penchant for glossing, caused by their sexual suppression and impotence, is merely ‘perverse’: ‘The clerk, whan he is oold and may noght do / Of Venus werkis worth his olde sho, / Thanne sit he down, and writ in his dotage / That wommen kan nat kepe hir mariage’ (III. 707-10).

the whole story and understands the essential teaching of it, while still uses the garbled text to mock Alisoun's concept of marriage/chastity (and misleads his readers at the same time), then he cannot escape from the accusation of being an accomplice of this distorted female religious education.

As Alisoun's 'carnality' is repeatedly investigated and criticized, 'the Wife of Bath's Prologue' can also be regarded as a long discourse on women's chastity. Chaucer's idea of this motif might have been inspired by the crusades and crusaders that had been launched and seen so often during the High and Late Middle Ages.⁷⁵ Indeed, the first pilgrim whom we encounter in the 'General Prologue' is a veteran knight. Chaucer admires this character very much; he describes him as a man of 'trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie' (GP 46) and gives him the first tale to tell. But as a warrior constantly fighting away from home, what might happen to the Knight's wife or what his wife might do sexually during his absence arouses readers' curiosity. Chaucer certainly does not want to make his Knight a cuckold,⁷⁶ and though he has not indicated anywhere how the Knight protects/prevents his wife, he saves no efforts to explicate in the prologue of the Knight's counterpart (i.e., Alisoun)⁷⁷, from the aspect of female education and through the mouths of the *auctoritees*, how a wife's chastity should and can be guarded. The many iron belts exhibited in modern museums tell us what kind of device many an anxious medieval husband like the Knight had used to alleviate their worry. Chaucer's Wife does not need a real chastity belt, since none of her husbands is a crusader; but her independent sexuality, in the view of her educators, needs something similar to curb it. The garbled story of 'the Samaritan Woman' has such a function: the

⁷⁵ According to historians, between 1096 and 1291, there were seven major crusades and numerous minor ones. To counter the expansion of Ottoman Empire in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a number of crusades (eight times) had been declared, too.

⁷⁶ Chaucer treats the fear of being cuckolded as men's major anxiety: John the carpenter in the "Miller's Tale," January (a knight, too) in the "Merchant's Tale," and Thomas in the "Summoner's Tale" all show such anxiety. The Wife's husbands, except the fourth one, also suffer from this unease.

⁷⁷ Critics often observe that the Wife is the female counterpart of the Knight (see n. 44).

teaching of it works exactly like a symbolic chastity belt, which not just moulds Alisoun's concept of marriage, but also reminds her constantly what chastity is and what a chaste woman should be. The Wife's version of the story of the 'Samaritan woman' thus exposes the medieval *auctoritees*' intention to manipulate women's thoughts via the universal religious education at that time. Unfortunately, though Chaucer has indicated that Alisoun's religious education is distorted by the *auctoritees*, in the end he shows no sympathy for Alisoun's misled understanding of the scriptural texts, nor illumination of the true teaching of the story of 'the Samaritan Woman'. Perhaps this is why most critics, following the Wife's way, only focus on her arguments about the 'nombre diffinicioun'⁷⁸ and the function of the 'sely instrument', while never noticed the fact that Alisoun's version of the 'Samaritan Woman' is merely a garbled text, and that her 'muddle' (incongruity) is the result of a poor distorted religious education.

III. His Mouth, Her Ears: The Conflict between the Teaching and the Taught

The story of 'the Samaritan Woman' is not the only text the *auctoritees* use to educate Alisoun about womanly virtues; seen from Jankyn's collection of 'wykked wyves',⁷⁹ it is only the tip of Alisoun's mis-education iceberg. If men need a textbook in hand to educate their wives, Chaucer's collection of 'wykked wyves' is indeed a genius one in the history of female education. In discussing Alisoun's title, 'the Wife of Bath', Priscilla Martin has proposed a question: 'Why is she not called the Clothmaker of Bath? Are we to understand her job as "wiving"?' (92). As the other pilgrims are respectively

⁷⁸ In arguing about how many times a woman can be married, the Wife says: 'God bad us for to wexe and multiplye' (III. 28)—namely, a woman should be married as many times as possible so that she can have many children.

⁷⁹ See n. 84 below.

identified by their professions, Alisoun's title—which indicates her marital status (not even a social status) rather than her profession—is indeed exceptional. Is it because she, having married five times, has really 'made a career out of it', as Martin remarks (92)? Martin's statement concerning the Wife's primary skill is certainly right, but this domestic title has another two implications. The first one truthfully reflects what Jill Mann has observed in her *Estates Satire* that in the Middle Ages women are classified 'not by trade or social rank, but marital status' (121).⁸⁰ In her whole prologue, Alisoun talks of marriage, dreams of marriage, argues about marriage, plans on marriage ('Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal', III. 45); in short, she cares about nothing but what is relevant to marriage. Since she is so immersed in the skill and profession of 'wiving', it is not inappropriate for the narrator to call her 'the Wife' of Bath rather than 'the Clothmaker' of Bath.

The second implication of the Wife's title reflects the major concern of this chapter: women's education. Alisoun's prologue could be read as a manifestation of her wiving experience by which Chaucer demonstrates the most important process of a woman's life education. To specialize as a wife, Alisoun's primary duty is to learn to be a 'good' wife, like the Knight who has learned to be a valiant soldier, the Parson a devout sermonizer, and the Prioress a professional religious, etc. How may Alisoun learn to be a good wife? Chaucer sends her to five schools:

'Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes,
And diverse practyk in many sondry werkes
Makes the werkman parfyt sekirly;
Of fyve husbondes scoleiynge am I'. (III. 44c-44f)

⁸⁰ Susan Crane also expounds that in history women's social status depends on 'their relations to men' rather than their 'professions or work in the world'—hence, they are either 'maidens, or spouses or widows' (22). In Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew* the character 'Widow' is always called by that title even after she is re-married to Hortensio (act V, scene II, *passim*). Namely, "widow" is her marital status when she first appears, and 'Widow' is also regarded as her identity (name) throughout the play.

In Middle English, ‘scoleye’ means ‘to study, to attend the schools of university’.⁸¹ So for Alisoun, each marriage is like a university in which she takes lessons for the theory and practice of wiving, and after completing ‘fyve husbondes scoleiynge’, she attains the degree of perfect wife, just like clerks made *parfyt* by attending ‘diverse scoles’. If we may trust what Alisoun concludes in her prologue: ‘But atte laste, with muchel care and wo, / We fille acorded by us selven two... / After that day we hadden never debaat. / God help me so, I was to hym as kynde / As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde, / And also trewe, and so was he to me’ (III. 811-25),⁸² she indeed has good reasons to consider herself not just a perfect wife but also a perfect woman.

Alisoun’s most assiduous teacher is her fifth husband, Jankyn the clerk, once a student of Oxford (‘He som tyme was a clerk of Oxenford’ [III. 527]). Her first three husbands are merchants; she becomes a shrewd businesswoman because of their training. But Jankyn is a real teacher who instructs her with a genuine textbook in hand—the collection of ‘wykked wyves’. Educating women with textbooks is not uncommon in the Middle Ages. Jankyn’s collection of ‘wykked wyves’ is apparently such a one intended for this purpose. Ironically, as the traditional deportment books and clerical instructions emphasize woman’s gentility, manners, and morality,⁸³ Jankyn’s collection—from eastern legends to western lore, from ancient myths to popular compositions, and from classical examples to contemporary cases—is full of sinful, malicious, scolding, and revolting wives.⁸⁴ These Jankyn reads and preaches to his

⁸¹ See *Riverside Chaucer*, 1286.

⁸² Some critics think that the conjugal harmony, like the magic ending of the Wife’s Tale, is unrealistic and merely Alisoun’s ‘wish-fulfillment’ (See Lee Patterson, “‘For the Wyves love of Bathe’”, *passim*; and Robert J. Blanch, “‘Al was this land fulfild of fayerye’”: The Thematic Employment of Force, Willfulness, and Legal Conventions in Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath’s Tale””, *Studia Neophilologica* 57.1 [1985]: 41-51).

⁸³ Mary Carruthers observes that these deportment books ‘were designed to teach young girls how to be good wives, and the books that have survived tend to stress wifely goodness more than wifely skills’ (‘The Painting of Lions’ 211).

⁸⁴ *The Riverside Chaucer* points out: “Jankyn’s *book of wikked wyves* is a fictional collection of antifeminist and antimatrimonial works written to encourage young men to choose celibacy. Chaucer

elderly wife every night and day as his custom ‘whan he hadde leyser and vacacioun’ (III. 682-3). A twenty-year-old husband inculcating his forty-year-old wife with a book of self-edited material is evidently Chaucer’s parody of the traditional patriarchs who take interest in educating their subordinate daughters and wives. Still, Jankyn’s texts and preaching reflect two cultural phenomena concerning female education in Chaucer’s age: they manifest the misogynistic tradition, mainly nurtured by people like Jankyn, and exemplify how the medieval *auctoritees* twist and manipulate women’s self-value and self-assertion by the pretext of education. Indeed, Jankyn’s incredible preaching—with stories of Clytemnestra,⁸⁵ Livia,⁸⁶ Delilah,⁸⁷ Xanthippe,⁸⁸ Pasiphae,⁸⁹ and the woman ‘a year or two ago who murdered her husband in his bed and then spent the night with her lover in the same bed’,⁹⁰ and such like—not only depicts the absurdity of a young husband who tries to teach his elderly wife how to be a good wife with extreme examples of evil wives, but also displays a long history of the male’s conspiracy in maneuvering women’s self-recognition by means of education. Yet, as Hamel remarks: “Whatever [Alisoun’s] faults, she is not a murderess; however shocking her sexuality, she is no Pasiphae” (138). Alisoun’s final revolt—the summit of the conflict between the teaching and the taught—is inevitable; it is but a natural consequence of such an abusive and ill-meant education.

most likely created it from his own collection of similar materials, possibly bound in one volume according to the usage of the time” (871). There are various sources of Jankyn’s collection as the Wife of Bath notices: “He cleped it Valerie and Theofraste / And eek ther was somtyme a clerk at Rome, / A cardinal, that highte Seint Jerome, / That made a book agayn Jovinian; / In which book eek ther was Tertulan, / Crisippus, Trotula, and Helowys, / ... And eek the Parables of Salomon, / Ovides Art, and books many on, / And alle these were bounden in o volume” (III. 671-681).

⁸⁵ Clytemnestra is the wife of Agamemnon, the King of Argos and Commander-in-chief of the Greek Army against Troy. She murdered her husband when he returned home triumphantly after the sack of Troy.

⁸⁶ Allegedly, Claudia Livia Julia (13 BC – 31 AD) poisoned her husband, Drusus, at the instigation of her lover, Sejanus.

⁸⁷ Delilah is a character in the Hebrew bible Book of Judges. She was the woman whom Samson loved and who caused his downfall.

⁸⁸ Xanthippe is the alleged shrewish wife of Socrates, the Greek philosopher.

⁸⁹ Pasiphae is the mother of the Minotaur, fathered on her by a bull.

⁹⁰ See Mary Hamel, ‘The Wife of Bath and a Contemporary Murder,’ 137.

The Wife's first three husbands hardly preach to her. Besides, she is too familiar with all the platitudes with which men traditionally accuse women or their wives of; thus, before her husbands could really reproach her for anything, she shouts them down by falsely accusing them of vilifying her with those platitudes when they are drunk. In a word, it is easy for Alisoun to overpower her old husbands verbally. But Jankyn the clerk is a particular case: he is difficult and different. Jankyn is difficult because he knows how to play 'dangerous'—i.e, hard to get, and that makes Alisoun desire him more: 'I trowe I loved hym beste, for that he / Was of his love daungerous to me' (III. 513-4). But to Alisoun, Jankyn's biggest charm is that he is different—from her other husbands who are business men and probably lowly educated. Jankyn is a clerk, a former student of Oxford, whose status represents knowledge and wisdom. His attraction therefore is not only the physical aspects which Alisoun reminisces in her narration—curly golden hair ('crispe heer, shynynge as gold so fyn', III. 304), youthfulness (only 'twenty wynter oold', III. 600), and lively sexual performance ('But in oure bed he was so fressh and gay', III. 508)—but a somewhat abstract image which the bourgeoisie admire most when they become well-off and can afford education. Priscilla Martin has described Jankyn's intellectual charm:

This gigolo is invested with the authority of the reading classes. He is a later-day example of a venerable image: the man with the book. Behind him stretches a long tradition, in visual as well as literary art, of such figure as the Evangelists and the Doctors of the Church. For example, Jerome...is usually painted at work on the Vulgate, complete with cardinal's hat and tame lion.
(6)

Ironically the book Jankyn pores over day and night 'whan he hadde leyser and vacacioun' is not any holy text, and his reading is but a parody of the studies of 'the

Evangelists and the Doctors of the Church'.⁹¹ Jankyn's charm as an icon of knowledge and wisdom thus turns out to be just a devil's mask, and his gross teaching worse than Alisoun's first three husbands' lowly mercantilism.

Jankyn is not unaware of good wifely examples. As Alisoun has complained: 'He knew of hem (wykked wyves) mo legendes and lyves / Than been of goode wyves in the Bible' (III. 686-7)⁹²—i.e., he also knows about the stories of good wives. Still, he would rather choose the wicked ones to instruct his wife. Why? Needless to say, constantly telling a woman that 'you are no good' is the most efficient way to devastate her pride and subdue her will. For Jankyn, the case is especially pressing since his wife—older, richer, and more experienced—has all the odds. Therefore, taking educating his wife as his duty and right, and, even more, a means to overpower her superiority, Jankyn tries to make his wife believe, by endless preaching, that she is by nature evil and with a nature to do evil—just like the wives whose stories he has been reading to her—and thus should submit herself to his wise guidance. The purpose of such brain-washing, similar to that of the priestly *glosynge* of 'the Samaritan Woman', is obviously this: to make *her* act according to *his* will.⁹³ Seen from this aspect, the battle between Alisoun and Jankyn should not be treated as a common husband-and-wife struggle for domestic sovereignty as many critics have alleged,⁹⁴

⁹¹ However, we should not suppose that the parody is based on the paintings of Jerome, since the more well-known ones of them are completed after Chaucer's time, for example, the engraving by Albrecht Durer (1514), and the paintings by Antonello da Messina (1475), Domenico Ghirlandaio (1480), Giovanni Bellini (1505), Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1607), and many others.

⁹² This passage literally means that Jankyn knows more about the stories of evil wives than those of good wives in the Bible. But it may also imply that Jankyn is not well-versed in the Holy Scripture as a clerk is supposed to be, which shows that he has no mind for serious study, and that (being an unsuccessful student) explains the reason why he "hadde left scole" (III. 528).

⁹³ Carruthers has pointed out a fundamental lesson in the medieval deportment books: since the husband controls the estate, he 'ought to be and is sovereign and can increase and diminish all'—thus, 'a wife should behave according to her husband's desire' (212). Carruthers examines this point from an economical aspect; my study is from the education of the mind.

⁹⁴ Many critics examine 'the Wife of Bath's Prologue' as a discourse of marital sovereignty (see Knapp, 125; Palomo, 306; Martin, 11-13; and Carruthers, *passim*). Manuel Aquirre Daban, from a political point of view, observes that the motif of 'the Wife of Bath's Tale' is 'the sovereignty of lands', and the rapist knight's quest is essentially 'to solve the riddle of it'.

since Alisoun never wants to be the boss,⁹⁵ but more a woman's war declared against the patriarchs/authorities who mean to subdue and dominate their female counterparts by twisted education.

Many critics, especially feminists, congratulate Alisoun's ultimate triumph over Jankyn's priggishness as well as her strategy in the fight (III. 788-10). If we regard Jankyn's burning of the book and his giving back to Alisoun 'the governance of hous and lond, / And of his tonge, and of his hond also' *atte laste* (III. 814-16) as the Wife's victory, this opinion may be true.⁹⁶ But if we examine what the fight has cost Alisoun and what that dear price signifies, we soon find that her winning is equivocal.

The fight between Alisoun and Jankyn is one of the most hilarious episodes in the Wife's prologue; it is dramatically described, and generations of readers have been amused by its comic effect. But the funny description—"the knockabout humor of the Punch and Judy show" as Priscilla Martin puts it (11)—is not at all funny if we perceive the brutality and absurdity behind it. Alisoun reveals that it is not the only time her young husband beats her up; the physical pain he has often caused her, even after he is long gone, still vividly dwells in her memory and stays on her flesh: 'That feelee I on my ribbes al by rewe, / And evere shal, unto myn endyng day/ ... he hadde me bet on every bon' (III. 506-11). Surprisingly, Jankyn the clerk, though handsome, gracious, and educated, is in truth not just a gross preacher but also a callous wife beater. 'Who wolde leeve, or who wolde suppose / The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne?' Alisoun laments (III. 786-87). Most readers hear her complaint without recognizing its implication. Indeed, even when Alisoun passes out in the fight because of Jankyn's

⁹⁵ Alisoun says that she marries her fifth husband for love, not for wealth ("Which that I took for love, and no riches," III. 526); after they are married, she not only treats him well but gives him all her money ("And to him yaf I al the lond and fee," III. 630)—in short, she entrusts her person and wealth to Jankyn's protection.

