

“Experience, though noon auctoritee/Were in this world, is right ynough for me”: Feminizing the Reality of Patriarchal Discursive “Auctoritee” in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath*

Laura Fox

In Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath*, the Wife’s socio-cultural position between being a proto-feminist modern woman and a woman inescapably mired in the tradition of patriarchal cultural and linguistic structures has served as a hotbed of debate. Complicating this perception is the Wife’s own circular double-speech and convoluted logic which wavers between upholding the sexually- and morally-corrupted images of women created by the patriarchy, and simultaneously denying the validity of those images by pointing out their limitations, both of which nearly renders her *entente* incomprehensible. Utilizing feminist linguistic theory and deconstructionist theory in concert, this paper’s objective is first to detangle the Wife’s speech by identifying and analyzing the key linguistic methods and characteristics that breakaway from the traditional patriarchal linguistic structure towards a more “feminized” linguistic act, and then to understand how the Wife’s linguistic performance subverts these patriarchal language structures. In so doing, this paper proposes that, rather than defining the Wife as taking a feminist/antifeminist position, she should instead be seen as a forerunner of these historically anachronistic terms. Indeed, she is a woman aware of a feminine rhetoric which, often vocally and controversially, defies the expectations of patriarchal discourse and uses the unique attributes of feminine speech in her own performance of feminine language to expose the limitations of patriarchal discourse in representing reality, and, most especially, women’s social and linguistic place within that historically male-defined reality.

Key Terms: patriarchal discourse; deconstructionist theory; feminist linguistic theory; feminine language; speech acts; Wife of Bath; Geoffrey Chaucer; Luce Irigaray; phallogocentrism

Perhaps no character, and especially no female character, has been the subject of more scholarly debate over the interpretation and significance of her story than Alisoun in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath*. Simultaneously lauded as a proto-feminist character who makes one of the first-recorded stands for women’s rights and equality in literature, yet also ridiculed for representing nothing more than the ultimate literary incarnation of poor female behavior and sexual temptation, thereby upholding antifeminist beliefs, the Wife of Bath has as many opposing interpretations of both her character and her story as she does words to tell it. Then again, what is interpretation, really, but the perceptions and opinions of an outside observer, colored by that viewer’s own prejudices, beliefs, judgments, and conceptions of another person’s power, authority, and reliability? For “Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?” (Chaucer

692), the Wife of Bath herself exclaims about men’s representations of women. Through this metaphor, the Wife of Bath not only points out that women, much like the leonine subject of a painting, have many attributes that cannot be accurately captured and represented in one limited snapshot, but also that it is the (male) interpretative audience which has “mis-interpreted” and thus misrepresented the subject of women and femininity. Thereby frozen in a role which prevents any alternative possibilities for understanding woman’s nature, and with no feminine perspectives to “unfreeze” these limited interpretations of male-authored discourse on the feminine, is it little wonder that it is problematic to make congruous the many subjects, opinions, and feelings of the Wife of Bath’s Prologue?

It is not difficult, either, to understand why interpreting the Wife of Bath has been so

difficult. At moments, in fact, the Wife cannot seem to agree with herself. Or, as Ross C. Murfin says in reference to the similarities between the fluctuations and circular, convoluted logic of her double-speech and that of the deconstructionist critics who try to disentangle her entente (intent), “By the nature of their very approach to literature and interpretation...reading their work, then, is sometimes frustrating because no sooner do they seem to say something than they seem to back away and unsay it or qualify it or contradict it” (Beidler 233). Indeed, even as Alisoun points out that men’s representations of women are flawed and biased (like the lion), she also regurgitates those very same antifeminist texts by verbally reproducing them only eight lines later, when she speaks to the nature of women in terms of astrological determinancy, saying, “Venus [women] loveth riot and dispenche...” (Chaucer 700). As if suggesting that women’s nature is as fixed as the stars, she thus seemingly excuses men for writing such salacious stories of woman’s character. Too, although she does mitigate the role of women in the antifeminist texts she repeats and does speak (at length) about the evils done to her by her “bad” husbands, suggesting she as woman is somehow sympathetic to the plight of women, she also never offers a textual counterpoint to the male-authored antifeminist texts. In fact, she even appears to betray her own sex when she just as easily inserts woman into the role of mischief-maker in stories where women played no part in the original antifeminist text (i.e., the Midas story).

In the face of this convoluted story-telling method which approaches, backs away from, and then turns back to its original tack, how, then, are we to interpret and derive the true entente of the ever-elusive Alisoun of

Bath’s Prologue and Tale? While there is an obvious feminist/anti-feminist argument to be made that the Wife of Bath is a proto-feminist fighting for women’s rights in a patriarchally discursive society which accepts men’s textual “auctoritee” as the be-all and end-all on appropriate feminine behavior, I cannot help but feel that such a breakdown along the line of feminist/anti-feminist interpretation is overly simplistic. Not only does such an analysis take no notice of the deeper motivations and methodological intricacies of Alisoun’s story-telling, but it also distracts from the true work of understanding the essential, underlying difficulty in interpreting her Prologue and Tale: that of recognizing and defining the carefully structured linguistic methods she utilizes to tell her story.

