from *Retelling Tales: Essays in Honor of Russell Peck*, ed. Thomas Hahn and Alan Lupack. Cambridge, UK, and Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1997

Sacred and Secular Exegesis in the Wyf of Bath's Tale

pp. 73-90

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The *Canterbury Tales* are not strictly speaking a collection of tales, but a collection of *retellings* of tales. That the distinction is not one without a difference is strongly suggested near the end of the prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* in the voice of the pilgrim-poet:

> Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
> He moot reherce as ny as ever he kan
> Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
> Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
> Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
> Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe. (GP 731–36)

I have recently tried to unpack what I take to be the densely compressed theoretical load of these lines, which intentionally and dramatically confuse the truth claims of propositional statements with those of fictive poetry (Fleming 73–85). What seems sufficiently clear on the face of it is that Chaucer, whether as manipulating author or manipulated voice, imposes a certain artistic obligation on the *re*-teller of a tale that has as much or more to do with the original teller as with the original tale.

The distinction between teller and tale, of course, lies behind the "dramatic principle" which remains as fecund as it did a century ago in generating interpretive essays about the individual tales. We rightly try to understand the Pardoner's Tale in terms of what we learn about

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[1]In this essay I shall use a Middle English spelling of *wyf* (woman) to identify the narrator, Alison of Bath, to help distinguished her from Midas's spouse ("the wife").

the Pardoner in the General Prologue; and we rightly try to allow the Wyf of Bath's literary and marital autobiographies in her dilated prologue to try to help us read her tale. Both the Pardoner's and the Wyf's stories have catalogued narrative "sources" and "analogues," but we would never confuse them with their "tales," which are a unique blending of the narrative and the narratorial.

Precisely what constitutes the *re*telling of a tale is itself a question freighted with a heavy theoretical load. The question may in the first place be asked whether there can be such a thing as an "innocent" or "naive" retelling—a retelling, that is, absolutely faithful to the telling it purports to repeat. At the theoretical level such a retelling seems impossible on at least two grounds, the performative and the interpretive. Any music lover knows that no two musical performances of the "same" musical text are identical or even nearly identical. And certainly most physicists would question, on technological grounds, whether even the repeated experience of mechanical reproductions of a single performance could be the "same." The principle of narratological uncertainty is more troublesome yet when we move from the active performer to the passive audience. The grandchild may seem endlessly to delight in the grandfather's repeated "narrative":

I'll tell you a story
About John Dory.
He went to the woods
And shot a Tory.
Now my story is begun.
I'll tell you another
About his brother.
He went to the woods
And shot another.
Now my story is done.

But of course the "story" can explain only a part of her delightful response, and a part that may actually decrease with each retelling, as it is replaced by other pleasures based in ritual, memory, expectation, and features of the social context of the "retelling." This is to say that "retelling," by its very nature, may posit a rather complicated relationship between the teller and the audience.

There are in Chaucer's poetry several instances in which the aspect of narrative *re*telling is emphasized in a fashion that implicitly draws attention to *differences* between the tale told and the tale retold, and invites interpretive speculation concerning the artistic role

of the retold tale in a larger narrative economy. One such example comes at an early part of the Wyf of Bath's tale, when she retells for exemplary purposes part of the story of King Midas from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. But King Midas enters the narrative by a rather oblique route.

Before proceeding with an examination of the Wyf's version of the Midas story, we may licitly inventory the reasonable expectations with which we approach her tale as a whole. There is not and probably cannot be an interpretive consensus concerning Alison of Bath, but there certainly has emerged a widely shared view of her nourished on the generous humanism of such scholars as E. T. Donaldson and subsequently toughened considerably by the claims of a committed feminism. According to this view Alison of Bath, the textual creature of a male, clerical, misogynist tradition anthologized in Jankyn's *Book of Wikked Wyves*, turns the tables on her social and textual oppressors alike by seizing the authority of *maistrie* in the social sphere of marriage and by destroying in the family hearth the book that has called her into being and validated her oppression. Her prologue ends in an act of literary parricide which, according to this view, leaves her free to revel in the uncontested authority of her own tale, a tale about the psychological, sexual, and social benefits that flow from the regiment of women.

