

**THE WIFE OF BATH'S COVERCHIEFS
AND CONJUGAL SOVEREIGNTY
IN FOUR CHAUCERIAN MARRIAGE TALES**

By

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ABSTRACT

This study is centred on four tales from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: the Wife of Bath's Tale, the Clerk's Tale, the Merchant's Tale, and the Franklin's Tale. The impetus of this study is the Wife's coverchiefs. Like Hope Phyllis Weissman, I seek a connection between coverchiefs and the Pauline doctrine of head-coverings. The Wife's excessive coverchiefs are a theological symbol mocking submission, foreshadowing her rant and tale. And, though the coverchiefs are not specifically referenced in the other marriage tales, coverchief doctrine lingers and overshadows the presentations of marriage. Each of the marriage tales seeks the solace and bliss of marriage, but the characters are confronted with conjugal conflict. At the centre of the conflict resides sovereignty. This thesis investigates sovereignty, conjugal conflict and the longing for bliss in marriage. And at the forefront of the marriage debate is the concept of sovereignty and submission, as represented in the coverchiefs.

Keywords: Coverchiefs; Wife of Bath; Wife of Bath's Tale; Clerk's Tale; Merchant's Tale; Franklin's Tale; medieval marriage

Subject Terms: Chaucer, Geoffrey, d. 1400 -- Characters -- Wife of Bath; Chaucer, Geoffrey, d. 1400 -- Characters - Women; Marriage in literature; Chaucer, Geoffrey, d. 1400. Wife of Bath's tale - Sources; Chaucer, Geoffrey, d. 1400. Clerk's tale; Chaucer, Geoffrey, d. 1400. Merchant's tale; Chaucer, Geoffrey, d. 1400. Franklin's tale; Marriage customs and rites, Medieval

For my Dianne and our boy, Riley,
*You have demonstrated the Clerk's patience amidst suffering
and the Franklin's patient love!*

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ABBREVIATIONS

CIT	The Clerk's Tale
CT	<i>The Canterbury Tales</i>
Eccl.	Ecclesiastes
Eph.	Ephesians
Florent	Tale of Florent
FranT	The Franklin's Tale
Gen.	Genesis
GP	General Prologue
KnT	The Knight's Tale
LGW	<i>The Legend of Good Women</i>
LXX	<i>Septuagint</i>
MED	<i>The Middle English Dictionary</i>
MerT	The Merchant's Tale
MLT	The Man of Law's Tale
NPT	The Nun's Priest's Tale
OED	<i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i>
ParsT	The Parson's Tale
Prov.	Proverbs
Ragnelle	<i>The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle</i>
Rom.	Romans
SqT	The Squire's Tale
SNT	The Second Nun's Tale
WBT	The Wife of Bath's Tale
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians

THE FOUR MARRIAGE TALES

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* have evoked a great deal of scholarly debate, opinion, and speculation, especially regarding marriage. Numerous tales recount stories that focus on the bliss and woe that is present in conjugal relations. Since the marriage motif is so prevailing, it has prompted varying critical perspectives on the structure and tone of connubial relations in the *Canterbury Tales*. The 1912 advent of George L. Kittredge's article, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," sparked a plethora of dialogue regarding select tales that Kittredge considered to be a specified and unified grouping—the Marriage Group.¹ Kittredge gave his foremost attention to four tales that focused on marriage: the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, the Clerk's Tale, the Merchant's Tale, and the Franklin's Tale, which Kittredge saw as concluding the dramatic action in the grouping of tales.

Focusing on what he felt was the dramatic action driving this section, Kittredge was less concerned with the dating and order of the tales, which had previously been the focus of critical debate, seeking instead the development of a promising theme. The group of tales, according to Kittredge, wrestles with and debates conjugality, providing a close connection throughout:

The Marriage Group of Tales begins with the Wife of Bath's Prologue and ends with the Franklin's Tale. There is no connection between the Wife's Prologue and the group of stories that precedes; there is no connection between the Franklin's Tale and the group that follows. Within the Marriage Group, on the contrary, there is close connection throughout.
(467)

¹ The term "Marriage Group" has become a way of referencing the tales of Groups D, E, and F. Though these groupings also include the Friar's Tale, the Summoner's Tale and the Squire's Tale, Kittredge and others pay less attention to these tales. This study will use the term "Marriage Group" when specifically engaging Kittredge's ideas. In order to guard against a wholesale acceptance of Kittredge's thesis, however, the term "marriage tales" will be employed as a designation of the four prominent marriage tales, namely the WBT, CIT, MerT, and FranT.

Thus, following Kittredge's proposal, the Wife's Prologue and Tale detail her various marriages, question ecclesiastical teaching regarding nuptials, and ultimately initiate a reinterpretation of the marriage roles. The comic interruption by the Summoner and the Friar is followed by the Clerk's response to the Wife of Bath. His tale, along with the concluding envoy, according to Kittredge, argues for female submission and reasserts male sovereignty in marriage. The Merchant's Tale, which employs savage irony, counters with a bitter attack on women and matrimony in general. In conclusion, proposes Kittredge, the Franklin's Tale answers the marital dilemma initiated by the Wife of Bath and proposes that marital bliss is possible when mastery is supplanted with mutual love and forbearance.

Recent scholarship has questioned Kittredge's original notion of the Marriage Group, especially the ideas that this grouping of tales is unconnected with what precedes it and that the Franklin's Tale adequately addresses the marriage dilemma. Despite Bernard O'Donoghue's declaration that the Marriage Group is "ancient critical history" and "depressingly tenacious," its importance and legacy lies in focusing scholarly attention on the issues surrounding marriage, both within the marriage tales as well as in the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole (247). The four marriage tales, because they indeed grapple with the issues of marital dissension and wedded bliss in a concentrated and sustained fashion, provide an appropriate, yet limited, testing ground for a revisiting of the marriage motif in the *Canterbury Tales*.

That numerous *Canterbury Tales* engage conjugal relations and that sovereignty in marriage is at the forefront of debate in the marriage tales is generally uncontested. More specifically, Velma Bourgeois Richmond affirms the four tales of the Marriage Group "contain strong evidence of Chaucer's intention to relate them by centring interest in a debate about the question of sovereignty in marriage" (323). Richmond stops short of a wholehearted acceptance of Kittredge's Marriage Group thesis, maintaining that other pilgrims and tales "may or may not be included in the argument" (323). Related to the question of sovereignty in marriage are a variety of issues: mastery, authority, obedience, submission, and the freedom and constraint of volition. Though critics have structured the discussion of conjugality within broad ecclesiastical and

theological perspectives, the notions of “sovereyntee” and “maistrie,” especially as the Wife of Bath expresses them, echo a specific biblical decree concerning marital relations that tends to be less emphasised.

The biblical declaration that Eve will be under Adam’s dominion is significant. Genesis 3:16 authorises the husband to rule over his wife and thereby seemingly thwarts the woman’s autonomy:

Also God seide to the womman, Y schal multiplie thi wretchidnessis and thi conseyuungis; in sorewe thou schalt bere thi children; and thou schalt be vndur power of the hosebonde, and he schal be lord of thee. (Gen. 3:16)²

This Genesis passage is the foremost and primary biblical statement regarding the hierarchy of marriage that Pauline doctrine espouses, and its interpretation determines what Christian marriage will look like. At the crux of Christian marriage is the question of how a husband’s power and dominion is exerted and what it means for a wife to be under her husband’s power. The Wife of Bath is especially concerned with these issues. Indeed, I contend that the Mosaic declaration is the very verse that the Wife of Bath needs either to negate or reinterpret in order to successfully present her theology of marriage.

Rooted in the discussion of marriage is the attempt to understand how a husband and wife can live together in a way that honours the biblical precept and ensures that each partner honours the other. Each of the nuptials presented in the marriage tales expresses a longing for connubial bliss, echoing to some extent a desire for the strife-free marriage of prelapsarian Eden. What stands in the way, however, is the issue of sovereignty and submission in marriage. The Wife of Bath’s solution to the issue involves the suggestion that wives should have sovereignty over their husbands. The Wife’s marriage to Jankyn as well as her tale of the hag present marriage as a joyful

² Unless otherwise noted, all citations of the Bible are from *The Holy Bible*, translated by John Wyclif (circa 1384). Also, while biblical scholars remain divided regarding the authorship of Genesis, Mosaic authorship will be presumed.

experience, though the wife has mastery.³ The Wife, in contrast to Mosaic and Pauline theological norms, declares that women desire sovereignty over their husbands. By lecturing on what the various biblical writers say about marriage, the Wife of Bath's Prologue centres much of her discussion of marriage within the spectrum of the ecclesiastical and theological. Though the Wife's Prologue provides a multitude of biblical quotes and allusions, of particular interest to this study is the General Prologue's description of the Wife of Bath – especially her coverchiefs. The Wife's coverchiefs are most often regarded as fashionable garb, an indicator of sexual frustration, or possibly the garment of a widow in mourning, but these explanations are not sufficient. Following Hope Phyllis Weissman – who recognises the coverchiefs as having a scriptural source – I seek to establish a close connection between the Wife's coverchiefs and the Pauline doctrine of head-coverings.

When the coverchiefs are understood within the parameters of Pauline doctrine, they become a significant theological symbol. The Wife of Bath's Sunday coverchiefs, which weigh ten pounds, illustrate a scornful submission to the Pauline pronouncement that women cover their head as a sign of submission (1 Cor. 11). Understood in this way, the Wife's excessive coverchiefs function as a parody of compliance, foreshadowing her theological tirade and her loathly lady tale. The coverchiefs are representative of the Wife's desire to subvert the ecclesiastical and theological imperatives regarding conjugal hierarchy. Alisoun and Jankyn's relationship, and the hag's suggestion that the knight should submit to her, counter the Pauline coverchief theology that highlighted a woman's submission to male authority.

The coverchief doctrine of womanly submission, though specifically associated with the Wife of Bath, overshadows the tales that follow. Thus, in contrast to the Wife of Bath, the Clerk, most likely inspired by the Wife's negative portrayal of his order, presents his tale of patience in adversity. His tale focuses on Walter and Griselda's marriage, emphasising Walter's sovereignty and Griselda's submission. Kittredge,

³ Lee Patterson understands the hag as abandoning maistrie "once she learns that [the knight] cares enough to grant it" (679). I understand the hag as keeping the sovereignty and wielding it lovingly.

believing the Clerk is scandalised, suggests the Clerk attempts to restore what the Wife of Bath has dismantled. His tale, then, seemingly seeks to re-establish the Mosaic and Pauline doctrines of marriage. The Clerk frames his story within the precincts of marriage, but the tale of marriage is misinterpreted by some of the pilgrims and the Clerk's generic moral is ignored. Though his tale speaks of patience in adversity, the Clerk presents the moral in the context of Christian duty and specifically applies it to all humanity – male and female – thereby offering patience as the means to living together amidst strife.⁴

The Merchant and host, having misconstrued the Clerk's conclusion, think the Clerk's story is primarily endorsing the husband's lordship and the wife's servitude. In his Prologue, the Merchant publicly weeps over his marriage, and, much like Harry Bailey, the Merchant is unable to exert the kind of conjugal governance Walter exemplifies. Further, his wife is not submissive like Griselda. The Merchant's Tale extols the bliss of Edenic marriage, only to subvert it and present it as a purgatory and a hell when wives are allowed to rule over their husbands. Thus, while January longs for the prelapsarian bliss of Edenic marriage, his ecstasy seems well out of reach, as his wife cuckolds him. January is unable to conjure the kind of lordship and dominion the tale's introduction anticipates, and the tale concludes with January blindly submitting to his sly wife, May.

The Franklin, echoing the Clerk's principle of patience, presents a portrait of marriage that counters all the examples of marriage thus far. The Franklin engages the pilgrims with a story that investigates mutuality in marriage. Though Arveragus relinquishes his sovereignty for mutual forbearance, he asks his wife Dorigen to maintain a public perception of his lordship over her. How she accomplishes this remains unknown. Though wearing a coverchief might indeed demonstrate her submission in a public way, Dorigen is not described as wearing the garb. The couple's marriage vows declare mutual submission within the marriage, and neither partner subjects the other to the heavy abuses of sovereignty seen in the previous tales. The conclusion of the tale, however, has Arveragus wield the sovereignty he has supposedly

⁴ A similar notion of patience is reiterated by the Franklin's philosophy of mutuality in marriage.

relinquished. This re-appropriation of sovereignty questions whether Arveragus had truly renounced sovereignty in the first place. Arveragus vows dictate that he will not engage mastery, unless Dorigen wills it. The sovereignty Arveragus exercises, though not as heavy-handed as Walter's, illustrates that mastery often produces offences against the one mastered. Thus the Franklin shows the pilgrims a marriage that extols mutual submission and the employment of sovereignty without the cruel abuse normally associated with it.

The analysis Kittredge provides regarding the so-called Marriage Group dispenses with the wider context of the *Canterbury Tales*. Kittredge maintains that the Marriage Group is unconnected to the tales that precede it and that it remains unconnected to the tales that follow. In Kittredge's mind, the Franklin's notions of love and *gentillesse* are the solution and conclusion to the marriage debate: "This...is the Franklin's solution of the whole puzzle of matrimony, and it is a solution that depends upon love and *gentillesse* on both sides" (464). Kittredge's proposal of mutuality resolving the marriage debate is justifiable to some degree, especially considering the Franklin's placement within the Marriage Group. Certainly, the Franklin's Tale engages similar subject matter, namely the state of conjugal relations with respect to mastery, sovereignty, authority, jealousy, and marital bliss. But although the Franklin's Tale of mutuality is a sufficient conclusion for Kittredge—because he does not connect the Marriage Group with the tales that precede or proceed—it does not account for the various other tales in the *Canterbury Tales* that deal with conjugality. Thus, whether the Franklin is successful or not remains a matter of conjecture and opinion.

The preceding synopsis summarises the focus of this thesis. The purpose of this study is to investigate the themes of sovereignty and mastery within the bonds of marriage, particularly as they are represented within the four marriage tales. My intention is threefold. First, I seek to establish a close connection between the Wife of Bath's coverchiefs and Pauline coverchief theology. Critical to this discussion is the Mosaic text, which proclaims the woman to be under the power of the man (Gen. 3:16). It is this text that the Wife of Bath is eager to invert. The woman's desire for sovereignty, also found in various loathly lady traditions, is also part of the patristic

dialogue on the early chapters of Genesis. Origen, Augustine of Hippo, and Jerome discuss the Genesis passage, and their debate provides evidence of a possible connection between a woman's desire for sovereignty and the biblical mandate that sanctions a husband's dominion over the wife.

Second, I tender a reading of the marriage tales, demonstrating that, though the coverchiefs are chiefly associated with the Wife, the concepts associated with the symbolic headgear linger, first foreshadowing and then overshadowing the discussion vis-à-vis connubial sovereignty and mastery in the Clerk's, Merchant's, and Franklin's presentations of conjugality. Each of the tales engages notions of marriage that entail the paradisaical. Yet, though the characters desire joyful bliss in marriage, each tale enumerates the hardships of postlapsarian connubial relations. The happy endings of the tales ensure the audience must evaluate the values and principles each couple lives by.

Third, my final chapter, the title taken from a line in the Parson's sermon – "God Made Marriage in Paradys" – provides a synopsis of the study and explores, at least preliminarily, a slightly wider context of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Connubial relations, good, bad and indifferent, including various estates and perspectives, are represented in Chaucer's work. Most germane to the study conducted here are the Second Nun's Tale of mystical marriage and the Parson's homily expounding the seven deadly sins and postulating marriage theology. The Nun presents a marriage in which the individuals are engaged in the ethereal to such an extent that they do not seek to consummate the marriage. The Parson is more realistic; he extols equality in marriage, but equality for the Parson does not negate the Mosaic and Pauline texts. Because the Parson is the final Canterbury episode, and because he presents his treatise as a theological exposition, the sections dealing with marriage are an important deliberation, providing a larger context than that of the marriage tales alone.

THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

The Wife's Coverchiefs as Theological Symbol

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale are suffused with notions of "sovereyntee" and "maistrie." Despite the sizeable sum of scholarship that exists, Gloria K. Shapiro believes that many aspects of the "Wife's complexity remain unexplored even today," and Alisoun's "religious dimension has not been sufficiently investigated" (130). Shapiro, however, as James W. Cook notes, "neither intends nor attempts to account systematically for the religious dimensions which interest her," inspiring Cook to provide an overview of the major theological dimensions of the Wife's performance, "especially those relevant to the theology of grace and of the sacraments," which interest him (51). Though Cook seeks to be theological and desires to incorporate Church doctrine in his understanding of the Wife of Bath, because his interest is in the theology of grace, he does not deal with specific biblical texts that explain the issues of authority the Wife raises. As a result, although Shapiro and Cook attempt to wrestle with theological themes, neither specifically probes the theology of marriage that explains the Wife's longing to usurp male "sovereyntee" and exercise "maistrie" within marriage.

The prevailing themes of sovereignty and mastery are foreshadowed and represented in the General Prologue's description of the Wife of Bath's clothing. Carolyn Dinshaw describes the Wife's clothing as significant:

Indeed, outfitted in her ostentatious garb—thick kerchiefs, fine stockings, new shoes, huge hat—and emphasizing that those "gaye scarlet gytes" are well used, the Wife of Bath...is a woman whose clothed appearance is centrally significant. But unlike that new bride, she retains her costume (which she intends, I argue, to be alluring, however overwhelming and repellent others might find it), [and] revels in her seductive person and adornment...." (114)

And, notes Dinshaw, “the Wife makes her autonomous desire the very motive and theme of her performance” (114). This performance is augmented by the Sunday coverchiefs the Wife wears. And while ample has been written on the Wife of Bath’s character, personality, theological lecture, and tale, there is a distinct lack of critical discussion referencing the Wife’s Sunday coverchiefs and the likelihood that they are associated with the Pauline imperatives regarding head-coverings:

But Y wole that ye wite, that Crist is heed of ech man; but the heed of the womman is the man; and the heed of Crist is God. Ech man preiyng, or profeciynge, whanne his heed is hiled, defoulith his heed. But ech womman preiyng, or profeciynge, whanne hir heed is not hiled, defoulith hir heed; for it is oon, as if sche were pollid. And if a womman be not keuered, be sche pollid; and if it is foul thing to a womman to be pollid, or to be maad ballid, hile sche hir heed. But a man schal not hile his heed, for he is the ymage and the glorie of God; but a womman is the glorie of man. For a man is not of the womman, but the womman of the man. And the man is not maad for the womman, but the womman for the man. Therfor the womman schal haue an hilyng on hir heed, also for aungelis. Nethes nether the man is with outen womman, nether the womman is with oute man, in the Lord. Forwhi as the womman is of man, so the man is bi the womman; but alle thingis ben of God. Deme ye you silf; bisemeth it a womman not hiled on the heed to preye God? Nether the kynde it silf techith vs, for if a man nursche longe heer, it is schenscipe to hym; but if a womman nurische longe heer, it is glorie to hir, for heeris ben youun to hir for keueryng. But if ony man is seyn to be ful of strijf, we han noon siche custom, nethir the chirche of God. (1 Cor. 11:3-16)

Weissman recognises the Pauline connection here. She contends Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is the “Scriptural source” for the Wife’s coverchiefs (10). When the coverchiefs are understood within the parameters of Paul’s discussion of submission and authority in 1 Corinthians 11, the headgear the Wife wears can be viewed as a Christian symbol of submission to authority. Weissman’s attention is also on the Pardoner’s vernicle, identifying it as an “iconographic device used by Chaucer to establish a symbolic relationship between the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath,” underscoring its association with Pauline doctrine. As such, the coverchiefs become the

dominant symbol used by Chaucer to emphasise notions of submission and governance in marriage (10).⁵

The *OED* views the “coverchief” as “head-dress” and “head-cloth,” chiefly worn by women, but it is not described as a hat (def. 1). It is tenable to consider the coverchief, the calle, and the kerchief as synonymous, as they all function as head-coverings and are in keeping with the symbolic head-covering that the Apostle delineates. “Calle,” according to the *MED*, is “a net for the hair, a kind of headdress” (def. 1a). Colin A. Ireland argues for an Irish influence for calle. It “is more than just a woman’s headdress,” maintains Ireland, “but serves as a “badge of her station in life and may imply those who have taken the veil as their years advanced” (157). Ireland asserts that *calle* comes from the Irish *caillech* and over time became the English *cawl*, losing the letter *-e*. Though clearly Irish, the word still encompasses “some type of headcovering or ‘veil’ commonly worn by women,” allowing it to be a synonym for coverchief (156). It is important, then, that the coverchief is not strictly associated with the everyday hat or fashionable headgear. Instead, as Weissman contends, the coverchief should be understood within the background of Pauline head-covering theology, and as such, it should be considered a theological symbol of submission to authority. It is therefore critical to differentiate between the kind of headdress that symbolically conveys the Pauline teaching in 1 Corinthians 11 and the more common and fashionable hats of the day that do not have a theological import.

Critical Perceptions of the Coverchiefs

Decidedly few critics view the coverchief as symbolically representative of submission to authority. Most critics either ignore it or view the coverchief as equivalent to everyday fashionable headwear. For example, Dale E. Wretlind makes a

⁵ Weissman’s primary concern lies in establishing a symbolic relationship between the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath: “the headwear of the Pardoner and the Wife are materially and conceptually antithetical” (10). The lightness of the Pardoner’s vernicle, notes Weissman, is contrasted with the substantiality of the Wife’s coverchiefs. Weissman links both garments to the Pauline head covering and the image of God theology. In doing so, she views the Pardoner’s cap as a “sham” and the Wife’s coverchiefs as a “comic literalization” (11).

case for the Wife's headgear as trendy headdress. In doing so he does not discriminate between the Wife's weekday pilgrimage hat and her Sunday kerchief: "the Wife's coverchief was not a kerchief at all" (381). Based on the sheer weight, Wretlind argues that the kerchief should be understood in the broader definition of "head-dress" or "hat," for, according to Wretlind, all evidence suggests that "kerchiefs...were not that heavy" until Anne of Bohemia made large and ornate hats fashionable (381, 382). Wretlind's argument suggests that the weight of the article is a reference to a single, sizeable coverchief, which should be viewed as a "hat" (382). Jill Mann, like Wretlind, asserts that the Wife's headdresses "were fashionable, and they are an example of Chaucer's topical illustration of long-established estates characteristics" (267). Mann claims the coverchief occurrences in Chaucer most often indicate "a handkerchief or piece of cloth" (267). She also notes that Chaucer uses the word for the headdresses of "the court ladies before whom the knight in the Wife of Bath's Tale is arraigned, without any hint that this is an archaic touch to fit the Arthurian setting" (267).

Some critics, however, see the coverchief as much more than fashionable headgear. Elaine E. Whitaker views the coverchiefs as part of the Wife's proper widow-in-mourning garb. She argues that late medieval books suggest "the gaily coifed Alisoun courts the devil," but the everyday coverchief was "less malignant," and possibly the apparel of a widow in mourning (27, 29). The coverchief defined in this way, determines Whitaker, "indicates that [the Wife's] life...remains in theological disarray" (31).⁶ Whitaker cites Alisoun's short-lived grief for her fourth husband as evidence for the coverchief as mourning attire:

I weep algate, and made sory cheere,
 As wyves mooten, for it is usage,
 And with my coverchief covered my visage;
 But for that I was purveyed of a make,
 I wepte but smal, and that I undertake.
 To chirche was myn housbonde born a-morowe. (WBT 588-593)⁷

⁶ The theological disarray is due to her conflicted character, notes Whitaker. The Wife is carnal and spiritual, she is gap-toothed and wears the accessories of the devil, yet she attends church and goes on pilgrimages. Any virtuous motive for going on pilgrimage may be suspect.