Critics H. Marshall Leicester and Barrie Ruth Straus also agree that such an interpretation divided along such strictly feminist/antifeminist interpretative lines without also considering the Wife’s intentional manipulation of linguistic and rhetorical devices leaves much to be desired. Indeed, they see such neatly classifiable feminist/antifeminist approaches as so formulaic that such an interpretation becomes not a quest for deeper literary understanding, but more similar to finding the solution to a mathematical equation. What I mean by this comparison is that there is so much attention devoted to solving the problems the Wife of Bath addresses and finding one ultimate, correct interpretative “answer”, that there has been relatively little investigation into the boring, process-specific individual linguistic “factors” which comprise, define, and explicate her relation and interpretation of these issues. Therefore, as Leicester, Straus, and I agree, it is in understanding the process of how the Wife makes her argument and what linguistic aspects she manipulates that are

integral, even before the why or any solutions can be determined. Or, as Leicester postulates, the Wife’s unraveling of the “male-dominated institutions [including the structure of language itself] that have in effect ‘enchanted’ men and women alike into accepting as ‘natural’ the socially imposed moral, physical, and social inferiority of women” (Leicester 238), demonstrates that the Wife of Bath becomes “herself a deconstructionist” (Leicester 239). For the Wife of Bath seeks not to create and uphold binaries which, she seems to recognize, ultimately establishes boundaries and, even worse (for women), hierarchical terms of preference and absence, but she seeks instead to tear these boundaries down. Barrie Ruth Strauss builds on and extends Leicester’s idea that the Wife is a deconstructionist by adding a more linguistic interpretation that is particularly sensitive to the place of women within the established patriarchal phallogocentric discourse. Positing that the Wife’s “...speech articulates the phallogocentric conditions of the discourse within which she and her readership [of women] are constituted” (Strauss 527) because her speech is a “subtle yet profound commentary on issues of knowledge and power...ground[ed] in sexuality” (Strauss 527), Strauss also recognizes the role of the female, and specifically female sexuality, in “...mak[ing] public...what masculine discourse wants to keep private” as well as in “challeng[ing] the legitimation of patriarchal authority and enunciation...by exposing, questioning, and reworking the boundaries of the its terms” (Strauss 531).

I agree with Leicester that the Wife of Bath does act like a deconstructionist in her approach to unraveling patriarchal institutions and discourse, and I align myself with Strauss that in so doing, the Wife of Bath “provides a critique of the patriarchal

foundations of language” (Strauss 527). Indeed, by deconstructing and exposing the limitations of patriarchal discourse which claims to represent reality while simultaneously turning away from the physicality, sexuality, and carnality of worldly “experience” that comprises reality, the Wife is able to interrogate the “auctoritee” of patriarchal discourse which claims to represent more than the interests of its male creators. For women, however, their voices of “experience” do not carry any authoritative voice within the power, rhetoric, and structures of patriarchal discourse – a fact which the Wife points out when she reveals that women’s private, invisible worlds lie outside the realm of a single, male, phallogocentric determination and interpretation. As such, women should not therefore be constructed by or constricted to the roles determined for them by the supposed “auctoritee” of phallogocentric language and male discourse. Instead, by “deconstructing” the restrictive binary categorizations of phallogocentric language, publicly performing the private world of the feminine utilizing male discursive methods, and appropriating and mimicking male textual authority, the Wife of Bath uses the versatility inherent in the “undecideability” of feminine speech to negotiate an alternative “all-encompassing” space for women that is simultaneously within and without the patriarchal system of language.

Therefore, I believe that a blending of these two approaches must be used to most fully understand both the methodology (deconstructionist – the how) and the specific linguistic factors (feminine linguistics – the what) that comprise and give significance to the Wife of Bath’s speech. The questions that thus become more integral to me in beginning to understand her Prologue and Tale are those

related to the very linguistic foundations and formulations of her argument. By this statement I mean to ask and investigate the following: Whether it is it, in fact, the convoluted ideas and solutions about marriage, power, class, and social inequalities that the Wife posits that pose such a stumbling block for interpretation and make her entente “unresolveable”? Or whether the difficulty lies “elsewhere” – namely in the realm of the feminine rhetoric she uses – a realm which is necessarily ethereal, unquantifiable, and seemingly illogical due to its position within the structure and nature of patriarchal discourse itself? It is therefore that I propose, rather than viewing the Wife of Bath as a feminist (in our modern sense of the word, which is also historically anachronistic), the Wife of Bath should be viewed as a woman who is sensitive to the unique ability of feminine speech and rhetoric in exposing the limitations of patriarchal discourse to represent reality, and most especially, women’s place within that reality.