Alison claims, credibly enough, that the "male tradition" represented by Jankyn's book—an anthology that includes, among other specific texts, Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, the scriptural book of Proverbs, and the *Ars amatoria* of Ovid—is irredeemably misogynist:

> For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
> That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
> But if it be of hooly seintes lyves,
> Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.
> Who peyntede the leon, tel me who? (688–92)

Had the lion painted the picture it would have shown not a Great White Hunter, musket at ease, with his jackboot firmly planted on the mane of a dead lion, but a well-fed and frisky lion ripping succulent morsels off the carrion of a Great White Hunter. Certainly we are led to expect a different view of women from that of Solomon, Ovid, and Jerome, when women take control of their own literary destinies. And as the Wyf's prologue ends, with the destruction of Jankyn's book and the subjugation of its one-time owner to female maistrie, the necessary revolutionary conditions seem to have been

achieved. But what do we actually get?

The Wyf's own story has begun with an abrupt act of rape committed by a "lusty bachelor" of Arthur's household upon an anonymous maiden—a crime for which the man is quickly captured and condemned to death by Arthurian justice. However the importunity of Arthur's queen and other women of the court leads the king to alter his own capital judgement and to turn the young knight over to the queen, who is given the power of life and death over him. Making clear that his life is still in jeopardy, the queen declares that he may be spared his life if, within the period of a year and a day, he is able to discover the answer to a question put to him.

The question to which the knight must discern the correct answer—implicitly a unique correct answer—is this: "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren"? (905). As he begins his house by house quest for the answer, the knight is offered numerous suggestions. Following a lengthy series of plausible answers (wealth, honor, fine clothes, sexual pleasure, independence, and so forth), comes one distinctly *im*plausible suggestion:

> And somme seyn that greet delit han we
> For to been holden stable, and eek secree,
> And in o purpos stedfastly to dwelle,
> And nat biwreye thyng that men us telle. (945–48)

Quite apart from the fact that this formulation violates the syntactic expectation of the interrogation—"to have great delight" in something is not the same as to "most desire" it—it is posited only for the briefest instant, to be dissolved with the completion of the rhyming couplet

> . . . But that tale is nat worth a rake-stele. (946)

The Middle English word *tale* (<OE *talu*) here means the expression of a particular idea or opinion, of course, rather than a larger narrative. If there is some sharp referential suggestion in "rake-stele," it escapes me. I presume that a rake-handle, like a straw, a bean, an oyster, a hen, a turd, a butterfly, and various other material commonplaces that show up elsewhere in nearly identical constructions in Chaucer's poetry, simply means in this context a thing of very little worth in comparison to which the opinion stated is worth even less.

To demonstrate the worthlessness of the tale (*opinion*) the Wyf invokes the exemplary power of a classical tale (*narrative*):

Pardee, we wommen konne no thyng hele
Witnesse on Myda—wol ye heere the tale?
Ovyde, amonges othere thynges smale,
Seyde Myda hadde, under his longe heres,
Growynge upon his heed two asses eres. . . . (950–54)

Even before we hear the tale, we get its moral application. The inability of a woman to keep a secret told to her by a man is linked, somewhat surprisingly, with the more general characteristic of stability: "to been holden stable, and eek secree, / And in o purpos steadfastly to dwelle" (946–47). And by using the second person pronoun the Wyf makes want of discretion and lack of steadfast purpose universal female characteristics.

The phrase "thynges smale" seems to mean "narrative details."[2] Since in Chaucerian retellings the devil is often in the details, we do well to attend to them. In this instance the most relevant detail is the textual invention of a *wife*.

. . . The whiche vice he hydde as he best might
Ful subtilly from every mannes sight,
That, save his wyf, ther wiste of it namo.
He loved hire moost, and trusted hire also;
He preyede hire that to no creature
She sholde tellen of his disfigure.
She swoor him, "Nay"; for al this world to wynne,
She nolde do that vileynye or synne.
To make hir housbonde han so foul a name. (955–63)

That we should not miss this salient detail seems to be the purpose of the provocative footnote with which the Wyf of Bath concludes her "retelling":

The remenant of the tale if ye wol heere,
Redeth Ovyde, and there ye may it leere. (981–82)

When we do follow this hint by consulting the Ovidian text in the eleventh book of the *Metamorphoses*, we find that the Wyf has compressed her original, that she has made a significant change in narra-

[2]The phrase may also refer to one of the shorter narrative segments of Ovid's *carmen perpetuum*. It is worth noting that Chaucer uses the same phrase in connection with the *Metamorphoses* and in an obviously provocative and problematical way in the "Book of the Duchess" (59).