⁹⁶ Pathetically, this is the lesson Alisoun learns from her fifth husband. As Carruthers explicates: "sovereignty is the power of the purse"—from her last marriage, Alisoun realizes that "sovereignty is synonymous with economic control" (214).

strike, some readers still think that she is feigning,⁹⁷ slighting the fact that because of that smite on her head, one of her ears has lost its hearing for good. At any rate, the ‘knockabout’ scene in which a forty-year-old wife beaten up by her twenty-year-old husband is not funny, but only absurd. And the domestic violence reflected by that scene truthfully depicts the brutal means which many husbands (modern or ancient) resort to when they feel powerless to deal with their vexed wives.⁹⁸ ‘Who wolde leeve, or who wolde suppose / The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne?’ Jankyn, apparently, never understands the pain and the woe his wife feels in the heart. Do most modern critics understand? Does our poet? Although some readers have queried whether Chaucer ‘was or was not woman’s friend’ (Delany 83),⁹⁹ few critics ever doubted that he is a humanistic poet.¹⁰⁰ Yet, from the ill-conceived humor of the “knockabout” scene, it is quite a danger (even “self-delusion,” to borrow Robertson’s words)¹⁰¹ to consider Chaucer sympathetic over women’s predicament. For, though he gives the Wife chance to argue with her oppressors face to face from equal positions, in the end she deserves nothing but a punch.

As mentioned above, owing to the ill-conceived humor, many critics fail to recognize the true significance of the Wife’s injury; that failure, consequently, leads

⁹⁷ See for example Britton J. Harwood, 270.

⁹⁸ In discussing attitudes toward marriage in *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, David Aers refers to the work’s account of a wife who answered her husband back: in response, he ‘smote her with his fyste to the erthe, and smote her with his foote on the vysage so that he brake her nose by which she was ever after disfygured. And so by her ryotte and ennoye she gat her a croked nose, moche evyll’ (145). The story is from Geoffroy de La Tour Landry’s *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, tr. W. Caxton, ed. M. Y. Offord (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), at 197. Compared to Landry’s wife, Alisoun seems luckier. But both stories, as Aers points out, present ‘[t]he celebration of male violence at the slightest challenge to the male ego’, which manifests Chaucer’s prejudices against women in marriage discussed in this chapter.

⁹⁹ To answer that question, Delany suggests that we should look at “the systems within which a late-medieval courtly writer was permitted to be woman’s friend, and the systems within which he was not permitted.” Delany’s conclusion is that Chaucer “both ‘is and is not’ the friend of woman” (83). Namely, although Chaucer tries to be wise and fair, the words he occasionally drops here or there show that he is after all a representative of that culture in which he was nurtured.

¹⁰⁰ Chaucer is widely hailed as a “medieval humanist,” a “liberal humanist,” a “humanistic thinker,” etc. (see Carolyn Dinshaw, 90; John C. Hirsh, 41; Allen C. Koresky, 11; Richard Rex, 129).

¹⁰¹ See n. 40.

many readers to a mis-comprehension and then mis-interpretation of Alisoun's deafness. According to traditional exegetic theories, ears and hearing are equated with the comprehension of truth; Alisoun's deafness is thus often treated as her inability or resistance to such comprehension. Melvin Storm, for example, remarks that 'if the ear is taken to represent understanding or the means to the perception of truth, deafness must connote an understanding that is in some way impeded' ('Alisoun's Ear' 221). W. David Shaw similarly observes: '[I]t is a pity [that Alisoun] could not have heard better, because then she might have been a better listener' (451). And Warren Ginsberg, though more sympathetic in tone, also agrees that Alisoun's partial deafness indicates that she 'hears only what she wants to hear' (198). In sum, to many critics, Alisoun's deafness implies either her inability to understand well or her reluctance to listen to truth or reason. These comments appear sensible, but they appear sensible only when we assess Alisoun's hearing ability from the *auctoritees*' view. And that view, like the garbled version of the 'Samaritan Woman', is twisted and unreliable. We must note that Alisoun is not born deaf; before forty, she hears well—maybe too well. Her keen and active response to whatever she hears is rarely seen in any female character before her, and her good hearing is explicitly demonstrated in her ability to doubt and debate whether what she hears is true or not. Therefore, attributing the Wife's 'misunderstanding' to her deafness, one not only misses the true significance of her loss of hearing, but also exposes a mistake which many modern critics have made but are unaware of: i.e., when critics claim that Alisoun has an impediment in understanding,¹⁰² they have unconsciously sided with Chaucer's *auctoritees* in presuming that Alisoun should hear whatever men want her to hear, otherwise she has no ability/right to hear (thus she

¹⁰² Alisoun's argument about how many times a woman can marry shows that she actually understands Jesus' words better than the priests who have garbled the religious texts for instructional purpose (as discussed earlier), and her argument that the functions of our 'sely instrument' are both 'for office and for ese' (III. 127), though gross, is, in my opinion, practically to the point.

deserves to become deaf)—the only difference, perhaps, is that while Chaucer’s *auctoritees* think Alisoun cannot understand their “truth” because she is a woman,¹⁰³ modern critics consider that it is because she lacks the ability to hear well. Actually, equating Alisoun’s deafness with her understanding is a muddle. Are foul stories of women’s ill-deeds—gleaned from historical, biblical, or mythological sources—and the infamous priestly glossing—often based on garbled texts—truths? Unless we agree that what Jankyn has been preaching to his wife is ‘truth’, and what the religious *auctoritees* have instructed her with is nothing but ‘truth’, the opinion that Alisoun ‘misunderstands’ (or resists) truth because she is deaf cannot be tenable. In fact, when critics choose to side with Chaucer’s *auctoritees* in believing that the Wife should certainly listen to men’s reason, they have revealed a serious fault in judgment: they have unwittingly mistaken Jankyn’s preaching and the whole misogynistic tradition as well as the conventional priestly glossing for ‘truths’. And this fault, paradoxically, has been the theoretical backbone of interpreting Alisoun’s deafness for the past many decades.

We should be aware that Alisoun’s deafness is not an innate impediment, but an imposed physical deprivation. Her loss of hearing therefore connotes some significance deeper than many critics have traditionally alleged. Like children who get slapped on the ears by teachers or parents because of being untoward, Alisoun, similarly, is hit and made deaf by the representative of *auctoritees* for the same reason.¹⁰⁴ To think one step further, the Wife’s offense is not only because she does not listen to men’s reason, but more because—considering her endless queries and disputes—she is too inquisitive about what her educators make her hear and has a propensity to expose the true face of what she has been hearing. Alisoun’s defiance thus is not just disturbing to the

¹⁰³ See Alcuin Blamires, ‘The Wife of Bath and Lollardy’, 227.

¹⁰⁴ In Confucian principles, children and women are put in the same category—both need to be edified and supervised by ‘men’ (parents and husbands). Deduced from Alisoun’s case, the concept of men being the teaching and women/children being the taught seems also prevalent in the western civilization.

auctoritees; it virtually creates a danger in the male-dominated society, threatening to tear down its existent construction and then reconstruct the conventional distribution of diverse interests, specifically men's advantage of being the privileged sex as well as their right to preach and gloss the holy texts—i.e., their authority for the interpretation.¹⁰⁵ To remove that threat, Jankyn the clerk, the representative of the patriarchal authorities, resorts to violence in order to shut the woman up. But since he cannot cut off her tongue—as King Tereus did to Philomela in the ancient myth¹⁰⁶—he blocks up her ears instead. The logic of this devastation is this: if the Wife could not hear any more, then she would not have so many annoying questions and arguments any more—namely, she would not continue to discover and uncover the ‘untruth’ in the male *auctoritees*’ preaching and glossing any more.

Alisoun's loss of hearing has traditionally been viewed as a punishment,¹⁰⁷ and this point is widely accepted by modern readers. But Alisoun does not deserve this severe castigation, for in her long struggle with Jankyn (and the *auctoritees*), she is always the provoked, never the provocative, party. Besides, if we recognize that in the Wife's case what we really face is not just the quandary of Alisoun, but that of her sex, her injury then cannot be regarded as an individual issue. Indeed, Alisoun's deprivation

¹⁰⁵ ‘The authority for the interpretation’ does not refer to a set of patristic reading of the holy texts, but signifies the controlling power of institutional interests (for detailed discussion, see Knapp, especially 116-20). Knapp also observes that Alisoun's arguments against priestly glossing early in her prologue ‘very pointedly pose the problem of controlling biblical interpretation in an age of increasing lay literacy’—the increasing lay literacy, which affects the partaking of knowledge and then the redistribution of political, economical, and religious interests, is a threat to the *auctoritees* in medieval times.

¹⁰⁶ In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Tereus, King of Thrace, raped Philomela, a sister of his queen, when he escorted her to Thrace for a visit. Philomela threatened to expose his crime, which incited Tereus to cut out her tongue. Being speechless, Philomela still found a way to express her wrong: she wove a tapestry (a woman's writing, in a way) that told her story and had it sent to her sister, Queen Procne. For revenge, Procne killed her son by Tereus and served him to Tereus who unknowingly ate his own son. In the end, all three were changed into birds by the Olympian gods. Philomela's and Alisoun's injuries are two classic examples (one is made dumb; the other deaf) which show the various ways that men have used to shut women up.

¹⁰⁷ Douglas J. Wurtele has expounded that in the traditional patristic doctrines, to ‘control and punish women, particularly their bodies and their dangerous disruptive sexuality was ... man's work’ (181). Storm also states that the blow is a punishment since Alisoun is deaf ‘especially to virtuous speech’ (‘Speech, Circumspection, and Orthodontics’ 125). To these critics, either from the aspect of a husband's job/duty or a wife's ignorance of virtue, Alisoun, being ‘unchaste’ and unable to perceive ‘truth’, needs to be punished.

does not only reveal the *wo* and *pyne* she personally suffers; it also manifests the injustice and brutality which the inferior sex often have to endure when they are considered disobedient by the patriarchs. Thus, to say that Alisoun's deafness symbolizes her poor understanding is not a righteous opinion on the significance of such a deprivation. To make it worse, that opinion even exposes a dark mindset commonly shared by men who seek to justify their verbal and physical violence when it occurs: when a woman is beaten, it is certainly her fault.¹⁰⁸ This is why Alisoun's deafness has always been treated as her own deficiency, never as an imposed injury, and her being made deaf by a blow—it serves her right since “she asks for it”—in many male critics' eyes, a scene to be mocked rather than an unfair, undeserved retribution to be sympathized with.

Although many critics point out that the fight between Alisoun and Jankyn reflects the domestic struggle for marital sovereignty, from the aspect of education, it is primarily about the discrepancy and disputes between the teaching and the taught. In Alisoun's long preamble, the priestly glossing, the misogynistic writings, Jankyn's preaching, and Alisoun's final revolt all significantly demonstrate the conflicts that have inevitably occurred because of the many oppositional concepts between the patriarchs/*auctoritees* and the women they intend to form/reform. These conflicting ideas—which, to put it simply, are mainly about how men think women are and how women think themselves are as well as what men think women should be and what women think they want to be—expose not just Chaucer's but medieval *auctoritees'* many prejudices against women in general. Alisoun's loss of hearing has nothing to do with her power of understanding; contrarily, it symbolizes that her access to truth is

¹⁰⁸ To quote Jankyn's final words after the fight: ‘Deere suster Alisoun, / As help me God, I shal thee nevere smyte. / That I have doon, it is thyself to wyte,’ (III. 804-6). Although the man apologizes for his violence, he does not forget to remind the woman that ‘it is yourself to blame’.

divested and her ability to enjoy the pleasure she cherishes is shattered.¹⁰⁹ The merciless impact on her head thus discloses the most horrid aspect of woman's education: i.e., the purpose of woman's education is to enhance man's comfort, therefore she can only learn within the limits and rules set by men; should she happen to trespass or question them (as Alisoun always does), a blow will come to lay her low. Certainly, that punishment is also a part of her education, an essential lesson which she must keep in mind if she wants to remain sound and safe alive.

IV. Conclusion

Many critics observe that the Wife has learned much from her marriages, but none has examined Alisoun's (auto)biography as a manifestation of a woman's life education. From how the Wife's youth is dictated by the marriage law, how she handles her first three husbands for their money, how she gets revenge on her fourth one for his unfaithfulness, how she struggles with her number five to finally gain back her property and dignity, and how she fights against the *auctoritees*, we realize how Alisoun step by step becomes the woman she is when we encounter her on the pilgrimage to Canterbury. In Alisoun's education, we also observe how a woman's life is affected by the prejudices of her misogynistic, chauvinistic educators (especially distorted religious instruction and gross preaching). Alisoun does not learn through kindly guidance or appropriate mentoring. In the process of the ill-meant education, she is mainly exploited as a young bride, crooked as an innocent believer, and oppressed as a disobedient wife; and, worse of all, her protest and uprising eventually incur a physical impact so traumatic that her access to the simple joy of music and the grave truth of God's words

¹⁰⁹ Alisoun tells her audience that she loves singing and dancing when she was young ('How koude I daunce to an harpe smale / And synge, ywis, as any nyghtyngale', III. 457-8).

are eternally destroyed.

Paradoxically, we cannot say that Alisoun's education is a failed one; through much *wo* and *pyne*, she has grown strong and tough, wise and mellow, tolerant and easy to get along with¹¹⁰—in short, she has acquired commendable maturity in her character, like most people who have passed through many hardships and crucibles of life. It is a pity that Alisoun's travel experience is in the end trivialized by the poet, which indicates another prejudice of Chaucer's: to him, the Knight, after the tempering of travel, becomes a man of 'trouthe and honour', while the Wife, whose travel, to the poet, is merely 'wandrynge by the weye', grows into a dissolute and carnal woman. Still, we may easily discern that the Wife's knowledge and insight are relevant to her travels, and that precious learning accidentally reflects a fact: a woman's best education in life does not come from her biased educators, but from her own incessant quest and self-exploring.

¹¹⁰ The Wife answers the Pardoner's sarcastic query good-humoredly (III. 169-89) and lets the Host shout down the interruption of the Summoner and the Friar instead of doing it herself (II. 856-59).

Chapter 4

The Pardoner's 'Coillons': A Prejudiced Discourse of Medieval Sexual Normalcy

According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'prejudice' means a 'preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience', or a 'dislike, hostility, or unjust behavior deriving from unfounded opinions or beliefs'. This definition is most crucially demonstrated in Chaucer's characterization of the Pardoner, especially the depiction of this pilgrim's appearance, sexuality, and moral character as well as the correlations between the traits. Chaucer's prejudices against the 'different' here are presented through his (mis-)conception of the non-heterosexual—the 'deviate', the 'perverse'. The power struggle between the masculine Host and the seemingly effeminate Pardoner, the Host's threat to emasculate the Pardoner, and the pilgrims' expulsion of the seemingly non-heterosexual Pardoner from the community reflect not just the narrator's but medieval people's hatred and fear of the alleged 'abhominable synne'. The poet's prejudices against the effeminate/feminine are also manifested through his negligence of the lady pilgrims when he makes 'al the peple lough' after the Host's insult of the Pardoner as well as his approval of the patriarchal, masculine, and authoritative punishment of the effeminate. Chaucer's characterization of the Pardoner, like those of the pilgrims discussed in previous chapters, is primarily based on many shoulds and should-nots, and modern critics also investigate the Pardoner according to the preconceived criteria: for example, how a man should look, how women should respond to men's doing, what sexual normalcy should mean, and so on. This chapter will examine Chaucer's prejudices against the 'different', the 'perverse', and the non-heterosexual via the depiction of the Pardoner as well as the injury and disharmony

caused by the prejudices.

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At the end of his prologue, the Pardoner brazenly proclaims that he is a ‘ful vicious man’: ‘By God, I hope I shal yow telle a thyng / That shal by reson been at youre likyng. / For though myself be a ful vicious man, / A moral tale yet I yow telle kan’ (VI. 457-60).¹ Although what this quaestor wants to emphasize is that he, though ‘vicious’, is capable of moral instructions, he is still traditionally recognized as the ‘most sinful’ of all the Canterbury pilgrims,² and because of the narrator’s notorious implication of the absence of his ‘coillons’ (‘I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare’ [I. 691]), his sinfulness and vice are thus constantly related to his ‘sexual abnormalcy’. Critics take further interest in what kind of physical/sexual abnormalcy it might be, and thereupon produce diverse speculations of what that abnormalcy signifies in every aspect of this character: his appearance, his occupation, his role among the Canterbury pilgrims, his significance in human sexual history, his wonderfully-told moral exemplum³, and so on and so forth.

¹ All quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); subsequent references are cited parenthetically by fragment and line numbers.

² See Robert S. Sturges, *Chaucer’s Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), 47. The Pardoner as well as his fellow pilgrims have often been called ‘sinful’ by critics, see for example, Lee Patterson, ‘Chaucerian Confession: Penitential Literature and the Pardoner’, *Medievalia et Humanistica* 7 (1976): 154-69, at 168; Janette Dillon, ‘Chaucer’s Game in the Pardoner’s Tale’, *Essays in Criticism* 41.3 (1991): 208-21, at 217; Gregory W. Gross, ‘Trade Secrets: Chaucer, the Pardoner, the Critics’, *Modern Language Studies* 25.4 (1995): 1-36, at 6; and Eugene Vance, ‘Chaucer’s Pardoner: Relics, Discourse, and Frames of Propriety’, *New Literary History* 20.3 (1989): 723-45, at 741. In the Pardoner’s eye, however, the foremost sinner is the Host, Harry Bailly, who, as the Pardoner declares, is ‘moost envoluped in synne’ (VI. 942).

³ The question readers often ask is: ‘why does this immoral person tell a moral tale?’ The Pardoner’s tale is lauded by many critics; for example, George Lyman Kittredge calls it ‘a beautiful story, wonderfully told’, ‘a story that no one can read without emotion’, and ‘one of the best told tales in the whole collection’ (‘Chaucer’s Pardoner’, *The Atlantic Monthly* 72 [1893]: 829-33, at 830, 832, 833); see also Jeffrey Rayner Myers, ‘Chaucer’s Pardoner as Female Eunuch’, *Studia Neophilologica* 72.1 (2000): 54-62, at 59; and Lee Patterson, ‘Chaucerian Confession’, 163. For different opinion, see Gordon Hall Gerould (*Chaucerian Essays*, [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952]), who contends that the Pardoner’s presentation is ‘drunken buffoonery’, ‘a disorderly sermon’ (66-67, referred to by James E. Hicks, ‘Chaucer’s Inversion of Augustinian Rhetoric in the *Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale*’, *Essays in Medieval Studies* 3 (1986): 78-98, at 78).