In order to understand how the Wife of Bath accomplishes this interrogation of patriarchal discourse, however, we must first take a step back to understand the underlying nature and structure of patriarchal discourse itself. In particular, two key terms must be explicated, which are as ancient and deeply embedded in language and linguistic structures as mankind (and womankind) itself: logocentrism and phallogentrism. Logocentrism, an idea that predates any modern psychological or linguistic theory, is a “part of...the Western tradition...the belief that in some ideal beginning were creative spoken words...spoken by an ideal, present God” (Murfin 222-3). That is, because speech implies “presence” and writing “absence”, speech is thus given preference in the speech/writing language dichotomy.

Although it is important and significant that logocentrism recognizes this dichotomous relationship between the two modes of communication and language – speaking and writing – that comprises and informs our understanding of the most basic structures of language, this tradition of logocentrism is also dangerous in the way it neatly and almost innocuously depends on and assumes a gendered binary-within-a-binary. That is, because speech is given preference, it therefore unintentionally assumes that same primacy as “male” in the male/female dichotomy; equally, then, writing takes on the non-preferential role of “female” in the binary.

It was out of this gendering of the speech/writing dichotomy that the idea of phallogentrism organically and logically arose. For phallogentrism, or the idea that language and thereby all discursive structures are organized around a central, male phallic center (patriarchal discourse) with all other linguistic methods and forms of expression (i.e., feminine discourse) relegated to the external, disorganized space orbiting around the central hive of male power and authority, is merely an extension of logocentrism. Or, as Luce Irigaray explains in her essay, “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine”, patriarchal discourse is able to attain and maintain the “position of mastery” due to the “power of its systematicity, the force of its cohesion, the resourcefulness of its strategies, the general applicability of its law and its value” (Irigaray 795). That is, established as the phallic center around which all discourse revolves, patriarchal discourse subsumes all other forms of discourse under the umbrella that patriarchal discourse naturally contains within it all possibilities for desire and satisfaction; that is, it fulfills all gaps, all the “lack” of feminine discourse. Thus, like a planetary

system where all power originates and is derived from the sun, or phallus, at the center of the solar system, women’s role in language is like that of cold, distant planets – they are to passively absorb and obey the laws of the male center, locked in the inescapable gravity of patriarchal discourse.

A combination of these two inter-related ideological organizing systems, phallogocentrism, then, is the term feminists such as Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray have used to “describe Western culture in general...one which is structured by binary oppositions...and that...together provide the basic structure of Western thought...” (Klages). More than just a systematic, theoretical way of thinking about language, structure, and patriarchal discourse, phallogocentrism, for feminist theorists, has an important distinction from its parents, logocentrism and phallogocentrism. For, just like feminist theory, which emphasizes the importance of the physical body in experiencing and expressing reality, phallogocentrism addresses the physical real-world applications of logocentrism and phallogocentrism once they are brought forth from the metaphoric, theoretical world of the mind to the physical world of the body and human culture. Indeed, it is because these ideas are brought to bear on social reality that there becomes a power struggle between patriarchal discourse and women’s place within it – the very linguistic inequality that the *Wife of Bath* attempts to reveal and negotiate in her Prologue.

Yet, whether thought about theoretically or applied literally to social, economic, class, or (most importantly for the *Wife of Bath*) gender linguistic structures, there is one important characteristic across all three linguistic organizing systems that is key to understanding the *Wife of Bath*’s performance: the role of binaries. Binaries,

in fact, are the one central organizing principle (or phallus, if you’ll excuse the deconstructionist/feminist pun) around which logocentrism, phallogocentrism, and phallogocentrism ground themselves. This is significant not only because binaries create a black-and-white system of logic and order that makes things easy to categorize by what they are (or, more importantly, by what they are not), but they also incidentally and necessarily, if not always favorably, create power dynamics. As such, defining and understanding the nature of these power dynamics in the three primary binaries that Alisoun “deconstructs” in her Prologue to challenge patriarchal discursive authority becomes the central, guiding principle for the purpose of this essay. For, if the *Wife of Bath* is triumphant in her challenge of patriarchal discursive authority, Leicester argues, it will allow her to “convert her own ‘experience’ into a new ‘auctoritee’...to engage in a counterproject of establishing new meanings on the basis of a new self” (Leicester 239). The three binaries that I therefore identify as the most central, the most integral to her argument are the male/female binary, the “auctoritee”/“experience” binary, and the speech/writing binary. Together, these three binaries are intricately linked to form a triangle of power (much like the three estates in medieval English society), with each binary dependent upon and upholding the authority and relevance of the other. Therefore, it is by examining how Alisoun unravels each of these binaries in turn and revealing how this unraveling of each individual binary has ripple effects for undermining other aspects of the authority of patriarchal discourse, that I will structure the next three sections of my argument.