tive detail, and perhaps above all that she has altered the *tone* of the story. The crucial narrative detail, of course, is that it is not a male barber who learns and reveals Midas's secret, but the king's own wife. Furthermore, no reader whose only knowledge of the Midas story came from Alison of Bath would know either that his ass's ears were a condign punishment for interpretive stupidity, or that the revelation of the secret is a comic episode in the larger satirical treatment of King Midas. In fact in Chaucer the "story of Midas" is no longer the story of Midas but the story of Midas's wife. This is an act of female literary appropriation, to be sure, but hardly one that gives voice to a silenced or marginalized female voice, since there is no female in the original story. Ovid's story is a story about the stupidity of King Midas. The Wyf's story is a story about the instability and treachery of Midas's wife. The only stupidity demonstrated by the Wyf's Midas is that he trusts his wife; his chief function is to bear literary testimony to the gender-specific inability of women to keep confidences:

> Pardee, we wommen konne no thyng hele;
> Witnesse on Myda. . . (950–51)

Ovid places no particular moral onus on the *famulus* who reveals the secret. The suggestion of the text is that the fact of the regal grotesquerie is simply so *outré* that it cries out to be made known. It is true that the barber "did not dare" (nec . . . auderet) reveal to others the shameful truth he had discovered by accident. This was not, however, because he had explicitly or implicitly agreed to keep the secret. Indeed, there is no "secret" in Ovid, but something quite different—the disgrace or shame of a judicial disfigurement. The *famulus* presumably fears the wrath of his foolish master. The entire force of the satire is directed at the male king. In the Wyf's version, by contrast, the moral onus is clearly assigned to the woman. It is hardly plausible that a wife would learn what her husband's ears look like as a matter of a secret communication rather than empirical observation, but the Wyf of Bath seems willing to risk narrative implausibility in order to focus on the woman's—or rather, all women's—incapacity to keep a secret. In other words, King Midas's unsympathetic wife is first gratuitously invented by the Wyf of Bath and then gratuitously blamed by her. In her "Prologue" the Wyf reasonably suggested that the unflattering literary versions of women in the *Book of Wikked Wyves* came from male authors. "Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?" And she suggested that when women took up the pen, things would be different, that they would "writen of men moore wikkednesse / Than al

the mark of Adam my redresse." Yet given her own artistic opportunity to "paint the lion," the Wyf strains to produce another clichéd canvas in the Great White Hunter School.

The Wyf's gratuitous "gender slur" becomes all the more remarkable if we consider the elements of the Midas story within a broad folkloristic context. Ovid's narrative is far from unique, for the story type was widely diffused in various forms throughout the folklore of Europe and the Near East as documented by Aarne and Stith Thompson, and other scholars (Crooke, Lehmann-Nitsche, Wegner). Several of the versions are, like Ovid's highly "literary," and at least one of them, the story of King Marc and his horse's ears, is to be found in the canonical Arthurian tradition within which the Wyf pretends to set her own tale. Gaël Milan, who has studied the romance motif in a very broad context, makes the point that within the narrative type the king figure is *never* betrayed by his wife, always by a male servant or barber (Milan, 20).

It was Robertson who first suggested that the wife's partial deafness as reported in the Prologue portrait ("she was somdel deef") is an allegorical emblem of her incapacity to understand the spirit as opposed to the letter of the sacred text. Among other grounds upon which his view has been controverted is the fact that there is a perfectly good literal narrative detail—her husband's violent fist to her head (795)—that could account for impaired hearing. Such an objection, in my view, is opaque to the particular qualities of high Gothic allegory. One does not expect a narrative element in Dante or in Jan van Eyck to be "only" allegorical or "only" verisimilar but to be indivisibly both at once. I am therefore inclined to be most nearly persuaded by those critics who have sought to find a thematic relevance to the Wyf's "use" of the Midas story and her use of other texts, especially from the Bible and from the *Book of Wikked Wyves*.

The common bond among such textual episodes is factual errancy and interpretive eccentricity. To mention for the moment merely the former, it is a factual error to attribute a text unique to the gospel of John to the gospel of Mark, as the Wyf does in her Prologue. It is a factual error to supplant a "famulus" with a "wife" in Ovid's story of Midas, as she does in her tale. Twenty-five years ago Judson Allen and Patrick Gallacher published an elegant essay that convincingly demonstrated Chaucer's likely thematic strategy: Alison of Bath botches the Midas story because she *is* a Midas.