What happens to the Pardoner's 'coillons'? What on earth is his sexual propensity? By speculating about the narrator's jibe some critics infer that the Pardoner is a eunuch (castrated or born without testicles);⁴ others claim that he is a homosexual or bisexual (of the effeminate type);⁵ still others argue with intriguing opinions, such as that he might be a hermaphrodite,⁶ a feminoid,⁷ a mannish woman,⁸ or a female transvestite.⁹ Looking at these striking words, the Pardoner's sexuality, indeed, could not have been more diversely and thoroughly explored. However, after examining the sexual puzzle of this 'noble ecclesiaste' (I. 708), I find one piece is probably still missing.¹⁰ The Pardoner's sexuality has been investigated from many perspectives as the variety of terms above have shown: medical, anatomical, physiognomical, exegetical, cultural, and religious; yet, the Pardoner's sexuality was never examined from his own point of view. Namely, critics label this pilgrim with various sexual terms and judge him by what they

⁴ The trend started early in last century when Walter Clyde Curry claimed in 1919 'to have discovered the Pardoner's "secret"'; Curry alleged that the Pardoner's glaring eyes, small voice, beardless cheek, and thin hair 'would have been recognized by a contemporary audience as the marks of a *eunuchus ex nativitate*' (i.e., a natural eunuch: a man born without testicles). Many critics have referred to Curry's investigation, though not all of them agreed with his diagnosis, for example C. David Benson ('Chaucer's Pardoner: His Sexuality and Modern Critics', *Medievalia* 8 [1982]: 337-49, passim); Richard Firth Green ('The Sexual Normality of Chaucer's Pardoner', *Medievalia* 8 [1982]: 351-59, at 352); Beryl Rowland ('Chaucer's Idea of the Pardoner', *The Chaucer Review* 14.2 [1979]: 140-54, at 140-42); Robert P. Miller ('Chaucer's Pardoner, the Scriptural Eunuch, and the Pardoner's Tale', *Speculum* 30.2 [1955]: 180-99, at 180-85); and John B. Friedman ('Another Look at Chaucer and the Physiognomists', *Studies in Philology* 78.2 [1981]: 138-52, at 138-39).

⁵ The most famous critic who holds this view is Monica E. McAlpine; her article 'The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters' (*PMLA* 95.1 [1980]: 8-22) has inspired a stream of discussions on this topic for the last three decades.

⁶ Beryl Rowland, drawing her evidence from animal imagery (the hare and the goat being regarded as hermaphroditic), concludes that the Pardoner is a 'testicular pseudohermaphrodite of the feminine type' ('Animal Imagery and the Pardoner's Abnormality', *Neophilologus* 48 [1964]: 56-60, at 58). To many readers, Rowland's term might be confusing rather than clarifying the Pardoner's sexual nature. Donald R. Howard also regards the Pardoner as a hermaphrodite, but a *male* one (note on the Pardoner, *Riverside Chaucer*, 824).

⁷ See Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, at 344, referred to by many critics).

⁸ See *Riverside Chaucer*, 824.

⁹ See Vern L. Bullough, 'Medieval Masculinities and Modern Interpretation: The Problem of the Pardoner', *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray (New York: Garland, 1999), 93-110, at 100. Jeffrey Rayner Myers also refers to the 'transvestite saints' (cross-dressing women) in literature as well as life in the ancient times to demonstrate the Pardoner's true sexual identity as a 'female eunuch'.

¹⁰ But one must admit that even all the pieces are gathered and each and one put in its right place, the Pardoner's sexuality will perhaps always remain a 'puzzle'.

call him, but never investigate how this character identifies himself sexually from his stance. This is perhaps why, though readers have imagined many possibilities of the Pardoner's sexual oddity (especially after the 1980s when people have grown more liberal about all types of sexuality), they often show hesitation in relating them to his vice while keep doing so.

This chapter intends to examine the Pardoner's sexuality, too; the goal, however, is not to define what kind of sexuality the Pardoner is, but to inspect how he, with whatever kind of sexuality, is forced to conform himself to the mainstream—i.e., the masculine and heterosexual norms—in his time as well as our own. 'Bullying' might be too modern a word to describe what this 'ful vicious man' has encountered, but I argue that, in Chaucer's world, the Pardoner, pressed by the prejudices of the cultural ambience, religious doctrines, social customs, and common heterosexual values, cannot be anything but struggle to be a man, a 'true' man, as defined by the world he lives in. From the perspective of either gender or sex, the unitary sexual norm the Pardoner is forced to identify with is simply a phallogentric one. Accordingly, no matter the Pardoner is by nature homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, effeminate, or womanish, he has to be masculine, and whether he is a eunuch, a transvestite, a hermaphrodite, or a person with small or normal-sized, warm or cold testicles,¹¹ he can but choose to be a

¹¹ Several critics have offered opinions about the size and temperature of testicles to explicate the Pardoner's 'effeminate' appearance. John M. Bowers informs that 'a heavy diet of alcohol over a span of years reduces the production of a man's testosterone and can result in shriveled testicles and erectile impotence, as well as the acquisition of certain female features such as beardlessness, a high-pitched voice, and even enlarged breasts' ("Dronkenesse Is Ful of Stryvyng": Alcoholism and Ritual Voice in Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale", *ELH* 57.4 [1990]: 757-84, at 768). Henry Ansgar Kelly also attests the small size of the Pardoner's testicles by speculating the mass of the 'hogges toord' (VI. 955) the Host suggests: 'the Host's ironic offer to assist the Pardoner does not seem to imply that the Pardoner has been castrated (and is therefore a literal gelding) or was born without testicles (like a mare), but rather that his testicles are "thynges smale", since, as we know from both historical and contemporary coprology, the porcine faex is normally of rather modest proportions' ('The Pardoner's Voice, Disjunctive Narrative, and Modes of Effemination', *Law and Religion in Chaucer's England* [Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2010], 411-44, at 412-13). Alastair Minnis from another aspect points out that the Pardoner 'did not have to be a *castratus*, or indeed any kind of eunuch at all, to lack the capacity to grow a beard; a cold and humid complexion in general, and cold testicles in particular, would have done the trick' ('Chaucer and the Queering Eunuch', *New Medieval Literatures* 6 [2003]: 107-28, at 114). Minnis then concludes that '[n]ature is eminently capable of producing a wide range of biological configurations:

man. From the Pardoner's enforced sexual identity, we see that the sexual anxiety displayed on this character by the narrator is not a secret singularly detected by the poet alone: when the Pardoner's 'secret' is 'out' into the public domain, that same anxiety which the Canterbury pilgrims anyway do not care to hide at once divulges itself and then soon draws forth its analogue from many modern minds. We also see, to cover up and release that anxiety, how the Host's threat (to cut off the Pardoner's 'coillons') together with the pilgrims' laughter and many modern critics' conviction (that the Pardoner's 'abnormalcy' is evidence of his vice) collectively thrust the Pardoner back to what they think he is and where he 'should belong'.

The Pardoner is not a marginal but a marginalized character.¹² Both his prologue and tale demonstrate how he, to authenticate his existence, tries every means to conform himself to orthodox sexual identity. Yet his arduous conformity eventually proves to be only in vain as the event at the end of his tale shows. His failure, manifested by the narrator's mocking, the Host's insult, and the pilgrims' laughter, reveals people's denial of him on all sides. Driven by this universal resistance, the Pardoner is not just a

womanly women, manly women, hermaphrodites, womanly men, manly men; men with one, two or no testicles, with large, medium-sized or small testicles...'; thus, terms such as 'normal', 'abnormal', 'heterosexual', and 'homosexual' would only 'obscure rather than clarify medieval thought about gender' (Ibid. 128).

¹² Whether the Pardoner is marginal or marginalized, critics have different opinions. John M. Bowers alleges that the Pardoner is a 'spiritual desperado', like the Old Man in his tale, 'wandering around the margins of society...' ("Dronkenesse Is Ful of Stryvyng", 778). Derek Pearsall, commenting on the kiss of peace between the Host and the Pardoner, writes: 'For all readers there seems to be the consciousness of a challenge to rescue the Pardoner from moral responsibility for his depravity, to enter psychological pleas for mitigation, and to re-enroll him in the margins of humanity' (*The Canterbury Tales* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1985], 95). For both Carolyn Dinshaw and Linda Georgianna, the Pardoner is at first marginal and at the end marginalized: 'The Pardoner has been viewed initially with uncertainty; when he first opens his mouth, he's repellent to the group; and at the end of his *Tale* he's enraged into silence, shunted back into the margins...' ('Chaucer's Queer Touches / A Queer Touches Chaucer', *Exemplaria* 7 [1995]: 75-92, at 90); 'Chaucer leaves unsolved... many of the religious questions raised by this powerful tale of death, guilt, and need, however sharply he moves to marginalize and silence the Pardoner' ('Anticlericalism in Boccaccio and Chaucer: The Bark and the Bite', *The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales: New Essays on an Old Question*, eds. Leonardo Michael Koff and Brenda Deen Schildgen [Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000], 148-73, at 168). Different from all the opinions above, Allen J. Frantzen, perceiving the fact that 'understanding the Pardoner's perversity is part of understanding the Christian values his prologue and tale so bitterly expose', emphasizes that the Pardoner 'is integral, not marginal' ("The Pardoner's Tale", the Pervert, and the Price of Order in Chaucer's World', *Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections*, eds. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994], 131-48, at 145).

marginalized figure, but almost a segregated outcast. Notably, that kind of struggle is not only seen in the medieval world, as some people might have thought; it still commonly exists between a sexually ambiguous person like the Pardoner and the more liberal minds of the modern times. Inheriting Chaucer's prejudices against the non-heterosexual, quite a few critics still imagine a relation between the Pardoner's sexuality and his vicious nature, and thus exclude him from the community where all types of sexualities are nowadays supposed to co-exist. The only difference, perhaps, is that Chaucer jibes when insinuating the Pardoner's physical abnormalcy while modern critics show over-seriousness in speculating about this cleric's sexual propensity. No matter whether it is mockery or gravity, it is regrettable to point out that, when Chaucer and modern critics expose the 'deficiency' which the Pardoner *might* have, they simultaneously expose a deficiency in both medieval and modern thoughts. Indeed, deficiency is not a problem; regarding deficiency as a problem *is* a problem. As a great author, Chaucer should have shown more humanity and liberal-mindedness in the judgment of a person like the Pardoner.

The discussion of this chapter is divided into four parts. The first part examines Chaucer's prejudices in the portraiture of the Pardoner, especially the poet's depiction of this character's appearance, with a focus on the relationships between long hair and effeminacy, and effeminacy and homosexuality. The second part explores the poet's plausible implication of the Pardoner's 'eunuchry', and analyzes how this pilgrim repels people with his seemingly physical deficiency and odd sexuality when he assumes male authority. The third part investigates how the Pardoner eagerly conforms himself to the values of the heterosexual, be it religious belief, marital perspective, sexual identity, or transactional behaviors by his 'performative masculinity'. And the last part considers the authenticity of the phrase 'al the peple lough' (VI. 961) to demonstrate how the lady pilgrims' voice is absent (or ignored) and what that absence signifies. What is wrong

with the Pardoner's appearance? How do the common notions of masculinity and femininity affect people's judgment of a person's sexuality? Who is the most homophobic of all the pilgrims? How is homophobia constructed by religious doctrines and heterosexual norms in medieval times, and how has it manipulated people's perception of a person's sexual propensity? Why did critics traditionally overlook the impropriety of the Host's rude language in the presence of the lady pilgrims, and why did they ignore the absence of the female voice (or presumed its existence) in that seemingly unanimous laughter? By discussing these questions, this chapter aims to conclude: as homophobia is caused by cultural, religious, and sexual prejudices, the Pardoner is doomed to be a scapegoat of his fellow pilgrims' fear of the 'abhominable synne', no matter how hard he tries to conform to the main stream; and the Host's threat of castration and modern critics' diverse definitions and interpretations of the Pardoner's sexual oddity collaborate to expel this quaestor out of the scope of humanity.

I. How Should a Man Look?

This Pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wex,
 But smothe it heeng as dooth a strike of flex;
 By ounces henge his lokkes that he hadde,
 And therwith he hise shuldres overspradde;
 But thynne it lay by colpons oon and oon...
 Swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare...
 A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot,
 No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;
 As smothe it was as it were late shave,
 I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare. (I. 675-91)

Though critics hold different opinions about the Pardoner's sexuality, most of them agree that this quaestor's effeminate appearance is the key to his sexual ambiguity.

Examining the above passage closely, however, only the second half of the line ‘no berd had he, ne nevere sholde have’ indicates that the Pardoner will never have certain secondary sexual characteristic, and thus suggests his congenital lack of manhood.¹³ Judging a person by his appearance is a risky thing, although that is what physiognomy—a lore based on the experience of reading people’s features, humoral conditions, and emotional expressions,¹⁴—does for thousands of years in human history. The portraiture of the Pardoner presents to us such a case: Chaucer judges the Pardoner by what he has observed of his appearance; readers judge this character by what the narrator has observed for them; and both, because of this judgment by appearance, have caused more confusions than clarifications in the depicting, comprehending, and interpreting of a figure like the Pardoner. Actually, Chaucer never explains why the Pardoner will not be able to grow a beard and how he knows about it; he informs us of that fact ‘not by observation or the Pardoner’s own admission’, as Henry Ansgar Kelly emphasizes, ‘but by authorial omniscience’ (‘The Pardoner’s Voice’ 411). If the narrator is not sure (as he says, ‘I trowe’) whether the Pardoner is a gelding or a mare, his confidence of the Pardoner’s inability to grow a beard then reveals a discrepancy between his observation and judgment; namely, if the narrator is not certain of the Pardoner’s physical ‘abnormalcy’, his conviction of his lack of ‘manhood’ is primarily implausible and irrational. Chaucer’s whimsical speculation hence exposes a prejudice against people who are ‘different’—or a ‘type’, and because of that prejudice, we

¹³ Actually, beardlessness, as Beryl Rowland points out, may just be an ‘obvious iconographical feature of youth’ (‘Chaucer’s Idea of the Pardoner’ 141). I have observed that Apollo and Hermes never wear beards in either the portraits or sculptures of them, while Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, though gods are said to have immortal youth and beauty, are always represented with beards to show that they are one generation ‘older’.

¹⁴ John B. Friedman notes that in courtly or aristocratic poems, such as medieval romance, ‘the face of the subject often reveals emotion as well as character’, for ‘the movement of the eyes, the color of the cheeks, and other such indicators are among the primary means by which medieval writers presented the inward states of their characters’. To distinguish these emotional expressions from the more familiar humoral approach (which Curry basically draws), Friedman specifies the treatments that point to the ‘state of soul and of the affections generally’ by giving it a term ‘affective physiognomy’ (see ‘Chaucer and the Physiognomists’, 140).

perceive how the Pardoner, a man who does not look like ‘what a man should’, is tolerated but never accepted by people around him, especially those who consider themselves ‘normal’ (i.e., heterosexual), masculine, and orthodox.

The Pardoner, with inability to grow a beard, is hence considered feminine or effeminate by readers; and many critics investigate the degree of the Pardoner’s effeminacy in order to interpret its relation to his sexuality. In fact, Chaucer’s implication of the Pardoner’s effeminacy is not that ample as critics have traditionally thought; there are only three details: his stylish hairdo, glaring eyes, and small voice. Readers are often amused by the Pardoner’s lovely hair and regard it as the most manifest sign of his effeminacy: its thinness, its locks, its length, and its spreading over the shoulders by ‘colpons oon and oon’ are exquisite depictions which modern people usually would not use to describe a man’s hair style. Indeed, though there are several arguments against Walter Clyde Curry’s inclusion of the Pardoner’s ‘thin’ hair as proof of his natural eunuchry,¹⁵ no critic has doubted the relationship between the Pardoner’s hair style and his effeminate character. Looking at the Pardoner’s hair, my interest, however, is more in the critics’ concern with the hair than in the hair itself. Long, curly hair seems to be a feminine feature for most modern readers,¹⁶ and that is probably why

¹⁵ Following Polemon’s description of a eunuch he knew (who had ‘an immoral character, a long, thin neck, abundant hair, and wide, glittering eyes’ [referred to by Beryl Rowland, ‘Chaucer’s Idea of the Pardoner’, 140-41]), Walter Clyde Curry asserts that the Pardoner is a born eunuch, *eunuchus ex nativitate* (see n. 4). This diagnosis has been attacked by many critics: one of the counter-points is that Polemon describes only ‘one specific eunuch’, not eunuchs in general; another is that Polemon’s eunuch has ‘abundant hair’, not thinning hair like the Pardoner’s (see C. David Benson, 340; Jeffrey Rayner Myers, 55; Gregory W. Gross, 11; and Beryl Rowland [‘Chaucer’s Idea of the Pardoner’], 141). However, Robert S. Sturges discovers that besides Polemon (a second-century Greek physiognomist), Curry has also adduced evidence closer to Chaucer’s own period such as from *Secreta Secretorum* and Trevisa’s translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus for associating ‘ryst opyn eighyn and glysinge’ with shamelessness and ‘voyce hei, smale and swete and plesaunt’ with a lack of manhood (see ‘The Pardoner’s [Over-]Sexed Body’, *Chaucer’s Pardoner and Gender Theory*, 35-46, at 36).