⁷ All Chaucer citations are from the *Riverside Chaucer*, 1987.

The emphasis here, however, is on the tears that Alisoun, as a widow, should have shed for her deceased husband, not on what a bereaved widow wears to designate mourning. Alison admits she lacks tears, and she must either manufacture them or conceal the deficiency. The versatile coverchief-cloth, being positioned on the head, is near the face and becomes the convenient veil or hanky Alison needs for the self-conscious moment. Although the coverchief is used in veil-like fashion here – either to conceal her face or hide the Wife’s want of tears – suggesting possible affinities to bereavement for Whitaker, the headdress need not necessarily be strictly designated as mourning attire.

Whitaker also suggests the garment could be symbolic of and frequently associated with “frustrated sexuality” (27). This proposal, much like the notion of mourning attire, is somewhat pressed onto the object. Whitaker maintains that Chaucer is consistent in his use of coverchief “in association with women who, like the old hag, search for sexual gratification” (30).⁸ S. H. Rigby, in a similar vein to Whitaker, views the garment as an indicator that the Wife is “morally wayward” (141). The Wife, according to Rigby, is “conspicuously overdressed,” and her “elaborate and excessive head-gear” evoked the condemnation of medieval preachers (141). The Wife’s excessive garb, when understood within the parameters of head-covering theology, would certainly meet with ecclesiastical disdain. Rigby, however, does not make the Pauline connection. Rather, ecclesiastical disdain, along with the biographic details of the Wife’s life, leads Rigby to conclude that the Wife is morally indulgent. Certainly the Wife’s character and tale warrant the stress on sexual gratification and indulgence, but the weighty coverchiefs she wears, when linked to Pauline theology, emphasize submission and sovereignty themes and temper the assertions that the garment projects moral waywardness or sexual indulgence.

The Wife of Bath’s Tale sustains an emphasis on sovereignty, though the sexual is never fully negated. Initially the Wife of Bath’s Tale focuses on the hag’s desire for sovereignty, and her sexual gratification is restrained until the sovereignty is acquired.

⁸ The hag, however, though she mentions the coverchiefs, is not described as wearing the garb. John F. Plummer similarly argues for an emphasis on the sexual. Plummer, however, views the Wife of Bath’s hat as a sexual metaphor. Plummer, unlike Dale E. Wretling, deals only with the Wife’s hat, correctly ensuring the Wife’s coverchiefs remain distinct from her hat.

The hag does not offer the knight sexual bliss in exchange for sovereignty, indeed, the knight has no sexual interest in the old woman, as evidenced by the old woman's wedding night complaint: "O deere housbonde, benedicitee! / Fareth every knyght thus with his wyf as ye?... Why fare ye thus with me this firste nyght?" (WBT 1088-1094). There is a distinct lack of sexual activity – except for the ravishing of the maiden – prior to the hag's acquisition of the knight's sovereignty; but, following the knight's surrender, the hag immediately initiates the sexual by soliciting a kiss: "kys me," quod she, "we be no lenger wrothe" (WBT 1239). And when the hag declares she will be young and fair both night and day, the knight responds enthusiastically and sexually – hugging and kissing her:

For joy he hente hire in his armes two.
His herte bathed in a bath of blisse.
A thousand tyme a-rewe he gan hire kisse,
And she obeyed hym in every thyng
That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng. (WBT 1252-1256)

Once she is transformed, the hag and knight live in harmony and the husband's heart is a "bath" of marital and sexual bliss. The bliss in fact benefits both partners. Therefore, while the sexual is certainly in play here, it follows the acquisition of sovereignty. Once the sovereignty is acquired, marital sexual joy is abundant. Augmenting this joy is the term "blisse," which has affinities to Edenic ecstasy. This "blisse," however, seems to be the outcome of the knight giving governance to his wife.

Though the knight has given the hag sovereignty, the text says that she obeys him in everything. Patterson understands this as an articulation of "fundamental orthodoxy," for the hag is promising to obey her husband (683). The obedience the hag offers, however, is tempered by the fact that she possesses the mastery in the marriage. The hag's obedience veils the possession of sovereignty, and though the text does not specify how she wields the sovereignty, it can be assumed that she still has it. And, interestingly, the hag is not presented as employing the sovereignty in an abusive manner. Instead of being abused by the relinquished sovereignty, the knight's submission to the hag garners him sexual pleasure. That she "obeyed" the knight could specify sexual obedience, since the word occurs in a sexual context. The Wife tells her

audience that the knight and hag embrace and kiss, and the hag pleasures the knight, giving him all his "likyng" (WBT 1256). The passage is critical because it establishes the happiness of the couple. The Wife of Bath, at the end of the tale, reiterates these same concepts in an invocation. The invocation similarly entertains the sexual, but the sexual is dependent on the governance being in the hands of the wife:

...Jhesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fresh abedde,
And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
That noight wol be governed by hir wyves. (WBT 1258-1262)

Thus, while Whitaker and Rigby's suggestions that the coverchiefs are representative of sexual gratification and waywardness fit the character of the Wife of Bath, the longing for sovereignty in the Wife's Prologue and Tale indicate that the coverchiefs may indeed have closer affinities to the Pauline symbol of submission.

The Pauline Directives on Head-coverings

The views of Wretlind, Rigby, Whitaker, and Mann do not take into account that the coverchiefs are specified as Sunday apparel: "That on a Sondag weren upon hir heed" (GP 455). Rigby recognizes that the coverchiefs are the Wife's "Sunday-best," indicating choice Sunday attire, but she does not explain the significance of the "Sunday-best" designation (141). The coverchiefs' close association with Sunday provides further affinities to Pauline head-covering theology. In addition, the Wife's Sunday coverchiefs are in keeping with the description of her in the General Prologue, which implies that church attendance was her custom: there is none like her in all the "parisshe," she participates in mass "offrynge," she wears coverchiefs on "Sondag," she marries five husbands at the "chirche dore," and she goes on various pilgrimages (GP 449-465). The text specifies the garment is worn on Sunday, and since the Pauline teaching on coverchiefs insists a woman's head be covered at prayer or worship as a sign of submission to authority, it is reasonable to presume that the Wife's coverchiefs

are specifically worn for church attendance and differ from the fashionable hats she may wear as coverings on other days of the week.

The apostolic directive regarding head-coverings makes the Sunday coverchief the appropriate attire for public worship: "But ech womman preiyng, or profeciynge, whanne hir heed is not hilid, defoulith hir heed; for it is oon, as if sche were pollid" (1 Cor. 11:5). Paul's imperatives concerning coverchiefs are formulated on the basis of a husband's headship within the marriage: "Y wole that ye wite, that Crist is heed of ech man; but the heed of the womman is the man; and the heed of Crist is God" (1 Cor. 11:3). The Apostle invokes the *imago Dei* – the image of God – as part of this order, and he concludes this order exempts the man from wearing a coverchief; thus a "man schal not hile his heed, for he is the ymage and the glorie of God" (1 Cor. 11:7). The Apostle's citation of the *imago Dei* creates a strong allusion to the events of creation and the fall from Eden, as found in the early chapters of Genesis.

Paul centres his coverchief discussion within the authoritative structure of headship, as well as the postlapsarian declaration that Eve will be under her Adam's dominion:

Also God seide to the womman, Y schal multiplie thi wretchidnessis and thi conseyuynge; in sorewe thou schalt bere thi children; and thou schalt be vndur power of the hosebonde, and he schal be lord of thee. (Gen. 3:16)

Chaucer is aware of the Genesis text, evidenced by a more direct allusion to it in the Man of Law's Tale: "Wommen are born to thraldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governance" (MLT 286-287). Paul uses the Genesis passage to elucidate a theology of womanly submission; a woman is to wear the coverchief, as covering the head is the prevailing symbol of submission to male authority. The Wife of Bath shows her submission by donning the headpiece, though she seems to mock and ridicule it through exaggeration and embellishment. As such, it is not surprising that the General Prologue makes use of the plural, "coverchiefs."

The plural, “coverchiefs,” is ambiguous: “Her coverchiefs ful fyne weren of ground; / I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound” (GP 453-454). First, it could mean that the Wife has numerous light linen kerchiefs that collectively weigh ten pounds, but that she only wears one light kerchief at a time. Second, it could mean the Wife has ten pounds of linen coverchiefs that she wears all at once, creating an unquestionably bizarre and hefty headdress. Ten pounds could also be an allusion to the immense cost of the article. Chaucer uses the term “pound” as a reference to monetary value: “Neuere heer after wol I with hym mete / For peny ne for pound” (CYT 707).⁹ Each of these readings fits the Wife’s flamboyant character, as they uniformly direct the reader’s attention to the extravagant and colossal heap of coverchiefs. The Wife does not seem to wear the garment in a spirit of reverence; rather, in keeping with her own theology of marriage, the Wife seems to be mocking and ridiculing the Pauline coverchief teaching by overemphasising the garment.

The embellished coverchiefs, along with the Wife’s theology, would certainly have invoked the disdain of medieval preachers. “English preachers,” according to Rigby, “were prone to condemn those women who wore elaborate veils, kerchiefs and wimples” (141).¹⁰ As evidence, Rigby cites the Parson, who also weighs in on the excessive dress of women: “it is a greet folye, a womman to have a fair array outward and in herself be foul inward” (ParsT 935). The Parson condemns the pride of those who engage in “outrageous array” and “superfluitee” (ParsT 411-431). While the Parson’s comments are not specifically addressing coverchiefs, it is in the clergy’s best interest, especially in light of the coverchiefs’ significance as a symbol of submission, to ensure the symbol is not ridiculed and that male sovereignty is preserved.

The embellishment of the coverchief is excessive. Weissman recognises the Wife’s overemphasis on the coverchief and describes it as “comic literalization”:

⁹ The *OED* discusses the “kerchief,” a more ancient kin of the coverchief, and it notes the British parliament limited the cost of coverchiefs in 1482: “They shall not suffer their wives to weare any reile called a kercheffe, whose price exceedeth twentie pence” (“Kerchief, n^{1b}” *OED*).

¹⁰ R. G. Owst presents a long tradition of preachers condemning women for their elaborate and excessive fashions (377-404).

In recognizing, however, that the headwear of the Pardoner and the Wife is an imitation of the Pauline paradigm, one must also recognize that the imitation makes a travesty of the Scriptural original....The Wife's ten-pound headdress, on one level, is simply a comic literalization of verse 10 in the paradigm...that is, to be ruled by the authority of a man. But on another level, the headdress represents a subversion of the paradigm....
(11)

Indeed, the Wife honours the Pauline command to have her head covered during public worship, yet she subverts the symbol by exaggerating it. Her convoluted coverchief, as Weissman notes, facilitates a blurring of submission and rebellion: "it is not only a comic literalization and subversion of the Pauline model, it is also a direct contradiction of it" (11). The hefty headdress allows the Wife to appear theologically submissive to masculine authority, but her obedience and submission is pretentious and ostentatious, conveying ridicule, mockery, and a repudiation of the authority it pretends submission to. The Wife's mockery is not surprising, as it echoes her anti-Pauline and anti-Peterine stance on modest apparel:

Thou seyst also, that if we make us gay
With clothyng and with precious array,
That it is peril of oure chastitee;
And yet – with sorwe! – thou most enforce thee,
And seye thise wordes in the Apostles name;
"In habit maad with chastitee and shame
Ye wommen shul apparaille yow," quod he,
"And noght in tressed heer and gay perree,
As perles, ne with gold, ne clothes riche."
After thy text, ne after thy rubriche,
I wol nat wirche, as muchel as a gnat. (WBT 337-347)

Not surprisingly, the Wife "is represented as invoking and transgressing against all manner of textual authorities," especially the Mosaic, the apostolic, and the patristic traditions (McCarthy, *Widows* 109).

Head-coverings, a Woman's Desire, and the Patristic Tradition

Patristic authorities of the early Christian Church accepted the head-covering as an external symbol of a woman's submission to male headship and authority. Monastic

exegesis and legal texts from the eighth to twelfth centuries use the Pauline hierarchy – what Kari Elisabeth Børresen describes as “the hierarchism of God’s image [to] either presume or deny woman’s creational God-likeness” (208, 213). Early Christian Church theologians also explored the relationship between the headpiece, authority, and the *imago Dei*. Thus Augustine remarks:

How then did the apostle tell us that the man is the image of God, and therefore he is forbidden to cover his head; but that the woman is not so, and therefore is commanded to cover hers? Unless, forsooth, according to that which I have said already, when I was treating of the nature of the human mind, that the woman together with her own husband is the image of God, so that that whole substance may be one image; but when she is referred separately to her quality of help-meet, which regards the woman herself alone, then she is not the image of God; but as regards the man alone, he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman too is joined with him in one...therefore the man ought not to cover his head. But because too great a progression towards inferior things is dangerous to that rational cognition that is conversant with things corporeal and temporal; this ought to have power on its head, which the covering indicates, by which it is signified that it ought to be restrained. For a holy and pious meaning is pleasing to the holy angels. (Schaff, *On the Holy Trinity* 159)

Augustine’s anthropology is entrenched in the creation event, where the woman is described as man’s helpmeet and the man is created in the image of God. Further, in his letter to Possidius, Augustine declares “it is not becoming even in married women to uncover their hair, since the apostle commands women to keep their heads covered” (Schaff, *Confessions* 588). The woman, then, according to the Augustinian understanding of 1 Corinthians 11, is to wear the kerchief out of deference to male authority, which the man has over her through the *imago Dei*. Medieval Church theology, in keeping with this perspective, supported the husband’s mastery in marriage, “which the Medieval Church defines clearly as the husband’s role” (McCarthy, *Widows* 105).

Jerome, like Augustine, endorses the coverchief as emblematic of a woman’s submission to male authority, indicating it was a common custom for women to cover their head, specifically in accordance to Pauline theology:

It is usual in the monasteries of Egypt and Syria for virgins and widows who have vowed themselves to God and have renounced the world and have trodden under foot its pleasures, to ask the mothers of their communities to cut their hair; not that afterwards they go about with heads uncovered in defiance of the apostle's command, for they wear a close-fitting cap and a veil. No one knows of this in any single case except the shearers and the shorn, but as the practice is universal, it is almost universally known. The custom has in fact become a second nature. (Schaff, *Jerome* 292)

Jerome's remark, vis-à-vis the fourth century monastic practices in Egypt and Syria, may seem contextually detached from medieval Europe, much less the English milieu of Chaucer. The reference, however, though it details hair-cutting ceremonies, indicates the practice of wearing the coverchief, according to Pauline directives. In another example—the letter to Pammachius—Jerome explains that the wife is subject to her husband, specifically referencing the lapse in Eden, which requires her to suffer in childbirth. This subjection, acknowledges Jerome, means that the wife is subject to the sway of a husband's will:

For the law binds the wife to bring forth children in labor and in sorrow. Her desire is to be to her husband that he should rule over her. It is not the widow, then, but the bride, who is handed over to labor and sorrow in childbearing. It is not the virgin, but the married woman, who is subjected to the sway of a husband. (Schaff, *Jerome* 74)

This letter is of particular significance, not only because it reiterates the subjection of a wife to her husband, but also because Jerome specifically writes about a wife's desire for her husband. The letter to Pammachius is noteworthy because in it Jerome alludes to the Hebrew text of Genesis 3:16, which makes a connection between a woman's desire (for her husband) and the sovereignty of her husband. The notion of a woman's desire is clearly explored in the *Wife of Bath's* Prologue and Tale. The *Wife's* biographic data details the subjection she has endured as a wife, how she has been able to acquire the sovereignty from Jankyn, and that she now desires a sixth husband she can rule over. Further, her tale intimately connects the acquisition of sovereignty with a woman's desire.

Jerome's letter to Pammachius includes the notion of desire—a concept that is in the original Hebrew of Genesis 3:16, but is not included in Jerome's *Vulgate*. Jerome's letter, however, contains a near verbatim quote of the Hebrew. As Jane Barr observes in her study of Jerome's translation of the Hebrew Scriptures and his attitude to women, Jerome's translation of the verse from Hebrew into Latin omits a Hebrew word that specifies "strong desire" (127).¹¹ The *Vulgate*, by omitting the Hebrew word, incorporates only the concept of submission to a husband's rule: *sub viri potestate*. Why the omission occurred is difficult to fathom. The missing word allows Jerome to avoid the issue of a woman's desire, though the translated verse still indicates the woman is under the power of her husband. Barr suggests that unless someone else changed it, Jerome intended to "suppress the true meaning here" (127). Jerome's letter to Pammachius, however, specifically indicates that Jerome, and possibly other ecclesiastical authorities, were aware of the connection between a woman's desire and male authority in the Hebrew of Gen. 3:16. Their awareness of this connection may explain why Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* incorporates coverchiefs, sovereignty and submission issues, and in particular, the notion of a woman's desire being the acquisition of male sovereignty.

Had Jerome included the Hebrew word emphasising strong desire¹² in the *Vulgate*, the Wyclif translation of Genesis 3:16—because it relied on the Latin *Vulgate*—might have read more like Tyndale's translation of the verse (circa 1530), which consulted the original languages and includes the notion of a woman's desire:

And vnto the woman he sayd: I will suerly encrease thy sorow a[n]d make the oft with child and with payne shalt thou be deleverd: And thy lustes shall pertayne vnto thy husbond and he shall rule the. (Tyndale, Genesis 3:16)

Instead, the Wyclif translation follows Jerome's rendition, which excluded the reference to desire:

¹¹ The Latin *Vulgate* is as follows: "mulieri quoque dixit multiplicabo aerumnas tuas et conceptus tuos in dolore paries filios et sub viri potestate eris et ipse dominabitur tui" (Gen. 3:16).

¹² C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch define the Hebrew word for desire, as "bordering upon disease...to have a violent craving for a thing" (103).

Also God seide to the womman, Y schal multiplie thi wretchidnessis and thi conseyuynge; in sorewe thou schalt bere thi children; and thou schalt be vndur power of the hosebonde, and he schal be lord of thee. (Genesis 3:16)

Though the concept of a woman's desire is absent in the *Vulgate* and the Wyclif Bible, Jerome's letter clearly references a woman's desire in connection with Genesis 3:16, much like the Hebrew account.¹³ Jerome, however, is not alone in commenting on a woman's desire in this way; Origen and Augustine do much the same. For example, Augustine's commentary on Genesis 3:16 connects the two concepts when discussing the punishment of the woman. Augustine argues that the woman, once she completes her labour pains, returns to her husband and his rule over her:

There is no question about the punishment of the woman. For she clearly has her pains and sighs multiplied in the woes of this life.... For even in animals the females bear offspring with pain....there is no restraint from carnal desire which does not have pain in the beginning, until habit has been bent toward the better part.... Scripture adds after the birth, "You will turn to your man, and he will rule over you." Do not many or almost all women give birth while their husbands are absent and, after the birth turn to them?...After saying, "You will bear your children in pain," it adds, "and your turning will be to your husband, and he will rule over you." (Teske, *Genesis* 123-124)

Augustine quotes the verse and includes the notion of desire as "return." He reiterates the concept twice, emphasising and explaining that the turning of the wife is clearly connected with the pain of childbirth and the authority of the husband over her.¹⁴ Augustine's notion of the woman turning to her husband echoes the notion of desire found in Jerome.

¹³ The meaning of a wife's desire, both in the Hebrew of Genesis 3:16 and in Jerome's letter, is ambiguous. Irvin A. Busenitz notes three prominent interpretations: a woman's desire, as a punishment, will be subject to her husband's desire (whatever her desire is, it will not be her own); a woman will have an immense longing and psychological dependence; a woman will desire to dominate the relationship with her husband – she will seek to "control her husband (to usurp his divinely appointed headship), and he must master her, if he can" (204).

¹⁴ Busenitz notes that the *LXX* rendered the Hebrew "desire" as "turn away" (204).

Much like Augustine and Jerome, Origen uses a similar term to speak of the same concept. Addressing God's instruction to Abraham — that he should listen to his wife's request — Origen seeks to ensure that this is not applied to physical marriage:

This saying [that Abraham obey his wife], at any rate, is not appropriate to physical marriage, since that well known statement was revealed from heaven which says to the woman of the man: "In him shall be your refuge and he shall have dominion over you." (Heine, *Origen* 122).

Origen's quote here is a reference to Genesis 3:16, and his use of "refuge" is akin to Jerome's "desire" and Augustine's "turning." This patristic data provides, at least preliminarily, evidence that early church ecclesiasts understood Genesis 3:16 to express and encompass the desire of the wife in connection to her husband's lordship over her, thus alluding to the Hebrew text. And these discussions persist in spite of the various early Bible translations omitting the concept.

The kind of familiarity Chaucer may have had with the ecclesiastical discussion over a woman's desire and male authority remains speculative. Lawrence Besserman, however, maintains that Chaucer's works reflect his longing to use "biblical diction, imagery, and story in variously original and audaciously independent ways" (*Chaucer and the Bible*, 31). Further, according to Besserman, Chaucer had an interest in and awareness of the "controversy over biblical translation, interpretation, and authority that was exercising his contemporaries," especially John Wyclif on the one hand and the friars on the other (31). Although Chaucer's interest in Wyclif, translations, and theological controversy could be conceived as a contributing factor, explaining why the Wife's Tale specifically associates a woman's desire with male authority, he is not alone in linking the two concepts in a literary context.

Two Gawain stories and John Gower's *Tale of Florent* exhibit the same linking of desire with authority that the Wife of Bath is famous for. For instance, in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* King Arthur investigates what women desire to fulfill Sir Gromer Somer Joure's demand: "Shewe me att thy comyng whate wemen love best in feld and town" (*Ragnelle* 91). The loathly lady of the tale, Dame Ragnelle, declares that women "desyren of men above alle maner thyng / To have the sovereynté" (*Ragnelle*

422-423). The *Ragnelle* version “survives in a sixteenth-century manuscript,” and its story follows closely the plot of the Wife’s Tale and another late Gawain story, a ballad called *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* (Hahn 120). The late date of the Gawain stories, however, and their similarities to Chaucer’s work, render them less helpful in determining a source of the possible relationship between desire and sovereignty.

Gower’s *Tale of Florent*, like the Gawain accounts and Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s* Tale, explores women’s desire for sovereignty: “What alle wommen most desire / This wole I axe” (*Florent* 1481). As in other versions, the loathly lady provides the knight the answer:

That alle wommen lievest wolde
Be sovereign of mannes love;
For what womman is so above,
Sche hath, as who seith, al hire wille’
And elles may sche noght fulfille
What thing hir were lievest have. (*Florent* 1608-1613)

The English versions of this tale respond to the question with the same answer: what a woman most desires is sovereignty over the man. The similarities between the Gower and Chaucer tales are compelling reasons to assume interdependence or a common source, prompting Olga C. M. Fischer and other critics to presume the two poets “derived their tale from a common ancestor” (205). Certainly the varied traditions of the loathly lady stories provide some elements for the stories, especially the descriptions of the woman as unsightly and the woman’s subsequent transformation as a result of some sort of exchange. And, according to Colin Ireland, Irish parallels to the *Wife of Bath* are “intimately related to the Irish ‘loathly lady’ analogues through the theme of sovereignty” (150). Both Gower and Chaucer seem to have knowledge of the loathly lady tradition. Meredith Cary, like Ireland, notes the various similarities and differences between Chaucer and the Irish folk stories involving the loathly ladies, concluding that Chaucer was influenced by the tradition, but “took only the most basic of components of the plot from the fairy tale,” using the “common material to a new end” (386, 376).