The Wyf's Midas enters her tale to exemplify a pre-announced interpretation: women cannot keep secrets. No account is given of the origin of the most remarkable thing about the king—the fact that he

has the ears of a donkey—and we would have the impression that for Ovid that fact, while a physiognomical "vice," was merely a narrative detail like other narrative details:

> Ovyde, amonges other thynges smale,
> Seyde Myda hadde, under his long heres,
> Growyng upon his heed two asses eres. (952–54)

Ovid's Midas is also a negative exemplary figure, but in a quite different way. The ass's ears were imposed upon the king as a divine punishment for his stupidity. In semiotic terms the ass's ears are, in the Ovidian text, a *sign*; the thing they *signify* is interpretive incapacity. The Wyf's version affirms the sign but edits out the thing signified.

In the eleventh book of the *Metamorphoses* Midas appears *only* as a negative example of short-sighted avarice and of artistic opacity. In the famous story of the "golden touch," analogous in some respects to the story of Shylock and the pound of flesh, Midas falls victim to his own literal-mindedness when *everything* he touches, including his food and drink, turns to unnourishing gold. Ovid links the account of the "golden touch" with that of the "ass's ears" in the following lines:

> pingue sed ingenium mansit, nocituraque, ut ante,
> rursus erant domino stultae praecordia mentis. (*Metamorphoses*, xi. 148–49)

[But a fathead he remained, and the foolishness of his mind would again, as before, bring harm to its owner.]

The harm came when he was invited to judge a music contest between the goatish god of Nature, Pan, and the great god of poetry itself, Apollo. The former played his rustic pipes, the latter his beautifully crafted lyre. Stupid Midas stupidly preferred the music of Pan to that of Apollo. The counter-judgement of the mountain god Tmolus as reported by the poet Ovid was quite severe:

> . . . nec Delius aures
> humanam stolidas patitur retinere figuram (xi.174–75)
> [The Delian god did not suffer that such stolid ears might keep their human form.]

Allen and Gallacher, building on the earlier work of Hoffman and Robertson, examined the medieval Ovidian commentaries on the Midas story. What they found demonstrated striking and massively coherent analogies between Chaucer's presentation of the "somdel deef" Wyf in the prologue and the medieval humanistic interpreta-

tion of Midas with his ass's ears. To prefer the pipes of Pan to the lyre of Apollo is to prefer the flesh to the spirit, the chaff to the wheat, the old dance to the new song. What we find, indeed, is a unifying density of exegetical imagery. The Wyf's prologue is, among other things, an extended dramatized medley of scriptural interpretations. The *exemplum* of King Midas in her tale provides an analogous instance of secular exegesis.

Ovid's own tale is of course itself exemplary. The stupid king's punishment presents a narratized version of a Greek proverbial expression, "to be as an ass before the harp," meaning to be brutishly incapable of a higher understanding. The image was guaranteed currency in medieval literature by its prominent use by Boethius near the beginning of the *Consolation of Philosophy* (Galdi, 197–200). For medieval humanists, as we shall see, the ass's inability to "hear" melody was a figure for an exegetical inability to move beyond the literal sense—of Scripture *or* of secular poetry—to grasp a moral meaning. What "to have ass's ears" or "to be an ass before the harp" meant to Chaucer is made apparent in a memorable episode of *Troilus and Criseyde* in which Pandarus visits the bed-ridden Troilus, whom Cupid's arrow has reduced to numbed and inarticulate suffering. In exasperation Pandarus asks

> "What? slombrestow as in a litargie?
> Or artow lik an asse to the harpe,
> That hereth sown whan men the strenges plye;
> But in his mynde of that no melodie
> May sinken, hym to gladen, for that he
> So dul is of his bestialite?" (*T&C*, i.730ff.)

The whole scene is wittily built upon the template of the first book of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, where the bed-ridden Boethius gets emergency medical treatment from Lady Philosophy. Her technical diagnosis of *lethargus* (Ip2) appears in Chaucer's Middle English text as *litargie*, along with the translated and transplanted image of the ass before the harp from Im4 (Holloway).

I have already stated the surprising conclusion to which Chaucer's readers are forced to come: what is in Ovid an *exemplum* of one male's stupidity becomes with the Wyf of Bath in its content an occasion for gratuitous and generalized misogyny and in its performance an exemplification of one female's textual incapacity. Alison's textual *maistrie* may seem strangely deployed.