¹⁶ Following Curry, a number of critics also refer to the Pardoner’s long hair as part of the evidence of his effeminacy, for example Beryl Rowland (‘Chaucer’s Idea of the Pardoner’ 144), Monica E. McAlpine (13), and Jill Mann (*Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973], 147-8); many more, though not stressing this, do not question it, for example John M. Bowers (‘Chaste Marriage: Fashion and Texts at the Court of Richard II’, *Pacific Coast Philology* 30.1 [1995]: 15-26, at 22), and Robert S. Sturges (‘The Pardoner’s [Over-]Sexed Body’ 39).

many of them often refer to it in the speculation over the Pardoner's sexuality. In fact, the length of hair, or its locks and curliness, never has much to do with a person's gender or sexual propensity in either ancient or modern times. Observing the portraits of English monarchs, we find many kings wearing long hair: for example, Eadwig (955-59) has curly, well-pressed hair covering the back of his neck; Eadgar (Edgar the Peaceful, 959-75) has neatly pressed locks with a curly lovely beard to match it; Eadweard (Edward the Martyr, 975-78) has long hair waved down to his shoulders; and the three kings of the House of Knytlinga (1016-1042) all have long curly hair. We may also find some examples in Chaucer's time: Edward III (1327-77) has long hair curled up at the end matching a handsome beard splitting into two tufts also curled up at the end; Richard II (1377-99) has wavy hair covering his ears (Chaucer has served these two kings and should have had good observation). After Chaucer's time, the monarchs' hair styles become extravagant: Charles I has long curly hair down to his back; Richard Cromwell has long curly hair luxuriant enough to do a shampoo commercial. And then, it seems that natural long curly hair is not sufficient; English kings (and all the courtiers) have come to cultivate a passion for wearing wigs: Charles II and James II as well as the famous Georges I, II, and III all wear very long, curly, and well-pressed gorgeous locks in their portraits. Not just kings: Thomas More (a grave political and religious figure), in the well-known portrait done by Hans Holbein, wears a haircut like a page boy's, though not as long as the Pardoner's, definitely not as short as many modern people would think a man 'should' wear. Shakespeare does not wear his hair short, nor does his contemporary Marlowe. And John Milton, the militant defender of Christianity, wears a hair exactly the same as Richard Cromwell's: long, curly, and luxuriant (in the portrait done when he was already sixty-two). Nowadays, except most white collars, many men do not care to trim their hair regularly; on the streets of the UK, men who wear long hair are commonly seen and surely no one would take a meaningful look at them with a

doubt of their sexuality. In brief, long hair is barely an indicator of effeminacy for English people; it is a common hairstyle many men would choose and probably the cold weather in this country encourages that choice.

Critics who consider the Pardoner's long hair an implication of his effeminacy thus reveals a biased concept of gender distinction and a highbrow intolerance of 'the different'. Actually, the Pardoner's image is not singular: it is not an exceptional portraiture specifically created for the Pardoner. Take our present interest, the Pardoner's hair, as an example, at least another two characters in *The Canterbury Tales* have the same modish hair style: the Knight's son, the squire, has a similar fancy penchant for his hair ('with lokkes crulle as they were leyd in presse' [I. 81]), and in *The Miller's Tale*, Absolon, the parish clerk, likewise has an exquisite taste for the look of his head: 'crul was his heer, and as the gold it shoon, / And strouted as a fanne large and brode; / Ful streight and evene lay his joly shode' (I. 3314-6). The hair styles of these three characters share some common characteristics: long, curly, well-pressed, and spread over the shoulders. The similarity is not coincidental; Chaucer's description is apparently based on a certain model and points to a 'type': the kind of young men who are fashionable, showy, fun-loving, boisterous, and—silly.¹⁷ Oddly, while the Squire, as far as appearance is concerned, is often regarded as an embodiment of youthfulness and liveliness, and Absolon squeamish and fastidious about outfits and manners,¹⁸ the

¹⁷ The Squire makes noise all day; his dress also 'talks' loudly: 'Embrouded was he, as it were a meede, / Al ful of fresshe floures, whyte and reede; / Syngynge he was, or floytynge, al the day; / He was as fressh as is the month of May' (I. 89-92). Absolon can dance 'in twenty manere', 'with his legges casten to and fro', and sing songs with 'a loud quynble' (I. 3328-32); his shoes and dress are also elaborate: 'With Poules wyndow corven on his shoos / In hoses rede he wente fetisly / Yclad he was ful smal and proprely / Al in a kirtel of a lyght waget; / Ful faire and thikke been the poyntes set / And therupon he hadde a gay surpys / As whit as is the blosme upon the rys' (I. 210-17). The Pardoner, according to the narrator, has a small voice, but paradoxically his promotion of pardons is loud, brazen, and detestable.

¹⁸ Many critics call Absolon squeamish and fastidious, see for example Raymond P. Tripp, 'The Darker Side to Absolon's Dawn Visit', *The Chaucer Review* 20.3 (1986): 207-12, passim; Cornelius Novelli, 'Absolon's "Freend So Deere": A Pivotal Point in the Miller's Tale', *Neophilologus* 52 (1968): 65-69, at 65; and Kelsie B. Harder, 'Chaucer's Use of the Mystery Plays in the *Miller's Tale*', *MLQ* 17.3 (1956): 193-98, at 195; Fredrick M. Biggs and Laura L. Howes, 'Theophany in the "Miller's Tale"', *Medium Aevum* 65.2 (1996): 269-79, at 274; Roy Peter Clark, 'Christmas Games in Chaucer's "The Miller's

Pardoner, with similar appearance, has been exceptionally treated as an effeminate man. More oddly, while the Squire's and Absolon's masculine desires/powers are never questioned,¹⁹ the Pardoner's sexual normalcy is constantly doubted by almost all critics. But since the Squire's and Absolon's gorgeous hair is never underscored as a mark of any sexual abnormalcy, why do readers fuss about the Pardoner's and consider it a reflection of his effeminacy and even his sexual oddity? Misled by the narrator's indecisive hint ('I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare'), critics have long judged the Pardoner's sexuality by a formula: long exquisite hair = effeminacy = non-heterosexuality. That is, a man with long exquisite hair is effeminate; an effeminate man is homosexual; and a man with long exquisite hair is homosexual—according to this logic, a homosexual man must be effeminate and wear his hair long. This formula is simply absurd, but it has been applied in many discussions of the Pardoner's seeming effeminacy and homosexuality in the past many decades.

Judging a man's sexuality by his appearance exposes many people whose minds are constrained by prejudices and traditional standards/values.²⁰ To them, a person who deviates from those orthodox standards and values must have 'problems' in certain aspects.²¹ Is Chaucer's mind great enough to be free from those constraints? John M.

Tale", *Studies in Short Fiction* 13.3 (1976): 277-87, at 284; Greg Walker, 'Rough Girls and Squeamish Boys: The Trouble with Absolon in "The Miller's Tale"', *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts*, ed. Elaine Treharne (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), 61-91, at 61; and Robert Graybill, 'Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale": "Exemplum of Caritas"', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 2 (1985): 51-65, at 55.

¹⁹ Both show strong interests in women, good at singing and dancing 'in hope to stonden in his lady grace' (I. 88). The Squire loves 'hotly' (I. 97) and, like his father, is full of strength and chivalry and has battled in several wars. Absolon shows masculine persistence in his pursuing of Alisoun, the carpenter's young wife, and does not hesitate to resort to violence when insulted by her.

²⁰ It is 'sexism' in the modern term; there are some common examples: boys like airplane models, and girls like Barbie dolls; men are bread-winners, and women home-makers; men are strong, women weak; men are masculine, women feminine; and, the one most closely related to our present issue, men wear short neat hair, and women long luxuriant hair; etc. These are clearly stereotypes in modern conception.

²¹ The anxiety caused by the 'problems' is well epitomized in Steven F. Kruger's comment on what medieval culture might have regarded the Pardoner's 'victory': 'we might hear in the conclusion of the tale the dominant voices of medieval culture lamenting what might happen if the power of language were allowed to those who could not and would not play by the rules' ('Claiming the Pardoner: Toward a Gay Reading of Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale', *Exemplaria* 6.1 (1994): 115-39, at 137).

Bowers alleges that by the depictions of Absolon—who ‘wears his blond hair long and parted in the middle, just like Richard II is shown in all the royal portraits’²²—and the sexually dubious Pardoner—who ‘intends to copy the fashion of the king’ by wearing the same ‘clothing and hair-style’—Chaucer means to present a satire on ‘a variety of Ricardian excesses and absurdities’ as well as some ‘savage comments’ upon ‘Ricardian sexual fashion’²³ (‘Chaste Marriage’ 21-23). Whether a tactful public servant like Chaucer would unwisely satirize the monarch he serves is certainly doubtful,²⁴ but if Bowers’ observation is right, then the poet’s concepts of how one (here a man) *should* look, act, and dress—and further his judging him by these ‘shoulds’—reveal a prejudice obviously formed by ‘traditional standards and values’. Examining the three young long-haired characters mentioned above, it seems Chaucer has unwittingly made the image of the king into a ‘type’, and reiterated it several times in his narratives to criticize the kind of personages that are sanguine and noisy (the Squire), moody and silly (Absolon), and even vicious and sexually dubious (the Pardoner). Following Chaucer’s mockery and praising its truth only prove that the prejudice against a person like the Pardoner is a strong tradition. Though it is hard to escape from the influence of tradition—not even Chaucer, a ‘liberal humanist’,²⁵ modern critics somehow should be less dominated by it (as we are supposed to be more ‘liberal’) and avoid similar judgment.

Strictly speaking, long exquisite hair for men is oftentimes an indicator of age rather

²² Bowers also observes that Absolon’s name conceals an allusion to Richard II as the monarch was described by Richard Maid as ‘handsome as Absalom himself’ (‘Chaste Marriage’ 21).

²³ That is, by the name of ‘chaste marriage’ (refraining from sexual relations with wife and calling it pious and devout), Richard II is actually covering his true sexuality—and thus reveals that the king is a religious hypocrite.

²⁴ Chaucer has safely served three monarchs: Edward III (1327-77), Richard II (1377-99), and Henry IV (1399-1413). The year before he dies (1400), he successfully gains a handsome pension from Henry IV (see introduction to Geoffrey Chaucer, *Norton Anthology of English Literature*).

²⁵ Critics tend to hail Chaucer with this title, see for example Carolyn Dinshaw, who calls Chaucer ‘a classic liberal humanist’ and claims that this is part of the reason why ‘the modern liberal humanist’ loves him (‘Chaucer’s Queer Touches’ 90-1).

than ambiguous sexuality. Young people love to make themselves look attractive, as they are at the age of finding mates;²⁶ yet, their efforts, in the eyes of the elder (who forget they have been young), often appear vainglorious, trivial, and even absurd and silly. Judging from the narrator's mocking tone, it is easy to imagine how characters like the Squire, Absolon, and the Pardoner would seem to his sophisticated eye. Actually, it is very probable for the Squire to become like his father, the Knight, someday, and Absolon, after the aversion therapy of that mis-directed *arse*-kissing, to grow wise and mature and start to pay attention to more meaningful pursuits than just appearance and love-making.²⁷ What about the Pardoner? When he grows older and wiser, will he change from being feminine to masculine or non-heterosexual to heterosexual, if he is effeminate or homosexual as critics have claimed? Scientific evidences show that natural sexuality cannot be changed, but sexual identity can. As can be expected, by the imposition of the homophobic anxiety²⁸ (reflected by Chaucer's 'sophisticated audience'²⁹) and social ambience as well as the ubiquitous religious doctrines and

²⁶ Greg Walker, in his discussion of the heroes of the fabliaux, has observed: 'the femininity of the hero is part of his lustiness, what marks him out as attractive to the women he pursues' ('Rough Girls and Squeamish Boys: The Trouble with Absolon in The Miller's Tale', *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts*, ed. Elaine Treharne [Cambridge: Brewer, 2002], 61-91, at 66).

²⁷ See Chapter 1, the effect of Nicholas's punishment.

²⁸ Who is homophobic? Monica E. McAlpine maintains that the Pardoner is isolated from his heterosexual and homophobic 'peers' (10), including the narrator, who shows 'intense homophobia' via that notorious phrase 'I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare' (16). While a number of scholars try to 'out' the Pardoner as a homosexual, Alastair Minnis has 'outed' the Host as a 'homophobic ancestor' ('Chaucer and the Queering Eunuch' 110). Several critics have observed that many Chaucerians show homophobia in their reading of the Pardoner: for example, Robert S. Sturges maintains that '[i]t does not require a great stretch of imagination, or any special pleading, to find in such readings (referring to Richard Firth Green's essay and Melvin Storm's assumption) a kind of institutionalized homophobia' ('The Pardoner's Different Erotic Practices' 49), and concludes that 'academic homophobia' may be regarded as 'responding to language as much as to bodies and acts' (Ibid. 56); see also Steven F. Kruger: 'Homophobia can produce extremes of intolerance and persecution, but in the academic world it more often produce articles. Homophobia has characterized some articles on Chaucer's Pardoner' (124 and passim); Gregory W. Gross perceives that both modern critics and Chaucer are homophobic, and the poet even more: 'At the beginning, I set out to "rescue" the Pardoner from the lingering homophobic stigma that Cold War critics had given him. Little did I know that I would eventually discover the Pardoner, in Chaucer's own hands, marked by a similar and perhaps darker stigma' (32). Toward the end of this chapter, however, I will argue that the Pardoner is the most homophobic of all.

²⁹ Although some of the Canterbury pilgrims are merely rude and crude, critics often call them 'sophisticated' or hint at their sophistication: see for examples, Beryl Rowland ('Chaucer's Idea of the Pardoner' 149), Robert S. Sturges ('The Pardoner Veiled and Unveiled', *Becoming Male in the Middle*

sexual norms of the age, the Pardoner, whatever sexuality he has, will have no choice but conform himself to the heterosexual identity.

II. Where are the ‘Coillons’?

While the Pardoner’s long exquisite hair is traditionally treated as the characteristic of his effeminacy, his beardlessness, glaring eyes, and small voice are more oftentimes regarded as the indications of his dubious sexuality. To find out what has caused the Pardoner to have that look, scholars probe into the more private parts of his body. Deduced from the narrator’s mockery (‘I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare’) as well as many other lores (e.g., physiognomy and anatomy), critics diversely claim that the Pardoner, as far as his physique is concerned, might be a born eunuch (*eunuchus ex nativitate*), a castratus, or a hermaphrodite. No matter by which term, the Pardoner’s ‘coillons’ are at the center of attention: they are either missing, removed, or co-existing with other female genitalia. To most critics, eunuchry or hermaphroditism does not just indicate a physical condition in the Pardoner’s case; since this pilgrim is expressively vicious, greedy, and immoral, his physical condition is believed to have contained metaphysical significations. What is a eunuch/eunuchry? A eunuch is a man ‘who has been castrated’—i.e., a man ‘whose penis and testicles... have been removed on purpose’ in order that he might perform specific social function; some of those individuals are ‘treble singers, messengers, government officials, religious specialists, military commanders, and guardians of women for royalty or harem servants for the nobility’.³⁰ The Pardoner cannot be a *castrati*, a person castrated to preserve his voice, for singing is not his occupation (though he can sing with ‘a loud quynyble’ [I.

Ages, ed. Jeffrey Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler [New York and London: Garland, 1997], 261-77, at 271), and Glenn Burger (‘Kissing the Pardoner’, *PMLA* 107.5 [1992]: 1143-56, at 1148).

³⁰ See Thierry Antha, *Sex, The Greatest Damned Thing* (Atlanta: JCS Publishing Company, 2011), 45.

3328-32])', and, as Vern L. Bullough points out, this kind of castration 'was not a practice in England at that time' ('Medieval Masculinities' 99). If Chaucer means to enlist the Pardoner in the long history of eunuchry, it seems only the category of 'religious specialists' suffices for his intention.³¹ Yet, although a religious may be a eunuch, a eunuch is not necessarily a religious (and vice versa); in Chaucer's narrative, there is no evidence at all to show that the Pardoner's 'social function' is propped by or in any way related to his probably being a 'geldyng'—i.e., a eunuch.³²

Then, what is our poet's purpose of making the Pardoner look like a eunuch if this cleric's possible eunuchry is not correlated with his religious status? The narrator's jibe, as afore-mentioned, mainly comes from his 'observation' of the Pardoner's traits: thin hair, beardless cheeks, glaring eyes, and small voice. Many critics have discovered that these characteristics may suggest as much significance to Chaucer as to his medieval audience³³ (although our poet might have never seen a eunuch himself—otherwise he

³¹ Numerous critics have examined the Pardoner as a religious eunuch but paradoxically proved that he cannot be one. For example, Robert P. Miller discusses the history and the functions of scriptural eunuchs citing references to eunuchry from the Bible (Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Matthew) as well as scriptural commentaries, and finds the Pardoner 'the antithesis of the laudable spiritual eunuchry', a 'perverted' churchman who is 'sterile in good works, impotent to produce spiritual fruit' (183-85)—namely, Miller's discussion only points to the conclusion that the Pardoner is not the kind of 'literal eunuch', 'prohibited from entering the church of the Lord' under the Old Law, nor the 'spiritual eunuch' who chooses, 'by an act of will', to 'lead the life of chastity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven' (183). From a similar perspective, Jeffrey Rayner Myers investigates the Pardoner as a 'female eunuch'—a woman disguised as a man, who belongs to 'a long tradition of female-to-male cross dressing in the Middle Ages', and who 'most often disguises herself as a cleric, sometimes either pretending to be or being mistaken for a eunuch' (54). In Myers's investigation, Chaucer, 'by casting the female eunuch as a Pardoner', creates a nexus of tension between 'hierarchical, or vertical, and organic, or horizontal, conceptions of social classes in Chaucer's world' (54), and 'by conflating the categories of eunuch and woman', was able to show that 'the constricting gender roles available to women... could often require a denial of sexual identity, a kind of social castration that includes gender and class' (54), and then, Myers writes, the Pardoner as a female eunuch 'exemplifies in an almost iconic fashion the new problems of female sexuality for the many women who struggled to realize their increasingly humanistic and material goals' (60). I find it hard to accept Myers's reading the Pardoner as a 'cross-dressing woman': since the Pardoner is famously greedy, vicious, and immoral, Myers's analysis of the Pardoner as a woman struggling for 'humanistic and material goals' merely denigrates women and saves Chaucer's Pardoner from male vices. I am also confounded by the term 'female eunuch'; as eunuchs are not born but made, one wonders what private parts a woman has to lose to become a eunuch.