Since patristic authorities were discussing the desire of a wife in respect to her husband’s authority, even though this notion is excluded from early Bible translations, it

is tenable that medieval ecclesiasts were aware of the issues in spite of Jerome's oversight. Thus, the source for the Gower, Chaucer, and Gawain stories that focus on the wife desiring the husband's sovereignty may have been influenced by the discussion surrounding the Hebrew of Genesis 3:16. Chaucer might still indeed be indebted to Gower and the Irish stories for various aspects of the plot, though "his treatment of it is completely different" (205). Most notable with respect to this study, is Chaucer's use of the coverchiefs as a theological symbol that encompasses the discussion of sovereignty and submission.

The discussion thus far has garnered a number of significant findings. First, the coverchiefs the Wife of Bath wears are not a trite or trivial description of fashionable headgear. Neither are the coverchiefs primarily the garb of a widow or the symbol of sexual frustration or gratification. Instead, they are indicative of the Pauline head-covering theology elucidated in 1 Corinthians 11, and they encompass the marital hierarchy Paul and the patristic tradition endorse as the result of the *imago Dei*. Further, the coverchiefs are a significant symbol representing submission, which the Wife has embellished and possibly accessorised in order to mock and ridicule the submission it demands. Second, the emphasis on a woman's desire and its relationship to the authority and rule of a man is part of a patristic discussion that Chaucer might have been aware of. Thus, it provides an interesting context for the study of Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale. The omitted Hebrew word likely incorporates sexual desire: the woman will desire her husband sexually, even though the consequences may be labour and sorrow in childbirth. But the phrase could also be understood as the woman's desire to usurp the male dominion she is under – that is, the wife desires the husband's authority, but he shall rule over her. The omitted word is significant, and, for the purpose of this study, the significance is specifically related to the riddle in the Wife of Bath's Tale: what do women desire most? The hag believes the answer is that women desire men to give them the sovereignty that Genesis 3:16 gives to men.

Coverchiefs as Mock Submission

A more definitive proof that indelibly links the Wife's coverchiefs with the Apostle Paul's head-covering theology can be found in the Wife of Bath's Tale itself. The old hag, having made an agreement to give the knight the answer to the queen's riddle in exchange for marriage, declares:

Thy lyf is sauf, for I wol stonde therby;
Upon my lyf, the queene wol seye as I.
Lat se which is the proudeste of hem alle
That wereth on a coverchief or a calle,
That dar seye nay of that I shal thee teche. (WBT 1015-1019)

The passage gives the marked impression that the coverchief is distinctively female attire. The old woman is confident that those who bear a coverchief will not refute the answer she gives the knight, and the hag's specification – "Lat se which is the proudeste of hem alle / That wereth on a coverchief or a calle" – narrows and restricts the declaration to a specific proud person, which the context infers is the queen (WBT 1017-1018). According to Cary, the queen has a degree of authority: "the queen and her ladies win their plea with the king to set aside the law, and they have therefore achieved 'sovereignty' "(378). But, whereas she has this sovereignty, she is still described as wearing the symbol of submission, probably in deference to her husband king. If the coverchief is not some sort of emblem, the line makes little sense; also if the coverchief is simply another hat, like Wretlind asserts, then the category of those who "wereth on a coverchief" seems anomalous.

If the coverchiefs are not symbolic of submission, then the hag's dare seems ridiculous and constructs a classification of hat-wearing individuals that is principally indistinct and indefinable. If the coverchief or calle were simply another hat, why would the hag invoke a hat-wearer and who could this hat-wearer be? Further, how does this define the proudest person? The hag's dare, when understood within the parameters of Pauline theology concerning head-coverings, which this study contends is rife here, refers to a woman who, by wearing the coverchief, shows outward submission to male authority. Indeed, it would seem odd if the challenge were made to a man, as

medieval males might be the first to disagree with the hag's conclusion. The old woman challenges anyone who wears a cappel to disagree with her answer, and she expects whole assent to her answer of the riddle. And, this is precisely how the tale concludes: the proud queen agrees with the hag. Thus, Alisoun's tale, like the description of the Wife of Bath in the General Prologue, recognises the far-ranging custom of the coverchief as a public symbol of acquiescence to male authority, in keeping with Paul's apostolic teaching.

It is reasonable and tenable to view Chaucer's reference to the Wife of Bath's coverchiefs as a conscious and calculated allusion to the head-covering theology of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. The coverchief is a unique and significant detail of a Christian woman's clothing, and the Wife's embellishment of the object—ten pounds of kerchiefs on Sundays—ultimately demarcates her as rejecting her proper gender role and defying the Apostle's charge to demonstrate submission to the biblical authoritative structures. This perspective of the coverchiefs prepares the audience for the theological incongruities of the Wife's Prologue and the crux of the Wife's Tale: the riddle, its answer, and the reinterpretation of Genesis 3:16 that allows women, like the cloth weaving Wife, to appropriate connubial "sovereyntee" and "masterie."

The Coverchiefs and "Clooth-makyng"

The desire to usurp a husband's sovereignty and authority is well established within the tradition of cloth weaving, the Wife of Bath's vocation: "Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt" (GP 449). That "we never hear again of the Wife's 'clooth-makyng' strongly suggest[s] that the only reason for introducing it here is to emphasise her estate function," writes Mann (122). Mann points out that "the assumption that cloth-making is the duty of the feminine estate" is common in late medieval satire (122). Sheila Delany sees the reference to cloth-making as a parody of the noble wife of Proverbs, who spins and weaves and clothes herself and her family. Delany, like Mann, believes the Wife's vocation to be "overdetermined" (*Literary Politics* 122). The vocation, nevertheless, suits the Wife, and Thomas Garbaty affirms the "archetypal bawd" is traditionally connected with the cloth trade (342). The bawd, according to Garbaty, was

the “go-between figure,” usually an intermediate figure/old woman/whore who had the confidence of a girl and her lover and taught the arts of love (344). The Wife knows “remedies of love” and “koude of that art the olde daunce” (GP 477-478). Mary Carruthers observes that the records of this period indicate that women wool merchants and clothiers are common, but maintains Alisoun’s vocation is more extensive than that of a weaver:

The Wife is not a weaver but a capitalist clothier, one of those persons who oversaw the whole process of cloth manufacture – buying the wool, contracting the labor of the various artisans involving manufacture, sending bales of finished broadclothes off to Bristol and London for export.... They were usually widows carrying on after their husbands’ deaths, and some of them were very wealthy indeed.... The term “cloth maker” refers to that person, the clothier, who manufactures cloth. (210)

Chaucer, maintains Garbaty, uses the archetype of the bawd and the weaving vocation to portray Alisoun. These weaving women, notes Garbaty, “controlled the destiny of all men and...were more powerful even than the gods” (345). The cloth making vocation is an important part of the Wife’s character, as it associates her with powerful women mentioned in the Bible.

Not only does the Wife’s cloth-making ability provide her with economic power, as Garbaty indicates, her trade links her with the authoritative power of medieval women, which, according to Alcuin Blamires, is particularly evident when viewed through the apocryphal work of Esdras. Blamires contends the apocryphal book of 3 Esdras, often found in versions of the *Septuagint*, in the *Vulgate* after the Apocalypse, and also in Wyclif’s Bible, establishes the “single most cognate source and paradigm for the medieval case for women” (51).¹⁵ The passage Blamires cites is significant, as it centres on a riddle King Darius gives to three bodyguards: What one thing is strongest? The first guard nominates wine, the second guard suggests kings, and the third guard maintains that women are strongest. Defending his position, the third guard tells the king that women have priority through maternity – they give birth to men. A further proof that

¹⁵ When Blamires speaks about the “case” of women, he is seeking to establish the “long-standing medieval tradition in defence of women” (1).

women are strongest, explains the guard, lies in the fact that women are the objects of a man's desire; a man having silver and gold, seeing a comely woman, will let go of all possessions to gape after her with his mouth open, explains the guard. Most notably, and most significant to the discussion here, the guard asserts that women make clothes: "And thei maken the stoles, or longe clothis, of alle men, and thei don glorie to men, and men moun not be seuered fro wymmen" (3 Esdras 4:17).¹⁶ The second reference to "thei" is "oblique," explains Blamires, as it can denote the clothes women make bring glory to men, or it can designate that the women, in making the clothes, bring glory to men. Either way, the close association of cloth and the glory it or the woman brings to a man prompts Blamires to suppose "a connection with 1 Cor. 11:7 and 11, which states that woman is the glory of man" (52). Blamires' suggestions are noteworthy, establishing a close connection between cloth, power, and glory. All three concepts are prominent in the Corinthian passage and are manifestly dovetailed with the *imago-Dei* and postlapsarian headship structures that are prominent in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale.

The Wife, as a merchant of cloth, has another accompanying biblical parallel that links the cloth trade with the wielding of power. The Wife is very much like Lydia, the woman of Thyatira and a seller of purple cloth from the book of Acts.¹⁷ Lydia is of particular interest because she is a woman who wields household authority. The text does not link her to a man, neither a husband nor guardian, and when she converts and is baptised, her whole household follows suit. This is the only case in the New Testament that describes a woman wielding the kind of authoritative power that can

¹⁶ While there is a confusion over how the book names – Esdras and Ezra – are used in the *Septuagint*, the *Vulgate*, and the various English versions, the book today termed 1 Esdras is not in the Jewish, Protestant or Catholic canon. It was, however, included in the *Septuagint*, in the Eastern Orthodox canon, and in the *Vulgate*. The Wyclif Bible calls it 3 Esdras.

¹⁷ And in the dai of sabotis we wenten forth with out the yate bisidis the flood, where preier semede to be; and we saten, and spaken to wymmen that camen togidere. And a womman, Lidda bi name, a purpuresse of the cite of Tiatirens, worschippinge God, herde; whos herte the Lord openyde to yyue tente to these thingis, that weren seid of Poul. And whanne sche was baptisid and hir hous, sche preyede, and seide, If ye han demyde that Y am feithful to the Lord, entre ye in to myn hous, and dwelle. (Acts 16:13-15)

subdue and dominate a household.¹⁸ The Wife's prevailing association with the cloth trade may allow Alisoun to wear her ten pounds of coverchiefs with less Ecclesiastical suspicion; she is, after all, involved in the cloth trade and has the means and resources to fashion the excessive headpiece. Further, while the Wife holds a powerful business position as clothier, the coverchiefs indicate that she defers to male authority. Yet, because she is a prosperous widow and because she is independent, the Wife's deference to male authority through the coverchiefs has little, if any, substance since she is widowed and not under a man's authority and since what the symbol represents is being ridiculed in the way it is worn.

The Wife of Bath's Reinterpretation of Genesis 3:16

Even if the Wife's excessive coverchiefs are not recognised as a mockery of the Pauline decrees regarding headship, the themes of submission and authority within marriage that permeate the Wife's Prologue and Tale make it clear she seeks a new interpretation of Christian marriage. Her character is in conflict with Christian piety. For example, the Wife is sexually vibrant, given to flirtatious affairs, lewd in her speech, flamboyantly dressed, a gap-toothed woman with red hose, new shoes, and a hat as broad as a shield. In some respects, the Wife's lifestyle is in keeping with the clergy of the day. Like much of the hypocritical clergy, Alisoun manufactures an air of godliness, but her Christian piety – her charity, penance, pilgrimage, and outward deference to authority – is contrasted by her "wandrynge by the weye," her "felaweshipe," her tendency to "laughe and carpe," and her "remedies of love" (GP 467-475).¹⁹ When the

¹⁸ All other New Testament references to household authority and conversion have a pronounced masculine association. A parallel text to the Lydia encounter occurs in the same chapter of Acts, where the converted jailor of Philippi has his household follow him in conversion and baptism, displaying his authority over them: "And he took hem in the ilke our of the niyt, and waschide her woundis. And he was baptisid, and al his hous anoon. And whanne he hadde led hem in to his hous, he settide to hem a boord. And he was glad with al his hous, and bileuede to God" (Acts 16:33, 34).

¹⁹ R. N. Swanson details the problems of the medieval priesthood: "there [were] complaints against immoral or inappropriate activity – sexual misdemeanors, failure to maintain property, conflict over tithes, and clashes of personality" (848). Ross William Collins' assessment coincides with Swanson's view, citing the priests with drunkenness and intoxication, public drinking bouts, playing dice and gambling, the keeping of taverns, charging usury, hunting and fowling, the keeping of concubines, and raising of families (314).

Wife begins to expound her theology, her longing to invert the traditional marital structures becomes clear, yet it is difficult to take the laughing woman seriously.

Amidst this posturing and spiritual projection, the Wife forewarns the Pardoner, who has interrupted her with his own wish to secure a wife, that she might not be telling the truth. She tells him that her words are beleaguered with the theatrical: "If that I speake after my fantasye, / As taketh not agrief of that I saye, / For myn entente nys but for to pleye" (WBT 190-193). The disclaimer that she is justing playing conjures sexual play, but it also qualifies what the Wife is about to say, guarding her against accusations of heresy. The Wife declares, a short while later, that women can lie bolder than any man, warning the audience that the Wife may not be fully honest: "For half so boldely can ther no man / Swere and lyen, as a womman kan" (WBP 227-228). The listeners, then, must weigh the Wife's words carefully, for the Wife, who is a weaver of cloth, is also a weaver of words, specifically of doctrine.

The ability to weave cloth, as well as words and doctrine, demonstrate the Wife's economic state and verbal skill. Alisoun is a woman who is economically in control of her past husbands' estates, she is sexually experienced, and she is widowed, all of which enable her to challenge the medieval male authority that dominates her and allows her to destabilize the authoritative structures within marriage in particular. Her marriage to Jankyn exemplifies her power, her desire for sovereignty, and the theme of her tale:

And whan that I hadde geten unto me,
By maistrie, al the soveraynetee,
And that he seyde, "Myn owene trewe wyf,
Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf;
Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estaat"-
After that day we hadden never debaat.
God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde
As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde. (WBT 817-824)

This passage occurs after the Wife and Jankyn have physically beaten each other. Strife is abated once her husband Jankyn relinquishes sovereignty to the wife. And once the Wife is widowed, she eagerly anticipates her sixth husband. The reasons she seeks another husband are varied; it may be to continue the usurping of authority, to satisfy

her lust, and even possibly to amass more fortune. McCarthy describes a widow's authoritative power over a man within the context of medieval widowhood:

Widows posed a potential challenge to dominant ideologies of gender because they were not subject to fathers or husbands, and were free to exercise legal and economic rights otherwise available for the most part only to men.... Ecclesiastical suspicion of widows finds expression in concern at their status as sexually experienced but unmarried women. (*Widows* 101)

It is this kind of woman – the empowered widow – that January of the Merchant's Tale seeks to avoid, believing these women to be deceptive. In addition to this powerful status, the Wife has a comprehensive and working knowledge of department books, the Bible, and the patristic tradition. The Wife is a sexually experienced woman who takes on the role of theologian and expositor. Alisoun's complex sermon demonstrates why the widowed Wife might meet with ecclesiastical suspicion, especially since her theological acuity allows her to develop a new theology of wifely sovereignty in marriage.

In presenting her new theology the Wife is astute enough to realize that history, and possibly theology as a result, is subjective and prejudicial. The Wife wants to know who "payntede the leoun," claiming that if women had written history, the stories would be different from a clerk's orations:

if wommen hadde written stories,
As clerkes han withinne hir oratories,
They wold han written of men more wikkednesse
Than all the mark of Adam may redresse. (WBT 693-696)

Carruthers defines the painting phrase as teaching that "the truth" of a picture often has more to do with the "prejudices and predilections of the painter" than with the "reality of the subject" (209). Alisoun, notes Carruthers, "treats herself in her tale to a controlled flight of comic fantasy...demonstrating through parody the literary instrument with which she seeks to correct authority" (209). The primary attack in both the prologue and tale, states Carruthers, is directed at "a body of marital lore held commonly by her own class and articulated most fully in the department books written to foster *gentillesse*"

(211). While the Wife is certainly seeking to attack the structures and morality of the deoprtment books, as Carruthers contends, the Wife is also seeking to deal with all that the “mark of Adam may redresse.” The mark of Adam, as E. T. Hansen contends, emphasizes that “males are also constrained and constituted by gender” (414). But the reference also cannot help but recall the most obvious allusion to the first male and the early history in Eden. Through the allusion to Adam, the Wife is able to prepare her audience for the theological “redresse” and inversion of the Genesis text, overturning the traditional interpretation of the Mosaic text concerning Adamic authority and Eve’s desire.

Chaucer manufactures Alisoun as an astute theologian and, in spite of her quasi-spiritual appearance and loose moral self-construction, she has the capacity to confront the authoritative theological figures of Christendom, namely Christ, the Apostle Paul, and specifically Moses, through the Genesis 3:16 passage. Her ability to cast doubt on the traditional biblical perspectives on marriage advances her perilously close to outright heresy, something she may well have anticipated, given that she subsequently protects herself by telling the Pardoner her words are “but for to pleye” (WBT 192). Even if the Wife succeeds in undermining the marriage teachings of Christ and Paul, if she is unable to reshape and reinterpret Genesis 3:16, her arguments are in vain. Indeed, the core of her argument lies in convincing her audience either to forget Genesis 3:16 or to comprehend it anew. It is no surprise, then, that the Genesis verse is only subtly alluded to; it is not in Alisoun’s interest to remind her audience of the quintessential text endorsing womanly submission and male authority.²⁰ A medieval audience familiar with Catholic dogmas regarding marriage, however, might very well recognise the Wife’s allusion to the Genesis passage and her heresy. Further, the Wife’s reading of the verse is so radical that she masks her unconventional theologizing, refusing to quote it

²⁰ The Wife is not only concerned with the Genesis passage. Her prologue cites numerous other biblical texts dealing with marriage—especially the Gospels and 1 Corinthians 7. This study, however, will focus its aim on the Genesis passage and 1 Corinthians 11 since they, more than the other passages, fit the coverchief symbol the Wife wears. Lee Paterson describes the Wife’s *sermon joyeux* as explicating “Paul’s text to show that it means the opposite of what a more orthodox exegete would claim it says” (677). This longing to overturn traditional exegesis happens not only with respect to the 1 Cor. 7 passage; the Wife also seeks to do the same to Genesis 3.

and telling the pilgrims it is all in play. Despite the Wife's longing to eradicate the Genesis text dictating a woman's "thraldom" and male "governance," the Edenic event has permanent consequences that demarcate the Wife's theology as heresy. Indeed, D. W. Robertson demonstrates the Wife's heterodoxy, concluding that the Wife "does her best to subvert the traditional hierarchy of husband over wife as it reflects the hierarchy of Christ over the Church" (330).

The Wife of Bath longs to escape the repercussions of Genesis 3 that restrict women, and her tale employs vocabulary similar to that of Genesis 3:16 and ecclesiastical commentators like Jerome, combining the issues of womanly desire and sovereignty. Contrary to the males, who often wielded authority abusively, when Alisoun gains sovereignty over Jankyn, she exhibits kindness and fidelity.²¹ Similarly, the Wife of Bath's Tale details how the hag, now fair and beautiful and wielding the power in the marriage, rules over the knight with respect and love, letting him embrace her and receiving a thousand kisses. Cary qualifies the kind of sovereignty the old hag has required from the knight:

To rule at all meaningfully, she must have [the knight's] voluntary submission. In return, she promises, and gives, her own. On this basis—that each voluntarily submits to the other—they live out their lives in perfect joy. (385)

Cary's assessment could easily be transferred to the Franklin's discussion via willing submission and mastery. Chaucer, in constructing the knight's submissive response and the hag's subsequent submission in return, reiterates the Pauline doctrine of mutual submission (Eph. 5:21),²² anticipating the mutuality suggested by the Franklin in his story of Dorigen and Arveragus. Here, in the Wife of Bath's Tale, however, the sovereignty the hag gains is never truly relinquished. It is what she desired and it is

²¹ The scene is reminiscent of the wedded joy of Palamon and Emelye in the Knight's Tale.

²² In the letter to the Ephesians Paul teaches mutual submission, and he also reiterates the marital hierarchy outlined in 1 Corinthians: "Be ye suget togidere in the drede of Crist. Wymmen, be thei suget to her hosebondis, as to the Lord, for the man is heed of the wymman, as Crist is heed of the chirche; he is sauour of his bodi. But as the chirche is suget to Crist, so wymmen to her hosebondis in alle thingis. Men, loue ye youre wyues, as Crist louyde the chirche, and yaf hym silf for it, to make it holi" (Eph. 5:21-25).

what she will keep, even though she will wield it lovingly. By concluding the tale in this fashion – the happy couple kissing and the wife obeying her husband – the Wife seeks to silence any detractors, showing that the hag and the knight “lyve unto hir lyves ende / In parfit joye” (WBT 1257-1258).

Conclusion

The Wife of Bath has fashioned a marriage in which the hag usurps the sovereignty of the knight she marries, resulting in a happy marriage. In doing so, she has refashioned Christian marriage theology, reinterpreting Genesis 3:16. The three main tales that follow the Wife of Bath, namely the Clerk’s, the Merchant’s, and the Franklin’s, contemplate the theology of marriage initiated by the Wife’s views of sovereignty. The Wife’s marriage to Jankyn, as well as the hag’s marriage to the knight, ends in marital accord and harmony, demonstrating non-abusive sovereignty. Thus the Wife, argues J. K. Bollard, “is interested in sovereignty not for its own sake, but in order to achieve a happy and secure marriage” (56). The Wife may well be positing that a woman’s desire for sovereignty is to procure the strife-free marriage her tale presents.

The Wife’s symbolic coverchiefs play a significant role. First they express the Wife’s attitude, then they foreshadow her theology and tale, and finally, the doctrine the coverchief symbol conveys overshadows the marriage tales that follow. Thus, though the coverchief symbol is primarily an emblem associated with the Wife, the concepts the coverchiefs express and embody dominate the Clerk, the Merchant, and the Franklin’s presentations of conjugality. Whereas the four tales present diverse views, all four end with the married couple joyfully united. The marriage tales depict, to varying degrees, the nature of marriage and the emphatic gap that exists between the human longing for marital bliss and the reality of postlapsarian conjugal conflict. At the root of the four depictions of marriage lie the theological underpinnings that the Wife of Bath’s coverchiefs emphasize and symbolically represent.

THE CLERK'S TALE

The Clerk's Patience in Adversity

The Clerk's Tale tells of Griselda, a woman of low birth and poverty, who suffers under the heavy-handed sovereignty of Walter, her noble husband. In contrast to the Wife of Bath who exerts her power through vivacious sexuality, rebellious speech, and outright insurgence, Griselda's abdication of all self-will makes her the quintessential submissive wife in the eyes of the Merchant and host. The themes of submission and sovereignty the Wife of Bath spoke of remain dominant in the Clerk's Tale, and this dominance is in part due to the Wife of Bath's symbolic coverchiefs and the doctrines associated with the symbol. Though the coverchiefs are not specifically mentioned in the marriage tales that follow the Wife of Bath's Tale, the concepts that permeate the coverchiefs overshadow the various presentations of marriage. As established in the preceding chapter, the coverchief symbol is comprehensive, embracing the issues the marriage tales engage: the hierarchy in marriage, the nature of authority, the essence of submission, and the ongoing debate over who possesses sovereignty and mastery in marriage. Thus the Clerk's Tale, like the Wife of Bath's Tale, wrestles with the issues of wifely submission and a husband's authority over her.