I. (Re-)Claiming Center Stage: the *Wife*’s Assertion of Feminine Sexuality in the Economics of Marriage

The first of these binaries that the Wife seeks to challenge lies along the very basic, yet intrinsically important lines of gender in the male/female dichotomy. Although this binary is relevant from its most primitive, biological level right through to its many cultural implications, Alisoun is perhaps most interested in the unequal power struggle this dichotomy creates. Most importantly, Alisoun is deeply interested in (and skillfully adept at) how she, as a woman, can use her female sexuality to its full advantage in order to undermine the authority of men. It is, in fact, because there is no place for woman and her female sexuality which, by its very nature is “unrepresentable within the phallogocentric...order” (Klages), that she is able to unnerve the men around her with her open dialogue on sexuality. For nothing is more threatening to men’s place in the phallogocentric order which dismisses women to the realm of the unknowable, illogical, and private than a woman who not only recognizes this but forces herself into the limelight, claiming center-stage in her reassertion of the important (if background) roles women have played on the stage of the male-dominated world. Or, as Cixous explains, she is a woman who “seiz[es] the occasion to speak...”, thereby “forg[ing] for herself the antilogos weapon” (Cixous 880).

Alisoun is not shy about expressing her dissatisfaction in a sexual order which excludes the pleasure of women, either. Indeed, she refuses to be a woman relegated to orbiting the far-removed male center, not only intellectually and socially, but most especially sexually. Not only does she recognize that a “wis womman” (Chaucer 209) has more agency in choosing her marital partner than the patriarchal structure will allow women to believe they do (“I have picked out the beste/Bothe of hir nether

purs and of hir cheste” [Chaucer 44a-b]), but she also points out that even once women are married, they still hold the keys to the most precious treasure of marriage yet: that of her “maidenhede” (Chaucer 64) and her sexual allegiance. Alisoun of Bath is not reluctant to inform women either that, even though they have succumbed to the patriarchally-beneficial institution of marriage, they also have the power to be recalcitrant in fulfilling their marital duties as well. Certainly Alisoun has recognized and takes advantage of this control she has over her husbands when she boasts, “Namely abedde hadden they meschaunce./There wolde I chide and do hem no plesaunce.” (Chaucer 407-8). Unfortunately for the Wife of Bath, however, even if she suspends them this pleasure, it is no guarantee of her own pleasure. For while her first three husbands were “goode, and riche”, thus serving her well financially, they were also “olde” (Chaucer 197), and unable to satisfy her sexually, for “...in bacon hadde I nevere delit” (Chaucer 418), bemoans the Wife of her first three marriages.

Despite this sexual hardship in her marriages, however, Alisoun is not a woman to “place her eggs in one basket”, to use a euphemism. Even if she is unable to be sexually fulfilled by her husbands, she can still use her sexuality to get other items of power and authority from her husbands. For there is more to marriage than having the upper hand in matters of the bedroom, Alisoun acknowledges; there is also the matter of female inequality in matters of wealth and land power that marriage brings to the husband and excludes from the wife. For while women, once they are married, must forfeit all their claims to their wealth and land to their husbands, the husband may not relinquish such claims to their wives until death (and sometimes not even then, in

the likely event of the coveted male heir husbands procure via their wives). Alisoun, however, upsets this balance of power and authority when she turns the tables on the appropriate gender roles and property rights in matrimony by reaping the economic benefits of marriage for herself. Using “mine instrument/As frely as my makere hath it sent” (Chaucer 149-150), she makes no excuses about using her sexuality to get what she wants, a power-appropriating strategy she exemplifies when she states the reasons for marrying her first three (sexually-unsatisfying) husbands:

A wis woman wol bisye her evere in oon
To get her love, ye, there as she hath noon.
But sith I hadde hem hoolly in mine hond,
And sith they hadde yiven me all hir lond,
What sholde I take kepe hem for to please
But it were for my profit and mine ese?
(Chaucer 209-214)

In this moment, some scholars would argue that this intentionally calculating behavior by the Wife of Bath does nothing but reveal her immorality and reinforce the patriarchal notion of “bad” women who are lusty, both sexually and economically, and manipulative (and her intentions clearly are less than honorable towards the function of marriage since she seeks material wealth rather than spiritual companionship). Straus, however, disagrees with this antifeminist viewpoint and sees her reversal of the conventional patriarchal power roles as her “articulation of language and sexuality as a means...[to] show that the regulation of phallogocentric discourse is grounded in a sexual economy based on deficit and domination” (Straus 535). On this point I agree with Straus and I do see the Wife not so much as a heartless entrepreneur taking advantage of old men through the institution of marriage, but instead, as a woman who has recognized the actual power she holds, even within her limited social position as “wife” (a title which, by its very nature, categorizes

women as a mere accessory to men’s authority) to turn even such a rigid social institution to her favor, and thereby once again expose the deceitfulness and hypocrisy of the marital system which has so long been used against women to put them in diminutive positions of power. Hence, even her title “Wife of Bath” confers upon her a new sense of power and authority, a new identity through which she can transcend her patriarchally-determined social position as woman.