³² A 'gelding' literally means a castrated horse, but in the portrait of the Pardoner the common gloss for it is a 'eunuch' (see Monica E. McAlpine, n. 11)—a number of critics accept this definition.

³³ Although the narrator indicates that he is not sure whether the Pardoner is a gelding or a mare, modern critics are quite certain that Chaucer's audience understands what the Pardoner is. Walter Clyde Curry, citing medieval manuals on physiognomy, asserts that the description of the Pardoner in the General

would have been more specific about whether the Pardoner is a gelding or a mare³⁴—scholars believe that he must have heard and read about how eunuchs look like and what characteristics are usually associated with them³⁵). However, the Pardoner's portrait does not merely present some features of a *castratus*—such as beardlessness and a small voice like a goat's (probably meaning thin and high-pitched³⁶) caused by 'hormonal consequences' because of the removal of testicles.³⁷ The portrait is actually more like a hackneyed combination of anatomical facts and some pieces of 'common sense' (or 'folk wisdom'³⁸) of interpreting people's characters according to traditional physiognomy. The confusion such a patch-up image may cause is patent, and this is perhaps the reason why Chaucer declines to affirm whether the Pardoner is physically defected or sexually odd.³⁹ Indeed, the phrase 'I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare' is equivocal, but the true indication is not that the narrator is unsure whether the Pardoner

Prologue (staring eyes, small voice, beardless cheek, and thin hair) 'would have been recognized by a contemporary audience as the marks of *eunuchus ex nativitate*' (see David C. Benson, 338). Beryl Rowland argues with evidence drawn from animal imagery that 'Chaucer used the hermaphroditic condition as a complex central figure... in order to make a specific indictment' and that 'a contemporary audience might have found the diagnosis less exceptional than modern critics' ('Chaucer's Idea of the Pardoner' 143). Monica E. McAlpine, in investigating the Pardoner's homosexuality, maintains that "'Geldyng" and "mare" are homely metaphors that must have had meanings both familiar and fairly precise for Chaucer's medieval audience; modern readers, however, face difficulties in recovering those meanings' ('The Pardoner's Homosexuality' 10).

³⁴ Alastair Minnis also observes that if the Pardoner had been forcibly castrated, 'it seems reasonable to assume that Chaucer would have informed us of that defining moment in his life' ('Chaucer and the Queering Eunuch' 111).

³⁵ Vern L. Bullough submits that Chaucer's portrait of the Pardoner might be 'a historical depiction, since it could have been brought about by the influence of returning crusaders, who had had contact with the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic world, where eunuchism was widespread' ('Medieval Masculinities' 99). Robert S. Sturges similarly remarks that Chaucer might not have read Polemon, but surely is familiar with *Secreta Secretorum* which he cites at the end of *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* (VIII. 1446-47) as well as his contemporary Trevisa's translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus ('The Pardoner's [Over]-Sexed Body' 36).

³⁶ See Jeffrey Rayner Myers (54); Monica E. McAlpine (8); Gregory W. Gross (7); Henry Ansgar Kelly ('The Pardoner's Voice' 413); John M. Bowers ("Dronkenesse Is Ful Stryvyng" 768); Vern L. Bullough ("Medieval Masculinities" 101); Lee Patterson ('Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch: Psyche and Clio in Medieval Literary Studies', *Speculum* 76.3 [2001]: 638-80, at 661); Carolyn Dinshaw 'Eunuch Hermeneutics', *ELH* 55.1 [1988]: 27-51, at 30; and Richard Firth Green ('The Sexual Normality of Chaucer's Pardoner', *Medievalia* 8 [1982]: 351-59, at 353).

³⁷ Henry Ansgar Kelly has explored several types of castration to distinguish their differences; there are three major types: orchidectomy (removal of the testicles), phallectomy or peotomy (loss of the penis), and 'Chinese castration' (removal of the entire male unit) (see 'The Pardoner's Voice', 418).

³⁸ See Henry Ansgar Kelly, 'The Pardoner's Voice', 425.

³⁹ For analyses of the descriptions of the Pardoner's body from medical and anatomical points of views, see Robert S. Sturges's 'The Pardoner's (Over-)Sexed Body', especially 37-41.

is specifically a gelding or a mare, but that the Pardoner plainly contains characteristics of both. Through scholarly researches of ancient and medieval physiognomy, readers are now quite definite of what the Pardoner's portraiture implies: with the features the poet bestows, the Pardoner is an embodiment, a representation of emasculation (beardlessness, small voice), impudence and shamelessness (glaring eyes),⁴⁰ as well as effeminacy and vainglory (long thin hair in an exquisite style). This judgment seems quite appropriate for the Pardoner since it matches Chaucer's characterization of him as a womanish, conceited, and greedy man who cheats ignorant villagers' money 'by hook or by crook'. In addition, via critics' analyses, readers perceive that the Pardoner's possible eunuchry is not just a description of his physical condition; his missing 'coillons', to critics, carry even more significance in metaphysical dimensions. Reflecting a character's inner state by giving him a particular look is a common literary skill; and though Chaucer's hint is 'vague and contradictory', his intention to reflect the Pardoner's moral/spiritual sterility and his evil/perverse character by indicating his physical deficiency and odd sexuality is thus made evident by critics.⁴¹

In my opinion, the real problem with the Pardoner's portraiture is not whether he is a castrated man or a sexually odd person, but that Chaucer, in characterizing this figure,

⁴⁰ See n. 15.

⁴¹ The Pardoner has traditionally been deemed as a perverse figure, a symbol of perversion, or an evil ecclesiastic who perverts his religious duties; the most frequently quoted passage might be Eric Stockton's statement: '[The Pardoner is] a manic depressive with traces of anal eroticism, and a pervert with a tendency toward alcoholism' (see C. David Benson, 338; Gregory W. Gross, 2-3; Carolyn Dinshaw, 'Chaucer's Queer Touches', 80; Steven F. Kruger, 122). Benson also advises that '[w]e should not take the vague and contradictory hints of sexual peculiarity in one part of the Pardoner's portrait as the key to his character... The real perversion of this pilgrim is not sexual but moral' (346); Alfred L. Kellogg, interpreting the Pardoner by Augustinian doctrines, analyzes: 'The second typical action of the defiant apostate is the attempt to pervert, to overthrow, to render ridiculous the order of the universe so painfully opposite to the disorder of his own soul... Like Satan and Iago, [the Pardoner] delights in evil: but unlike Satan and Iago, his perversion takes an essentially comic form. Under his perverted comic genius everything turns from its proper nature. A sermon against avarice and her followers, gluttony and lechery—the Pardoner's cherished sins—becomes a sermon in financial support to them' ('An Augustinian Interpretation of Chaucer's Pardoner', *Speculum* 26.3 [1951]: 465-81, at 471-72); and Allen J. Frantzen illustrates that the Pardoner is a 'pervert' who is not 'institutionalized' by the 'ecclesiastical and financial networks', but creates 'his own network and strategies' for 'reterritorializing' others (143-44). For discussion of the relationship between perverse sexuality and its significance in language, see Steven F. Kruger, especially 126-28.

equates physical defects with spiritual flaws, effeminacy with brazenness, and emasculation with sexual perversion. Namely, by conflating ‘I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare’ with an evil character, our poet suggests outright that the Pardoner is vicious, shameless, and non-heterosexual because he is physically deficient and effeminate, and has a high voice and no beard; or, to put it other way round: the Pardoner has no penis (or testicles)⁴², no virility, no abundant hair and no deep voice, and is therefore vicious, impudent, and sexually abnormal. This prejudiced concept and the logic derived from it deserve critical attention.⁴³ Actually, when people mock because of prejudice, there is always malice beneath it rather than just the joke we see on the surface. As Alastair Minnis has observed: ‘*gelding* and *mare* are neither literal description nor scientific definition—but meant to be insulting’, and that in insult ‘there frequently is some crucial distance between the offensive accusation and the actuality’.⁴⁴ If Minnis’s observation is right, then we may understand that what the narrator really means by the jibe is that the Pardoner ‘has no balls’—even he has his ‘coillons’ with him, just as modern people would tease a person when they see him lacking courage or masculinity.⁴⁵ Indeed, the Pardoner is unlikely to be a ‘geldyng’. As Robert S. Sturges has reasoned, the Host’s threat to cut off the Pardoner’s *coillons* at least suggests that

⁴² See n. 37.

⁴³ Many critics obviously have inherited this prejudice, for example Walter Clyde Curry—as Robert S. Sturges has observed: ‘In using the *Secreta Secretorum*, ... [Curry] assimilates effeminacy, not to mention shamelessness, to the status of eunuch all too unproblematically’ (‘The Pardoner’s [Over-]Sexed Body’ 37).

⁴⁴ See ‘Chaucer and the Queering Eunuch’, 122. By judging the kiss of peace between the Host and the Pardoner, Henry Ansgar Kelly also concludes that the Host’s threat has done ‘no permanent damage to the Pardoner by revealing some devastating and shameful secret, but only insulted him in some hypothetical and forgivable way, leaving his reputation as a winner intact’ (‘The Pardoner’s Voice’ 426). Lee Patterson provides a similar explication: ‘The narrator of the General Prologue speaks of the Pardoner as a gelding not to imply that he is actually missing his testicles but in the nearly universal substitution of physical traits for ones of character. It is not difficult to think of analogous insults in our own culture: when we call someone an “asshole”, we mean it not literally but metaphorically, as a transference of meaning’ (‘Chaucer’s Pardoner on the Couch’ 661).

⁴⁵ Lacan reminds: ‘the phallus is not identical with the penis but “symbolizes” it’ (referred by Robert S. Sturges, ‘The Pardoner Veiled and Unveiled’, 268)—i.e., a man’s having the penis does not equal his having the manhood.

‘something may be there to be cut off’.⁴⁶ Richard Firth Green also stresses that ‘a threat to castrate a putative eunuch is ludicrously improbable’.⁴⁷ In a word, the Pardoner’s *coillons* are intact, and the narrator knows it. Therefore, though modern readers constantly look at Chaucer as a liberal humanist/thinker,⁴⁸ a genius with a subtle dramatic sense (Gregory W. Gross 9), and a keen sympathetic observer of social behaviors and mannerisms,⁴⁹ the poet’s characterization and contempt of the Pardoner unfortunately betrays a lack of true humanity and sympathy in the judgment of a sexually ambiguous person like the Pardoner. ‘I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond... Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie’ (VI. 952-55). The punishment meted out for the Pardoner at the end of his tale via the Host’s threat is nasty and brutal. On the face of it, the threat to castrate the Pardoner looks righteous and gratifying to all⁵⁰ as it seems meant to punish his vice and evil.⁵¹ But since the conflict fundamentally structures a power struggle between the masculine Host and the seemingly effeminate Pardoner and the punishment indicates a violent eradication of an

⁴⁶ See ‘The Pardoner Veiled and Unveiled’, 273.

⁴⁷ See ‘The Pardoner’s Pants (and Why They Matter)’, 132.

⁴⁸ See n. 25.

⁴⁹ John M. Bowers reasons that Chaucer’s persona in *The Canterbury Tales*, the narrator, is, like the poet, ‘a keen observer and expert listener who was able to learn the most intimate details of other people’s personal lives’ (‘Chaste Marriage’ 21). Walter Clyde Curry also observes that Chaucer is a ‘keen observer of human nature’, who is able to appreciate, ‘without judging too harshly, the point of view of a *eunuchus ex nativitate*’, and ‘extends his sympathy... even to the sexually deviant’ (see Gregory W. Gross, 9)—though I do not agree with the latter part of this comment.

⁵⁰ In discussing the ‘moral jurisdiction’ of the Pardoner’s portrait, Alcuin Blamires calls our attention to the instruction of the biblical texts: ‘This psalm (51, Vulg.) goes on to promise such a person destruction by God, along with people’s derision (the righteous shall laugh at him), which offers an interesting supplementary rationale for the pilgrim company’s eventual laughter following the tale and the Host’s dismissal of the Pardoner’ (‘Men, Women, and Moral Jurisdiction: “The Friar’s Tale”, “The Physician’s Tale”, and the Pardoner’, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2006], 181-206, at 206).

⁵¹ Most critics agree that the Host’s ‘gritty’ threat is a punishment for the Pardoner’s greedy character and his offence at the end of his tale. Michael A. Calabrese, for example, explicates that when the Host threatens the Pardoner with castration, it is like saying to the Pardoner: ‘You pretend to be a servant of truth and salvation; but you are not the “genius” of Nature who can control pardons, but rather the one himself condemned to castration, sterility, and death’ (‘Make a Mark That Shows’ 280). Lee Patterson also submits that the Pardoner ‘invites exclusion, even punishment’ when he ‘asks for inclusion’, and the punishment inflicted on him by the Host is ‘exquisitely apt’ (‘Chaucerian Confession’ 168). Some critics think that the Pardoner’s ‘fragmented physique’ is itself a ‘divine punishment’ (see for example Alfred L. Kellogg, *passim* but especially 474).

effeminate man's manhood, the so-called punishment in fact figures a false justice under which the privileged believe they are superior to the under-privileged and which the heterosexual (the masculine)⁵² often impose (or think they can impose) on the non-heterosexual (the effeminate or feminine). To be specific, the Host strikes back not only because the Pardoner accuses him of being the most sinful man, but because his male authority as leader of the group (i.e., the patriarch/authority of the society), self-justifiably propped and enhanced by his heterosexuality and masculinity,⁵³ is challenged by the effeminate Pardoner,⁵⁴ whose 'fragmented gender identity and possibly dismembered body are without authority' ('The Pardoner Veiled and Unveiled' 267). Therefore, to the Host, and those who consider in the same way with him, the Pardoner's 'fragmented physique' must be further shattered so as to render it utterly powerless and silent, and thus controllable again. Seen from this aspect, by making the Pardoner look like a eunuch (or indicating that he is one)—whose defected body symbolizes presumptuous offence, evil, and sin—Chaucer justifies the Host's abuse of a man who is effeminate and seems sexually odd.

To some critics, the Pardoner is punished not because of his public offense, but because of his 'transgression'. Robert S. Sturges in his study of the Pardoner's 'body' points out that in Chaucer's time effeminacy is condemned as a transgression rather than as a physical condition.⁵⁵ In the Pardoner's case, this plainly means that the Pardoner as

⁵² 'Masculine' is traditionally the equivalent of 'normal', 'heterosexual', 'authority', 'right reading' and 'productive writing'; 'effeminacy', on the contrary, indicates 'non-heterosexual', 'homosexual', 'sodomy', 'misreading', and 'false writing' (see Glenn Burger, 'Kissing the Pardoner', 1143; Michael A. Calabrese, 'Make a Mark That Shows', *passim*; Gregory W. Gross, 29; and Robert S. Sturges, 'The Pardoner's Different Erotic Practices', 56).

⁵³ The Host is a 'masculine' man in traditional definitions: 'A semely man oure Hooste was withalle / For to been a marchal in an halle. / A large man he was with eyen stepe - / A fairer burgeys was ther noon in Chepe - / Boold of his speche, and wys, and well ytaught, / And of manhod hym lakkede right naught' (I. 751-56).

⁵⁴ Robert S. Sturges elucidates: '[T]he social disruption [which] ambiguities of sex and gender create become most apparent in the Pardoner's encounter with the Host at the end of *The Pardoner's Tale*' ('The Pardoner's [Over-]Sexed Body' 45).

⁵⁵ Robert Sturges observes: 'As several more recent historians have noted, effeminacy was regularly perceived in the later Middle Ages as a sign of unauthorized gender, and hence class, transgression

a man should look like a man; since he does not, he is then crossing the gender/class boundary, and thus needs a thrust to put him back to where he should be. This point not only explains how the Pardoner offends all by his ‘difference’, but also demonstrates how he incurs hatred of the patriarchs by endeavoring to play their roles with that presumptuous ‘difference’. Namely, the Pardoner assumes men’s authority by being not a man (with testicles probably missing)—and that appears even more repulsive to the opinionated patriarchs, because by that ‘performative masculinity’⁵⁶ he is hideously committing ‘double transgression’.

III. Who is the Most Homophobic?

In the eye of the Host and the narrator, the Pardoner’s eunuchry and odd sexuality are his ‘open secret’, which people easily perceive but avoid naming.⁵⁷ The best way to punish this bold-faced person, therefore, is to divulge this secret by blatantly exposing his lack of ‘coillons’, and thereby deconstruct his counterfeited authority and fake masculinity. Paradoxically, the Pardoner is not the only one who has secrets, for what the conflict eventually divulges is not just the Pardoner’s ‘secret’, but also the Host’s,

(male-male erotics being considered an aspect of gender transgression), and was therefore condemned, but not usually as a sign of any particular physical condition’ (see ‘The Pardoner’s [Over-]Sexed Body’, 37).

⁵⁶ Sturges illustrates: ‘For Lacan... the possibility of castration is essential to the construction of the phallic signifier, and the sexual organs themselves are not to be identified with the phallus anyway. But the veil is necessary; it is exposure that destroys the signification of the phallus and its significance. That is the threat that undermines the Pardoner’s masculine authority, the threat that deconstructs performative masculinity’ (‘The Pardoner Veiled and Unveiled’ 272).