The Clerk endures maltreatment, foreshadowing his tale of Griselda's suffering. As the pilgrims ride to Canterbury, Harry Bailey notices that the Clerk is quiet and reserved. Unlike the Miller, who is so drunk he can barely ride his horse, the Clerk rides "as coy and stille as dooth a mayde" (CIT 2). The Clerk patiently ignores the host's disparaging remark, possibly because the Wife's harangue may still be on his mind, especially since the Wife attacked the Clerk's order, maintaining that no clerk "wol speke good of wyves" (WBT 689). Harry Bailey is somewhat worried that the Clerk may be too learned and thus bore the pilgrims: "Telle us som murie thyng...Speketh so pleyn...That we may understonde what ye seye" (CIT 15-20). He hints at the possibility

that the Clerk will be unable to entertain the group. Though the Clerk is insulted, he does not give any indication he is upset, nor does he confront the individuals directly. Instead, he informs the pilgrims his tale was "Lerned at Padowe" and is based on Petrarch's poetry. The Clerk specifies that the tale is learned, implying that he will not stoop to the host's suggestion of a merry tale. The tale he tells provides an exemplum for patient suffering, something the Clerk personally illustrates (CIT 27, 31).

The Clerk's Tale establishes a contrast between Griselda and the Wife. Margaret Hallissy asserts the tale, as well as the Envoy-song that follows the story, "[tie] the character of Griselda to that of the Wife of Bath as representatives of two dichotomous models of feminine behavior" (73).²³ Whereas the Wife of Bath wears the coverchief symbol, she mocks and scorns it by her speech and by her behaviour. Conversely, Griselda, who is never described as wearing the symbolic headgear, encapsulates all it represents in the way she behaves towards her father and toward her husband. In seeking to obey her husband in all things, Griselda accedes to the Mosaic command and endorses the Pauline marriage hierarchy, yielding to her husband's rule over her. Because Griselda's submission dramatically contrasts with the Wife's Tale, Kittredge views the Clerk's Tale as intending to repair what the Wife of Bath has sought to undo: "the Clerk of Oxford, [seeks] to demolish the heretical structure so boisterously reared by the Wife of Bath in her prologue and her tale" (447). The Clerk, however, seeks to do more than just repair what the Wife has undone.

While there is a prevailing tendency to view the Clerk's Tale as a re-endorsement and restoration of male sovereignty in marriage, the tale encompasses a subversion of the very marriage ideals it seems to project. For example, the Clerk's Tale is "at least as much concerned with the absurdities of male chauvinism as with wifely subjection," writes Richmond (336). Other critics, like Carolyn Van Dyke, view the Clerk as unwittingly subverting the very kind of marriage theory that the story seems to restore:

²³ Chaucer's Clerk's Tale is based on Petrarch's story that is an adaptation of a tale in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and on a French version of Petrarch's story. Morse notes that Petrarch uses the Griselda story in order to endorse her exemplum, applying it to all Christians' response to the Divine. According to Morse, the French translators then "apply Griselda's example to women, but Chaucer is the first to set her against the antifeminist type of woman" (55).

"[the tale] veers between equally untenable opposites, formulaic misogyny and subversive sympathy, its indeterminacy subtly undermining the generic lesson" (67). The tale's indeterminacy presents hermeneutical challenges, asserts Emma Campbell, because the tale challenges "contemporary notions of gender hierarchy while, at the same time, seeming to confirm and reinforce those hierarchies" (194). Robert E. Finnegan agrees, noting that the Clerk creates "contradictions and paradoxes, movements that flow each against the other, that make interpretation most difficult" (321). And J. Allan Mitchell too, substantiates the tension between an endorsement and a subversion of marriage hierarchies. Mitchell writes:

For instance, Chaucer may have conceded that from the clerkly perspective Griselda "shewed wel" and yet have gone on to subvert the clerkly perspective. On the other hand, we could pursue the idea that Chaucer is critiquing medieval marriage (the very idea of wifhood Griselda represents) by pushing female submission to its logical limit. Here are the lengths to which a woman must go if she is to be a good wife, Chaucer could be saying, and here is what a man will do to a woman when she really is that good. (12)

It is important to understand the indeterminacy and subversion that is present in the tale, as it works to the Clerk's advantage—it allows him to exact revenge against the Wife and the host. In essence, it is a significant part of his stratagem. The Clerk has been insulted, and he seeks revenge through his tale. The Clerk's Tale presents the marriage of Walter and Griselda, but he tells the story in such an indeterminate way that the audience is forced to approve and disapprove of the marriage at the same time. The Clerk initially depicts a marriage that embraces the Pauline connubial hierarchy and the Mosaic demand that wives submit to a husband's rule. As such it is a re-endorsement of connubial male sovereignty, countering the Wife's Tale. However, the Clerk also subverts Walter's authority, calling it evil. The sovereignty Walter wields is abusive and the submission Griselda displays is absurd. The Clerk tells a tale of marriage, but his generic moral makes it clear that he is less interested in marriage theology per se.

The Clerk, like Griselda of his tale, is an exemplum. He does not attack the Wife for her comments about clerks and he acknowledges a willing submission to the host's governance, even though the host has censured the Clerk's horsemanship and derided

his education: “Hooste,” quod he, “I am under youre yerde. / Ye han of us as now the governance” (CIT 22). The Clerk counters the adversity he has experienced by actions that convey a polite demeanour to the Wife and a wholesale submission to the host, yet he is also able to articulate a condemnation of his accusers with such subtlety that those who have offended him remain unaware of the denunciation. Thus the Clerk is able to answer the Wife’s criticism—a clerk can speak well of women—yet his speaking well of women is a sham, as the woman he extols is dead. Further, following the tale, Harry Bailey’s focus is on having a submissive Griselda-like wife, ignoring the moral about patience in adversity and proving that the Clerk has indeed told a tale that is too learned for the host to grasp. The tale’s moral shifts the focus from Walter’s sovereignty and Griselda’s submission to non-gendered patience in adversity, but the pilgrims—particularly the host and the Merchant—miss the point of the moral.

Walter, the Knight of Lombardy, and Griselda, “ful innocent”

Walter is a knight from Lombardy, a locale that in the *Legend of Good Women* is linked with tyranny.²⁴ He is the primary figure of the first 140 lines of the tale, and he is normally depicted in relation to his subjects. Katherine L. Lynch describes Walter as “the tale’s center of gravity, around which all else necessarily revolves” (45). The Clerk makes mention of the geographic locale three times: “boundes of West Lumbardye” (CIT 46); “gentilleste yborn of Lumbardye” (CIT 72); and “so noble array in al West Lumbardye” (CIT 945). According to Phillipa Hardman, “Chaucer clearly expected that [Lombardy] would be immediately familiar to his audience,” and thus the allusion to the reputation of Lombard tyranny and cruelty foreshadows the testing that Walter imposes on Griselda (174). Not only do the allusions to Lombardy linger, Walter’s narcissism and hedonism are featured tendencies of his character: “But on his lust present was al his thoght, / As for to hauke and hute on every syde. / Wel ny alle othere cures leet he slyde” (CIT 80-82). The subjects ask the marquis to marry, hoping to avoid political chaos if he were to die without an heir: “And that a staunge successour shold take /

²⁴ Attempting to get the god of Love to change his behaviour, Queen Alceste asks him to forego “crueltee and tyrannye” and adopt the character of a “ryghtwys lord”: “And not ben lyk tyraunts of Lumbardye, / That usen wilfulhed and tyrannye” (LGW 353-355).

Youre heritage, O wo were us alyve! / Wherefore we pray you hastily to wyve" (CIT 138-140). Walter is moved to "pittee" over their "meeke preyere" and their "piteous-cheere" (CIT 141, 142). As these exchanges between Walter and his subjects indicate, other than the persistent allusions to the tyranny of Lombards, the Clerk's initial description of Walter shows him to be "the ideal lord" and "a 'naturel' hereditary sovereign, not a 'tyraunt and crewel' usurper" (Hardman 174). As the tale progresses, Walter increasingly satisfies his lust as he pleases, demonstrating that he may not be the ideal lord that Griselda resolves to obey.

Griselda is a woman of character who submits to the authorities that rule over her. The story, like the Wife of Bath's Prologue and the Merchant's Tale, tells of a young woman marrying an elderly man. Griselda is primarily portrayed in relation to authority figures—first her father and then her lord, the marquis. Walter knows marriage will restrict his liberty, and he deliberately avoids a mature woman, lest she challenge his authority and limit the extent of his sovereignty. Griselda's young age is reinforced three times: first, she is a "yonge mayden" (CIT 210); second, though this "mayde tendre were of age," she is "rype and sad of corage" (CIT 218-220); and third, her virtue passes all "of so yong age" (CIT 240). Griselda is "fair ynogh to sighte," "povreliche," without "likerous lust," and hardworking: "She knew well labour but noon ydel ese" (CIT 213-217). She is ascribed "vertuous beautee," and the beauty is reckoned to be the "faireste under sonne" and "passynge any wight" (CIT 211, 212, 240). Griselda is not delicate; the bed she sleeps on is "ful hard and nothyng softe" (CIT 228). These descriptors fashion Griselda's character, anticipating her fortitude and stalwart ability to withstand the suffering Walter will put her through. Hence, when the wedding announcement is about to be made, Griselda is unaware that the richly ornamented marquis and entourage is there for her, demonstrating her modesty and humility: "Griselda of this, God woot, ful innocent, / That for hire shapen was al this array" (CIT 274-275). The narrator takes pains to provide a description of Griselda that extols her character and establishes her as the acquiescent daughter and the quintessential submissive wife.

Griselda's voluntary submission mimics the submission of Christ and allusions to the Christ-child are prominent in the description of Griselda. Three times the text associates Griselda with an ox stall, conjuring images of the Nativity. Two of the references are occasioned by the narrator's comments: first, that high God sometimes sends "His grace into a litel oxes stalle" (CIT 207); the second reference occurs when the marquis calls Griselda forth – and she sets down her water pot beside the threshold of an "oxes stalle" (CIT 291). The third account notes that Griselda was born in "rudenesse, / As in a cote or in an oxe-stalle" (CIT 397, 398). Like Christ, Griselda is "ful innocent," and, akin to Christ, she is low born and shows her submission by kneeling and awaiting her "lordes wille" (CIT 294). The notion of the "lordes wille" here remains ambiguous, since it has as its reference Walter, God, or both. The declaration of submission echoes Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: "netheles not my wille be don, but thin" (Luke 22:42). Griselda's virtuous character and willing capitulation to Walter mirrors the character and compliance of Christ.²⁵ Since the marriage tales tend to present a Christian view of marriage, quoting or alluding to the various texts that endorse the position the storytellers seek to promote, and since Christ represents the quintessential submission – dying as a result of his father's request – the Clerk's association of Griselda with Christ provides her with the premier example to imitate.

Though the abuse that Griselda endures is not unlike the experience of Alisoun of Bath, the women illustrate a contrast. Both the Wife and Griselda are young when they marry and, when Walter seeks to displace Griselda and marry their daughter, the twelve-year-old girl is the same age as Alisoun was when she first experienced woe in marriage.²⁶ In contrast to the Wife of Bath's suspicion of authority, and in keeping with

²⁵ She is also, at times, associated with the compliant Virgin Mary and hagiographic maternal martyr motifs. Tara Williams maintains, though, that Griselda does "not become a saint, but she does achieve [a] superior form of motherhood by sacrificing her children" (101). The hagiographic motif was popular in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and "used child sacrifice plots as a strategy by which mothers could become saints...[and] this renunciation of her children [set] a holy seal on her motherhood" (101).

²⁶ Hallissy remarks that marriage to a twelve-year-old woman was a "luxury item, a form of conspicuous consumption," something Chaucer sees "as a piece of male foolishness" (142-143). Countering this notion, however, is Dyan Elliott who establishes twelve-year-old women as "the age at which a woman allegedly achieved the majority that supposedly corresponded to puberty and marriageability" (220).

her Christ-like character, Griselda demonstrates volitional submission, patience, and fortitude amidst woe and tribulation in marriage. Griselda does not have Alisoun's assertive disposition. While Alisoun readily pulls pages from her husband's book, demanding that he treat her with some dignity, Griselda is never so forthright.²⁷ Griselda's stalwart constancy contrasts with the Wife's mock submission and presents an alternative to her suggestion that a wife usurp her husband's sovereignty. The coverchiefs the Wife wears contradict her, but Griselda, in keeping with the symbolic head-coverings the Wife of Bath wears, prefers to practise deference to her husband, even though she does not don the garment.

Free Will, Consent, and Assent

The marquis accepts the prospect of marriage, even though it limits his freedom. Walter listens to his subjects' request that he bow his "nekke under that blisful yok / Of soveraynetee" that "men clepe spousaille or wedlok" (CIT 114). Richmond links "spousaille" and "wedlok" with willingness:

The idea that the yoke is blissful, involving the partners in mutual authority, is crucial, if paradoxical, and very like the older Christian view of religious leadership, the expression of power through service; and the words *spousaille* and *wedlok* emphasize a willing giving of self. (336)

Along with this willingness, the terms spousal and wedlock also evoke the "unpleasant connotations of constraint" (Lynch 42). And Walter, acknowledging that marriage will restrain his liberty, accepts the "blisful" yoke: "Wherfore of my free wyl I wole assente" (CIT 150). The yoke of wedlock is deemed blissful because it incorporates sovereignty. It is unusual that the Clerk describes the husband's role as a burden or "yok," when the latter part of the tale makes it clear that Griselda is the one who is constrained in a yoke-

²⁷ Jankyn would read to her from the book of "wikked wyves" and, when she tore out some of the leaves, he struck her, causing her to go deaf: "he smoot me so that I was deaf. / He hadde a book that gladly, nyght and day, / For his desport he wolde rede always" (WBT 678-670).

like manner.²⁸ The Clerk, by applying the yoke to Walter, substantiates the husband's lordship over his wife and emphasizes that Walter is under compulsion to wield sovereignty within wedlock. The yoke, then, could be understood as the Mosaic imperative that a husband rules over his wife—he must rule. While marriage limits the freedom of the marquis, the constraint of marriage for husbands, according to the Clerk, is the imperative that they must exercise sovereignty over their wives.

Although the tale indicates that Griselda and her father have a measure of volition, in reality they are limited to accepting what Walter proposes. Janicula, either through fear or whole-hearted joy, dares only to submit to the will of the marquis, and he swiftly accepts Walter's proposal: "Lord," quode he, "my willynge / Is as ye wole, ne ayeynes youre likyng" (CIT 319-320). Walter's higher social status means he could easily demand and dictate the terms of marriage, if he were so disposed, yet he seemingly subordinates his will to his prospective father-in-law: "I wol nocht speke out of thyn audience." (CIT 329). The marquis does not command the nuptials, but gives every indication he is sincere in asking for Griselda's hand. It is appropriate for the marquis to formally request permission for Griselda's hand in marriage, as Glen Burger maintains that Western European life in the latter half of the eleventh century radically changed the face of medieval marriage:

The new emphasis in canon law and theology on individual consent as the basis for marriage proceeded out of its revaluation as a sacrament by Peter Lombard and others in the twelfth century. (52)

Thus, recognizing that courtship requires more than simply the father's consent, Walter proposes to Griselda, asking her permission: "For I wol axe if it hire wille be" (CIT 326). The request may be an offer that she really may not have the power to refuse: "Wol ye assente, or elles yow avyse?" (CIT 350). Griselda, like her father, responds willingly, and when the marquis initially calls Griselda, she "with sad contenance kneleth stille, / Til she had herd what was the lordes wille" (CIT 293, 294). The use of "willynge" and

²⁸ Walter's yoke of sovereignty contrasts the yoke that Christ offers: "Take ye my yok on you, and lerne ye of me, for Y am mylde and meke in herte; and ye schulen fynde reste to youre soulis. For my yok is softe, and my charge liyt" (Matthew 11:29,30).

“wole,” and the reiteration of “wille,” indicate the characters are free to act and choose despite the imposing status Walter’s position projects. Griselda’s acceptance of Walter’s proposal indicates a “total and self-willed subordination to her husband,” which “teeters on the edge of vowing extinction of herself as a person” (Finnegan 306). For Finnegan, this extinction implies the loss of moral decision making and the loss of conscience. The battery of terms reiterating freedom thus emphasizes the value of volition that Griselda renounces.

Walter offers Griselda his terms for marriage, seeking to extend his liberty in marriage as far as possible. His concern is centred on doing as he pleases: “To all my lust, and that I frely may, / As me best thynketh” (CIT 352). Walter expects of his young wife a “quality of obedience similar to what he demanded of his people in the matter of the bride choice” (Finnegan 306). The marquis arrogantly expects Griselda to accept: “As I suppose, ye wol that it so be” (CIT 347). The terms of marriage, however, do not offer Griselda any freedoms; whether it produces laughter or whether it yields pain, Walter requires Griselda never to disagree with him:

I seye this: be ye redy with good herte
To all my lust, and that I frely may,
As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?
And eek whan I sey ‘ye,’ ne sey nat ‘nay,’
Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?
Swere this, and heere I swere oure alliance. (CIT 351-357)

Griselda’s immediate response is fear: “Wondrynge upon this word, quakyng for drede” (CIT 358). Not only does Griselda assent to Walter’s terms, she determines to amplify the degree of submission, declaring her external actions and internal thoughts will never betray her husband:

But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I.
And heere I sewre that nevere willyngly,
In werk ne thoght, I nyl yow disobeye,
For to be deed, though me were looth do deye. (CIT 361-364)

The phrase “nevere willyngly” qualifies and limits Griselda’s obedience; her submission is a deliberate act of her will and if she disobeys, she says, it is an unwilling and coerced disobedience. In essence, Griselda willingly gives up her will and assumes her husband’s wishes as her own. The marquis quickly states, “[t]his is ynogh,” as if Griselda could have assented to more (CIT 365). Griselda has, by her own terms, willingly magnified Walter’s sovereignty over her.

The Clerk’s Tale situates the story within the characters’ ability to exercise their will, namely using the words “assenten” and “consenten.” The terms are related and the *MED* defines them in terms of each other. The *MED* defines “consenten” to mean “to agree mutually,” and “to agree unanimously” (def. 1a). And “assenten” as “to assent or consent...approve of...express agreement” (def 1a). In essence, the words describe mutual agreement and harmony of purpose. Finnegan, however, understands “assenten” as agreeing “to something without agreeing with it or its proposer,” and “consenten” happens when one “agrees with, feels with, is in harmony with [a] proposal or proposer” (304). With this in mind, Finnegan seeks to establish that Griselda moves from a situation of “*assenting* in the abstract to whatever Walter wishes in their marriage to the condition of *consenting* in the particular instances of the murder of her children” (304). “Assent” is used eight times in the early part of the tale, while “consent” is used only once, referencing Griselda’s agreement that her daughter can be taken from her: “Grisildis moot al suffren and consente” (CIT 537). Finnegan concludes Griselda’s movement from assent (an agreement in the abstract) to consent (an agreement in particular) has “led her to be an accomplice to infanticide” (307). The difference between these two words, Finnegan acknowledges, is ultimately predicated on the Latin: “it is on... the Latin prepositions... that the difference hangs” (304). But, contrary to Finnegan’s claim, Griselda’s speeches make it clear that she submits yet the words she uses form an appeal to the sergeant and to Walter that indicates the absurdity of the abductions. The Clerk is not interested in establishing Griselda as murderer; rather he longs to establish her as an illustration of patience amidst suffering.

Walter's "merveillous desir" to Tempt his Wife

Walter's "marveillous desir" to tempt his wife can be seen as wondrous and evil. The tests show that Walter primarily intrigued with Griselda's sanctity, virtue and "wommanhede": "Commendynge in his herte hir wommanhete, / And eek hir vertu, passynge any wight" (CIT 239-240). The Clerk describes Walter's longing to "tempte his wyf" as a "merveillous desir," a term that contrasts the chief desire of women detailed in the Wife of Bath's Tale (CIT 452, 453). Walter's desire to tempt his wife is described as a marvellous longing to gain knowledge: "tempte his wyf hir sadness for to knowe" (CIT 452). The *MED* defines "merveillous" as "wonderful, astonishing, suprising... admirable...splendid [and] excellent" (def. 1a). It also incorporates notions of the "miraculous...supernatural, [and] magical" (def. 2). Along with these positive connotations, the term also exudes the "(a) strange, peculiar; (b) unnatural, monstrous; (c) unpredictable [and] inscrutable" (def. 3). The "terrifying, horrible," and "fearful" can be associated with the term as well (def. 4). Walter's desire, then, is a conflicted desire that engages the ethereal and miraculous, all the while expressing the monstrous and the hideous.

Walter's testing of Griselda seeks to verify her character, substantiate her constant resolve, authenticate her ability and willingness to endure adversity, and, ultimately, confirm that her will is wholly unified with his own. Why he seeks this knowledge and why it is fully verified through the divorce/marriage test remains ambiguous. In a sense, the testing of Walter mimics the desire of the Wife of Bath. If the woman's desire is to possess sovereignty, then the desire of the man is to know that he has sovereignty, as evidenced by the wife's willingness to suffer under his power. In exerting his sovereignty over his wife Walter is exercising the rights of a husband to rule over his wife given to him through Genesis 3:16. Walter's testing of Griselda proves Walter's unqualified freedom to explore both the boundaries of his sovereignty and Griselda's ability to withstand Walter's sovereignty.

Walter's testing of Griselda is mysteriously initiated by the birth of their daughter, the narrator considering the testing evil. Other than the allusion to the tyrannical reputation of Lombards in general, this is the first indication that Walter will

cruelly test his wife. The Clerk, however, reveals Walter has a history of abusive tempting:

He had assayed hire ynogh bifore,
And foond hire evere good; what neded it
Hire for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore,
Though som men preise it for a subtil wit?
But as for me, I seye that yvele it sit
To assaye a wyf what that it is no nede,
And putten hire in anwyssh and in drede. (CIT 456-462)

The phrase "assayed hire ynogh bifore" could be a reference to Walter's excessive nuptial demand that Griselda obey him in deed and word. The presence of "drede" and the fact that Walter has tested Griselda enough prompts the Clerk to provide his opinion; he declares Walter's actions evil. In evaluating Walter's testing as evil the Clerk subverts Walter's authoritative testing of Griselda. Interestingly, Griselda's patient suffering of Walter's evil testing conjures allusions to the patient suffering and testing of Job. These allusions have, as Natalie Grinnell recognises, various difficulties. Grinnell accepts the possibility of linking Walter with Satan, rather than with God, but her suggestion that it may "provoke a re-evaluation...which reads the characters of God and Satan as two parts of the same personality that Chaucer integrates into his marquis," is difficult to accept, especially since the Clerk recognizes a contrast between Walter and God (79). The Clerk ensures the audience is aware of the disparity between Walter and God: "But [God] ne tempteth no man that he boghte...he preeveth folk al day, it is no drede" (CIT 1153-1155).²⁹ While God does not tempt any man, Walter is willing to test and tempt Griselda.

²⁹ While the Clerk's line, "it is no drede," is generally read as "there is no doubt" or "doubtless," the *OED* and *MED* indicate the word "drede" can, along with "doubtless" or "no doubt," also encompass "extreme fear," "fright," "anxiety," and "apprehension." The Clerk describes Griselda as "quakyng for drede" at Walter's call (CIT 358). Further, when Griselda returns her clothes to Walter, she uses the word: "broghte I noight elles, out of drede, But feith and nakednesse and maydenhede" (CIT 866). Here the use of "drede" is in close proximity to "nakednesse" and recalls Adam's declaration that he is naked and filled with fear: "I dredde there thur that I was nakid" (Gen. 3:10). The Clerk's "it is no drede," then, specifies the lack of doubt and, perhaps, seeks to recall the fear Griselda experienced.