II. Using Their Words Against Them: the Wife’s Reappropriation of Male Textual Authority

In addition to using the power of her sexuality against her patriarchally-determined social position, the Wife of Bath also uses her real-world experiences to expose the fallacy of patriarchal discourse in its claims to represent reality through her deconstruction of the “auctoritee”/“experience” binary. Recognizing that men’s basis for their “auctoritee” is based on nothing more than an academic, theoretical ideology of how things should be instead of the way they actually are, Alisoun keenly determines that the “auctoritee” of men is nothing more than a self-serving fiction designed to preserve men’s position of authority within the patriarchal social and linguistic order. Unfortunately for women, too, this fiction of male “auctoritee” arises out of the same linguistic power structure as the phallogocentric discourse which informs it. Just as its phallogocentric generator, male “auctoritee” also necessitates the subordination of women and thereby their “experience”, thus espousing the antifeminist idea that women’s experience is invalid. Justifying women’s experience as worthless because it is worldly and carnal, and therefore destructive to the body and

soul, rather than high-minded and spiritual, and restorative to the spirit as is man’s “auctoritee”, men thus add yet another layer of obscurity to their representations of reality in attempt to keep the feminine private and obscured from sight (and language). Yet, while such a fiction would seem to be self-evident and inevitably destroyed as the flimsiness of its foundations and assumptions were revealed, it is due to the primary mode of perpetuating this fiction that therein lays the strength of its tradition: textual authority. For if men’s experiences are in writing, they must be true and irrefutable, right?

Once again, though, Alisoun sees this fiction of male and phallogocentric authority for what it is and champions for an alternative perspective which incorporates the experiences of women as a different, but equal type of “auctoritee”. In fact, it is through her skillful modifications of male-authored anti-feminist texts, based on her actual “experience” of those events they purport to tell truthfully and with “auctoritee” that we are most able to see her challenge of the claim of patriarchal language to represent reality. For example, although it would be easy to assume that her incorrect recollection of antifeminist texts was due to either her lack of education or outright lack of common sense, the Wife demonstrates throughout her discourse that she is neither uneducated nor dim-witted. In point of fact, she demonstrates a wide range of academic knowledge and understanding, for she is able to quote from the Bible to classic Greek and Roman mythology to current church doctrine. Yet, aside from seeming to prove men’s (and anti-feminist texts’) point about the silly, foolish, unfocused, and simple-minded nature of women, why would the Wife of Bath purposely mis-recite and mis-interpret these texts? Is she another woman whose

feminine rhetoric has been forever trapped and defined by phallogocentric linguistic structures and is thus unable to escape the power of patriarchal “auctoritee”? Or is she a woman whose feminine rhetoric has necessarily become so masculinized in her attempts to be heard and understood that she has been consequently doomed to merely repeat those same patriarchal textual authorities which informed her (de-)feminized discourse?

No, Irigaray would argue, for while the system of patriarchal discourse does leave women with “only one ‘path’, the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of mimicry” (Irigaray 795), this seemingly benign process of “assum[ing] the feminine role deliberately” is the most powerful way, and indeed the only way, for women to fight back against the autocracy of patriarchal discourse. Although “assuming the feminine role deliberately” would seem, at first glance, to be merely giving in and condoning the authority of patriarchal discourse, Irigaray sees “mimicry” as a “means...to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it” (Irigaray 795). For should women actively challenge the condition of the feminine, they would have to necessarily take on the language of the patriarchy by “speak[ing] as a masculine subject” (Irigaray 795), thus further acknowledging the supremacy of patriarchal discourse. Instead, by “mimicking” male discourse instead of acceding to it, woman is thus able to render herself “‘visible’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible – the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language” (Irigaray 795). Acting completely opposite to the men who use language as a means of control, women are therefore able to control feminine language through their silent acquiescence which acts like a shield in

warding off male-oriented discourse. Visible only through what their shield of silence deflects, or “reflects”, women assert their own place as the “mirror for...narcissistic speculations” (Irigaray 795) of men.

There is no moment more exemplary of the Wife’s “mimicry” of men either than when she takes on the role of that most exclusively male, authoritative role: that of the clergy. Appropriating the tone, stance, discursive structures, and the ultimate textual authority – the Scriptures – as her weapons, the Wife uses men’s linguistic and discursive tools against them to herself become an authoritative figure. Yet Alisoun makes one important distinction: she does so not as a masculine authority but as a feminine subject “mimicking” and therefore undermining the pretension of male authority.