Much of the textual misogyny of the Wyf's prologue is scriptural,

coming either directly from particular biblical texts or from the exegetical traditions surrounding them. But there is a distinctly secular and classical strain there present as well. I believe that idea of female stability—raised here only as a strawwoman to be demolished peremptorily by the Wyf of Bath—derives from the most famously misogynist sentence in Virgil: "Varium et mutabile semper / femina" (*Æneid* iv. 569–70), "A fickle and changeful thing is woman ever." The grounds for my belief are the textual filiations between the "Midas digression" in the Wyf's tale and an extended antifeminist passage from the mouth of Genius in his colloquy with Dame Nature in the *Roman de la Rose*. Chaucer's editors long ago established isolated textual "borrowings" in such passages as the following:

> But nathelees, hir thoughte that she dyde
> That she so longe sholde a conseil hyde . . .
> That nedely som word hire moste asterte. (965–66, 968)
> Por nulle rienz ne se teroit,
> A son avis morte seroit
> Se ne li sailloit de la bouche. (16365–67)

But an examination of the two passages in their integrity shows more than textual "borrowings." As is true of many other features of the literary treatment of the Wyf of Bath, Chaucer has clearly found a thematic and intellectual model for the "Midas digression" in the poem of Jean de Meun. And Jean's Genius introduces his disquisition on the folly of entrusting secrets to women with an explicit citation of Virgil:

> Virgiles meïsmes tesmoigne,
> Qui mout connut de lor besoigne,
> Que ja fame n'iert tant estable
> Qu'el ne soit diverse et muable. (16325–28)

It is the French *estable* of line 16327, in my opinion, that shows up in the Middle English *stable* of line 946. The French "diverse et muable" (16328) clearly responds to Virgil's "varium et mutabile" in *Æneid* iv.596.

The larger intellectual pattern of this passage in the *Roman de la Rose* also leaves its impress on the function of the "Midas digression" in the Wyf's tale, for Jean de Meun was a great master of the syncretistic art of melding sacred and secular exegesis. In Genius's mini-diatribe, he repeatedly links classical texts from Virgil and Livy with biblical citations or paraphrases. Some of the texts thus invoked are

of philological relevance to the "Midas digression," and I shall return to them in due course. One text relevant to the tactics of sexual warfare and manipulation raised in the "Prologue," Micah 7:5 ("ab ea quæ dormit in sinu tuo custodi claustra oris tui") specifically locates the theme of wifely secrecy in the marriage bed. Genius imaginatively dramatizes this text in an elaborate tableau in which a sexually provocative wife in pillow talk wheedles from her husband a secret that gives her power over him. Jean renders the text as "De cele qui te dort ou saing, / Garde les portes de ta bouche" (16694).

I suggest that if we are to appreciate the nature of *re*telling in the Wyf of Bath's Tale we must remain alert to the complex but clearly demonstrable influence of the *Roman de la Rose* on this particular artifact of Chaucer's imagination. The Wyf's tale is a tale of moral and material metamorphosis in which a rash rapist is transformed into an ideal husband and an old hag into a lovely bride. Indeed the *exemplum* of King Midas has its origins in the book called the *Metamorphoses*. From one point of view, therefore, it seems entirely consistent that we find textual change among its most salient charac- teristics: Ovid's male barber becomes the Wyf's female barber. But by what process has this transformation been effected?

It is a process that I might describe as textual attraction. In the thematic context established by the Wyf's Prologue, a context of scriptural exegesis, the secular Ovidian exemplum in the Wyf's tale has responded to the transforming attractive powers of sacred text. Where in anterior literary tradition will we find yoked together in somewhat unlikely union the two elements of the Chaucerian exemplum—a *barber* and a *wife*? To ask the question is to answer it: the biblical story of Samson and Delilah in the book of Judges.

The secret of Samson's seemingly superhuman strength lay in his hair which, in accordance with the ascetic practice of the Nazarites, should not be cut. His wife, Delilah, a treacherous Philistine woman, at length wheedled his secret from him, then betrayed him into captivity by her compatriots. "But she made him sleep upon her knees, and lay his head in her bosom. And she called a barber, and shaved (*vocavit tonsorem et rasit*) his seven locks, and began to drive him away, and thrust him from her; for immediately his strength departed from him" (Judges 16.19).

It is this biblical text that brings together the barber and the betraying woman. Their actual identity has not yet been perfected. She presumably calls the barber to have him perform the tonsure; but the grammatically indeterminate construction "vocavit tonsorem et rasit. . ." can suggest that she herself did the shaving with the barber's

assistance or advice. However in the same passage of the *Roman de la Rose* from which Chaucer has built the rest of the topic of women's inability to keep secrets, the barber *is* the wife:

> Dalida la malicieuse,
> Par flaterie venimeuse,
> A Sansom, qui tant ert vaillans,
> Tant preus, tant fors, tant travaillans,
> Si cum el le tenoit forment
> En son giron soëf dorment,
> Copa ses cheveus a ses forces,
> Dont il perdi toute ses forces
> Quant de ses crins le despoilla. . . (16677–85)

That is where Chaucer came by his version of the female barber. The Wyf herself, of course, had another source—the *Book of Wikked Wyves*.