Griselda steadfastly submits to and endures the malice and cruelty of Walter, even when it results in the abduction of her children. Though Walter had asked that Griselda obey him in “word” and “countenance,” Griselda modified and amplified the vow, telling the marquis she would never assent willingly to disobey in “werk” and “thought” (CIT 356, 363). Grinnell posits that Griselda never “agrees to Walter’s injunction against speech, a demand he repeats at least three times” (86). It is obvious that Walter, because he quickly agreed to Griselda’s counter-vows, thought that what Griselda offered was equal to or superior to his initial tender. In changing the vows, argues Grinnell, Griselda assures herself the right to speak, which she prudently and judiciously exercises in defence of her children and the annulment of the marriage.³⁰ When Walter demands their daughter be surrendered, Griselda responds insightfully: “Lord, al lyth in youre plesaunce” (CIT 501). She places the responsibility for the abduction completely within the bounds of Walter’s pleasure. Her “contenance” remains unchanged and Griselda tells him the “child and I.. Been youre al” (CIT 144). Griselda views the abduction as Walter’s doing and Walter’s responsibility. She does not say “nay” to his “ye,” but unequivocally states the actions singularly belong to Walter.

Griselda’s speeches illustrate that she appeals for her children’s welfare. The obedience and submission Griselda displays toward her husband ensure the onus for the children’s’ abduction is heaped solely upon Walter. Because Griselda has vowed to obey Walter, and because he has decided to abduct the child, she first speaks to the child and then asks the sergeant to be kind to the child. In essence her speech is an appeal to rescue the child:

And thus she seyde in hire benigne voys,
“Fareweel my child! I shal thee nevere see.
But sith I thee have marked with the croys
Of thilke Fader – blessed moote he be! –
That for us deyde upon a croys of tree,
Thy soule, litel child, I hym bitake,
For this nyght shaltow dyen for my sake.” (CIT 554-560)

³⁰ In contrast to Finnegan, who attempts to charge Griselda with infanticide, Grinnell views Griselda’s speeches as evidence that she continues to obey, but she does not consent to the murder of her children as Finnegan suggests.

Griselda tells the child of "thilke Fader" that procured salvation, comparing and contrasting the Divine and Walter – they are both fathers who allow their own child to die, but Walter's actions are full of malice. Griselda does feel somewhat responsible for the child's death, saying the child will "dyen for my sake" (CIT 560). Griselda's words may be an attempt to move the sergeant to pity and rescue of the child. When she has an opportunity, she appeals to the sergeant directly:

But o thyng wol I prey yow of youre grace,
That, but my lord forbad yow, atte leeste
Burieth this litel body in some place
That beestes ne no briddes it torace."
But he no word wol to that purpos,
But took the child and wente upon his weye. (CIT 569-574)

Griselda appeals to the sergeant, begging him to bury the child so no wild beasts "it torace" (CIT 572). The sergeant, however, "wiste his lordes wille," demonstrating his complete submission to Walter and that he is not vulnerable to her appeal.

When her second child is removed, Griselda's speech reminds Walter that the demise of the children is his will:

"I have," quod she, "seyd thus, and evere shal:
I wol no thyng, ne nyl no thyng, certayn,
But as yow list. Naught greveth me at al,
Though that my doughter and my sone be slayn—
At youre comandement, this is to sayn.
I have noght had no part of children tweyne
But first sicknesse, and after, wo and peyne.
"Ye been oure lord; dooth with youre owene thyng
Right as yow list; axeth no reed at me.
For as I left at hoom al my clothyng,
What I first cam to yow, right so," quod she,
"Lefte I my wyl and al my libertee,
And took your clothing; wherefore I yow preye
Dooth youre plesaunce; I wol youre lust obeye. (CIT 645-659)

These lines are of particular interest: they recount Griselda's vows to obey; they establish that she wills no thing but what Walter wills; they demonstrate that Griselda has abandoned her will when she married; and they hold Walter culpable for his command

to abduct the children. The discourse proves that the vows do not preclude Griselda's speech, and it is through her speeches that she holds Walter responsible for his decision to take the children.

When the marquis seeks to dissolve their marriage, Griselda's speech shows she will gladly go to her father, implying that her father is a kinder sovereign than Walter. She is willing "with hym [to] dwelle unto [her] lyves ende" (CIT 832-833). While Walter may have seemed kind on the day of their marriage, Walter is in fact all that the Lombards had a reputation for. That Walter's behaviour is tyrannical is hinted at even in the beginning of the marriage, and he continues to behave this way at the (seeming) end of it. When Walter secured Griselda as a wife, he clothed her and showered her with gifts. This seems generous, yet within that open-handedness lies a more selfish impulse, because Walter's clothing of Griselda sexualises her and by doing so it "accomplishes her absorption into Walter's household and her subordination to him in marriage" (Williams 113). The provision of clothes and wedding gifts demonstrated Walter's power over Griselda. The coverchief is not specified as an article of clothing here, even though Griselda's acceptance of the clothing suggests her submission to Walter and what he can provide. Now, however, Walter seeks to dispossess Griselda, choosing a younger wife, an act that further demonstrates his sovereignty over Griselda. In response, Griselda returns to him the clothes he gave her, and the act strips away Walter's authority over her as wife. Further, in returning the gifts she obliges Walter to return to her the gifts she gave him – the priceless and irrecoverable "feith, and nakednesse, and maydenhede" that he received on their wedding night (CIT 866). Griselda's gift demonstrates her sexual submission to Walter, and now, since Walter cannot return them, Griselda is empowered. Tara Williams describes marital intercourse as "more than a site for the exercise of masculine authority" and power (114). The sexual act justifies the "existence of such authority," as it produces heirs for lineage and inheritance, and as such it is most significant for a medieval man to have "authority over his wife" sexually (114,115). Submission in the non-sexual realm becomes "irrelevant" if a "wife did not submit to her husband sexually" (114, 115). Griselda's children are evidence of her sexual submission, but Walter, having abducted the children, has diminished the power of Griselda's sexual deference.

Griselda has been wholly submissive, and she knows that the ability to tolerate prolonged adversity is not a common quality; Walter has often marvelled at her steadfastness. Hallissy notes that the medieval requirements for wives in didactic literature favour Griselda's character:

Walter's definition of a wife is not different in kind, only in degree, from the image routinely presented to medieval men. Obedient, even subservient; capable of self-sacrifice; moral exemplar, guide and advisor; competent in domestic and political peacemaking; adaptable to changing circumstances; and incapable of expressing or even experiencing...anger or resentment at past mistreatment: these are the routine requirements for wives. (70)

Griselda is such a wife, and when Griselda is asked to comment on Walter's choice of a new wife, she asks him to be kinder to this new wife than he was to her, because his new wife will "nat adversitee endure" (CIT 1042). Williams refers to Griselda's strength as "the mediating power of womanhood" (115). Her argument is based on Chaucer's coining of the word, "wommanhede," and maintains that Walter's goal is to assay Griselda in order to investigate her "wommanhede" (116). Walter may have the power to assay his wife, but Griselda has the power to withstand the assault.

The Happy Ending and the Clerk's Moral of the Story

The happy ending of the tale is quickly established. The Clerk has numerous happy conclusions: Griselda and Walter have "cheere / betwix hem two" (CIT 1112, 1113); Griselda gets a "gold" dress (CIT 1117); the family lives a good many year in "heigh prosperitee" and "concord and reste" (CIT 1128, 1129); Griselda's daughter marries "richely," much like her mother (CIT 1130); Janicula is hosted in the "court" (CIT 1133); and Griselda's son "sucedeth in [Walter's] heritage" and is "fortunat" in marriage (CIT 1135, 1137). The re-clothing of Griselda re-establishes her submission to Walter and the power of the marquis over her. A dress is provided, but no coverchief, yet the actions of Griselda remain in keeping with the subjection the coverchief garment signifies. Following the Tale, the Clerk establishes the moral of the story, lest the tale be

misapplied, a trap the host and Merchant easily fall into, each of them wishing his wife was more like Griselda.

The conclusion the Clerk seeks to establish is encapsulated in a quote from the epistle of James: “[God] ne tempteth no man that he boghte...He preeveth folk al day, it is no drede” (CIT 1153, 1155).³¹ Unlike God, who tempts no man and is not tempted by evil, Walter’s testing of Griselda is specifically declared as evil. Though God is not a tempter, it does not negate the fact that God “sondry wise” brings “scourges of adversitee,” says the Clerk. In addition, the Clerk indicates that God knows human “freletee,” and his “gouvernaunce” is for “oure beste” (CIT 1160-1161).³² In this way, God is wholly dissimilar to Walter. The scourges of adversity that Walter has inflicted on innocent Griselda can hardly be understood as being for Griselda’s good. Rather, they are solely for his pleasure, his desire, and his amusement. Though Walter says there has been no malice or cruelty in assaying Griselda, the Clerk nevertheless designates his actions as evil. The narration specifies Walter’s offences against Griselda as multitudinous – “so ofte had doon to hire offence” – and it is Griselda, not Walter, who has had “no malice at al” (CIT 1045-1046).

That the Clerk’s Tale has the Wife of Bath in mind is clear, as he addresses the Wife and her sex. The Clerk extols the Wife, asking God to maintain her life and sect, but the invocation also provides constraints, desiring that she be under God’s high mastery – the ultimate authority: “For which, heere for the Wyves love of Bathe, / Whos lyf and al hir secte God mayntene / In heigh maistrie” (CIT 1170-1171).³³ The invocation has affinities to the Wife’s prayer for meek and mild husbands, who can be ruled over. The Clerk seeks to ensure that the Wife is ruled over and maintained by God. The *Lenvoy de Chaucer* follows the invocation, and the *Lenvoy* narrator, most likely the Clerk, but perhaps the poet himself, remarks that “Grisilde is deed, and eek hire pacience” (CIT

³¹ “No man whanne he is temptid, seie, that he is temptid of God; for whi God is not a temptere of yuele thingis, for he temptith no man” (James 1:13).

³² The acknowledgement of human frailty is also important to the Franklin’s presentation of patient love amidst speaking and acting amiss.

³³ The reference to high mastery is ambiguous. It could refer to God’s sovereignty, the Wife’s mastery, or to the authority of the Wife’s sect.

1177). The Wife's existence and the wives of the Merchant and host in the Merchant's Prologue seem to prove this point. The *Lenvoy* presents Griselda as the model of wifely conduct, but it also suggests that wives should not give occasion for clerks to write "yow a storie of swich mervaille" (CIT 1186). Strong wives and slender wives can also, even though their husband's are armed in mail, pierce them with their arrows of "crabbed eloquence" (CIT 1203). In doing so, they can be the source of their husband's weeping and wailing, foreshadowing the Merchant's tears.

The tale's concluding moral demonstrates that at the forefront of the Clerk's Tale is the notion of constancy in adversity. The Clerk does not see Griselda as a real "wife at all but an allegorical figure of the soul triumphant over adversity" (Hallissy 70). Griselda's wifely steadfastness and patience amidst adversity is a quality that the Clerk declares to be applicable to all – female and male: "every wight, in his degree, / Sholde be constant in adversitee" (CIT 1145-1146). The telling of the tale, however, also magnifies the critique of male sovereignty. Richmond asserts that "the man is the one who is really being tested" in the Clerk's story (337). Indeed, she continues, Griselda actually "tutors" Walter:

Only when he gains the confidence to accept the virtue of Griselda – which he has always recognized – and to be confident of her loyalty, can a true and kind marriage exist...we are also reassured by indications that he is deeply moved and impressed by his wife's patience and steadfastness, so that we can be confident of the happy ending. (338)

Walter has the equivalent of a perfect, obedient, and subservient wife, yet he shows his imperfections, as he is not sated until he has cruelly tested her.

Conclusion

The Clerk engages marital issues in his Tale, he seems less interested in specifying a particular marriage theology, preferring the generic principle of patience in adversity. Though the Wife of Bath has ridiculed the members of his order, and though she has, even if unwittingly, assailed him with her comment that he and his peers cannot speak well of wives, the Clerk has suffered quietly. Further, he has sat still on his horse

while others have interrupted each other and hurled insult for insult and offence for offence, exemplifying that they do not possess the quality of patience in adversity. The Clerk has also endured the ridicule of Harry Bailey, yet he willingly yielded to the host's "yerde" (CIT 22). His tale exacts a degree of revenge as the host, like the Merchant, misapplies the tale. Further, the Clerk is learned enough to counter the abuse the Wife of Bath heaps upon clerks; he extols a woman, but the praise he offers is tempered by the fact that the woman he extols does not exist: "Grisilde is deed, and eek hire pacience" (CIT 1177). The tale's presentation of marriage initially depicts the Pauline connubial hierarchy where the husband has absolute authority over his wife and the wife responds submissively. And Griselda's submission is thoroughly representative of the Mosaic declaration that the man will rule over the woman (Gen. 3:16). As the story moves along the Clerk condemns Walter's testing of Griselda as evil. Thus the tale seems to vacillate between endorsement and subversion of the marital roles. Instead of resolving this tension, the tale's moral shifts the emphasis from marriage roles and marriage theology to a more generic moral – patience in adversity. Unlike the Wife of Bath, the Clerk does not seek a theological interpretation of Genesis 3 or 1 Corinthians 11; rather he seeks to establish the tale's universal application to both males and females – an application that he has modelled for the pilgrims. In doing so, however, the Clerk has presented Griselda as a submissive wife who, though she is not described as wearing the coverchief symbol, nevertheless characterises it.

THE MERCHANT'S TALE

The Merchant and Marriage

The Merchant's Tale, like the marriage tales before it, engages notions of sovereignty and bliss in marriage. The Wife of Bath mocks the Pauline idea of wifely submission by her flagrant coverchiefs, and the Clerk has told of Griselda, a woman who is never described as wearing the symbolic coverchiefs, yet submits to Walter — who clothes her. And in submitting, Griselda behaves in a way that exemplifies what the coverchiefs represent. While the Clerk attempts to apply a generic moral of patient suffering, the Merchant and Harry Bailey miss the point: they long for marriages that echo Walter's dominion over his wife, emphasising the Mosaic and Pauline directives. The lament the Merchant and Harry Bailey articulate indicates their ability to distinguish between the Wife, who wears the coverchiefs yet betrays what they represent, and Griselda, who is not described as donning a coverchief yet typifies the symbol. The Merchant's Tale envisions a young girl much like Griselda, but the girl's behaviour does not match the submission Griselda represents. And while the tale initially endorses the Pauline sanctioned hierarchy in marriage, it demonstrates that January, the principal character, is unable to wield the power over his wife that he believes he rightfully possesses.

Taking his cue from the Clerk, the Merchant tells of an aging Lombard knight who longs to exercise mastery in marriage. The Clerk's knight, Walter, has ably demonstrated that the knights of Lombardy are tyrannous, having tested and tempted the submissive Griselda. January's connection with Lombardy, maintains Burger, is an indictment of the "old-style feudal model for aristocratic male identity," and his impotency points to the changing views of marriage (62). Indeed, the Merchant's knight longs for a young wife whom he can shape and fashion into a submissive spouse, but his

powerlessness indicates that his understanding of marriage is pure fantasy. January fully expects to exercise authoritative rule over May, in keeping with the connubial ideals encompassed in the Mosaic and Pauline marriage doctrines. The Merchant's knight, however, is weak and vulnerable, while May, although she speaks very little, has the ability to quietly usurp January's supposed authority. January's marital fantasy is set within a garden, which recalls the biblical creation event and extols the joys of Eden-like conjugal bliss. The hopes for Edenic bliss, however, are dashed, as January is unable to live up to the fantasy he creates.

The Merchant, like the Clerk, references the Wife of Bath, establishing a thematic continuity. There are numerous parallels between the Merchant and the Wife of Bath. The Wife of Bath and the Merchant share a similar status and class; she is a cloth weaver and he is a cloth exporter. The Merchant, much like the Wife, is transparent vis-à-vis his experience of marital sorrow. The Wife of Bath has experienced woe from various abusive husbands and the Merchant has been the object of his wife's cruelty and malice. The Merchant married a wife who seems to possess sovereignty within the marriage, echoing the Wife of Bath's relationship with Jankyn and the union of the knight and the loathly lady at the end of her tale. In this example of marriage, the Merchant husband weeps and wails, unlike the concluding picture of the blissful marital union between the Wife and Jankyn or between the hag and the knight in the Wife of Bath's Tale. Each makes liberal use of the biblical metaphor that describes sex as debt. The Wife establishes her view of marriage through a reading of biblical texts, and so does the Merchant in his encomium on marriage. Each speak of a young girl marrying an older man, though for the Wife this is autobiographical, while for the Merchant it occurs in his fiction. Also, the character of January seeks to delay the nuptials as long as possible and then hastily marries, while the Wife herself first married young and is now eager for future relations. These similarities are significant because they unite the tales in a singular endeavour – defining Christian marriage; Joan G. Haahr agrees, stating that at the “core of both works lies an attempt to define the nature of Christian marriage” (107).

Critics have questioned how the Merchant's experience of marriage impacts the tale he tells. Compounding the relationship between the Merchant's experience and his

tale is the tale's tenuous textual history.³⁴ A. S. G. Edwards suggests the textual difficulties should be considered "conscious attempts to reflect the moral realities the tale seeks to represent," namely "indeterminacy" (418). Dealing with the prologue and tale within the spectrum of indeterminacy allows Edwards, unlike Kittredge, to contend the tale is "presented in such a way as not to resolve the problems of moral engagement it invites, so that it neither affirms nor denies some particular stance" (418). In contrast to Edwards' notion of indeterminacy, Michael A. Calabrese, having investigated the poem's close link to the *Romance of the Rose*, argues that the themes present in the *Romance of the Rose* are dominant, making "the relationship between the Merchant and his tale dramatically necessary and profound" (261). Echoing Calabrese, Burger maintains that the "Merchant's outburst – intended or not – would thus appear to bracket the tale with an autobiographical frame" that inadvertently draws "parallels between the newly married (and thus henpecked) Merchant-narrator and the old husband January" (61). Though the textual variants may perhaps extend "back to Chaucer's drafts," indicating Chaucer "remained undecided as to how to characterise the tale's teller," the prologue's characterisation of the Merchant's marriage and the tale that ensues seem to have a union that, though riddled with textual incongruity, can neither be divorced nor annulled (Edwards 413).

The characterisation of the Merchant and how his marital history impacts the tale is especially crucial to Kittredge, who views the Merchant's story as a reflection of the Merchant's own experience of wedded woe. The Merchant, however, asserts his experience will not influence the telling of the tale. Kittredge, viewing the dialectical relationships among the Marriage Group as the interpretative key to the marriage issues residing in the *CT*, understands the tale's prologue as essential, binding it thematically and dialectically with the other tales in the Marriage Group. Knowledge of the Merchant's marriage woe and "soore" experience tends to be ubiquitous, forcing the critic to hold both the teller's context and the tale itself in a precarious tension that

³⁴ For example, the Merchant's prologue appears before the Merchant's Tale in only twenty-one manuscripts; the twenty-one, A. S. G. Edwards notes, do not include Hengwrt, Corpus, Lansdowne, and Petworth (413). Further, in the nineteen manuscripts – including Hengwrt and Petworth – where the Squire's Tale, not the Clerk's Tale, precedes the Merchant's Tale, the "Squire-Franklin link is simply adapted to the Merchant" (413).

values both – prologue and tale – without overemphasis or devaluation of one or the other. Emphasizing a strong connection between the prologue and the tale does not necessitate a reading of January as the Merchant; rather, it forces the reader to accept a text that blurs the reality of the Merchant with his fiction.

The Merchant's Miserable Marriage

The Merchant's miserable marriage is evident in his weeping and wailing in response to the Clerk's Tale. Unlike January, the Merchant is not blind to the cruelty of his wife. While readers may conclude that the Merchant seeks Walter-like control over a Griselda-like wife, it is equally credible that the Merchant is saying that the only way a man can live with a wife who has sovereignty is to be willingly blind to the wife's actions, much like January. Indeed, the Merchant may in fact be wishing for a January-like blindness to deal with his own marriage to a woman who seemingly rules over him. Although he has only been married two months, the Merchant weeps and bewails the wretchedness of his marital state, declaring he has the worst wife. The Merchant's wife is no Griselda, and thus, because of his wife's malice, the Merchant lives in sorrow, reckoning he can tell "so muchel sorwe...of [his] wyves cursednesse" (MerT 1238-1239). Further, the Merchant believes he can speak more tellingly about his wife's "cursednesse" than a single man can speak of the sorrow of life-long bachelorhood. It is difficult to ascertain if this "cursednesse" is a theological assessment, a colloquial descriptor, or both, but the tale's numerous allusions to the Garden of Eden, January's expectation of prelapsarian conjugal bliss, and the cuckolding of January make "cursednesse" a fitting play on words, alluding to the curse on humankind in Genesis 3 and foreshadowing further conjugal conflict.

There is a considerable gap between the Christ-like submission of Griselda and the Merchant's devilish wife. The Merchant's marriage is demarcated by wailing both morning and night, just like purgatorial suffering. The Merchant says his complaint supersedes all "that wedded been" (MerT 1216). His wife would even "overmacche" the devil himself had they been wed, bemoans the Merchant. And, grumbles the Merchant, there is a "long and large difference / Bitwix Grisildis grete pacience / And of my wyf

the passyng crueltee" (MerT 1223-1225). Neither Harry Bailey nor the Merchant seems to have the sovereignty Walter wields, and each man wishes his wife were more like Griselda. Thus, in contrast to the Wife of Bath's conclusion that marital bliss happens when wedded men relinquish sovereignty to their wives, the Merchant's Prologue indicates that when women have sovereignty, wedded men live in more sorrow than do their lonely unmarried counterparts. By implication, the host and the Merchant believe that Griselda-like wives would put an immediate stop to the tears.

The Merchant's Prologue forces knowledge of the Merchant's marriage upon the tale. The personal marital data allocate the tale's cynicism and irony beyond the scope of the story itself and into the life of the storyteller. The host also recognizes this possibility. Thus, since the Merchant has experienced significant marital conflict, Harry Bailey declares that the Merchant knows something of the art of marriage and asks him to elaborate on it in a tale. The Merchant accepts the offer to tell a tale, but qualifies the acceptance, stating he will not divulge any more of his sorry acquaintance with marriage. Despite the Merchant's qualifier, it is difficult to hear or read the tale without associating the tale with the teller's marital strife. Subsequently, the Merchant's narrative voice naturally blends and blurs with January's voice in the tale, creating ambiguity between the two. At times, notes Christian Sheridan, the "voice is so changeable as to render it quite unreliable" (30). This unreliability tends to obscure character-based readings, prompting Edwards to embrace the disjunctive features the blurring creates:

What the observations of January and the narrator do is to sharply juxtapose two tonally discordant perceptions of the same moment in a way that denies either perception any distinctive authority.... The two passages are held in equipoise, not meshing to form a coherent perspective on either January or the narrator. (420)

This layering of voices, described by Edwards as "discordant perceptions," may diminish coherence yet it augments the tales irony and cynicism. That the two voices—the Merchant's and January's—blur and blend is of note, as the two men respond differently to their marital woes. The prologue and tale, then, seem to present a question that the Merchant and January answer through their actions: what is a husband

to do when the wife does not submit? The Merchant complains and weeps, while January, impotent and weak, blindly accepts May's word and is glad.