One way in which she does this, too, is through the very focus of her “sermon”: the bodily delights and functions of marriage rather than the highbrow spiritual aims of marriage. Because even if men pretend otherwise, Alisoun knows they are also clearly interested in the bodily aspect of marriage – a hypocrisy she is very quick to point out from almost the beginning of her Prologue. For if men are uninterested in the bodily aspects of women and marriage, what is the benefit of having a bodily pure, virgin bride? “It liketh hem to be clene in body and goost,” the Wife points out of men’s preference for virginity (Chaucer 97). Yet, since a woman becomes “corrupted” only after a man has touched her, this must indicate, therefore, that it is man’s nature that corrupts women through this act of bodily “experience”. This, in turn, would seem to undermine men’s “auctoritee”, which is supposedly based on their purity of intention and spirits. After all, even

“Th’apostle, whan he speketh of maidenhead/He seyde that precept therefore hadde he noon” (Chaucer 64-65) – that is, even those men that the Scriptures hold up as models of male spotlessness weren’t untainted themselves. Poking holes in the some of the greatest tenets in their religious texts which informs their position of “auctoritee” by appropriating these same ideas for her own subversive reasons, Alisoun reveals the circular cycle of patriarchal “auctoritee” wherein the authority of men is upheld by texts upheld by the supposed “purity” of the men who write and interpret them. Dissolving this cycle down to nothing more than a repetitive chain of self-fulfilling and self-substantiating assumptions and beliefs, Alisoun seems to hint that this, then, can mean only one thing: that the “auctoritee” of men’s superiority, whether physical or spiritual, can only be an illusion.

If men’s “auctoritee”, given to them and upheld by even their most sacred of texts is to be called into question, their subordination of women therefore becomes even more damning. For if there is no religious textual basis for men’s dominance, why is there an unequal distribution of power and authority between men’s falsely-determined “auctoritee” and women’s real-world “experience”? From the very beginning of her Prologue, in fact, Alisoun alludes to this unequal power distribution between men and women in the “wo that is in mariage” (Chaucer 3) when she laments that, “...ne sholde [I] wedded be but ones... ‘And that ilke man that now hath thee/is not thine housbonde.’” (Chaucer 13, 18-19), yet “...the wise king, daun Salomon/...he hadde wives many oon!” (Chaucer 35-36). Through this insight, Alisoun points out the hypocrisy that men may marry as many times as they choose while women must marry only once. “As wolde God it were

levelful unto me/to be refresshed half so ofte as he/Which yifte of God hadde he for alle his wives!” (Chaucer 37-39), Alisoun exclaims in remorse to the inequality of opportunities for men and women. Once again, in bemoaning the real-world applications of this inequity, she reveals the faultiness of men’s reasoning, which asserts their superiority on a textual authority that in actuality neither upholds nor denies women their position of authority alongside men as equal partners, but which men have instead misinterpreted to their own advantage. Alisoun further drives this point home when she openly declares: “Men may devine and glosen up and doun...how manye mighte she have in mariage” (Chaucer 26, 23). Instead of passively accepting men’s interpretations of the Bible, she offers her own interpretation of the Bible’s verse “God bad us for to wexe and multiplie” (Chaucer 28) to argue that she, too, can just as validly interpret of the role of marriage based on her own specifically chosen Biblical verse. Pointing out that men are strictly adhering to the one passage of the Bible that most benefits them while ignoring other passages that benefit women, the Wife therefore takes the equally ridiculous, opposite position to expose the fraudulence and preposterousness of their claims and, in so doing, tears apart the very foundation of the accepted roles of power in the “auctoritee”/“experience” binary.

Rather than allow men to be the sole “misinterpreters” of texts, Alisoun chooses another classical antifeminist text upheld as an “auctoritee” on male wisdom and superiority – Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* - to satirically point out that men have changed many tales throughout history to satisfy their own objectives (that is, writing tales that reinforce the inferior position of women to men) when she recites the well-known tale of Midas incorrectly, saying:

...he hidde as he best mighte
Ful subtilly from every mannes sighte,
That save his wif there wiste of it namo.
He loved her moost and trusted her also.
He preyed her that to no creature
She sholde tellen of his disfigure. (Chaucer
955-960)

In substituting Midas’ wife for his barber in the original tale, it as if through her mis-telling the Wife is not only humorously commenting that it is no secret to women that men are such fools (as represented by Midas’s ass’s ears), but also that in telling the reeds this “fact”, women are not revealing anything damning about the gossiping nature of themselves, but rather about the foolish nature of men who think their own vices are a secret. In addition, she also seems to be saying to her audience, “See, men are so bent on defiling woman’s character that they would even do something as ridiculous as to change the role of women in Greek and Roman mythologies!” Revealing that the importance men place on textual sources for their power and “auctoritee” is in fact flawed since they have chosen writing as the means through which to claim their superiority, without realizing that the cumbersome, static method of “absent” writing is no match for the instantaneous “experience” of verbal re-writing that she can produce in the “present” moment, the Wife thus revolutionizes the power structure of the “auctoritee”/“experience” dichotomy by demonstrating that speech based on “experience”, the feminine mode of communicating that men have disregarded as inferior, is in fact the superior term in the binary.