> Tho redde he me how Sampson loste his heres,
> Slepinge, his lemman kitte hem with hir sheres;
> Thurgh which tresoun loste he both his yën (WBP 721–23)

By this point in Chaucer's fiction, of course, the *Book of Wikked Wyves* has gone up in smoke. The Wyf is fully in narrative control and we are led to expect a revolutionary painting of a lion. Certainly the background she sketches is promising for such a project. She sets her Arthurian tale in an indefinite but apparently ethnic antiquity before—"I speke of many hundred yeres ago"—the evangelical intrusions of the friars and, by implication, before Christianity altogether. Nonetheless, Holy Writ will not be so easily banished. You can take the Wyf of Bath out of the Bible, but you cannot take the Bible out of the Wyf of Bath. She is biblical by *nature*, and as her most proximate literary ancestor says, quoting Horace,

> Qui vodroit une forche prendre
> Por soi de Nature deffendre
> Et la boutast ensus de soi,
> Revendroit elle, bien le soi.[3]

The covert reintroduction of the Samson and Delilah story is one

[3] Jean de Meun, *Roman de la Rose*, 14021–24, translating Horace, *Epistles*, I.x.24: "naturam expelles furca, tamen usque recurret."

way that the sacred text trumps the secular text in the Wyf of Bath's tale. I believe Chaucer achieves the same end in another, and in some ways more interesting and metaphorical way as well. The medieval Christian humanistic traffic in ancient secular stories was almost always a somewhat anxious business, for there was never a dearth of querulous ascetic voices to ask what Ingeld, or Arthur, or Tristram might have to do with Christ. From the point of those posing it, no doubt, the question was meant to be devastating; but in fact it had an answer, or rather several answers, often expressed in the metaphorical terms of the allegorical exegesis of scriptural texts. The best known of such images, perhaps, was that of "Egyptian gold." Before the Hebrew slaves fled Egypt in the Exodus, they took from their Egyptian oppressors "vessels of silver and gold, and very much raiment" (Exodus 12:35). The meaning of this passage according to celebrated glosses in Augustine and other Fathers was that the Church rightly appropriated the wisdom and eloquence of antique culture and purified it to a sacred use (Folliet, 582–84). Another metaphoric application was taken from the story of David and Goliath. That David decapitated the fallen Philistine champion with the giant's own sword mysteriously betokened the manner in which monuments of pagan learning could be used to defeat ancient theological and philosophical error.

Yet another such "reading" is particularly associated with Jerome. Jerome is, of course, *par excellence* the patristic authority countered by the Wyf in her prologue. Jerome was the translator of the Vulgate, the definitive form of the biblical text in Chaucer's intellectual universe. He was the author of the *Adversus Jovianianum*, the book in which the enshrined classical misogyny of Theophrastus joined with its Christian ascetic posterity to form the very textbook of the monastic antimatrimonial tradition. From this book come the exegesis of the stories of the wedding at Cana and the Samaritan woman with which the Wyf's prologue so memorably begins. Later she cites Jerome and the *Adversus Jovinianum* by name—the only patristic author and the only patristic text to be so noticed by her.

In a passage nearly as celebrated as Augustine's treatment of the "Egyptian gold," Jerome had dealt with the question of whether a Christian writer could licitly use the poetry of ancient pagans. Jerome took up this issue in a letter written in 397 or 398 to the orator Flavius Magnus. According to this letter, Magnus has asked with surprise why Jerome, in some of his books, "has put forward examples taken from secular literature, thus dirtying the bright whiteness of the

Church with the filth of pagans."[4] He answers the question with numerous scriptural arguments, invoking both the letter and the spirit of the sacred text. Moses himself used gentile texts in the Pentateuch. The exordium of the Solomon's Proverbs enjoins the wise man "to know wisdom and instruction. . . . He shall understand a parable, and the interpretation." St. Paul in his epistles used lines from Epimenides and Menander, and when he preached on Mars Hill he invoked Aratus. And he finds in the ancient legislation of the period of the conquest of Canaan an allegory, paralleling that of the interpretation of the "Egyptian gold," to justify the Christian's use of pagan poetry. Under what circumstances could a Hebrew warrior marry a woman from among the conquered and enslaved gentiles? "If thou go out to fight against thy enemies, and the Lord thy God deliver them into thy hand, and thou lead them away captives, and seest in the number of the captives a beautiful woman, and lovest her, and wilt have her to wife, thou shalt bring her into thy house. And she shall shave her hair and pare her nails. . . . And after that thou shalt go in unto her, and shalt sleep with her; and she shall be thy wife" (Deut. 21:10–13). *Quae radet cæsariem*; she shall cut her hair.

