

The Wife of Bath and Midas

D. W. Robertson, Jr.
Duke University

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It is frequently helpful to consult Chaucer's sources to see first how he has managed them for his own purposes, or allowed his characters to manage them, or both, and then to consider the alterations made in the original. When the sources are scriptural or classical or are well-known medieval works, like the *Roman de la Rose*, we can assume that the members of Chaucer's audience, or at least many of them, remembered a great deal about the original and its implication, that alterations or gross misinterpretations would have been obvious to them, and, moreover, that these changes would often have produced smiles and even laughter among them. The story of Midas from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (lines 1-193), introduced by the destruction of Orpheus at the hands of frenzied Thracian women, and the Wife of Bath's use of it have been examined perceptively, but in a rather general sense.¹ I should like here to examine these matters in more detail, since it seems to me that the story of Midas is reflected in the Wife's progress as she relates it in her *Prologue* and that it echoes in the *Tale* itself, forming a sort of theme that unfolds as the narrative progresses. In the development of the last point I shall advance an interpretation of the *Tale*, not altogether a new one, I confess. But I believe that some attention to the *Roman de la Rose*, long recognized as being significant because of the Wife's obvious kinship with La Vieille,²

¹ Judson Boyce Allan and Patrick Gallacher, "Alisoun Through the Looking Glass: Or Every Man his own Midas," *ChauR* 4(1970):99-105.

² The Wife, of course, begins her *Prologue* by quoting La Vieille. M. S. Luria's observation, in *A Reader's Guide to the Roman de la Rose* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1982), p. 84, that "the Wife of Bath is quite simply inconceivable without

will make the interpretation more cogent and enhance our appreciation for the wider significance of the story of Midas.

At the close of the Wife's *Prologue* the Friar laughingly comments on her "long preamble of a tale," a remark probably intended to suggest that her mental processes resemble the pace of the slow and easy "amblere" on which she is mounted. Neither her spurs nor the whip added by the Ellesmere illustrator seems to have been of much avail. The Summoner, irritated by the Friar's remark (for he is a rival of the Friar in seeking monetary gain from the people, corrupting the administration of God's justice for gain just as the Friar corrupts the administration of God's mercy for gain), responds (*WBP D* 837-39):

"What! spekestow of preambulacioun?
What! amble or trotte? — or pees! or go sit doun!
Thou lettest oure disport in this manere."³

Women like the Wife, who enjoyed "compaignye in youthe" before her first marriage and who could not refuse "a good felawe," were useful to summoners, as the Friar reveals in his *Tale*. It is significant, however, that the "trot" is the conventional pace of an old woman in a hurry; hence the expression "old trot." Old women like the Wife do not move very fast. The Summoner is a despicable character, and his interference produces a promise from his rival to tell uncomplimentary tales about summoners,⁴ so that even Harry Bailly, who is

the antecedent conceptions of Jean de Meun in the *Roman*" seems quite just; further support for it will be offered below. For La Vieille's "sect" or "school" see the *Roman*, ed. Langlois, lines 13,475-13,498, or Charles Dahlberg's translation (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 232. The idea is imitated by Boccaccio in *The Corbaccio*. See the translation by Anthony K. Cassell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 331 n. 223. It is fairly obvious that Chaucer must also have had La Vieille in mind when he had his learned Clerk refer to the Wife's "secte."

³ References and quotations, with some alterations in punctuation and spelling for clarity, are from Robinson's second edition of Chaucer's works (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

⁴ This was not a difficult task, for summoners were notoriously corrupt. Cf. Brian L. Woodcock, *Medieval Ecclesiastical Courts in the Diocese of Canterbury*

not exactly a penetrating character, says that the two ecclesiastics are behaving like "folk that dronken been of ale." But why did Chaucer place the Wife on an "amblere"? Had he seen wealthy female clothiers so mounted? Or is this, like much else in the Wife's *Prologue* and *Tale*, a literary echo?