III. Turning the Linguistic Tables: Reordering Masculine “Reason” and Championing Feminine “Chaos”

This then brings us to the last binary in the triangle of patriarchal power – the

speech/writing binary. For although the Wife’s manipulation of the first and second male/female and “auctoritee”/“experience” binaries revolutionizes her own sense of personal power within the social fabric, she does not completely deconstruct the overarching power of these binaries and, in fact, remains relatively adherent to expected and accepted societal norms that define the roles and behaviors of men and women in medieval society. In fact, she remains deeply embedded in this basic male/female social structure to be able to “reify herself, to define her own true nature” (Leicester 238). It is, therefore, via deconstructing the last binary – the speech/writing binary – that the Wife is able to turn patriarchal phallogocentric discourse on its head to erode the foundations of the triangle of power.

Recognizing this systemic preferencing of male/speech and the subordination of female/writing, the Wife of Bath, however, sees a fatal flaw in this dichotomy. For men, in their blind quest for power, have somehow accidentally gotten the speech/writing binary confused and have placed all their authority in writing, rather than speech, which is actually the preferred term in the binary and therefore the term from which all power extends. The Wife of Bath, however, does not neglect to see or utilize this error to her advantage. Indeed, from the very verbosity of her Prologue and Tale to her reciting of anti-feminist texts which she intentionally retells incorrectly, we can infer that the Wife clearly understands the power of speech in verbally “re-writing” male textual discursive authority. Using the example of her fifth husband, Jankyn, who “...hadde a book that gladly, night and day/For his desport he wolde rede alway” (Chaucer 668-669), the Wife deconstructs the importance that Jankyn (and by extension all men) places on

this authoritative book by pointing out that even though all supposedly “authoritative texts” were written by men (the “superior” role in the male/female dichotomy), their “auctoritee is nonetheless to be questioned since all writing is but “inferior or ‘fallen’ speech” (Leicester 223). She further demonstrates this point by arguing that “the accounts of women’s inferiority of which Jankyn’s book is full are the productions of clerks who write such things only when they are too old to be sexually involved with women anymore” and in so doing she “point[s] to the human motives that have constructed those supposedly authoritative accounts...by showing that such pronouncements are constructed” (Leicester 238). Indeed, in the moment when the Wife of Bath wrenches the book from Jankyn’s hands (“I rente out of his book a leef” [Chaucer 667]) and tells him, “I wolde not of him corrected be” (Chaucer 661), Jankyn reacts by trying to silence the power of her words when “he smoot me so that I was deef” (Chaucer 668). Intuiting that the true source of his anger with her lies not in the fact that she tore the leaves out of his book so much as the fact that she verbally contradicted him, she says to him, “Now wol I die. I may no lenger speke” (Chaucer 810). Yet through the choice of these very words, the Wife reveals once again her cunning, for by saying this she not only makes Jankyn feel guilty for his abuse but also forces him to be painfully aware that she is aware of the true source of his frustrations with her – that she speaks her mind and is not easily subdued with the pseudo-authority of his book of evil wives. Realizing he has met his match, Jankyn gives into her and “He yaf me all the bridel in mine hond/To han the governance of hous and lond/And of his tonge” (Chaucer 813-815). Quite literally, then her words, and by extension the power of speech, has subdued him and the power of the written word.

Although the Wife recognizes this erroneous belief of the power of (male) writing over (female) speech and verbally exposes this mistake, however, she also realizes that this speech/writing binary has been turned around for so long and been used so extensively as a tool representing and upholding patriarchal authority, that her speech is unlikely to radically change the established order without also somehow finding a place in writing that is uniquely “feminine”. Cixous proposes only one form of writing that can begin to represent the presence of women: poetry. For poetry, she says, “involves gaining strength through the unconscious...that other limitless country...where the repressed manage to survive: women” (Cixous 879-880). Dislocated from one, centralized meaning and comprised instead of a multiplicity of layers and meanings, much like the ethereal, moving target position of women and the feminine in male phallogocentric discourse, poetry also is vague, fluidic, and constantly shifting position and interpretation in relation to its interpreter (men). Poetry, like femininity, is comprised of “an inherently deconstructive language” (Klages). Therefore, it is a curiosity to me to that Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale are, in fact, written in poetic verse (an idea which I do not mean to solve or investigate, only to propose as an idea, for this paper’s intent is not to investigate Chaucer’s motives, but only the Wife’s methodology), that very feminine form of expression in writing that Cixous proposes women use to their own empowerment that is both within, and escapes the definitive boundaries of, patriarchal discourse.