⁵⁷ To critics, the Pardoner’s ‘secret’ indicates different things as mentioned earlier: for Walter Clyde Curry, it is eunuchry—and many others, different types of eunuchry; for Beryl Rowland, it is hermaphroditism; and for Monica E. McAlpine and many others, it is homosexuality. Michael A. Calabrese also observes that the Pardoner’s ‘professional office, his relations to the pilgrims, and his tale itself, the very images and characters he creates, are all informed by his implied homosexuality’; he further illustrates this by referring to Foucault: ‘in discussing the “homosexual” in the late nineteenth century, Foucault tells us that “nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret always gave itself away”’ (‘Make a Mark That Shows’ 272). Foucault is talking about the so-called ‘gaydar’ in modern understanding; many critics, when trying to ‘out’ the Pardoner, indicate that Chaucer evidently has this marvelous perceptibility.

the Canterbury pilgrims', and the poet's—in a word, the medieval people's. The Pardoner's secret is his seeming homosexuality, while the others' is the fear of it. Although we are not certain whether a 'mare' means a homosexual man,⁵⁸ a number of critics maintain that the Host's anger and the other pilgrims' laughter, in addition to Chaucer's 'notorious phrase',⁵⁹ have in truth disclosed 'the operation of medieval homophobia'—i.e., medieval people's fear of the 'unnamed and unnameable' (Monica E. McAlpine 16), the 'unspeakable', the 'unmentionable',⁶⁰ vice, which was, as Allen J. Frantzen puts it, 'abominated by the Church' (140), and which the church, as McAlpine stresses in her influential article, 'had helped both to create and to perpetuate' (16). The religious doctrines on this 'vice' and the ubiquitous influence of them in Chaucer's age have been widely investigated by critics. In his examination of the Pardoner's erotic practices, Robert S. Sturges demonstrates to us the effect of the Pearl Poet's discussion of same-sex eroticism in *Cleanness* and St. Paul's reference to 'the unspeakable vice' in Ephesians 5:3-12 in medieval times (52-57).⁶¹ Allen J. Frantzen with a similar perspective elucidates that the Pardoner's sexual characteristics signify the 'pleasure

⁵⁸ Monica E. McAlpine's influential article has inspired many followers in the discussion of the Pardoner's homosexuality, but C. David Benson argues that the hints we can find in Chaucer's depiction of the Pardoner to implicate that he is a eunuch or a homosexual is 'vague and contradictory' ('Chaucer's Pardoner' 346); Steven F. Kruger also argues that the Pardoner's homosexuality is 'unprovable' (Claiming the Pardoner' 125).

⁵⁹ McAlpine asserts that if we recognize that 'there were shadings of opinion and feeling about homosexuality in 'I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare', it would be wrong 'to deny, by qualification, the intense homophobia embodied in this notorious phrase' (15). See also Steven F. Kruger, who states that 'we need to show how the Pardoner's challenge to medieval heterosexist notions of signification—and Chaucer's anxiety about the challenge—lays bare the constructed nature of those notions' ('Claiming the Pardoner' 138).

⁶⁰ Robert S. Sturges has a thorough discussion of the signification and people's fear of the same-sex erotic practices in the Middle Ages and of the paradox that the 'vice' must be confessed and remain unspoken at the same time; when explicating that 'sodomy' etymologically means 'mute', he quotes Paul of Hungary's recommendations: 'The sin against nature cannot be forgiven anyone unless it is confessed by name, and yet its acts are so bestial that they can hardly be named... they are left unnamed even by nature. Not to speak them is to entomb oneself in hell, and yet nature itself seems to abhor the speaking' ('The Pardoner's Different Erotic Practices' 53).

⁶¹ Ephesians 5:3-12: 'But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you... For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person... has any inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ and God... And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness... For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret' (New King James Version). For discussions of St. Paul's arguments of 'unnatural passions', see Gregory W. Gross (23-4), Lee Patterson ('Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch' 676-77), and Carolyn Dinshaw ('Eunuch Hermeneutics' 29).

and freedom' which the Church 'feared to let loose in the world' (145). The religious influence can also be observed in Chaucer's narratives: in the 'Parson's Tale', the poet refers to homosexuality as an 'abhominable synne', which no man 'unneth oghte speke ne write; natheles it is openly reherced in holy writ' (X. 910).⁶² The horror or revulsion of this 'vice' reflects medieval people's attitude toward homosexuality, same-sex erotic practices,⁶³ or sodomy,⁶⁴ which Chaucer's portrayal of the Pardoner implies and the Host's threat reminds. Hence, when the Host threatens to cut off the Pardoner's *coillons*, he publicizes the 'unspeakable' for all. Needless to say, the Host's intention is not to help the Pardoner achieve redemption,⁶⁵ but to impel him—in addition to gaining back his 'heterosexual hegemony' as Steven F. Kruger puts it (135)—to the margin of the community, if not humanity⁶⁶—since expelling him is not

⁶² Via the mouth of the Parson, Chaucer also quotes St. Paul's famous lament: 'Allas, I caytyf man! Who shall delivere me fro the prisoun of my caytyf body?' (X. 344) to manifest the suffering of the soul that has immersed in the 'shameful passions' and its wish to be delivered from that passion. Lee Patterson maintains that this passage is 'the meaning of the Pardoner's words' by which the Pardoner 'finally reveals himself to us' ('Chaucerian Confession' 168).

⁶³ Several critics explicate that 'same-sex' and 'same-sex activities (desires)' are more accurate terms for 'homosexual' and 'homosexuality'; for example, Robert S. Sturges explicates: '[T]hey ('homosexual' and 'homosexuality') are modern terms that do not seem to correspond to any medieval concept' ('The Pardoner's Different Erotic Practices' 48), and Vern L. Bullough states: 'We do not know that Chaucer was not unacquainted with same-sex activities, now categorized as homosexuality. The term "homosexual" is a nineteenth-century one and implies a more modern connotation than Chaucer would have had' ('Medieval Masculinities' 102).

⁶⁴ Homosexuality is commonly associated with sodomy in medieval times (see Jeffrey Rayner Myers, 58; Gregory W. Gross, 24; and Lee Patterson, 'Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch', 661). According to Lee Patterson's study, European people's attitude toward sodomy has grown illiberal only after the eleventh century: '... there was a relative tolerance in Europe toward same-sex relationships until the eleventh century and then, coincident with other forms of social control, including the imposition of clerical celibacy, a growing repressiveness... In Italy this repressiveness takes the form of civic statutes outlawing sodomy and prescribing severe penalties, usually burning... But in England no civic statutes outlawing sodomy were enacted, and the records of the church courts—where sodomy cases would therefore have been tried—show a remarkable record of disregard' ('Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch' 662-63); Patterson concludes that 'sodomy, as either social practice or ideological construct, was a minor presence in Chaucer's cultural world', and suggests that '[i]f neither castration nor sodomy seems to have mattered much as historical practices in fourteenth-century England, perhaps we should concentrate instead on what they might have meant symbolically' (Ibid. 663).

⁶⁵ See n. 60 & 66.

⁶⁶ Derek Pearsall writes, '[f]or all readers there seems to be the consciousness of a challenge to rescue the Pardoner from moral responsibility for his depravity, to enter psychological pleas for mitigation, and to re-enroll him in the margins of humanity' (*The Canterbury Tales* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1985], 94-95, qtd. by Allen J. Frantzen, 143). My point is that the Pardoner is not a marginal but a marginalized character, but Pearsall's is that the Pardoner needs to be 'reterritorialized' as an indispensable, though slighted, member of the Canterbury group. Quoting Pearsall's statement, Frantzen, however, does not believe in the readers' or the Canterbury pilgrims' 'moral responsibility'. Glenn Burger, from a different

possible;⁶⁷ and that crude gesture, even with a later pretense to reconstruct the social order by an urged kiss of peace, only exposes the Host's and the other pilgrims' (including the narrator's) innermost 'secret': their anxiety and phobia of a person like the Pardoner, who appears, as the phrase 'I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare' indicates, 'deficient' and 'sexually odd'. The pilgrims' unanimous laughter testifies their recognition of the significance of the Host's threat as well as their conspiracy in that joint act of marginalizing the one they fear and repulse. The Pardoner, cornered by that collective bullying, is too angry to say a word. However, he is not silenced by the Host, as many critics have often said, but by all his fellow pilgrims who share that common secret. The 'class conspiracy' (to borrow Frantzen's words, 143) the Pardoner eventually encounters implies a total triumph on the Host's side, for the result of the power struggle between these two characters demonstrates an utter prevalence of the heterosexual over the non-heterosexual, the masculine over the effeminate, and, treating the Pardoner's 'false preaching'⁶⁸ as a mimicry of Christ's Words, the phallogocentric

perspective, argues that the Pardoner, being not-man, not-woman, is 'the unlikely but best pilgrim for [the] task on the road to Canterbury'—for 'in the ideal Christian society, ... according to Saint Paul, "non est masculus neque femina" (Galatians 3:28)—and thus, though the Pardoner is completely unlike the others around him, he is not treated by the pilgrims as 'their Other' ('Kissing the Pardoner' 1145). That is, whether the Pardoner is marginal or marginalized, he is still accepted as a member of the Canterbury group.

⁶⁷ Though the Host tries to push the Pardoner away by a vehement threat, he cannot really kick him out of the society (as the kiss of peace in the end shows)—as Allen J. Frantzen points out, 'civilization understands itself through perversion' (i.e., 'difference', identified as perversity in Christian values), and the latter 'remains integral to the former' (145). In Monica E. McAlpine's analysis, the Canterbury pilgrims may contain more complex feelings toward the Pardoner: '[W]hat the Pardoner must confront in others is not their outright condemnation of him but their discomfiture, with its varying degrees of amusement, fear, sympathy, disgust, and ambiguous tolerance' (16). McAlpine's explication is convincing and intriguing, but, judged from the Host's 'vehement response' and the other pilgrims' 'violent laughter', her observation reflects more of modern people's clement response toward the non-heterosexual rather than Chaucer's and his contemporary's.

⁶⁸ The Pardoner's peddling of 'false pardons' and 'fake relics' is often taken to symbolize his false/bad teaching/preaching as well as a reflection of his deficient/sodomitic body; for instance, Lee Patterson expounds that preaching 'ought to be a way of begetting God's children with the seed of his word', and the Pardoner's false preaching is 'an unkynde offense against nature, a spiritual sodomy worse than bodily sodomy' ('Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch' 667); Carolyn Dinshaw, in analyzing the relationship 'of the spoken word to the Word', states: 'The Pardoner, with his "hauteyn speche", missing "coillons", and fake relics, is the focus of anxiety about language in the *Canterbury Tales*. Late-medieval fears about language's instability and unreliability focused, at least in part, on the use of language by self-seeking preachers (especially friars); and the Pardoner is, of course, a false preacher' ('Eunuch Hermeneutics' 37); Mark Allen also argues that the Pardoner is the major sinner whose preaching prescribes the pilgrims'

over the logocentric.⁶⁹ The Pardoner is defeated, effectively, thrown back to what his fellow pilgrims think he is (non-heterosexual) and where he should belong (the margin of the society/community). Certainly, the Pardoner's setback is not just a punishment of his presumption and transgression; the universally-recognized defeat, considered from the Pardoner's own homophobia, exposes even more the Canterbury pilgrims' denial of the Pardoner's heterosexual conformity.

Reading the 'Pardoner's Tale' as a homophobic construction of male homosexuality, Steven F. Kruger has demonstrated a most insightful analysis of literary presentation of medieval homophobia in Chaucer's narratives.⁷⁰ Besides Kruger, a number of critics also explore or extend their investigations to the issue of medieval homophobia.⁷¹ The main discussion of this section, however, is not to manifest the poet's, the Host's, or any

moral choice: 'The Pardoner offers his false pardons and his false tale, inviting all who hear him to fall on the Canterbury road' (41); James F. Hicks, in analyzing the Pardoner's rhetorical skill, observes that the Pardoner 'inverts Augustinian rhetorical ideals to gratify his base desires, thereby corrupting his soul and the homiletic practice', and '[w]hereas Augustine's Christian teacher utters a profound expression of faith from his heart's passionate feelings, Chaucer's Pardoner preaches only to satisfy his cupidity' (91-2); and Robert E. Jungman alleges that the quarrel between the Host and the Pardoner 'calls to mind St. Paul's description of the results of false preaching': the Host's oaths ('thanne have I Cristes curs!' [VI. 946] and 'by the croy which that Seint Eleyne fond' [VI. 951]) and allusions to the Pardoner's 'sexual abnormality' manifest the dispute between the Host and the Pardoner, which 'provides a perfect illustration of St. Paul's argument in Tim. 6—teaching based on *cupiditas* will lead inevitably to quarreling' ('The Pardoner's Quarrel with the Host', *Philological Quarterly* 55.2 [1976]: 279-81, at 280).

⁶⁹ 'Phallogocentrism' or 'phallogocentrism' is a neologism coined by Jacques Derrida 'to refer to the privileging of the masculine (phallus) in the construction of meaning'. It is also a key word in Robert S. Sturges's essay 'The Pardoner Veiled and Unveiled' in which the construction of the significance (as a dialectic between the signifier and the signified) of the Pardoner's sexuality and preaching is thoroughly and persuasively explored. As Sturges points out, the *Logos* 'is associated, if not equated, with the phallus' (266); the Pardoner, 'neither clearly male nor clearly female, indeterminate in gender and erotic practice as well as in anatomical makeup' and whose 'fragmented gender identity and possibly dismembered body are without authority', is hence excluded from the 'phallogocentric truth' (267). Thus, the Host's declining to 'fetishize' the relics is a refusal to 'grant the Pardoner any part of his own phallogocentric authority' ('Veiled and Unveiled' 271), and a recognition that '[o]nce the penis itself becomes merely a means to pleasure, pleasure among men, *the phallus loses its power*' ('The Pardoner's Different Erotic Practices' 58). By 'phallogocentric over the logocentric' I mean the situation in which men's construction of meaning has prevailed the meaning (of Words) itself, since it is common that slighting the Pardoner, many critics also tend to slight the Pardoner's tale because it is told by a 'ful vicious man' (see for example Kruger's skepticism: '[h]ow can the straightforward Christian doctrine of the tale be recognized through the strange, feminized body and self-admittedly corrupt motives of the Pardoner?' ['Claiming the Pardoner' 134]).

⁷⁰ See his 'Claiming the Pardoner: Toward a Gay Reading of Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale', *Exemplaria* 6.1 (1994): 115-39.

⁷¹ See for example, Monica E. McAlpine (10-16); Gregory W. Gross (31-32); Alastair Minnis ('Chaucer and the Queering Eunuch' 109-110); and Robert S. Sturges ('The Pardoner's Different Erotic Practices', *passim*).

other Canterbury pilgrim's 'phobia' of a sexually dubious person like the Pardoner, but the Pardoner's own 'irrational fear' of what his physical and sexual conditions may cause in a heterosexual environment. Speaking of homophobia, we presume that it is the 'negative attitudes and feelings' of the heterosexual toward the homosexual. Can a homosexual also have homophobia? It might sound odd to suggest that a homosexual could at the same time be homophobic,⁷² but whether the Pardoner is also infected by that similar fear/repulsion which his fellow pilgrims commonly feel in the face of a non-heterosexual like him is the key to our understanding and clarifying of the Pardoner's own sexual identity.

The Pardoner is described by the narrator as constantly exposed as the object of the 'masculine gaze';⁷³ he is gazed at not only because he is a preacher in some way,⁷⁴ but also because, as the narrator indicates, he has a sexually peculiar body. From the way the Pardoner preaches—

Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke,
 And est and west upon the peple I bekke,
 As dooth a dowve sittynge on a berne.
 Myne handes and me tonge goon so yerne
 That it is joye to se my bisynesse (VI. 395-99) ...
 Thanne wol I styng hym with my tonge smerte
 In prechyng... (VI. 413-14)

⁷² Recognized types of homophobia include *institutionalized* homophobia, e.g., religious homophobia, and *internalized* homophobia, experienced by people who have same-sex attractions. According to this distinction, the Canterbury pilgrims' antipathy toward the Pardoner is of the *institutionalized* type. However, although 'internalized homophobia' indicates the kind of fear experienced by people who might be homosexual, the Pardoner's homophobia—if he is a homosexual—is not of the *internalized* type; his fear, inescapably, is also institutionalized, just like that of his fellow pilgrims.

⁷³ See Glenn Burger, 'Kissing the Pardoner', 1147.

⁷⁴ According to Alfred J. Kellogg and Louis A. Haselmayer's study ('Chaucer's Satire of the Pardoner', *PMLA* 66 [1951]: 251-277), the Pardoner 'was not even authorized to preach and, technically, his indulgences could only help in conjunction with confession' (see Michael A. Calabrese, 'Make a Mark That Shows', n. 37). Namely, Chaucer's Pardoner has done many practices that were not permitted 'under canon law'.

Steven F. Kruger has observed: ‘None of the male pilgrims, and only the Wife of Bath among the women, describes him- or herself in such strongly physical terms’ (132). Nevertheless, these forceful physical gestures, though arousing, do not seem to contain true masculine power to many readers. Associating the Pardoner’s false relics with his false manhood (implied by his ‘fragmented physique’), Kruger elucidates that ‘the Pardoner’s foregrounded body plays an integral role in the deception of his audiences’ (ibid.). The Pardoner’s ‘art of deception’⁷⁵, as he himself confesses, is for extracting money from his audiences; judged from the money he makes (‘yeer by yeer, an hundred mark’ [VI. 389-90]⁷⁶), he seems to have performed quite successfully as a preacher. Certainly, the Pardoner’s exertion of such physical efforts is not for calling attention to his ‘deficient body’—it would make the Pardoner’s angry silence in the end a muddling paradox; on the contrary, it is the proof that he tries hard to divert his audience’s attention, that is, to turn their ‘gaze’ from his appearance to his words and, by his emulation of Christ’s teaching, guide them into belief that he is also authoritative, masculine, and heterosexual, just like any other ‘man’ in his world. Hence, the Pardoner, by his strength in preaching, does not just superficially show his ‘bottomless *cupiditas*’ as readers have traditionally perceived; since the premise to get money from his audience is that he must be masculine, authoritative, and heterosexual (the power of Christ’s true preaching, in contrast with ‘false/bad preaching’ which his body implies⁷⁷), the Pardoner’s efforts in effect disclose his forced sexual identity—namely, by preaching, an enacting of his power to interpret with right/masculine language, the Pardoner is telling others and himself that he is a man, wants to be a ‘man’, and can be a ‘man’. Seen from this perspective, the Pardoner’s preaching from town to town can thus

⁷⁵ Kruger alleges that the Pardoner’s ‘feminized physicality’ is closely tied up ‘with questions of misreading [and] linguistic fraud’ in which ‘bodies that might serve holy purposes... can instead become part of an elaborate art of deception’ (132).