Marriage as Edenic Bliss

Each of the four tales studied here emphasizes marital bliss and Edenic paradise. The idea of marital bliss and its close connection to Paradise can be found in medieval sermons, providing a source for the pilgrims' focus on bliss. For example, Konrad Holtnicker's marriage sermon, notes David d'Avray, emphasizes that marriage was instituted "not in a contemptible place, not in a corner, as clandestine marriages are made nowadays, but in Paradise" (68).³⁵ "Other sermons," continues d'Avray, "make the point about Paradise more simply," echoing the Parson's declaration that marriage was made in Paradise (68). More than the other three marriage tales, the Merchant alludes to the biblical Garden of Eden, framing January's hopes for a blissful, paradisaal marriage. The preamble of the tale draws attention to the creation of Adam and Eve, describing Adam as "bely-naked" (MerT 1326). E. Talbot Donaldson, asserts that the "narrator vulgarize[s] the creation of Adam and Eve" (40). The creation account is important as it serves to establish the Christian background to the marriage, and the vulgarity may indeed be foreshadowing the kind of marriage January desires. The creation account is certainly at the forefront of the tale's preamble; January, like God, seeks to create a woman in his own image. Hansen explains:

May is made in the image of both January and her maker, the Merchant, and both project themselves and their base desires all too clearly onto the creature they bring into being. (250)

Further, Hansen argues, the silence of the text—talking about May without mentioning her name for some one hundred lines—means there "is literally no May before January marries her...[and she is] the product of the old man's warped imagination" (150). January believes he can enjoy a marriage that is based on the prelapsarian paradisaal

³⁵ Holtnicker was a thirteenth-century German Franciscan, and his sermon on marriage belongs to the "model sermon" genre (d'Avray 223). Though German, he reiterates the same connection between marriage and Paradise that Chaucer's Parson makes.

ideal yet allows him to exercise the authority characteristic of postlapsarian marital roles.

January fully expects a marriage in which the wife is submissive to her husband's dominion. In keeping with January's hopes, the Merchant's Tale presents marriage as a holy bond, which God first ordained; the tale recalls the first married couple, Adam and Eve, as an example of matrimony: "to lyve under that hooly boond / With which that first God man and womman bond" (MerT 1261-1262). Three times the narrator declares a "womman is for mannes helpe ywroght," glossing the Genesis narrative describing the creation of the woman (MerT 1324, 1328, 1331).³⁶ Thus a wife is a "paradys terrestre," having been created to "helpe" Adam in the Garden of Eden (MerT 1326). Within this idyllic world, the wife's focus is on her husband's good, and all "that hire housebonde lust, hire liketh weel," never saying "nay" when he says "ye," and when he demands "Do this," she responds with "Al redy, sire" (MerT 1343-1346).³⁷ Thus, the tale's depiction of wedded bliss is centred on the nature of the wife, who only does as her husband commands: "So buxom and so vertuous is she" (MerT 1333). January's fantasy assumes the wife will be wholly compliant to the husband's will, reminding the audience of the patient Griselda. The Merchant narrator describes marriage as a "blisful ordre of wedlok precious," adding that every man should, "upon his bare knees," give thanks to "his God that hym hath sent a wyf" (MerT 1351, 1352). The Edenic bliss that January seeks is, however, wholly dependent on a wife that submits to his sovereignty and mastery, motivating January to seek a pliable and submissive wife.

The encomium on marriage ensures a Christian context and holy motivation for marriage. The opening hundred lines dictate the kind of marriage January anticipates:

³⁶ Genesis describes the woman as a helper: "And the Lord God seide, It is not good that a man be aloone, make we to hym an help lijk to hym silf. Therfor whanne alle lyuyng beestis of erthe, and alle the volatils of heuene weren formed of erthe, the Lord God brouyte tho to Adam, that he schulde se what he schulde clepe tho; for al thing that Adam clepide of lyuyng soule, thilke is the name therof. And Adam clepide bi her names alle lyuyng thingis, and alle volatils, and alle vnresonable beestis of erthe. Forsothe to Adam was not foundun an helpere lijk hym" (Gen. 2:18-20).

³⁷ This submission – never saying yes when he says no – echoes the wholehearted subjection of Griselda to Walter.

he desires a young wife; he longs for a wife that he can control and mould; his wife must be submissive and quickly obey; and his wife is expected to give him the bliss and joy of wedded life. The encomium specifies that the impetus for marriage—be it the Merchant's marriage, January's marriage, or possibly marriage in general—must be sacred and holy.³⁸ Burger, citing a sermon from Guibert de Tournai, ascertains that medieval sermons dictate that the motives for marriage must be pure:

...The motives for [marriage] are pure, so that the husband and wife should not love each other or be joined in marriage for the sake of some temporal gain, or a beautiful figure (*forme*), or to gratify their lust, but so that they may live together...happily and decently, so that God may receive honour, and the marriage yield fruit for the service of God...but when they got married for the sake of a dowry or for something temporal they always quarrel. (57)

Initially January seems to have the kind of motivation de Tournai describes, but the Merchant is not entirely sure: "Were it for hoolynesse or for dotage / I kan nat seye" (MerT 1253). It is only as the tale progresses that the reader is able to determine that "dotage" is indeed January's motivation. To veil the dotage motivation the Merchant describes January's longing to be in keeping with Christian marriage rhetoric. For example, January, notes the narrator, prays that the "Lord [would] graunten him" a knowledge of the "blissful life / That is betwixe an housbonde and his wyf" (MerT 1258,1260). Further, the narration recognises marriage is a "hooly boond" created by God and the wife is demarcated as "Goddess yifte" (MerT 1261, 1311). And in particular, the tale explicitly describes marriage as a "greet sacrament," emphasizing the sacredness of the institution within Christendom and the need to ensure that motives are holy (MerT 1319).

January understands marriage within the context of Christian sacrament. Thirteenth-century English statutes regarding marriage as a sacrament "reveal an ambiguity about the position of marriage as a sacrament" (McCarthy, *Love* 509). As noted in the previous chapter on the Clerk's Tale, Burger attests that the reorganization

³⁸ The encomium blurs the voices of the Merchant and January. I understand the encomium as the voice of the Merchant, though what he says and presents about marriage is also the view and context of January.

of Western European life in the latter half of the eleventh century radically changed the face of medieval marriage. The change was in part propagated through sermons; “[the] sacramental nature of marriage is a common theme in thirteenth century sermons” (56). This emphasis on the sacramental function of marriage in turn encouraged a much greater emphasis on the value of the personal relations it established between a man and woman. The sacramental nature of marriage articulated “a kind of conjugal love that [went] beyond either the external aspects of marital affection or the contractual obligations of equal sexual rights” (54). January’s idea of the sacramental nature of marriage, however, does not engage the kind of equality Burger describes. Rather, January understands blissful marriage to be the product of a wife who wholly submits and participates in his dream of Edenic joy.

January desires holy marriage, but his marriage is undermined by an emphasis on the mercantile. The Merchant details January’s financial status in the third line of his tale, associating the knight’s prosperity with his state of singlehood: “he lyved in greet prosperitee; / And sixty yeer a wyflee man” (MerT 1247, 1248). January’s prosperity allows him to be selective in his choice of a wife and makes him a desirable husband, though his age insinuates that marrying a young girl demonstrates dotage. Riches seem to skew January’s perspective of marriage. The tale presents marriage in commercial terms and views a wife as a gift as well as a valuable investment. Not only is a wife a gift from God, she is of surpassing value. The Merchant describes a wife as more valuable than “londes, rentes, pasture, or commune, / Or moebles – alle been yiftes of Fortune” (MerT 1313-1314). In contrast to lands, rents and pastures, a “wyf wol laste,” an indication that marriage is a commodity and an investment that has longevity (MerT 1317, 1354).³⁹ Because a wife is a valuable commodity, she needs to be skilfully managed and scrutinized in order that the value of the marriage investment does not diminish. While these notions extol the value of a wife, they also demean marriage, demonstrating “that women are reduced to desirable commodities which the male can purchase” (Aers 152). January degrades marriage when he seeks to purchase his wife’s fidelity:

³⁹ The wife of noble character is extolled in Proverbs 31: “Who schal fynde a stronge womman? the prijs of her is fer, and fro the laste endis” (Prov. 31:10). This kind of wife is rare.

Beth to me trewe, and I wol tell yow why.
Thre thynges, certes, shall ye wyrne...
And al myn heritage, toun and tour;
I yeve it yow, maketh chartres as you leste; (2169-2173)

Sheridan describes the wife January seeks as the “ultimate commodity” and January, believing that his wife’s faithfulness can be bought, offers her his heritage (31). However, no “matter how much property [January] may bestow on her, May is not the ideal wife he imagines in the *Tale’s* opening” (Sheridan 36). January is deluded in his understanding of marriage. In one sense he wholly accepts the holy and sacramental aspects of marriage, attempting to project holy motives, while in another sense he undermines the very marriage he holds so high by commodifying it.

January is familiar with the mercantile world and his expectations of May express a desire to possess and control her, believing this will result in a blissful marriage. From January’s perspective, the husband possesses the wife; she is under the sovereignty of her spouse: “She seith nat ones ‘nay,’ whan he seith ‘ye’” (MerT 1345). In presenting his wife in this way, it is clear that January endorses a view of Gen. 3:16 that allocates the husband complete freedom to subjugate his wife. The narrator describes January’s wife as “His fresshe May, his paradys, his make,” alluding to the paradisaal garden of Genesis (MerT 1822). The Merchant, like the narrator of the Knight’s Tale, romanticizes marriage and frames it within paradisaal and Edenic ideals, negating postlapsarian conflict: “That in this world [marriage] is a paradys” (MerT 1265). To sustain the idyllic vision of prelapsarian conjugality, the Merchant persistently and frequently employs the descriptor bliss. The *OED* views “blisse” as representative of “glad,” “delight,” and “enjoyment” (def. 2). It can also have more mystical or ethereal overtones: “perfect joy or felicity, supreme delight; blessedness” (def. 2b). “The perfect joy of heaven” and the “place of bliss, paradise, [and] heaven” are also distinctly connected with the word (def. 2c). The reiteration of bliss in the tale is reminiscent of the Wife’s declaration that the knight’s heart enjoys a bath of bliss. It also reinforces the ideals of paradisaal marriage and expresses Edenic marital joy as being within January’s grasp, even though he lives in a postlapsarian reality.

In order to enjoy marriage, and in order to ensure that his marriage encompasses the Christian ideals of male sovereignty and wifely submission, January seeks out a young and impressionable wife. January wants a wife that embraces the ideals represented in the coverchief emblem. He believes that a young maid is more adept at submitting: "She shall nat passe twenty yeer, certayn...I wol no womman thritty yeer of age" (MerT 1417-1421). He differentiates between young and old by references to fish and beef, dehumanising women: "oold fissh," "yong flessch," "a pyk," "a pykerel," "old boef" and "tendre veel" (MerT 1418-1420). A woman over thirty is unappealing to January; he will not marry someone older than "thiritty yeer of age," as they are "bene-straw," "greet forage," and these "Olde wydwes" know too much of "Wades boot" (1422, 1423).⁴⁰ January believes that older women, and especially widows, have too much knowledge of Wade, who uses a boat to trick enemies. While January seeks to avoid marrying an older, deceptive wife, the lines – declaring his rejection of older women who may decieve their husband – foreshadow January's marriage. May might be young, but she is as cunning and as deceptive as the older women January seeks to avoid. The prospect of marrying a young woman consumes January, and critical to January's perspective on marriage are the Christian ideals that endorse the submission of the wife and the sovereignty of the husband. The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, and the coverchief emblem she wears, introduce these ideals. By seeking a young wife, by expecting to wield his sovereignty over his wife, and by contextualizing the marriage within the creation event, the Merchant's Tale expresses January's desire for his wife to display the kind of submission the coverchief represents.

Marriage as Purgatory

The Merchant's Tale presents marriage as bliss, yet the tale twice designates marriage as having the prospect of suffering and purgatory, establishing a connection with the Wife of Bath and the role of a wife's submission. First, January fears that a blissful marriage will threaten eternal bliss: "Ther may no man han parfite blisses

⁴⁰ Wade abducted a beautiful maid. In like manner, Paris took Helen, and Pluto took Prosperina. January's seizure of May is similar.

two...how sholde I thanne, that lyve in swich plesaunce...Come to the blisse ther Crist eterne on lyve ys?" (MerT 1638-1652). He is presumptuous about marital relations, thinking "alle wedded men" live in the "plesaunce" of marriage and thus risk their eternal state of bliss in heaven (MerT 1651). The presumption of bliss contrasts the Merchant's state of marriage, which is characterised by cursedness. The cursedness of the Merchant's marriage is due to his wife being unlike the submissive Griselda. Further, it is due to the fall and subsequent curse that Genesis 3:16 declares the wife to be under the authority of the husband. The Wife has made a case for the reversal of this authoritative structure and presents a tale of marriage that results in a bath of bliss. The blissful marriage January expects counters the Wife's version of marriage.

The second reference linking suffering and marriage occurs when Justinus speaks about purgatory, furthering the association to the Wife. Unlike the Wife of Bath, who quotes a host of writers, the Merchant notes that Justinus will "noon auctoritee allegge" (MerT 1658). However, like the Wife of Bath, Justinus has experience as his guide and authority, and he has been married. His marriage, like the Merchant himself, has caused him to weep: "For, God it woot, I have wept many a teere / Ful pryvely, syn I have had a wyf" (MerT 1544-1545). Justinus finds marriage to encompass "cost and care" and is of "alle blisses bare" (MerT 1547-1548). Due to his circumstances, Justinus' perspective represents an understanding of marriage that January lacks. Hallissy, writing about medieval marriages, notes that "most men rushed into remarriage," demonstrating that Justinus, who advises his brother to be patient, offers January advice that could apply to Justinus if he were seeking remarriage (297). Encouraging patience when pursuing marriage, Justinus states that choosing a spouse is "no childes pley," and that marriage is "of alle blisses bare" (MerT 1521). Ironically, Justinus maintains that May will not be January's bliss, rather she might be his "purgatorie" and "Goddes whippe" (MerT 1670, 1671). The reference to purgatory echoes the Wife's similar declaration that she will be her fourth husband's "purgatorie" (WBT 489).

Justinus' direct invocation of the Wife of Bath is also significant because it recalls the voice of the Merchant. Nothing more needs to be said about marriage, declares Justinus: "The Wyf of Bathe...Of marriage, which we have on honde, / Declared hath

ful wel in little space" (MerT 1685-1688). The naming of the Wife at this juncture of the tale is curious, because it has Justinus, a character within the Merchant's Tale refer to the Wife, who is one of the pilgrims telling the tales. The Merchant, whom Burger designates as "henpecked," would certainly not have the disposition or courage to utter the declaration (61). Justinus' knowledge of the Wife is clearly due to the Merchant's storytelling. Though the Merchant seeks to engage the connubial discussion in his tale, he does not seem to want to enter the discussion on a personal front. The Merchant, by having Justinus talk about the Wife, safeguards himself from any rebuttals the Wife of Bath may wish to pursue regarding his tale of marriage.

Justinus' reference to the Wife also provides a solid link between May and the Wife of Bath: each of the two women is described as purgatory; they are both married older men; each is a schemer; and each is linked with a whip. Hallissy recognises the similarities between May and Alisoun, but notes that in creating May, "Chaucer is in some ways providing a counterweight to the image of the...Wife of Bath" (304). Hallissy maintains May does not have the ability to plan and control her behaviour: "May is impetuous and instinctual, not calculating and deliberative" (304). Though the two women can be contrasted, their similar roles as whip and purgatory establish the Merchant's desire to engage the very concepts of sovereignty that the Wife raises and the Clerk narrates in his story of Griselda and Walter.

Marriage is not the fantasy that January has invented, and, instead of endorsing January's Edenic view of marriage, Justinus seeks to shatter it. He also states that January will have opportunity to "repente of wedded mannes lyf, / In which ye seyn there is no wo ne stryf" (MerT 1663-1664). Beyond Justinus' suggestion that wives are a husband's purgatory, the strife-filled conjugal relations he refers to are never really specified. Nevertheless, Justinus views a wife as a husband's purgatory and the theology of marriage that he presents counters January's desire to place marriage within the confines of the Garden of Eden.

January's Impotence and January's Garden

The Merchant develops allusions to the Eden event in Genesis in order to contextualize marriage within postlapsarian discord. For example, May is January's "paradys," and he tells her that he "moot trespace" and "greetly offende" her (MerT 1822, 1828, 1829). The Merchant has January attempt to trespass in Paradise. The allusion to trespassing in the garden also anticipates the consequence of Gen. 3:16, which subjects the wife and empowers the husband – something that January hopes and longs for. January, however, is a weak and vulnerable Lombard knight and very likely impotent.⁴¹ Critics have long suspected January's weakness, doubting his ability to fulfil the marriage debt: "Thus laboureth he til that the day gan dawe...For every labour somtyme moot han reste, / Or elles longe may he nat endure" (MerT 1842, 1862-1863). January himself has doubts about his potency, and his consumption of aphrodisiacs is an attempt to invigorate himself in preparation for his wedding night: "He drynketh ypocras, clarree, and vernage / Of spices hoote t'enceessen his corage" (MerT 1807-1808). If in fact he were truly impotent, January would be unable to trespass or offend his paradise, May. His wife is clearly unimpressed with his sexual prowess, as she "preyseth nat his pleyyng worth a bene" (MerT 1854). January's inability to consummate the marriage indicates his loss of sovereignty; being unable to subdue his own body and being even less able to exercise his own will over his wife's body negates the bliss of Eden that January expected in marriage.

The Merchant is combining two theological perspectives regarding pre- and postlapsarian sexuality. January is conflicted and trapped between two worlds: he views his prospective marriage to May in terms of paradise, while understanding his sexual desire for May in terms of offence and trespass. January seeks to justify his sexual trespassing as sinless: "man may do no synne with his wyf" (MerT 1839). May's perspective of January's sexual advances, "wheither hire thoughte it paradys or helle" further solidifies the story's various allusions to the Garden of Eden, as well as linking it

⁴¹ In describing his knight in this way, the Merchant contrasts January with Walter, the Clerk's powerful and tyrannous knight. Walter is able to wield sovereignty, pay the marriage debt, and he has two children as proof.

with the discussion January had with Justinus regarding purgatory (MerT 1964). The Merchant's juxtaposing of paradise with offence and trespass, as well as the prospect that it might be hell for May, ensures the audience recognises the allusions to paradisaical Eden and hell. January thus frames his marriage within prelapsarian ideals – May is his paradise – but he longs to exercise postlapsarian authority over her. The Merchant allows January's two worlds to clash when it is clear that May is not his paradise and he is unable to secure his authority over her.

In order to sustain his vision of Edenic marriage, January creates a literal garden in which he longs to "paye his wyf hir dette" (MerT 2048). The "tale hyperbolises and idealises the garden," and the garden is January's attempt to create an Eden-like environment within which his marital fantasy can be enjoyed (Sheridan 38). January's garden abounds in beauty, and, notes Haahr, it has clear evocations of "earthly and heavenly paradise" (115). In a similar vein, D. W. Robertson views the garden as "an iconographic representation of Paradise" (*Preface* 387). Indeed, the January/Adam and May/Eve affinities ensure "the pear-tree story can be superficially understood as a simple allegory of the Biblical fall" (Simmons-O'Neill 396). The Merchant arranges the tale in a manner that undermines January's fantasy and forces him, if he wants to maintain his dream, to be blind to reality.

The Merchant's description of January and May's marriage encompasses rape and abduction, distancing January from his idyllic vision of paradisaical marriage. The Merchant tells his audience that January seeks to hold May tight, much like Paris' ravishing of Helen of Troy: "Harder than evere Parys dide Eleyne" (MerT 1754). The reference to Paris and Helen, as well as the reference to Pluto and Proserpina that the Merchant uses later in the tale, centres the reader's attention on abduction and rape themes. January is like Paris who ravished Helen and Pluto who abducted Proserpina. While January views his marriage as blissful fantasy, the Merchant ensures that January's marriage is associated with violence, abduction, and rape.⁴² In describing

⁴² But Wolfgang E. H. Rudat understands January's marriage to be his sin: "January's marriage is his sin, or to use the Biblical analogue, his entry into the terrestrial Eden of marriage is his *Fall*" (*Games* 112).

January in this way, the Merchant implies that January is very much like the knight from the Wife of Bath's Tale, who is guilty of rape and is destined to live under the power of a woman. In much the same way, the Merchant has January, who has abducted May and is likely guilty of dotage, live under the power of May, as she has the power to answer any charge. Ironically, though the Merchant has distanced January from his paradisaical ideals of marriage, January remains in denial, willingly turning a blind eye to May's infidelity in an attempt to maintain his fantasy.

The presence of Pluto and Proserpina reinforces the themes of rape and sovereignty. The elder Pluto, having abducted and raped the younger Proserpina, parallels January's abduction of May. The Merchant describes the deities as quarrelling, thereby demonstrating marital strife and discord among the classical gods. Proserpina, frustrated with Pluto's degrading comments, seeks to ensure that women have the ability to boldly answer any charge of harlotry:

Now by my moodres sires soule I swere
That I shal yeven hire suffisant answere,
And alle wommen after, for hir sake
That, though they be in any gilt ytake,
With face boold they shulle hemself excuse,
And bere hem down that wolden hem accuse,
For lak of answere noon of hem shal dyen. (MerT 2265-2271)

Proserpina exemplifies the very thing she declares that she will give to May and all women—an answer for every charge. Pluto, having waxed eloquent over Solomon's conclusion that not one righteous woman can be found among a thousand, is rebuked by Proserpina.⁴³ Her powerful retort undermines Solomon's exemplary status and undermines Pluto's position.⁴⁴ Pluto gives in, but still fulfils his word to give January his sight: "I yeve it up! But sith I swoor myn ooth / That I wolde graunten hym his sighte ageyn, / My word shal stonde" (MerT 2312-2314). Proserpina has the ability to

⁴³ "Lo! Y foond this, seide Ecclesiastes, oon and other that Y schulde fynde resoun, which my soule sekith yit; and Y foond not. I foond o man of a thousynde; Y foond not a womman of alle." Eccl. 7:28,29

⁴⁴ Proserpina reminds Pluto that even though Solomon built a temple for God, he also built a temple for "false goddis," was a "lecchour" and "ydolastre," and he "forsook" God (MerT 2295-2299).

answer the charge against her and she desires to give this power to all women. Thus, much like Proserpina, who can cajole Pluto and win, May is adept enough to answer January's charge of infidelity, forcing January to acquiesce to her.⁴⁵

Augmenting the sense of conflicting realities within the tale is the emphasis on blindness, illusion, and self-deceit. When Eve took the fruit and ate, her eyes were opened and she knew good and evil.⁴⁶ In the Merchant's Tale, May desires the pears and partakes of the fruit of infidelity and January's eyes are opened, not hers. Yet, because May has the power to answer any charge, January chooses to remain blind and deluded. He has lived a life of fantasy prior to this moment and January, in accepting May's answer, is willing to continue the delusion. Calabrese speaks of the tale as "glossing reality," noting January's willingness to embrace delusion rather than face the reality of being cuckolded (262). January's loss of vision, much like his loss of sexual potency, represents a loss of independence as well as the loss of control and sovereignty over May. In losing his vision January becomes fully dependent on May. The narrator, having first depicted January as a man of means, prosperity, and power, incapacitates January physically and sexually, ultimately empowering May. His attempt to maintain some semblance of sovereignty is expressed in his unwillingness to trust May. January is unable to possess May sexually, and his blindness drives him to seek continuous physical contact with May: "He nolde suffre hire for to ryde or go, / But if that he had hond on hire alway" (MerT 2090-2091). No longer fearing the pains of purgatory, January now fears that his wife will be untrue. Once Pluto restores his sight, January has two options: to shamefully accept what he has seen with his two eyes—the fact that he has been cuckolded—or, like Donaldson posits it, to "settle for an inner blindness which is more complete than physical blindness" (45). January chooses the latter, thereby maintaining his fantasy.