The tonsure, along with other requirements stipulated in this chapter of Deuteronomy, is here at once a gesture of control, of purification, and of manumission. In terms of the narrative suggested, the passage precisely reverses the situation in the story of Samson and Delilah, in which the Philistine gains control of the Nazarite by means of tonsure. Jerome applies the image to a *corpus* of texts explicitly imagined as a beautiful female body. He himself is the barber. "Why should it be surprising if in appropriating the wisdom of secular literature because of the beauty of its stylistic expression—that is to say the beauty of her physical members—I should wish to make a free Israelite woman of a slave and prisoner? So long as either I clip off or I shave away *[uel praecido uel rado]* whatever there is about her of death—idolatry, disordered desire, error, sexual passion—then, by copulating with a body now purified, I generate proper offspring for the Lord Sabaoth. My labor profits the household of Christ. My adultery with the foreign woman adds to the company of believers."[5]

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[4]*Epistola* 70.2.1, cited from Saint Jerome, *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi epistulas selectas*, ed. C. Favez (Brussels: Latomus, 1950), p. 43: "cur in opusculis nostris saecularium litterarum interdum ponamus exempla et candorem ecclesiae ethnicorum sordibus polluamus. . . ." [5]"Quid erto mirum si et ego sapientiam saecularem propter eloquii uenustatem et membrorum pulchritudinem de ancilla atque captiua Israhelitin facere cupio, si quidquid in ea mortumm est idolatriae, uoluptatis, erroris, libindium uel pracedio uel rado et mixtus

Jerome's understanding of the image of cutting the hair of the captive woman was widely diffused among medieval scriptural exegetes and, in the later period, among humanists of the Renaissance. One vernacular poet of the generation following Chaucer's used it conspicuously to justify the poetic project—the Spaniard Juan de Mena, in his much admired *Debate de la Razón contra la Voluntad* (Lida, 112–14). I suggest its subliminal presence in the Midas episode of the Wyf's tale not because of any irrefutable textual signal to be found there but because of the circumstantial evidence of its thematic justice. There are many felicitous congruences—in my mind too many to result from coincidence. The Wyf's prologue is in large measure a medley of Hieronymite exegesis; the "shaved slave-woman" is among Jerome's most celebrated exegetical essays. Alison's marriage of the biblical story of Sampson with the Ovidian story of Midas typifies the mixture of sacred and secular which is Jerome's concern in his letter to Magnus. Both Alison of Bath and Jerome are concerned with controlling texts and controlling women, in all the ambiguity of those phrases. And it is worth noting that Alison, too, is a textual barber. She has trimmed the Ovidian text, curtailed it, cut it short in a fashion that creates an interpretive vacancy for the reappearance of the misogynist text. But we note that it is a "text" woven by the milliner of Bath herself.

What the wise are enjoined to know in the famous prologue to Solomon's "Proverbs" is "the story and its interpretation" (*parabolam et interpretationem* [Prov. 1:6]). With regard to Ovid's Midas, she knows "the story" but remains conspicuously ignorant of "the interpretation." The narrative gesture can hardly be accidental, for the hermeneutical theme is deeply imbedded in both the Wyf's prologue and her tale. We are tempted to discover it as the poet's principal and unifying subject. Certainly it is the theme that unifies the images of the lady barber and the ass before the harp, images that had a certain cultural urgency in medieval poetic circles. The arguments raised by Jerome in defense of poetry in his letter to Magnus had a necessary currency among those fourteenth-century humanists who found their traditions and, perhaps, their very craft attacked by the dogmatic theologians of the fraternal orders.