⁷⁶ Almost seven hundred pounds in modern values (see George Lyman Kittredge, 830).

⁷⁷ See n. 68.

be regarded as the process, the journey, and his desire of his 'becoming male'⁷⁸. At the same time, the 'masculine gaze' which critics recognize that the Pardoner is always exposed to paradoxically illuminates the Pardoner's homophobia. For that gaze conscientiously informs him that he is 'different' from others in the society, that he is a 'stranger'⁷⁹ to the group; in order to avert that gaze, the Pardoner endeavors to manifest his virile power ('I wol... have a joly wenche in every toun' [VI. 452-3]), passes on his plan for marriage ('I was aboute to wedde a wyf' [III. 166]), stresses his ability to keep a family ('By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer, / An hundred mark, sith I was pardoner' [VI. 389-90]), and tells a tale full of most masculine vices.⁸⁰ Apparently, the Pardoner desires to display his manhood whenever he seizes upon a chance and is eager to act in conformity with the heterosexual norms—with a purpose to seek recognition from his peers, obviously. The road to Canterbury, owing to the Pardoner's ambiguous existence, is permeated with an ambience of homophobia: the narrator's unkind mockery, the Host's vehement threat, and the pilgrims' heartless laughter materialize those people's fear of that unspeakable vice. But the Pardoner is unexpectedly the most homophobic of all. Indeed, none of the other male pilgrims expresses so much concern about the heterosexual values or tries so hard to conform to the heterosexual identity as the Pardoner does.

⁷⁸ I borrow the term from the book *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Jeffrey Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York and London: Garland, 1997).

⁷⁹ I use the word 'stranger' to mean both a 'strange one' and an 'outsider'. Critics have received the Pardoner's 'strangeness' as a signifier in different aspects: for example, Donald R. Howard treats the Pardoner as a 'grotesque', as a 'feminoid' or a 'hermaphroditic' male—while, to Monica E. McAlpine, this recreating of the Pardoner's 'strangeness' is this pilgrim's power to 'mystify, frighten, and fascinate' (see McAlpine, 10); and to Carolyn Dinshaw, the Pardoner's strange body is what makes him 'queer', and by Chaucer's 'touch of the queer', 'the force of the queer touch is carefully controlled and managed in the fourteenth-century context' ('Chaucer's Queer Touches' 78-79).

⁸⁰ The Three Rioters 'pleyen at dees, bothe day and nyght, / And eten also and drynken over hir myght' (VI. 467-8); 'it is grisly for to heere hem swere. / Oure blissed lordes body they totere' (VI. 473-4); and after drinking they go to women to 'kyndle and blowe the fyr of lecherye' (VI. 481). In brief, the three rioters are gluttonous, abusive, and truculent, and indulge themselves constantly in wine-drinking, gambling, and prostitution—which are traditionally considered male vices.

IV. Do al the Peple Lough?

Treating the Pardoner as the object of ‘the masculine gaze’ naturally and conveniently constructs a sexual discourse between the gazer and the gazed—this is how most critics, taking after the narrator’s stance, regard the correlation between the Pardoner and his fellow pilgrims.⁸¹ However, polarizing these two parties into opposite positions not only defines the Pardoner’s role as an outsider to the group (namely, he is not even treated as a marginalized figure, not even as the ‘Other’ of the community⁸²), but also reveals the narrator’s and critics’ unconscious negligence of the female voice when the ‘unanimous’ laughter breaks out. Do the lady pilgrims laugh, too? If they do, what do their voices signify? Does it matter whether these ladies laugh or not? If it does/not, what can the narrator’s and critics’ traditional negligence of the matter imply in the interpretation of the Pardoner’s sexual identity and his often-observed ‘gender/class transgression’?

When the Host threatens to castrate the Pardoner and enshrines his ‘coillons’ in a hog’s ‘toord’ (VI. 952-55), the narrator reports that ‘al the peple lough’ (VI. 961). No critics ever doubted the authenticity of this report. Readers simply accept the message and overlook that the Canterbury group is not a single-sexed one, and that there are several characteristic female pilgrims whose incontrovertible presence may simply

⁸¹ See for example, Glenn Burger’s ‘Kissing the Pardoner’ and Steven F. Kruger’s ‘Claiming the Pardoner’; both articles are interesting and insightful. In fact, it is also the correlation between the Pardoner and many modern critics.

⁸² The ‘Other’ is identified as ‘different’, indicating the opposite of the ‘Same’; it is a concept used in social sciences to understand the processes by which societies and groups exclude ‘Others’ whom they want to subordinate or who do not fit into their society (see Leona F. Cordery, ‘The Saracens in Middle English Literature: a Definition of Otherness’, *Al-Masaq* 14.2 [2002]: 87-99, at 87-88). However, as our experience of self-consciousness is mediated by a distinct experience of the ‘Other’, the ‘Other’ is ‘irremovably at the heart of “the Self”’ (see John Russon, ‘Self and Other in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit’, *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 18.4 [2011]: 1-18, at 2; and Leona F. Cordery, 87). According to this concept, the Pardoner is obviously the ‘Other’ in the Canterbury group, who, though ‘different’ from those around him, is definitely a part of it. This concept of understanding ‘self’ through ‘Other’ is similar to what Allen J. Frantzen states about the relationship between the Pardoner’s perversion and civilization (see n. 67).

deconstruct the long recognized sexual discourse and skew the particularized ‘masculine’ gaze. Traditionally the unanimous laughter is received as the pilgrims’ supportive response to the Host’s insult and as a righteous punishment of the Pardoner’s presumption and transgression. But, really, ‘al the peple lough’?—including the ‘coy’ Prioress and the very decent Second Nun? Perhaps the Wife of Bath laughs,⁸³ feeling vindicated since the Pardoner has interrupted her rambling speech and challenged her loquacious argument about the marriage debt.⁸⁴ Yet, though the Wife is belligerent and domineering—hence usually regarded as more masculine than feminine⁸⁵—we should not suppose that she would thus respond like men, or her laughter—if she laughs—is *men’s*. Actually, if we know the Wife well, we should suspect whether she laughs at all. She might have smiled, with a sneer at the corner of her mouth—not at the Pardoner, certainly, but at the Host. Indeed, who knows better than Alisoun of Bath does the indignation of being chided by the opinionated *auctoritees*? And who has suffered more consciously than she has the suppression of the patriarchal superiority? The Wife fights like a soldier on the marriage battlefield and against *auctoritees* all her life; evidently she knows, especially from her dealing with her fifth husband Jankyn the clerk, what chauvinistic men consider themselves. When she sees the Host brutally insulting the Pardoner regardless of the presence of the lady pilgrims, she no doubt perceives what the Host intends and what his abuse signifies: in the patriarch’s eyes, the Pardoner, like

⁸³ The Wife is often commended by readers for her maturity and worldly wisdom: after the trials of five marriages—through much *wo* and *pyne*—she has grown tough and strong, wise and mellow, tolerant and easy to get along with. To the Pardoner’s sarcastic query, she also takes it quite good-humoredly.

⁸⁴ ‘An housbonde I wol have—I wol nat lette— / Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral, / And have his tribulacion withal / Upon his flessch, whil that I am his wyf. / I have the power duryng al my lyf / Upon his propre body, and noght he... / Up stirte the Pardoner, and that anon; / “Now, dame,” quod he, “by God and by Seint John! / Ye been a noble prechour in this cas. / I was aboute to wedde a wyf; allas! / What sholde I bye it on my flessch so deere? / Yet hadde I levere wedde no wyf to-yeere!”’ (III. 154-68).

⁸⁵ Because of her belligerent spirit, the Wife of Bath is often treated as the female counterpart of the Knight and considered ‘masculine’ (See Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer’s Women: Nuns, Wives and Amazons* [London: Macmillan, 1996], 93; Lee Patterson, “For the Wyves love of Bathe”: Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the “Roman de la Rose” and the “Canterbury Tales”, *Speculum* 58.2 [1983]: 656-95, at 680; Warren Ginsberg, ‘The Lineaments of Desire: Wish-Fulfillment in Chaucer’s Marriage Group’, *Criticism* 25.3 [1983]: 197-210, at 198; and Dolores Palomo, ‘The Fate of the Wife of Bath’s “Bad Husbands”’, *The Chaucer Review* 9.4 [1975]: 303-319, at 318).

an untoward woman, needs to be checked by a stick so that he would learn to know his place (isn't that what Jankyn/Chaucer means when he makes his Wife deaf with a blow?).⁸⁶

The Prioress and the Second Nun might not perceive the Pardoner's plight from this same aspect; after all, though they also face the hegemony of patriarchal authorities, they are supposedly more domesticated by their religious education and the closure of the conventual environment. But, these two nuns' status and discipline are exactly what make their laughter incredible. It is hard to imagine that the elegant Madame Eglantine and the demure little nun would senselessly enjoy the Host's obscene joke⁸⁷ and laugh out loud with the male pilgrims (not to mention that some of them are famously lewd). Even if they do not frown at words like 'Cristes curs', 'fundement', or 'hogges toord', they must have been stunned by the blunt word 'coillons' and the brutal implications of 'kutte them of' and 'hem carie' 'in myn hond'.⁸⁸ In a word, hearing such profane language like the Host's, the Prioress and the Second Nun cannot be amused, but only displeased; and if they do not pass out (or pretend to pass out, like the ladies in many literary works), they must at least appear embarrassed and indignant. Do 'al the peple lough'? When the laughter breaks out, the Wife actually sneers, and the two nuns only scowl. Hence, if the female pilgrims' laughter is traditionally undistinguished, it is not because their voice is drowned, but because they have not laughed at all.

We may examine these three female characters' response from another aspect. Suppose the lady pilgrims do laugh, as the narrator wishes. Even so, their laughter does

⁸⁶ See discussions in Chapter 3, section 3.

⁸⁷ Marijane Osborn alleges that the 'coillons' passage is 'among the most obscene in Chaucer's works' ('Transgressive Word and Image in Chaucer's Enshrined "Coillons" Passage', *The Chaucer Review* 37.4 [2003]: 365-84, at 366). Osborn observes that for this reason, the passage 'was often ignored or even suppressed, for example... without notice, Wyatt goes from VI 949 to VI 956' (see her n. 9).

⁸⁸ Madame Eglantine is not the kind of Abbess which Boccaccio depicts in his stories (e.g., III, 1 & IX, 2): although Chaucer ridicules her hypocrisy and provinciality, he never in any way hints at her lechery. Like the Pardoner's ambiguous sexuality, if the Prioress is unchaste or lustful, the narrator would have indicated it in his omnipotent narration. I even doubt if these two nuns are familiar with the word 'coillons'.

not signify the same as the men's. If the male pilgrims' laughter manifests a masculine bullying of the feminine/effeminate one, the female pilgrims' laughter only reflects women's eager identification with and approval of what men have done. By making these three women laugh, Chaucer has created a very pathetic laughter in the world. For through that laughter, the poet depicts a situation in which women not only are insensible of their own quandary, but also mindlessly behave as the patriarch's accomplice when they see him oppress the weaker sex. Seen from this perspective, when Chaucer takes it for granted that 'al the peple lough', he is not only denigrating his female pilgrims but also exposing a chauvinistic prejudice: for an unfortunate moment, our poet simply believes that whatever men do (even brutal things), women should applaud. As these women are treated as appendixes to men, whether they laugh or not then does not matter to the poet—that is perhaps the true significance of the phrase 'al the peple lough'.

However, although Chaucer unconsciously obscures—even debases—the characteristics of his female pilgrims when the laughter breaks out, we need not treat his lapse harshly. The fact is: these three women are not indistinct personages; the Wife and the Prioress are two conspicuous characters with very strong features and individualities, and the Second Nun is often judged as pious and spiritual.⁸⁹ Therefore, we would rather believe, as earlier paragraphs have demonstrated, that they probably have not laughed at all when the Host triumphs. Indeed, by being silent these women not only keep their dignities, but appropriately correspond to their distinctive images in the *General*

⁸⁹ While Madame Eglantine is described 'too much' in Chaucer's *General Prologue*, the Second Nun is not described at all. But from the Second Nun's tale, many critics are still able to observe her pious and goodly nature. For example, Chauncey Wood calls her 'very spiritual', making her a contrast to the 'unspiritual Prioress' ('Chaucer's Use of Signs in His Portrait of the Prioress', *Signs and Symbols in Chaucer's Poetry*, eds. John P. Hermann and John J. Burke [University: University of Alabama Press, 1981], 81-101, at 100). And Charles Moorman, treating the Second Nun's tale of St. Cecilia as a 'rebuke' of the Prioress, maintains that the Second Nun is one of the pilgrims (the others are the narrator, the Prioress's Priest, and 'that aboriginal Cockney, Harry Bailley') who 'see through' the Prioress ('The Prioress as Pearly Queen', *The Chaucer Review* 13.1 [1978]: 25-33, at 31).

Prologue as well as their respective prologues and tales. At any rate, ‘al the peple lough’ is a chauvinist’s untrue observation; also, it is worth noting that not only is the narrator negligent of the female pilgrims’ voice, but modern critics—including the feminist ones—have failed to notice its absence in that alleged unanimous laughter. After the Host’s threat, attention is universally drawn to the Pardoner’s angry silence (‘This Pardoner answerde nat a word; / So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye’ [VI. 956-57]),⁹⁰ but none to the female pilgrims’ indignant silence. Still, though there is no relationship between these two kinds of silence, their parallel reveals significance in several aspects. Firstly, via the negligence, Chaucer presents to us a biased social structure, wherein women’s existence and voice are commonly ignored and their face and worth are boorishly disregarded; at the same time, the poet displays willful indulgence as the privileged sex of the society and his inability to show proper reflection in front of that monstrous social structure. Secondly, the Pardoner is categorized by the narrator/Host with the lady pilgrims. And that is why the Host dare threaten to castrate the Pardoner regardless of its impropriety: he needs to feminize the Pardoner before he can righteously punish him; for only when the Pardoner’s manhood is removed or his lack of it exposed in public, will his abuse of this sexually ambiguous person be fairly justified and supported by all (men) on the scene. In other words, when the Pardoner becomes *she* (or regarded as *she*), the Host, the representative patriarch of

⁹⁰ All critics observe the Pardoner’s ‘angry silence’, but with different interpretations. Robert S. Sturges explicates that the Pardoner’s furious silence ‘suggests that the testicles are his specific point of vulnerability’ (‘The Pardoner Veiled and Unveiled’ 268). Robert Boenig, treating the Pardoner as a parodist of the Wife’s exegetics, considers that the Pardoner’s silence ‘reflects anger not only at the violence of the Host’s attack on him but also at the literary insensitivity that would miss the point of his brilliant parodic criticism’ (‘The Pardoner’s Hypocrisy of His Subjectivity’, *ANQ* 13.4 [2000]: 9-15, at 13). Carolyn Dinshaw asserts that the Pardoner’s silence is the natural consequence of his ‘queer’ touch, as he is ‘repellent to the group’, and by being enraged into silence, ‘he is shunted back into the margins... like a bad memory’ (‘Chaucer’s Queer Touches’ 90). To Allen J. Frantzen, it is Chaucer who silences the Pardoner, because our poet, ‘[h]aving created a character whose will so powerfully exposed the weaknesses of the ecclesiastical system and its corruption... had no choice but to assert his own will, at the *narrative* level, against the Pardoner’—as it is, though in most readers’ eyes, the pilgrims ‘may laugh to see the Pardoner’s sexual lack ridiculed and his tongue silenced’, Frantzen, however, reads the laughter ‘less as ridicule than as relief that the flow of the Pardoner’s dangerous words has been dammed up’ (143).

the Canterbury group, can then have full rights, endowed by social consensus, to reprimand that womanish person who dare forget *her* place. What the Pardoner encounters reflects the three female pilgrims' plight as the weaker/inferior sex of the society—all of them men consider themselves entitled to inculcate and subdue. The Pardoner's quandary and the negligence the female pilgrims have received (together with their respective experience⁹¹) demonstrate that the Pardoner is intentionally put into the same place and position with the other three female pilgrims by the poet.

V. Conclusion

Many critics assert that the Pardoner's sexuality, owing to its ambiguity, cannot be categorized;⁹² the Host, nevertheless, is not so indeterminate. By a brutal insult, he pithily categorizes the Pardoner as a woman by publishing his 'difference'—his 'perversion'⁹³—and by that nails him for the crime of transgression. Being masculine

⁹¹ In 1298, Pope Boniface VIII published *Periculoso* ordering that nuns should never leave their convents, and though this decree of strict enclosure was never put into force owing to various practical situations, modern critics still often criticize the Prioress for her breaking the conventual rules (see discussion on p. 113). In both ancient and modern men's eyes, where the nuns should belong and what *place* they should keep are obvious. More drastic is the Wife's experience: her fifth husband Jankyn the clerk teaches her a woman's duty (i.e., her *place*) by preaching to her with foul stories of women and eventually making her deaf with a blow.