Along with this idea of using the fluidic form and relatively open linguistic elements of poetry to represent the presence of women in writing, the Wife of Bath also seems to recognize that her true power as

woman lies not in her determinancy, not in being able to neatly define or locate any nexus of her power or interpretation. Instead, women must maintain their linguistic, sexual, and social elusiveness as a way to protect themselves from being understood and therefore “mastered” by men. Therefore, it is in her “undecideability”, that wavering “...between two or more equally plausible and conflicting readings motivated by the same text” (Murfin 226) without seeking a center of logic and order around which to ground herself and her language, that the Wife’s true assertion of her power lies. Thus, although her “undecideability” complicates coming to any neat resolutions or answers to the problems she addresses and poses for her male audience, it is also from this very same “undecideability” that her speech and its reassertion of the feminine within the phallogocentric order derives its strength in thwarting patriarchal control.

In the end, the Wife of Bath reveals not only the limitations and unfounded, stereotypical assumptions that the binaric nature of phallogocentric discourse necessarily imposes on women’s place in patriarchal society, but even more importantly, she unmasks the self-created authority of patriarchal discursive “reality”. In so doing, Alisoun is thus able to make her deconstructive argument by tearing apart the male/female, speech/writing, and “auctoritee”/“experience” binaries which act together to uphold the female-exclusive authority of the patriarchal system. In deconstructing this illusion of patriarchal authority, the Wife is able not only construct a new identity for herself on a personal level and benefit both financially and socially from her new-found power, but even more importantly, she is able to extend this new identity to “woman” by advocating a role for

women’s speech and experience in fourteenth century medieval society. Prevailing in her deconstructionist challenge to patriarchal textual authority, then, the Wife becomes not so much a proto-feminist but a pro-humanist, urging for a leveling of female “experience” and male “auctoritee” to give both their proper authoritative and experiential places across genders and throughout all levels of society, be they however great or humble.

Works Cited

- Carruthers, Mary. “The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions.” *PMLA* 94.2 (1979): 209-222. JSTOR. Web. 23 Nov. 2012.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Wife of Bath*. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1996. 42-85. Print.
- Cixous, Helene. “The Newly Born Woman.” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 2nd ed. Eds.
- Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 348-51. Print.
- , “The Laugh of the Medusa.” *Trans.*
- Cohen, Keith and Paula Cohen. *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875-93. JSTOR. Web. 1 Dec. 2012.
- Hagen, Susan K. “The Wife of Bath: Chaucer’s Inchoate Experiment in Feminist Hermeneutics.” *Rebels and Rivals: The Contestive Spirit in the Canterbury Tales*. Eds. Susanna Greer
- Fein, David Raybin, and Peter C. Braeger. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 1991. 105-124. Print.
- , “The Wife of Bath, the Lion, and the Critics.” *The Worlds of Medieval Women: Creativity, Influence, and Imagination*. Eds. Constance H. Berman et al. Morgantown: University of West Virginia Press, 1985. 130-38. Print.
- Gottfried, Barbara. “Conflict and Relationship, Sovereignty and Survival: Parables of Power in the ‘Wife of Bath’s Prologue’.” *The Chaucer Review* 19.3 (1985): 202-24. JSTOR. Web. 23 Nov. 2012.
- Irigaray, Luce. “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine.” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 2nd ed. Eds. Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 795-98. Print.
- Klages, Mary. “Helene Cixous: The Laugh of the Medusa.” <http://www.colorado.edu/English/courses/ENGL2012Klages/cixous.html> Web. 2 Mar. 2011.
- Leicester, Jr., H. Marshall. “‘My bed was full of verray blood’: Subject, Dream, and Rape in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale.” *The Wife of Bath*. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1996. 234-254. Print.
- . “Of a Fire in the Dark: Public and Private Feminism in the Wife of Bath’s Tale.” *Women’s Studies* 11.1/2 (1984): 157-78. Academic Search Premier. Web. 24 Nov. 2012.
- Murfin, Ross C. “What is Deconstruction?” *The Wife of Bath*. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1996. 221-234. Print.
- Scala, Elizabeth. “The Gender of Historicism.” *The Post-Historical Middle Ages*. Eds. Scala, Elizabeth and Sylvia Federico. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 191-214. Print.
- . “Desire in the Canterbury Tales: Sovereignty and Mastery Between the Wife and Clerk.” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 31 (2009): 81-108. Project Muse. Web. 27 Nov.

2012.
Straus, Barrie Ruth. “The Subversive
Discourse of the Wife of Bath:
Phallogocentric Discourse and
the Imprisonment of Criticism.”
ELH 55.3 (1988): 527-54. JSTOR.
Web. 23 Nov. 2012.

Tuttle-Hansen, Elaine. Rev. of Chaucer’s
Sexual Poetics, Carolyn Dinshaw.
[http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.c
gi?article=1567&context=mff](http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1567&context=mff). Web.
28 Nov. 2012.