One such scholar-poet, Giovanni Boccaccio, was among the most influential writers to leave their impress on Chaucer's work. Both in

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purissimo corpori uernaculos ex ea genero Domino Sabaoth? Labor meus in familiam Christi proficit, stuprum in alienam auget numerum conseruorum" (Favez, p. 44). See Hagendahl, 208–09.

his formal defense of poetry in the fourteenth book of the *Genealogia* (Boccaccio, 1951, II, 737) and in his commentary on Dante's *Commedia* (Boccaccio, 1965, 40–41). Boccaccio rehearses an argument that clearly derives from Jerome's letter to Magnus. Ideas of recuperating the wisdom of Antiquity are likewise linked with the exegetical binaries of spirit and letter in the extensive apologetic writings of Chaucer's strict contemporary, the Florentine chancellor Culuccio Salutati. One of the lesser studied of Salutati's letters, written in 1398 to his friend Pellegrino Zambeccari, is in effect an extended essay on the implications of the Greek proverb *onos lyras*, which he cites after Boethius (Salutati III, 285–308.) Salutati links secular and sacred exegesis through the double argument founded in Jerome. To condemn classical poetry is to condemn the sacred page itself, since inspired biblical authors from Moses to the Apostle Paul used their poetic heritage to express the great truths of Revelation. Secondly, poetic fictions are not lies but figurative truths expressed beneath the veil of allegory (Greenfield, 164–67).

The paradoxical effect of the Wyf's retelling of the Midas story is to reestablish the biblical and exegetical authority attacked or deflected in her prologue, and apparently destroyed in a revolutionary conflagration:

> He yaf me al the bridel in my hond. . . .
> [I] made hym brenne his book anon right tho. (813, 816)

The image of bridling may remind us of a biblical text frequently invoked by medieval moralists in their discussions of "the letter and the spirit." It is Psalm 31:9, "Nolite fieri sicut equus et mulus, quibus non est intellectus. In camo et freno maxillas eorum constringe. . ." ["Do not become like the horse and the mule who have no understanding. With bit and bridle bind fast their jaws . . .]. The academic and exegetical understanding of medieval Ovidian commentators was that King Midas had deserved his ass's ears for being deaf to the spirit, for having, that is, "no understanding." In the Wyf's retelling of the Ovidian story on the other hand his mistake seems instead to have been his trust that his wife would bind fast her jaws.

The specific bibliography of the *Book of Wikked Wyves* ends with a startling syncretism. Among the individual texts "bounden in o volume" are "the Parables of Salomon, / [and] Ovides Art." The word "parable" is here often taken by editors to refer explicitly to the Book of Proverbs, but it can as well refer generally to the scattered *sententiae* of the Wisdom books. The Solomonic text most directly countered

by the Wyf of Bath is probably Ecclesiasticus 25: 30 "A woman, if she have superiority, is contrary to her husband" ["Mulier si primatum habeat, contraria est viro suo"]. The Wyf does not explicitly cite this text, but Jean de Meun does in precisely that passage in the *Roman de la Rose* in which the story of Sampson and Delilah in linked with the alleged inability of women to keep their mouths closed (16645–48). This authoritative text is overturned by the Wyf's experience:

> And whan that I hadde geten unto me,
> By maistrie, al the soveraynetee . . .
> After that day we hadden never debaat. (817–18, 822).

Since Jankyn is conveniently dead, her triumphant experience cannot be interrogated. But Solomon has many "parables." "Cast your bread upon the running waters," he says elsewhere, "and after a long time thou shalt find it again" ["Mitte panem tuum super transeuntes aquas, quia post tempora multa invenies illum," Ecclesiastes 11:1]. Midas's compromising secret, buried in its watery grave, returns Lazarus-like, or rather, in a more secular and Ovidian spirit, perhaps, phoenix-like, to complicate the Wyf's tale, wherein the sacred story of Sampson and Delilah reappears by secular proxy.

From the Wyf's point of view, as no doubt from that of many of her readers, her performance is about sexual politics or sexual poetics or both. There has appropriately been a great deal of attention devoted to "feminism" and "antifeminism" in her artistic presentation. Such analysis, however, centers only on one of the conflicts Chaucer considers in his text. The battle of the sexes is actually a *minor* theme in the larger narrative fragment initiated by the Wyf's prologue; its *major* theme is the chasm separating surface and substance, letter and spirit. The literal-minded Wyf prepares the ground for two more flamboyant literalists, the Friar and the Summoner, who tell tales about "themselves" as literalists, a summoner more literal-minded than the devil himself, and a would-be spiritual exegete of a friar who is in fact incapable of understanding the spiritual meaning of a fart. The Wyf's partial retelling of the story of King Midas and his ass's ears inevitably draws our attention to Chaucer's insistent exegetical theme as it may guide our own reading of both the sacred and the secular page.

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