⁹² Many critics allege that the Pardoner's sex is hard to categorize (whether he is male, female, hermaphroditic, or castrated), many others his sexuality (whether he is homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual), still others his gender (masculine, feminine, feminoid, effeminate), from biological, medical, or anatomical points of views. More complicatedly, Jeffrey Rayner Myers asserts that in the Pardoner we see the conflating of 'the categories of eunuch and woman'—and by that Chaucer 'was able to show that the constricting gender roles available to women, whether embraced or shunned, could often require a denial of sexual identity, a kind of social castration that includes gender and class' (54). Michael A. Calabrese, looking from Foucault's theory of 'homosexuality' (i.e., homosexuality constituted as a 'psychological, psychiatric, medical category'), maintains that 'Chaucer's Pardoner is not "homosexual in the post-1870 sense of having a specific childhood, psychic make-up, and medical identity", and from that aspect, Foucault's study 'can be a helpful corrective to our tendency to make fictional characters from the past into real people' (272-73). Obviously, Calabrese is suggesting that readers should not diagnose the Pardoner's sexuality from modern point of view, for 'the type of psychologically tortured figure' which Monica E. McAlpine and Donald Howard describe 'could not have existed' (273). Carolyn Dinshaw, by analyzing 'the unknowability of the Pardoner's body' and 'his absolute resistance to categorization and control', points out: 'The Pardoner generates the desires to know... and then plays off it... But no one really knows what the Pardoner is' (*Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, at 157, qtd. by Glenn Burger, 1144).

⁹³ Allen J. Frantzen remarks: 'To stigmatize difference as perversity is the first step to demonizing it',

and heterosexual, the Host never doubts his privilege as the superior sex of the society, his entitlement to castigate womankind, and his authority for interpretation⁹⁴; with similar patriarchal arrogance, he shows no hesitation in his *righteous* exclusion and feminization of the Pardoner. The ‘Othering’ of the Pardoner is not done single-handedly; it is executed by a collective bully: the narrator’s mockery, the pilgrims’ laughter as well as modern critics’ ‘masculine’ gaze and various attempts to define the Pardoner’s dubious sexuality all make the feminization of the Pardoner a particular motif at the end of the tale. The confrontation between the Pardoner and the Host reflects how social order is breached because of sexual prejudice; Gregory W. Gross observes: ‘Chaucer portrays the Pardoner as one who shamelessly rejects the social order... on the other hand, he portrays the social order as it shamelessly rejects the Pardoner in sexual terms’ (32). The kiss of peace urged by the Knight at the end of the Pardoner’s tale does not indicate that the Pardoner is once again received into the community—to reestablish ‘the divided social order’ as some critics put it;⁹⁵ it only manifests that the pilgrims have failed to ‘completely erase the Pardoner’s presence’ (‘Kissing the Pardoner’ 1146). The Pardoner is after all an integral part of the group, a fact that makes him more hateful to people like the Host.

As mentioned, the Pardoner is traditionally condemned for his many transgressions.⁹⁶ This also explains why the Host flares up, since from his point of view,

and indicates that the Host and many modern critics have demonized the Pardoner. By referring to Jonathan Dollimore who writes ‘civilization understands itself through perversion’, Frantzen further emphasizes that the Pardoner’s tale ‘leads us to the heart of medieval Christianity’ (145).

⁹⁴ ‘The authority for the interpretation’ does not refer to a set of patristic reading of the holy texts, but signifies the controlling power of institutional interests (for detailed discussion, see Knapp, especially 116-20).

⁹⁵ See Eugene Vance, 743; Vern, L. Bullough, 105.

⁹⁶ See n. 55. In addition to Robert S. Sturges’ ‘gender/class transgression’, Eugene Vance recognizes that the Pardoner’s preaching is a transgression of style (740); William Chester Jordan emphasizes that the Pardoner’s peddling of relics is a moral and spiritual transgression (‘The Pardoner’s “Holy Jew”’, *Chaucer and the Jews: Sources, Contexts, Meanings*, ed. Sheila Delany [New York and London: Routledge, 2002, 25-42], at 35). Sturges, in his further discussion of the Pardoner’s over-sexed body, mentions about Alan of Lille’s argument in which hermaphrodites are associated with the Pardoner’s ‘bodily’ transgression (43).

his privileges as a heterosexual patriarch are encroached by the seemingly effeminate, homosexual—and thus unauthoritative—Pardoner who tries to emulate and replace him. In fact, ‘transgression’ is a concept the privileged invent to protect their privileges and an excuse to punish those who infringe upon them. Seen from this perspective, the Pardoner appears to transgress because he does not stay in the *place* others define for him. But, to examine this from the other way round, why does the Pardoner have to stay in the place defined by others? Why does anyone? As Glenn Burger has observed: the Pardoner’s ‘effort to assert identity—his transgressive desire—mirrors ours’ (‘Kissing the Pardoner’ 1146). That is, the Pardoner’s desire to be free from shackles actually lurks in every heart. The Pardoner defies others’ definition of him; so does the Host. When the Pardoner calls Harry Bailly the man ‘moost envoluped in synne’, the latter strikes back vehemently—he likewise refuses to be defined, like the Pardoner. If we treat the Host’s response as his ‘effort to assert identity’, his counterattack is also transgressive. The Pardoner is punished by a gross insult owing to his transgression. What about the institutionalized ‘neurotic’⁹⁷ Host? Unless we regard the Pardoner’s accusation (obviously also an insult—but no one pays attention to it since it is by an effeminate, homosexual, and unauthoritative pardoner) as a nominal punishment, the Host is never criticized for his arrogance and brutality. Indeed, being masculine and heterosexual, Harry Bailly’s leadership and authority for interpretation (as he will judge who tells the best tale) have traditionally won approval and recognition from the Canterbury group as well as many modern critics—that distinction is certainly a prejudice.

⁹⁷ Allen J. Frantzen, in discussing how the neurotic, the pervert, and the psychotic react differently to the process of ‘reterritorialization’, exemplifies that the Host is ‘the neurotic, as many of the Canterbury pilgrims are, trapped like him by the territorialities and the confines of ecclesiastical and financial networks’ (143). Frantzen further indicates: people who are confined will naturally confine others; the Host is ‘neurotic’ because he is *institutionalized*; compared to his audience, the Pardoner is ‘free’ and offers to set them free—that is why he is hated by all.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored many of Chaucer's prejudices in *The Canterbury Tales*. As demonstrated in the introduction and throughout the thesis, this work is filled with various prejudices, including cultural prejudice, religious prejudice, racial prejudice, sexual prejudice, gender prejudice, class prejudice, professional prejudice, language prejudice, and so on. These prejudices are displayed via the many ideas and values presented in this collection of tales. Specifically, Chaucer's disregard of the female body and its autonomy, his deprecation of the female religious and mistrust of their professional abilities, his biased concept of women's education and negligence of the *auctoritees'* garbling of the holy texts, his contempt of the seemingly non-heterosexual, his exclusion of the 'different', and his chauvinistic belief that whatever men do women must comply, are some of the most obvious prejudices in this masterwork. 'Prejudices' have affected Chaucer's characterizations of the pilgrims and choices of the tales they tell: for example, in the portrait of the Prioress, the poet ambiguously glosses Madame Eglentyne as a religious woman by the traditional depiction of a courtly beauty, and lets her tell a bloody anti-Semitic tale to hint at her provinciality and narrow-mindedness. Nevertheless, Chaucer's prejudices and contradictions not only reveal his misjudgment of a prioress's social status and functions, but also his hostile and snobbish attitudes toward a professional female counterpart. Likewise, in the portrait of the Pardoner, Chaucer describes the Pardoner's evil character by indicating his physical and sexual oddities, and lets him tell a tale filled with most condemned iniquities to reflect his greedy and vicious nature. Associating a person's wickedness with his physical defects and odd sexuality, however, only exposes the poet's lack of compassion and true humanity.

In addition to the prejudices mentioned above, Chaucer has shown particular

prejudices against women's physical existence. The stripping and vilification of the Miller's Alisoun's body, the taunting of the Wife's sexually experienced body, the sexual innuendo of the Prioress's 'nat undergrowe body', and even the contempt of the Pardoner's effeminate body disclose a misogynistic poet's aversion and deficient knowledge of the womankind and the female body. Chaucer's prejudice against the female body is especially manifest in his view of the 'rape' women suffer. In the Wife of Bath's tale, the rapist knight, instead of punishment, eventually wins a trophy—a 'trewe' wife 'yong and fair'. This reversion of justice reveals Chaucer's misogyny and illustrates how the poet regards a woman's physical existence in general: it is objectified for use and abuse; it is an object over which a man becomes 'male' by performing masculinity and authority. Indeed, the rapist knight is not punished for raping a maiden's body; he is rewarded for doing it. In the Wife of Bath's tale, Chaucer's distribution of justice, which he insists on doing in many places, fails to meet its criteria in the face of traditional misogyny.

Chaucer also shows prejudices against the 'Other'. The anti-Semitism in the Prioress's tale on the surface indicates religious and racial prejudices, but intrinsically, it is about people's intolerance and savage exclusion of the 'Other'. The murder of the 'litle clergeon' and the atrocious revenge on the murderer both result from the concept of 'Other' and 'Othering': both the Christians and the Jews cannot endure the existence of other races and religions in their territories and resort to violence to remove them. Although some critics observe that it is not entirely inappropriate for the Prioress to tell such a tale, as the kind of stories are popular readers for women in the Late Middle Ages (known as the *Miracles of the Virgin*),¹ it is a regret that Chaucer shows no criticism or reflection on the concept of racial/religious exclusiveness in any part of the narrative. In

¹ See Karma Lochrie, 66; Hardy Long Frank, 233; Carol M. Meale, 58; Daniel F. Pigg, passim, especially 71.

a way, we may look at Chaucer's mockery of the Prioress's professional status and abilities as the poet's accidental 'Othering' of his female counterpart. Chaucer's mistrust and contempt of the Prioress as a social peer is obvious. Similar intolerance and exclusion of 'Other' also appear in the portrait of the Pardoner and the confrontation at the end of the Pardoner's tale. The insult the Pardoner receives from the Host reflects the poet's as well as medieval people's general fear and aversion of the 'different', especially the 'perverse' and the non-heterosexual. 'Othering' is evidently a masculine activity, executed by male authorities. When the Host threatens to castrate the Pardoner, the narrator says: 'al the peple lough'. The untrue observation of that 'unanimous' laughter not only instantly involves the three female pilgrims in the collective bullying of the Pardoner, but reveals the male poet's negligence and manipulation of the individuality and autonomy of the distinguished female characters he creates.

Some more prejudices can be observed in Chaucer's lenience and support of patriarchy, the *auctoritees*, and even male violence. The Wife of Bath's eloquence and argumentativeness are eventually inhibited by her being made deaf. This physical impediment is universally regarded as the Wife's own deficiency, never as an imposed undeserved castigation, which shows that even modern critics sanction Jankyn's violent punishment of his wife when he finds her resistant to 'men's truth'. When the Host threatens to castrate the Pardoner, his language indicates nothing but male violence: 'kutte them of' and 'hem carie' 'in myn hond'. Upon hearing that threat of physical enforcement, the author makes all the pilgrims laugh to show their gratification of the Host's 'righteous' punishment of the effeminate/weaker one. The most distinct example takes place at the start of the Wife of Bath's tale. The sexual assault committed by the rapist knight even points to the myth of male violence: a woman's body, like a virgin

land, is for men to conquer, prevail, subdue, and occupy through rape.²

Chaucer's prejudices can also be observed in his interpretations of medieval jurisdiction. The Wife of Bath's concept of marriage debt not only makes her arguments appear ludicrous but enhances the readers' suspicion of her alleged carnal desires. Further, old profligate husbands married to young wives are usually described as being foolish, not unchaste or lascivious. By contrast, young wives who make their old husbands cuckolds (e.g., the Miller's Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, and the Merchant's May) are criticized for their unchastity and carnality. The Miller's Alisoun and the Wife of Bath are thus severely punished for their independent sexualities: the Miller's Alisoun is grossly 'swyved'; the Wife loses her hearing for good. Obviously, though old men are deemed stupid to marry young wives, only the young wives, in the view of the author, fail to meet the social and legal expectations. Doctrinal interpretations of medieval laws often appear in modern criticisms, too. The opinions that the Prioress exposes too much of her forehead, that she breaks the regulation of conventual enclosure, and that she has a name unfit for a female religious are most common jurisdictional prejudices against the Prioress.

My study of Chaucer's prejudices in *The Canterbury Tales* inevitably extends to the investigations of modern critics' prejudices. It cannot be ignored that some modern critical comments are merely prejudices. The Wife of Bath's deafness, for example, is traditionally regarded as her inability to understand God's Words—which means men's words since only men have the authority for interpretation. This opinion not only slights the fact that the Wife is made deaf, not born deaf, but manifests a deep-rooted patriarchal belief: women should follow men's rules, or they should be punished.

² See Manuel Aquirre Daban, 'The Riddle of Sovereignty', 277-279. In view of the 'political content', as Daban claims, a woman is 'not just the land but the territory' whose prosperity depends on 'her choice of a rightful king'; hence, if the "Hunt" is one symbol for the "Courtship", then the rape is a literalization of the symbol' (Ibid. 279).

Another example is the interpretations of the Prioress's beauty. Many critics do not acknowledge Madame Eglentyne's beautiful features and graceful deportment as Chaucer's imitative descriptions of courtly ladies in medieval romantic literature, but as the poet's insinuating presentations of this religious woman's pride, vanity, and worldliness. Even the Prioress's wearing her wimple neatly and speaking French 'fetishly' appear sinful in the eyes of some modern critics—as if a prioress should better look threadbare or obscure. The Miller's Alisoun's 'escape' from the author's punishment is also a misguided interpretation. Critics commonly regard Alisoun's getting off 'scot free' as the poet's clemency to women; however, Chaucer's contemptuous attitude toward the female body is constant. Like the unnamed maiden's body in the Wife of Bath's tale, exploited to ripen the knight's masculinity, the Miller's Alisoun's body is 'swyved' as a means to punish her husband for cherishing her too much. To Chaucer, the female body is merely an object, used and abused as a men's tool. Regarding Alisoun as unpunished and even praising Chaucer for his nonexistent clemency reveal modern readers' negligence of the poet's misogyny and chauvinistic inheritance. The most biased comment in the study of Chaucer's pilgrims is perhaps the interpretations of the Pardoner's sexuality. Medieval people may associate the Pardoner's alleged physical defects and seeming sexual oddity with his natural vices owing to limited understanding of natural sexualities, but six hundred years later, modern readers would only appear illiberal and inhumane if they, with more advanced knowledge in diverse sexualities, still treat the Pardoner's physical defects or whatever kind of sexual oddity as reflections of his moral deficiencies.

To sum up, *The Canterbury Tales* is filled with various kinds of prejudices, including cultural prejudices, social prejudices, religious prejudices, racial prejudices, sexual prejudices, class prejudices, language prejudices, and so on. As it is difficult to discuss all of these mentioned prejudices fully in one thesis, some of them give way to

others. For example, anti-Semitism in the Prioress's tale is only referred to, but not explored at full length. The main reasons are that many critics have made remarks on this religious prejudice and that I do not have a fresh opinion to offer. Also, the chivalric quest in the Wife of Bath's tale is not discussed in a separate section, in that a full discussion of it appears additional rather than integral to my demonstration of women's education in the chapter (though the rapist knight's adventures can be treated as a man's education—a contrast to that of the Wife's). In short, I have chosen to examine the prejudices to which I have original ideas or new discoveries to contribute and those that are pertinent to the consistency of the discussion of the whole thesis. My project may thus appear insufficient in the covering of materials in some ways. But I hope that this is only a minor regret. My research for this thesis is ample and the scholarship is not poorly demonstrated. And I believe that my insights, analyses, and interpretations of the prejudices will make contributions to the study of *The Canterbury Tales*: particularly, my views of the Miller's Alisoun's false 'escape' and the true significance of the Wife's deafness are hitherto unobserved by critics; my measuring the Prioress's forehead and the Pardoner's hair by investigating medieval artworks and historical portraits are new approaches in the study of these two pilgrims' appearances; critiquing the poet's treatment of the female/effeminate body and its autonomy presents a new aspect of the misogyny tradition in Chaucer's time; and the garbling of the story of 'the Samaritan Woman' in the narrative and the author's untrue report of the pilgrims' laugh after the Host's insult of the Pardoner are yet undiscovered in modern criticisms. Other fresh points include treating *privee* Nicholas and *apert* Absolon as the Miller's Alisoun's ambivalent desires in the public and private domains, inspecting the Prioress's French ability from the aspects of foreign language acquisition and the royal pedigrees, examining the Wife's prologue as a manifestation of medieval women's education and 'his mouth, her ears' (men talk; women listen) as the patriarchal code of interaction

between the *auctoritees* and the subordinate sex, and investigating the seemingly homosexual Pardoner as the most homophobic of all the Canterbury pilgrims and the Host's ousting of the Pardoner as a collective social bullying of the 'different'. Chaucer's highly praised 'poetic justice' is also found not truly 'poetic' when men's punishments and women's punishments are juxtaposed.

As emphasized in the introduction, the main purpose of investigating Chaucer's prejudices is not to find fault with the poet, but to make cultural observations and comparisons between Chaucer's age and ours. Chaucer is doubtless a polymath; he is knowledgeable in many subjects: philosophy, astrology, theology, law, medicine, folklore, music, among others. Hence, though he is chauvinistic, misogynistic, and occasionally malicious (e.g., replacing Nicholas's buttock with Alisoun's in the first window scene in the Miller's tale), his *Tales* is also generously invested with what he knows, thinks, and believes. Therefore, *The Canterbury Tales* is not just a masterwork of literature, but also a great textbook for students who take interest in medieval studies since it contains diverse knowledge of English culture in the Middle Ages. As far as literary achievements are concerned, *The Canterbury Tales* is perhaps only surpassed by Shakespeare's plays and Milton's *Paradise Lost*; many readers are especially charmed by Chaucer's English: its pronunciation, rhythms, and rhymes construct the best musicality in the history of this language. But the collection of thirty portraits and twenty-two tales is incomparable in the history of English literature. Discovering and critiquing Chaucer's prejudices does not abate the poet's name and fame; it provides another approach to the study of Chaucer, and manifests not only the diversity and amplitude of Chaucer's work but also his role and characteristics as a male author of his time.

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