⁴⁵ The Genesis account has Eve answerless, thus she blames the serpent: "And the Lord seide to the womman, Whi didist thou this thing? Which answerde, The serpent disseyued me, and Y eet" (Gen. 3:15).

⁴⁶ "And the iyen of bothe weren openid...." Gen. 3:7

Conclusion

The Merchant's Tale describes January's desperate longing for an idyllic and Eden-like marriage and his expectation to wield postlapsarian sovereignty. The Merchant's Prologue and its emphasis on postlapsarian marital cursedness anticipate January's inability to wield sovereignty over May, limiting the ecstasy he anticipates in marriage. Ultimately the tale undermines the paradisaical, demonstrating the loss of Edenic bliss and the prominence of postlapsarian strife in marriage. The Merchant's Tale establishes that marriage is not the sum of courtly and romantic ideals depicted in the Knight's Tale, neither is it what the two knights of Lombardy – Walter and January – envision it to be. Walter is tyrannous and tempts his wife, while January is impotent, unable to possess his wife and unable to wield the kind of sovereignty that he believes is biblically warranted. Though he attempts to wield the sovereignty the Mosaic text provides him with he is unable to combine his prelapsarian vision of marriage with his postlapsarian desire for mastery. Thus, January's hopes for a blissful marriage in which a husband possesses sovereignty and the wife submits remain unfulfilled, and the only way that he can experience conjugal happiness is by blindly submitting to May: "This Januarie, who is glad but he? / He kisseth hire, and clippeth hire ful ofte, / And on hire wombe he stroketh hire ful softe" (MerT 2412-2414). The Merchant ensures his audience knows that prelapsarian conjugal ideals can only exist in delusion and fantasy, and people who try to re-create Edenic ideals in marriage remain trapped between two worlds – the fantasy of prelapsarian bliss and the reality of postlapsarian strife.

THE FRANKLIN'S TALE

The Franklin's Breton Lay

The Franklin's Tale, like the tales of the Wife of Bath, the Clerk, and the Merchant, engages the sovereignty and submission roles in marriage. Following the Wife of Bath's Tale, the Franklin tells a tale about a knight who gives up mastery in marriage: "Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie" (FranT 747). In keeping with the Clerk, the Franklin agrees that "Pacience is a heigh vertu, certeyn, / For it venquysseth, as thise clerkes seyn" (FranT 774). Moreover, much like January, who longs for marital bliss, the Franklin tells of Arveragus and Dorigen's marital "blisse" and "solas" (FranT 802). In contrast to the Merchant's lament that bachelors are happier than wedded men are, the Franklin declares the happiness of Arveragus is so great that only one who was married can identify with it: "Who koud telle, but he hadde wedded be, / The joye... That is bitwixe an housbonde and his wyf? (FranT 803-805). The Franklin's Tale of joyful marriage and mutuality counters the prevailing notions of sovereignty that are present in previous marriage tales. And, the mutuality presented in the tale, according to Kittredge, is Chaucer's solution for the marriage debate. The solution, however, entails Dorigen's public display of deference to her husband, even though Arveragus does not exercise mastery over her in private. The show of public deference is never described, though the Pauline coverchief symbol would portray it.

The Franklin's Tale, though situated within the context of a Breton lay, evokes distinctly Christian themes of love and marriage. The Breton lay is in part defined by the interaction of two worlds; "the supernatural and the human; and it calls attention to the self-conscious nature of the second world in which the tale takes place" (Nowlin 49). Three features are prominent in the Breton lay: a focus on love and *gentillesse*, the use of magic, and "an a-Christian ethic" (Hume 374). Because the context of the tale is a Breton lay, it is to be "judged more by the standards of *gentillesse* than by those of Christian

morality," argues Kathryn Hume (371). But, while *gentillesse* is certainly dominant, Carol Falvo Hefferman asserts that the tale has a dominantly Christian emphasis, because "Dorigen invokes an unmistakably Christian God over and over again...and her view of married love is holy," in keeping with a Christian sacramental view of marriage (181). In a similar vein, Angela M. Lucas and Peter J. Lucas view Arveragus and Dorigen's marriage as a distinctively "Christian" (501). Chaucer does not hesitate to combine supposedly conflicting contexts. The Clerk's Tale, the Merchant's Tale, and the Franklin's Tale each combine distinctively Christian themes, yet they also allude to and encompass classical and mythical characters within their respective tales. The Breton lay provides the Franklin a degree of distance from the traditional Christian marital hierarchy, allowing him to speak of Arveragus and Dorigen's unusual nuptial vows. In this way the Franklin averts possible criticism from those who may think his tale of mutuality undermines the Christian status quo, which normally bestowed sovereignty in marriage to the husband.

At the heart of the tale is a prominent Christian doctrine – the law of love – exemplifying the biblical mandate to love and forgive. The Franklin's Tale alludes to various biblical texts that substantiate his doctrine of mutual patient love in marriage. The biblical texts that his presentation of marriage can do without, however, are the Mosaic text that allocates the woman under the man's authority (Gen. 3:16) and the Pauline directives determining headship in marriage (1 Cor. 11). Instead of assigning sovereignty and submission roles, the Franklin promotes friendship and demotes mastery, rendering the traditional texts that demarcate the boundaries of mastery and obedience obsolete, and recognizes the importance of acknowledging human weaknesses. To illustrate his principle of friendship, the Franklin provides his audience with two people who seek to live harmoniously in a postlapsarian reality where the likelihood of offending others is ever present.

Arveragus and Dorigen and Connubial Mutuality

Arveragus and Dorigen's courtship and nuptials determine mutuality and equality in marriage. According to Wolfgang E. H. Rudat, "Dorigen marries Arveragus

expressly because of the *gentillesse* which he is exhibiting when he promises a marriage without maistrie" (*Marriage* 451). Arveragus, however, pursues Dorigen through "labour" and "many a greet emprise," and she accepts his hand before Arveragus abandons mastery, thinking that she will experience the kind of "lorshipe as men han over hir wyves" (FranT 732, 743). Having told Dorigen of his "wo," his "peyne," and his "distresse," Arveragus ultimately wins Dorigen's favour (FranT 737). He then, to her surprise, offers Dorigen his vows of mutuality. Arveragus does not seek to exercise the kind of lordship that subjugates a woman under a man's authority. Instead, Arveragus promises to take "no maistrie" against Dorigen's will and declares his intent never to be jealous. Further, he will obey and follow Dorigen's will in everything. Arveragus' promises are unusual, especially considering Dorigen's initial willingness to submit to what she understood to be normative lordship:

Of his free wyl he swoor hire as a knyght
 That nevere in al his lyf he, day ne nyght,
 Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie
 Agayn hir wyl, ne kithe hire jalousie,
 But hire obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al,
 As any love to his lady shal,
 Save that name of soveraynetee,
 That wolde he have for shame of his degree. (FranT 745-752)

It is critical to recognise that Arveragus' promise – not to take mastery – has a qualifier: "Agayn hir wyl" (FranT 748). This qualifier is particularly important when Dorigen must tell Arveragus of her rash promise to Aurelius, putting the vows of mutuality at risk. Dorigen's vows, like her husband's, also endorse and protect mutuality; she promises never to stir up strife, and she says she will to be true to Arveragus: "As in my gilt, were outhere were or stryf. / Sire, I wol be your humble trewe wyf" (FranT 757-758). Though the Franklin presents the tale in the context of a pagan marriage – the Breton lay – Timothy H. Flake correctly maintains that it "partakes in some measure of the mutuality Paul advocates" in Ephesians 5:21-23, which urges all believers to exercise

deference to one another (213).⁴⁷ In doing so the Franklin continues the debate on what Christian marriage may look like.

Neither Arveragus nor Dorigen seek to manipulate or exploit each other, vowing to obey each other and avoid bringing strife into the marriage. Dorigen's vow illustrates that she will not take advantage of Arveragus' *gentillesse*, expressing a *gentillesse* of her own:

She seyde, "Sire, sith of youre gentillesse
Ye profre me to have so large a reyne,
Ne wolde nevere God bitwixe us tweyne,
As in my gilt, were outhere werre or stryf.
Sire, I wol be youre humbe trewe wyf –
Have heer my trouthe – til that myn herte breste." (FranT 754-759)

Dorigen acknowledges and appreciates Arveragus' offer of freedom. In contrast to January of the Merchant's Tale, who attempts to bribe his wife in exchange for her fidelity, Arveragus need not bribe Dorigen to secure her faithfulness; neither does Arveragus need to be blind to his wife's actions. Thus, Arveragus and Dorigen illustrate the kind of trust needed within marriage: Arveragus will not exploit or abusively rule over Dorigen and she, in return, will be a true wife, and she will not abuse the free reign her husband extends to her.

Although Arveragus is disposed to mutually follow and obey Dorigen privately, the kind of marriage he proposes is tempered by a desire to retain a semblance of sovereignty within the public eye. The request for Dorigen to protect his public persona underscores the fact that Arveragus' vows are not the norm. It also indicates a degree of pride. Arveragus abandons traditional vows, yet wishes to retain a public acknowledgement of sovereignty: "Save that the name of sovereynetee, / That wolde he have for shame of his degree" (FranT 751-752). There is no mention in the text of how this longing to guard his reputation and position as a knight and husband is

⁴⁷ Paul endorses mutuality to all believers: "Be ye suget togidere in the drede of Crist" (Eph. 5:21). The very next verse, however, restores the the marriage hierarchy: "Wymmen, be thei guget to her hosebondis, as to the Lord, for the man is heed of the wymman... Men, loue ye your wyues, as Christ louyde the chirche, and yaf hym silf for it, to make it holi" (Eph. 5:22-25).

accomplished, though Dorigen's daily sorrow and longing for Arveragus during his absence may represent it to some degree. Dorigen's gratefulness infers she understands what Arveragus asks of her and that she is in agreement, willingly providing the public perception of Arveragus' lordship in marriage: "She thanked hym" (FranT 753).

Friendship in Marriage

Not only do Arveragus and Dorigen's nuptials abandon exploitation via marital mastery and sovereignty, they also exhibit friendship in marriage: "That freendes everych oother moot obeye, / If they wol longe holden compaignye" (FranT 762-763). The Franklin views mastery as the enemy of love and friendship:

Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye.
Whan maistrie comth, the God of Love anon
Beteth his wynges, and farewel, he is gon! (FranT 764-766).

He concludes, therefore, that mastery in marriage chases away the God of Love. The Franklin has listened to his fellow pilgrims discuss mastery, but unlike them the Franklin recognizes that "Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee, / And nat to been constreyned as a thral" (FranT 768-769). He also understands men to be similar to women in this regard: "And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal" (FranT 770). In essence, then, according to the Franklin a woman does not want to be treated like Griselda and a man does not want to be ruled over like Jankyn, the hag's knight, or January. Since both spouses want freedom and not thraldom, the Franklin presents a marriage of friendship in which freedom is maintained and mastery, if engaged, will not threaten or exploit either spouse.

The Franklin's version of marriage seeks to temper mastery, but he does not negate mastery entirely. In the early part of the tale, the Franklin utilizes three comparable terms within a few lines of each other: "lordshipe," "maistrie," and "soverayntee." First, Dorigen recognizes a certain kind of "lordshipe as men han over hir wyves" (FranT 743); next, Arveragus, in contrast to common marriage, will "take no maistrie," yet adds the qualifier, "Agayn hir wyl" (FranT 748-749); and third, the

Franklin notes that Arveragus, “for shame of his degree,” wants the “name of soveraynetee” (FranT 751). The Franklin affirms that mastery and love do not co-exist, but he seems to contradict himself when Arveragus’ vow potentially allows mastery – if Dorigen wills it. Arveragus announces he will obey and follow Dorigen’s “wyl in al,” further signifying that Dorigen has the ability to request him to take mastery, if she so wills it (FranT 749). Thus, though mastery is the enemy of love in the Franklin’s assessment of marriage, mastery is not necessarily removed. Instead of negating mastery, the Franklin’s Tale allows for the prospect of Arveragus wielding mastery, as long as Dorigen willingly allows it.

Friendship in marriage must consider the law of love as paramount. After the wedding vows are uttered, the Franklin declares that Arveragus is servant and lord, but the Franklin qualifies the kind of lordship employed:

Servant in love, and lord in mariage.
Thanne was he bothe in lordshipe and servage,
Servage? Nay, but in lordshipe above,
Sith he hath bothe his lady and his love;
His lady, certes, and his wyf also
The which that lawe of love acordeth to. (FranT 793-798)

The words “lordshipe above” distinguish the heavy-handed mastery evident in the previous marriage tales from the lordship presented by the Franklin. The lordship the Franklin envisions is from “above,” and as a result, it alludes to divine kindness and patience, as well as Christ’s “lawe of love.” The law of love has various biblical texts at its core: Christ declares that his followers must follow a code of love; and second, Christ, when asked what the greatest law was, notes two laws – love God and love your neighbour.⁴⁸ Less pronounced here, yet certainly viable, would be Paul’s chapter on love in 1 Cor. 13. The Franklin hopes to ensure that his version of marriage amalgamates both “lady” and “wyf,” thereby taking the best of courtly love and

⁴⁸ For example: “These thingis Y comaunde to you, that ye loue togidere” (John 15:17); “Maistir, which is a greet maundement in the lawe? Jhesus seide to him, Thou schalt loue thi Lord God, of al thin herte, and in al thi soule, and in al thi mynde. This is the firste and the moste maundement. And the secounde is lijk to this; Thou schalt loue thi neiyebores as thi silf. In these twey maundementis hangith al the lawe and the profetis” (Matt. 22:36-40).

common conjugality into account, creating a marriage with patient love at the centre. Noticeably absent in the Franklin's presentation of lordship are the Mosaic authoritative structure and the Pauline marital hierarchy.

The Franklin's Tale, having invoked the law of love, offers a new way of conjugal living – one guided by patient love and *gentillesse*. The Franklin's Tale, by emphasizing patient love, seems to reject the Mosaic and Pauline texts used to endorse traditional mastery and submission roles in marriage, especially Gen. 3:16 and 1 Cor 11. If love is truly being exercised, then the texts on mastery, submission, and headship are unnecessary, as love does not seek to usurp mastery. Instead of biblical texts on sovereignty, the Franklin seeks to incorporate the texts that sanction mutuality, love, and patience. Thus, in the Franklin's version of mutual marriage, the Mosaic marriage doctrines are less dominant and the Pauline coverchief symbol is superfluous. The virtue of patient love is, as Mann argues, the key to understanding the Franklin's Tale: "[t]he only way that the stability and harmony of a relationship can be preserved is through constant adaptation, responsiveness by one partner to changes in the other" (139). Patience in love is critical to the Franklin's Tale, because "in this world, certein, there no wight is / That he ne dooth or seith somtyme amys" (FranT 779-780). The Franklin clearly presents the person who practices patient love as being "above" all:⁴⁹

Looke who that is moost pacient in love,
He is at his avantage al above.
Pacience is a heigh vertu, certeyn,
For it venquysseth, as thise clerkes seyn. (FranT 771-774)

The Clerk has linked patience to suffering and now the Franklin applies the virtue of patience to love. According to the Franklin, the practice of patient love provides an advantage, though the specifics of the advantage remains unmentioned. The patience in love presented in the Franklin's Tale is superior to the Clerk's patience in suffering. For example, patient love has the power to moderate mastery and lordship in a way that would circumvent the evil abuse that Griselda suffered under Walter. Patient love

⁴⁹ This reference to "above" reiterates the Pauline notion that love is the greatest of virtues (1 Cor. 13:13).

requires both spouses to employ the virtue equally and acknowledges the desire that both spouses have for freedom. Patient love allows the married couple to live in solace and even in “sovereyn blisse” (FranT 1552). And, according to the Pauline doctrine of love, it is the greatest virtue (1 Cor. 13:13).

Though his tale is a Breton lay, the Franklin’s presentation of marriage alludes to the quintessential Christian text on patient love – 1 Cor. 13. The tale endorses the Pauline adage that love is patient, love forgives, and love bears all things: “Charite is pacient, it is benygne...it suffrith alle thingis, it bileueth alle thingis” (1 Cor. 13:4-7). This passage outlines a patience that is similar to what Griselda exemplifies: she is patient, she bears Walter’s cruel testing, and, when the testing is over, she implicitly forgives Walter. However, the Franklin’s connubial ideals suggest that Griselda and Walter’s marriage lacks the substance of friendship. The fact that Walter tests and tempts his wife cruelly proves the lack of love. The difference between the Clerk’s patience in suffering and the Franklin’s concept of mutually forbearing friendship is that patient love applies to both spouses and rules out exploitation. Most important, this kind of friendship in marriage also accommodates offences; because all people have the tendency to speak or act amiss, patient love in marriage employs mutual, loving forbearance:

For in this world, certein, ther no wight is
That he ne dooth or seith somtyme amys.
Ire, siknesse, or consellacioun,
Wyn, wo or chungynge of complexioun
Causeth ful ofte to doon amys or speken.
On every wrong a man may not be wreken. (FranT 779-784)

Because people err, patient love and forgiveness is essential, and Arveragus and Dorigen have this kind of marriage, exemplifying that they know how to live harmoniously in a postlapsarian world:

And therefore hath this wise, worthy knyght,
To lyve in ese, suffrance hire bihight,
And she to hym ful wisly gan to swere
That nevere sholde ther be defaute in here. (FranT 787-780)

Dorigen's promise never to have a flaw is presumptuous since the Franklin established all people err. The presumption sets her up for failure, and when Dorigen does err, promising Aurelius he can have her love if the rocks are cleared from the coast of Britain, it provides a test for the marriage vows of patient love.

Mutuality Threatened

Having made promises to ensure their marriage is safeguarded and harmonious, Arveragus and Dorigen's actions directly threaten the vows of mutuality. For example, Arveragus' prolonged absence sets the stage for Dorigen's impulsive promise to Aurelius. Arveragus leaves his bride at home, seeking "armes," "worshipe," and "honour" (FranT 811). His drawn out absence is paramount to the Franklin's declaration that everyone at times "dooth" amiss (FranT 780). The absence is motivated by pride, and the knight's decision to leave endangers the wedding vows. Janemarie Luecke maintains that "there seems to be neither discussion nor mutuality regarding Arveragus leaving for England" (116). Though the tale offers no dialogue or narration regarding Arveragus' exploits in England, the Franklin makes it clear that Dorigen is wholly distraught, confirming the offence. Dorigen desperately longs for Arveragus' return, writing letters and being in "grete sorwe" (FranT 835). Her friends try to console her with lively conversation and dances, and they take Dorigen to a beautiful paradisaal garden dance where she meets Aurelius, who secretly loves her. The scene is somewhat reminiscent of the temptation scene in Eden and the garden scene from the Merchant's Tale: "That nevere was ther gardyn of swich prys / But if it were the verray paradys" (FranT 911-912). Three specific references to "May" further the affinities between the two tales and the allusion to Eden: the Franklin's garden scene occurs on the "sixte morwe of May" (FranT 906); May "hadde peynted with his softe shoures / This garden" (FranT 907-908); and Aurelius is described as "fressher...than is the month of May" (FranT 927-928). The Franklin's garden temptation scene, however, remains undeveloped in comparison to the garden in the Merchant's Tale, most likely because the Merchant had already developed it so prominently that the Franklin need only allude to the garden to make the connection. The garden/temptation scene leads Dorigen to conditionally vow her love to Aurelius, risking her marriage to Arveragus.

Thus, Arveragus and Dorigen hazard their marriage vows, requiring them to exercise patient love in order to have their marriage survive.

The coastal rocks, a source of sorrow and grief, prompt Dorigen's promise to Aurelius. Her husband's absence causes Dorigen to curse the ocean rocks that have thwarted travellers from returning home. Hefferman observes three specific elements—grass, sea, and rocks—that “together are suggestive of the river of Eden” (181). The rocks in particular are prominent, suggesting, for Hefferman, the framework of Christian doctrine:

First, that the rocks, taken literally, are a source of care to Dorigen because they represent a danger to mariners...and second, that, understood allusively, rocks as a sign of the Church are a reminder of the sanctity of the sacrament of marriage which can be easily threatened and is in the central complication of the tale that unfolds in the courtly love garden. (182)

In light of this, Dorigen's desire for the rocks to disappear seems to indicate that she longs for the removal of the ecclesiastical imperatives that underscore the sanctity of marriage. While it is tenable that Dorigen is showing a divided duty here, she “restate[s] her marriage vow” at this point, possibly in an effort to remind herself and possibly in an attempt to thwart Aurelius' pursuit (183). Dorigen tells Aurelius, “I wol been his to whom that I am knyght,” emphasising that she is faithful to Arveragus and wants to continue the faithfulness (FranT 986). While Dorigen is faithful, she has a penchant for stories of woe. Much like Arveragus, Aurelius woos Dorigen with his stories of pain and woe, but resists him by declaring her fidelity to Arveragus: “Ne shal I nevere been untrewye wyfe” (FranT 984). As the temptation continues, however, Dorigen's weakness for stories of woe, her willingness to flirt, and her longing for the rocks to disappear prompt her rash promise: “Whan ye han maad the coost so clene / Of rokkes...Thanne wol I love yow best of any man” (FranT 995-997).

In making her promise to Aurelius, Dorigen condemns Arveragus for his absence. Dorigen's promise to Aurelius entails loving him best. The language she employs is akin to the narrator's description of Aurelius's love for her: “Aurelius, / Hadde loved hire best of any creature” (FranT 939). The Franklin presents a story in

which patient love and friendship are at the core of Arveragus and Dorigen's marriage, yet it is Aurelius that is described as loving Dorigen best. That Aurelius can be described as loving Dorigen better than Arveragus seems incongruous. Aurelius, however, does love Dorigen better in that he, unlike Arveragus, is present. Dorigen hints at this:

Lat swiche folies out of youre herte slide.
What deyntee sholde a man han in his lyf
For to go love another mannes wyf,
That hath hir body whan so that hym liketh? (FranT 1002-1105)

Dorigen's declaration that a husband can have his wife's body whenever he desires is an indictment against Arveragus, who has not accessed her body for some time. The lines do not just express sexual desire, as Dorigen could, if she were so disposed, pursue Aurelius in order to satisfy herself sexually. The fact that she is not sexually unfaithful indicates that Dorigen's promise, which indicated she would love Aurelius best, condemns Arveragus' for his absence and indicates her desire that he would return home.

Aurelius' pursuit of Dorigen differs from the model of patient love the Franklin tenders. In spite of her indiscreet promise to Aurelius, Dorigen never intends the consequence that erupts when the rocks disappear. Once the rocks are magically removed, Aurelius refers to Dorigen as "sovereyn" and reminds her of the promise she made to him in the garden:

Of yow, my sovereyn lady, but youre grace –
But in a gardyn yond, at swich a place,
Ye woot right wel what ye bihighten me. (FranT 1325-1327)

Dorigen does not yield to Aurelius, even though he has met the terms of the stipulation. Aurelius' recognition of Dorigen as sovereign shows the disparity between his pursuit of love and the vows the Franklin advocates. While Aurelius calls her sovereign, implying Dorigen has the power to reject his request or to fulfil his desires, he desires what she promised him: "ye bihighten me" (FranT 1327). The removal of rocks fulfils the stipulation Dorigen thought was impossible to accomplish, and Aurelius is eager to

benefit from the achievement. Aurelius' actions, however, are oppressive and manipulative; Aurelius' pursuit of Dorigen is not in keeping with the principle of loving friendship the Franklin extols. In contrast to patient love, Aurelius is much like the lustful knights who seek to fulfil their desires by force, and therefore he is not worthy to be submitted to. Aurelius tricks Dorigen, using the Clerk's magic, and demands that she fulfill her rash promise.

On the day the rocks vanish, the tone of the Franklin's Tale shifts significantly. The narrator's description of the "colde, frosty seson of Decembre" contrasts the flowery month of May in which the flirting first took place (FranT 1244). Underscored by this change in seasons, Dorigen's promise to Aurelius and the subsequent disappearance of rocks initiate a conundrum that tests the marriage of mutuality: How does Dorigen remain a true wife to Arveragus while still keeping her promise to Aurelius? Dorigen's promise to love Aurelius threatens the covenant she and Arveragus made: it risks sexual infidelity; it may cause the jealousy Arveragus promised never to entertain; it could be the source of strife that Dorigen promised never to bring into the marriage; and, ultimately, it jeopardizes Dorigen's status as a faithful and "trewe" wife (FranT 759). The second half of the tale, then, is focused on Dorigen's initial response, how Arveragus will react to his wife's impulsive promise to Aurelius, and if the marriage will be able to live up to the vows of mutuality.

Dorigen's Patience

Dorigen does not seek to fulfil her foolish vow; instead, she decisively delays action to contemplate a solution. Once she realises the folly of her pledge, Dorigen struggles to remedy the predicament. Van Dyke understands Dorigen's inaction to demonstrate she is "incapable of standing on her own two feet" (61). But Dorigen is not simply a passive sufferer who, because she lacks the power, must meekly wait for her husband and then obey him. Dorigen's dilemma presents a serious crisis—it jeopardizes her marriage—and because it has severe repercussions, she delays, hoping for a solution that will allow her to retain her faithfulness to Arveragus. Dorigen, then, is decisive in her choice to do nothing. In keeping with Raybin, who insists "on her independence,"

Dorigen's long lament enables her to consider her options carefully and logically (66).⁵⁰ These are the actions of a contemplative and thinking woman. Her lament allows Dorigen to consider other women who have been faithful amidst crisis, as well as those women who have chosen suicide as a solution to their impending defilement: "Sith that so mane han hemselven slayn / Wel rather than they wolde defouled be" (FranT 1420-1421). The lament is framed by what Homer says about Penelope; like Penelope, Dorigen hopes to delay until her husband comes home. Warren Smith observes:

[Dorigen] pities, but does not applaud, women who chose suicide, and reserves praise for wives who were faithful to their husbands; there is emphasis only on their devotion. (387)⁵¹

Indeed, Dorigen, like the women she considers, is devoted. Her inaction is a tactic that provides her with an opportunity to think, and the delay makes it clear that she does not wish to fulfil the impulsive vow to Aurelius. As long as her promise to Aurelius remains unfulfilled, Dorigen retains the fidelity she vowed Arveragus, even though the foolish promise was voiced. Dorigen's inaction and her lament, then, do not imply an inability to act, but rather decisiveness to consider her options.

Dorigen's delay does not imply that she is weak and dependent on spousal consent, rather it demonstrates wise, patient love and fidelity to her husband. Luecke understands action to be "precisely what Dorigen is incapable of willing" (114). Citing Dorigen's incapacity to act and her inability to solve the crisis on her own, Luecke concludes that she is a weak, "inferior, submissive, [and] hysterical wife" (117). Dorigen's behaviour, however, indicates a powerful resolve to patiently wait, incorporating the Franklin's idea of patient love for her husband. Dorigen had no help from her friends, indicating that her fidelity to Arveragus, prior to his homecoming, is

⁵⁰ Raybin writes: "I differ...from sympathetic readers, however, in my insistence on Dorigen's independence, a point that is central to recognizing how radical a stance Chaucer presents when he bases a happy tale on the proclamation that 'wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee...'" (66).

⁵¹ Smith notes that the lament of Dorigen contains twenty-two exempla, all from Jerome's work, *Against Jovinian*. He argues that Dorigen's sincere "emotional responses to the grim stories in *Against Jovinian*, point to [Chaucer's] efforts to mark out a differentiation from Jerome's position on marriage and virginity, again with a favorable glance toward the position of Augustine in contrast with that of Jerome" (375).

singularly attributable to Dorigen's inaction. Arveragus' sudden homecoming reunites the couple: "Hoom cam Arveragus, this worthy knyght" (FranT 1459). Dorigen weeps and tells "hym al as ye han herd bifore," demonstrating that while she spoke amiss, her waiting has in fact allowed her to remain faithful to Arveragus (FranT 1465).

Arveragus' abrupt return home puts an end to Dorigen's waiting and compels the couple to reunite in a way that reflects their vows of mutuality. Arveragus' prolonged absence and the foolish promise Dorigen made to Aurelius has threatened the couple's marriage. They had vowed mutuality and forbearance, and now that the couple is reunited, neither accuses the other of any offence. Dorigen is guilty of speaking foolishly to Aurelius, but she does not bring further strife to the marriage by angrily accusing Arveragus for his absence. Similarly, Arveragus, in keeping with his vows, does not allow Dorigen's impulsive promise to produce jealousy, nor does he impose abusive mastery against Dorigen's will. Arveragus treats his wife kindly, even weeping with her over the situation, indicating his sympathy and his sensitivity: "he brast anon to wepe" (FranT 1480). Appropriate to their vows, no angry or jealous words are spoken and Arveragus declares his love for Dorigen: "For verray love which that I to yow have" (FranT 1477).

Arveragus and Mastery

Dorigen implicitly allows Arveragus the mastery he promised never to employ without her permission. She tells Arveragus everything that happened while he was away: "Thus have I seyde, quod she, 'thus have I sworn' / And toold hym al as ye han herd bifore" (FranT 1464-1465). Arveragus may be wondering if Dorigen has been completely honest and faithful, or if she has compromised the marriage by fulfilling her vow to Aurelius. He asks if there is any more:

"Is ther oght elles, Doregen, but this?"
"Nay, nay," quod she, "God helpe me so as wys
This is to mucche, and it were Goddes wille." (FranT 1469-1470).

These are Dorigen's last words to Arveragus concerning her promise to Aurelius. Her "God helpe me," hints at relinquishment, and Arveragus responds with an imperative to "lat slepen that is stille" and a declaration that keeping "Trouthe is the hyeste thyng" (FranT 1472, 1479). Dorigen has no response, her silence and her willing obedience implying that she grants Arveragus permission to exercise mastery. A more direct proof that Dorigen wills Arveragus to take control is evinced in her response to Aurelius:

And she answered, half as she were mad,
"Unto the gardyn, as myn housbonde bad,
My trouthe for to holde – allas, allas!" (FranT 1511-1513)

Dorigen obeys her husband, though she expresses the submission as if she were insane. The madness she conveys seems to contradict the compliance, and her despairing utterance of "allas, allas" is closely associated with the fact that she is going to the garden to keep "trouthe" with Aurelius, which Arveragus arranges (FranT 1513). Dorigen's "alas" is understandable – she never wanted to fulfil her rash promise to Aurelius. The fact that she goes to the garden in keeping with her husband's request is of note, as it demonstrates her willing obedience and echoes the Franklin's notion that "freendes everych oother moot obeye" (FranT 762). If the Franklin's principle is being followed, then Arveragus cannot wield mastery without Dorigen's express approval. This is an important aspect of the tale, as Arveragus' mastery is never sanctioned by authoritative texts. Instead of biblical or extra-biblical texts demanding a wife submit to her husband's authority, it is Dorigen herself who implicitly and volitionally gives Arveragus sovereignty.

Once Dorigen implicitly sanctions Arveragus' sovereignty, his wielding of mastery causes speaking and doing amiss. His first request is backed up by a threat; Dorigen, on "peyne of deeth," must not reveal the details of the event (FranT 1481). Arveragus is a proud knight who does not want to be humiliated. Thus he asks Dorigen to help him retain public honour by keeping secret her rash promise, his weeping, and his desire that she keep "trouthe" – threatening her with death if she does not comply. This is the second time that Dorigen has had to keep Arveragus' behaviour hidden in order to safeguard his pride and public image. It was the pride of arms and worship

that motivated Arveragus' absence in the first place, risking her fidelity. In uttering the threat, Arveragus requests Dorigen to protect his public persona once again, maintaining his pride. The threat is particularly problematic because it contradicts the law of love that highlights Arveragus and Dorigen's marriage. The threat reveals the abusive nature of sovereignty, the potentially lethal results of mindless submission, and certainly qualifies as speaking amiss. Like the death threat, Arveragus' second request – Dorigen must keep "trouthe" with Aurelius – also results in offence. That Dorigen must keep "trouthe" is problematic because it risks the fidelity of the marriage. Dorigen's response to Arveragus' demand is a cry of "allas, allas" (FranT 1413). The Franklin acknowledges Arveragus' command jeopardizes the marriage: "Wol holden hym a lewed man in this / That he wol putte his wyf in jupartie" (FranT 1494-1495). Immediately following these lines, however, the Franklin anticipates the tale's happy ending: "Herkneth the tale er ye upon hire crie,/ She may have bettre fortune than yow semeth" (FranT 1496). The Franklin seems to think that the happy ending justifies the story's suspense. And even though The Franklin tries to placate the audience with the happy ending, the duress that it causes Dorigen indicates that Arveragus has spoken amiss and his actions are foolish and offensive.

The tale's conclusion applies the principle of patient love more broadly. The Franklin demonstrates that the power of patient love extends to all human interactions, not just those between a husband and wife. Thus, Arveragus honours Dorigen's vow to Aurelius, forgoing his own marital rights to her; Aurelius releases Dorigen from her promise to him in spite of the cost of removing the rocks; Aurelius seeks to keep his word to pay the magician the large sum of money, even if he must make payments for years; and the clerk-magician graciously releases Aurelius from his contract, thereby bragging that a "clerk koude doon a gentil dede / As wel as any of yow, it is no drede" (FranT 1611-1612). The Franklin's Tale seeks to end well, presenting his characters as noble and virtuous. The tale does not teach the radical goodness and generosity of mankind; rather, it focuses on the desperate need humans have for generosity, as all people speak or act amiss.

Conclusion

The Franklin's tale renounces the Wife of Bath's doctrine of wifely sovereignty, replacing it with mutuality. The wifely subjugation themes present in the Clerk's Tale are replaced with a tempered mastery, and the Clerk's patience in adversity is substituted with patient love. The Franklin confronts January's idyllic fantasy marriage, replacing it with a marriage that truly addresses the issues people face in a postlapsarian world. The Franklin's Tale presents the audiences with two people who attempt to live in harmony in spite of the tendency humans have to offend. The narrator does not invoke the biblical texts that are prominent in the marriage tales that precede it. The Franklin does not seek to romanticize or idealize the institution of marriage; rather he emphasizes the fact that all people everywhere "dooth or seith sometime amys" (FranT 780). The tale seeks to offer married people a way of living together that recognises the struggle for mastery that is inherent in marriage, but does not succumb to the temptation to usurp and commandeer the sovereignty in an abusive fashion.

In the beginning of his tale, the Franklin describes Arveragus' chivalric adventures as all-consuming: "For al his lust he sette in swich labour" (FranT 812). Arveragus' lust is rooted in chivalric duty and is set against the lust of January and Walter, which is sexual, and the Wife's desire for sovereignty. Arveragus' love of arms and honour and his treatment of Dorigen prompts the audience to rethink marriage. Each of the four marriage tales present knights as husbands, and Arveragus differs from the knights studied thus far. His knighthood does not fit the actions of the Wife of Bath's knight, and it does not suit Walter's abusive mastery or the impotence of January. Neither does Arveragus' knighthood match the courtly behaviour of either Arcita or Palamon of the Knight's Tale. In contrast to the other knights and their wives, Arveragus and Dorigen attempt to fashion a marriage that is realistic in its understanding of human weakness, and neither spouse manipulates the other. Mastery should be avoided, but if it is employed, it needs to be tempered with the permission of the spouse and with love. The danger of mastery is that it tends to offend.

The tale concludes with a happy picture of the couple continuing to exercise mutuality. At no point does the Franklin hint that the couple's vows were

compromised. Arveragus continues to treat Dorigen with high respect and esteem and Dorigen, in return, responds with fidelity: "He cherisseth hire as though she were a queene, / And she was to hym trewe for evermoore" (FranT 1554). The fact that the Franklin describes Arveragus and Dorigen's marriage as "sovereyn blisse" demonstrates that he views his version of connubial love and friendship as supreme, prevailing over the previous marriage tales' notion of marital bliss: "Arveragus and Dorigen his wyf / In sovereyn blisse leden forth hir lyf" (FranT 1551-1552).

GOD MADE MARRIAGE IN PARADYS

Connubial Conflict

The four marriage tales – the Wife of Bath’s Tale, the Clerk’s Tale, the Merchant’s Tale, and the Franklin’s Tale – provide four versions of marital bliss. Though these tales are prominent in discussing connubial relations in Chaucer, they are by no means the only tales that engage conjugality. Chaucer’s opening tale – The Knight’s Tale – relates the story Palamon’s love for Emelye. The narrator describes their marriage as encompassing “alle blisse and melodye,” and the tale concludes with the couple “Lyvyng in blisse” and no word of jealousy passes between them (KnT 3097, 3102). The concluding tale – The Parson’s Tale – which is more a sermon than a tale, exclaims that “God made marriage in paradys, / in the estaat of innocence” (ParT 882). These two passages, prefacing and concluding Chaucer’s work, associate marriage with the paradisaical. The Knight’s focus is on the bliss of love within courtly ideals, while the Parson expounds the theology of marriage. The various other Chaucerian tales that deal with marriage, as well as the characters they present, are diverse, representing numerous estates and perspectives. Most of the characters expect marriage to fulfil their hopes for strife-free conjugal joy, but they are fated to reap the dissension and discord that is characteristic of the postlapsarian life. Their marriages tend to be complicated by the various interpretations of sovereignty and submission roles within conjugal relations.

The Mosaic passage, which bequeaths sovereignty to one spouse and subjects the other, is at the centre of much of the debate over marriage. Conflict in marriage is inevitable, unless the characters can fashion a marriage that deals with the submission and sovereignty questions. The Wife of Bath, the most strident of the pilgrims and the most vocal character, attempts to invert the statute that confers mastery (Genesis 3:16). Further, she seeks to undermine the hierarchy that gives husbands supremacy in

marriage (1 Corinthians 11) by giving it to the wife. Thus the Wife surpasses her contemporaries in what she says, offering a theology of marriage that subjects men, and in what she wears, the embellished symbolic coverchiefs.

The Coverchiefs

This study has sought to emphasise the Wife's peculiar coverchiefs as representative of the Pauline symbol of submission to authority. The Wife's head-coverings are a significant marker, expressing her character, her theology, and her attitude. The garment operates in tandem with the Wife's reworking of the biblical texts. The hag's riddle and its answer, "Wommen desyren to have sovereyntee," can be understood as part of the patristic discussion of Genesis 3:16, linking the two concepts more intimately (WBT 1038). Moreover, the Wife's marriage theology and the hag's riddle give the distinct impression that the Wife of Bath would like nothing better than to discard the headpiece, thereby inverting the Mosaic and Pauline texts.

Chaucer uses the coverchief symbol of submission to specifically demarcate the Wife of Bath's position, declining to use it in the tales that follow. Once the coverchiefs are linked to the Wife of Bath, conveying her rebellion and hypocrisy, the actions and attitudes of the cast of characters that follow demonstrate their volitional submission to authority or their rebellious desire to usurp sovereignty – without the necessity of wearing representational and emblematic clothing. The audience may well expect the submissive Griselda to wear the garb, but the Clerk does not describe Griselda in this fashion. Instead, the Clerk has Griselda's behaviour express her inner resolve to comply, thereby expressing what the coverchief symbolises. By limiting coverchief references to the Wife, Chaucer portrays the Wife of Bath as fulfilling the letter of the Pauline coverchief theology, though she seeks to usurp authority, while others, like Griselda, fulfil the spirit of Pauline coverchief theology, though they do not wear the garb.

In contrast to Griselda, May, who passively acquires sovereignty from the impotent January, is ineligible to wear the garb, for she cuckolds her husband and lies to

him about her affair, securing her position as sovereign. While May is willing to compromise her vows and pursue an affair, Dorigen will not break her vows or be unfaithful. Instead, she enjoys a marriage of mutuality, though she must hide it under a veil of submission. How Dorigen projects the submission to her husband is not known, but the tale assumes she is able to succeed. And as such, Dorigen exhibits, at least publicly, the kind of deference to her husband that could be represented by the Pauline coverchief. Whether any of these diverse women wear the head garb or not, the wives represented in the marriage tales exhibit attitudes that either accept or reject the submission to authority that the coverchief emblem represents.

A Knight, a Miller, a Nun and a Parson

The marriage tales are not the only tales that deal with conjugality, though the other tales do so less explicitly. Some aspects of the Knight's Tale have already been addressed, albeit in a cursory fashion. The tale extols the romantic ideals of courtly love and does not give sway to the reality of postlapsarian connubial cohabitation, which normally encompasses conflict. The Knight lauds the romantic, but the Miller seems ready to shatter the idyllic, presenting a bawdy tale in which humans have to deal with what it means to live in the real world, where jealousy and misery often abound. The Miller's Tale details the comic cuckolding of John, who worries that he may not be able to satisfy his young wife, Alisoun. The Miller's emphasis on the bawdy and sexual is wholly absent in the Second Nun's Tale, which recounts the joy of a spiritual union, disregarding the physical and sexual aspects of connubial living. If Valerian, Cecilia's husband, attempts to touch his new bride, an angel guarding her will slay him. Though Cecilia and Valerian are married, the narrator extols her for sacrificing her marriage chamber in service to God: "The world and eek hire chambre gan she weyve" (SNT 276). In the Nun's perspective on marriage, there is no occasion for the sexual; the physical is forbidden on pain of death and substituted with mystical and spiritual endeavours, ultimately embracing martyrdom.

The Parson does not endorse the Nun's perspective of mystical marriage, seeking rather to re-endorse the Pauline and Peterine doctrines of marriage. The Parson

understands marriage as created by God in Paradise: “for God made mariage in paradys, in the estaat of innocence” (ParT 882). The association of marriage with Paradise is critical, as some characters seek bliss and paradisaal joy via marriage. Conjugal relations are sacramental, notes the Parson, and the breaking of the sacrament of marriage through lechery is “an horrible thyng” (ParT 841). For the Parson, conjugal life should be marked by love, implicitly endorsing the Franklin’s presentation of connubiality: “Man sholde loven hys wyf by discrecioun, paciently and atemprely” (ParT 860). Marital love, however, according to the Parson, is understood within the boundaries of Pauline marriage theology, including headship. The Parson quotes both Peter and Paul, expounding the subjection of the wife to the husband and the need for a husband to love his wife.

Now how that a womman sholde be subject to hire housbonde, that telleth Seint Peter. First, in obedience. / And eek, as seith the decree, a womman that is a wyf, as longe as she is a wyf, she hath noon auctoritee to swere ne to bere witnesse withoute leve of hir housbonde, that is hire lord; algate, he sholde be so by resound. / She sholde eek serven hym in alle honestee and been atempree of hire array....It is a greet folye, a womman to have a fair array outward and in himself be foul inward. / A wyf sholde eek be measurable in lookynge and in berynge and in lawghynge, and discreet in alle hire wordes and hire dedes. / And aboven alle worldly thyng she sholde loven hire housbonde with al hire herte, and to hym be trewe of hir body. / So sholde an housbonde eek be to his wyf. (ParT 929-937).

The Parson reiterates the Peterine and Pauline doctrines of wifely submission and obedience. Thus the wife has no authority, but serves in honesty and modesty. The Parson’s declarations may be an attempt to restore what the marriage tales have undone in their representations of marriage. The Parson’s view is entrenched in a tradition that reserves the right of sovereignty for the man, does not share authority with the woman, and holds women accountable to a standard that does not apply to men. Thus, the Parson cannot help but endorse the Peterine and Pauline theology that places the woman under the man’s authority.

The Parson seeks to provide a semblance of gender equality by stating that Eve was made from Adam’s rib, not his head or feet. The woman, says the Parson, is not

created from Adam's head "for she sholde not claym to greet lordshipe" (FranT 925). Nor was she created from his foot, "for she ne sholde nat been holden to low," but "God made womman of the ryb of Adam, for womman sholde be felawe unto man" (ParT 926-927). The Parson's reference to Adam's "ryb" seeks to promote patient and loving conjugality, echoing the kind of marriage the Franklin presented, but the Parson will not allow the woman to possess sovereignty: "For ther as the womman hath the maisterie, she maketh to much desray" (ParT 926). For the Parson, marriage is wholly situated within biblical bounds, yet his speech of Adam's rib seems to be an attempt to temper the views that allocate the woman to extreme servitude on the one hand, or her exaltation above the man on the other. The rib speech provides the Parson with the theory for the equality of women with men, but the Parson's application, because it is entrenched in the Pauline theology, continues to subject the woman.

The Longing for Edenic Bliss

The marriage tales describe a longing for bliss, even though the characters are fated to live within the precincts of postlapsarian conjugality. Many of the characters express a longing for, or an expectation of, harmony and bliss in marriage. Chaucer's recurrent use of "blisse" in these tales projects the joy, gladness, and ecstasy of an Edenic paradise. Ironically, while the characters long for paradisaical joy, each marriage endures a degree of dissension and discord, often the result of how sovereignty and submission is viewed. The characters are forced to seek ways to deal with connubial strife in order to construct a marriage that provides them with the bliss they long for. While each tale enumerates the hardships of postlapsarian connubial relations, each of the marriage tales ends with the couple happily embracing their lot and enjoying a degree of bliss. The Wife of Bath declares that once she obtained sovereignty from Jankyn, they never debated again; and the hag's husband has his heart bathed in a "bath" of marital "blisse" (WBT 1253). The Clerk's Tale only uses the term "bliss" once, declaring that Walter is encouraged to take on the "blisful yok / Of soverayntee," namely marriage (CIT 114). The marriage may be a blissful and sovereign yoke for Walter, but it is "angwyssh" and "drede" for Griselda (CIT 462). While the Clerk ends his tale with the couple seemingly happy, it is not described as bliss. Instead of bliss, Griselda's life is full of peace and rest.

The Merchant's Tale describes January expecting marital paradise: "That in this world [marriage] is a paradys" (MerT 1265). Marriage is extolled as "thilke blisful lyf," but his brother undermines January's fantasy, declaring that marriage is of "alle blisses bare" (MerT 1259, 1548). The Franklin states that Arveragus and Dorigen's marital life begins with bliss and solace and ends with "sovereyn blisse" (FranT 1552).

The four happy endings indicate that each couple has found a way to either wrestle with or prevail over the theological dictates of Genesis 3 and 1 Corinthians 11. The Wife's symbolic coverchiefs foreshadow the sovereignty and submission doctrines the marriage tales encompass. Despite her unconventional solution, the Wife of Bath's Tale manufactures a marriage that results in conjugal accord and harmony, but the Clerk, the Merchant, and the Franklin are also able to summon similar successes in their tales. Chaucer, by ending each tale happily, permits each pilgrim a degree of success in her or his version of marriage, forcing the pilgrim audience and perhaps the readers of the tales to consider and assess the value and benefits of the assorted fictions. Each marriage tale documents the difficulty of postlapsarian connubial life, especially given the biblical constraints and dictates vis-à-vis submission and sovereignty.

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