The Wife begins her *Tale* with some humorous remarks about the unrestrained lechery of friars, remarks perhaps not altogether unwarranted,⁵ though rather ironic in view of her own self-confessed worship of Venus and her gifts. She then introduces her protagonist, a "lusty bachelor,"⁶ or young knight bachelor, riding "fro river," a phrase that implies a quest for venereal pleasure when the context supports such an interpretation, as it does in this instance, as well as the literal act of hunting for waterfowl, hawk on wrist, along a river.⁷ For he meets a "mayde," whom he rapes at once, in spite of a legal death penalty for the deed.⁸ King Arthur, at the plea of the queen and her ladies, turns his felon over to them for judgment, an action that does not comment very favorably on either the chivalric

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 49, 111. In 1378 their extortionate practices provoked a parliamentary complaint. See *Rotuli Parliamentorum* (Record Commission, 1783), 3:43.

⁵ Cf. D. W. Robertson, Jr., *Chaucer's London* (New York: Wiley, 1968), pp. 192-96.

⁶ In the twelfth century Étienne de Fougères, who was chaplain to Henry II, complained: "Haute ordre fut chevalerie, / Mes or est ce trigalerie. / Trop aiment dance et balerie / Et demener bachelerie."/. See his *Le Livre des manières*, ed. J. Kramer, *AARP*, Vol. 39 (1887), lines 585-89. It is quite possible that *bachelerie* still had the connotations he suggested. Étienne was probably influenced by John of Salisbury, who severely condemned the kind of chivalric behavior exemplified in Chaucer's Squire.

⁷ See D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 190-94, 209, 446; and D. W. Robertson, Jr., *The Literature of Medieval England* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. 363, and the accompanying illustration.

⁸ Rape was a felony, like other felonies punishable by death in Chaucer's England. The ordinary penalty under the common law was hanging (left dangling without benefit of a trapdoor or a knot at the base of the skull), but other means of execution, including beheading with an ax, burial alive, and drowning were used under various borough jurisdictions. Chaucer may have thought beheading appropriate for a knight.

leadership or the administration of justice in England.⁹ The queen defers judgment, sending her knight off on a quest to discover "What thyng it is that wommen moost desiren" in order to save his life. At this point in the narrative we can anticipate that there will be one judgment—that of the queen—though Chaucer has another—that of the knight—in store for us. As a kind of prologue to these, he allows the Wife to suggest still another—that of Midas—though she omits the actual judgment and deals only with its consequences.¹⁰ This does not mean, of course, that either Chaucer's audience or the modern reader should forget about the actual judgment. It is quite likely that Chaucer's audience did not.

At this point I should like to digress for a moment to remind modern readers that in the later Middle Ages, and, indeed, even in the later sixteenth century, it was common to associate "wife" or "woman" with the flesh or sensuality.¹¹ This does not mean that actual women were thought to be necessarily either weak spiritually or without virtue. Among Chaucer's characters Constance and Saint Cecilia, as well as Griselda, who was regarded as an actual woman,¹² are good illustrations. Nevertheless, to live *muliebriter* was to live "softly" or "effeminately" with a concentration on fleshly comforts

⁹ One can hardly imagine a felony being transferred from King's Bench to a group of court ladies; indeed, although Alice Perrers for a time served on the council and may have intervened in court cases, the idea is laughable.

¹⁰ The importance of the theme of judgment in the Wife's *Tale* is emphasized by Allen and Gallacher in "Alisoun Through the Looking Glass."

¹¹ See Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer*, pp. 61–62, 69–75.

¹² Thus Philippe de Mézières, in his *Letter to Richard II* of 1395, refers to "the authentic chronicle of the said Marquis of Saluzzo and Griselda his wife, written by that learned doctor and sovereign poet, Master Francis Petrarch." See the translation and edition of G. W. Coopland (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 42. Philippe used the story, having first urged his readers to take the fruit and disregard the chaff, and echoing Petrarch's explanation (also used by Chaucer) in *Le Livre du sacrement de mariage et du reconfort des dames mariées*. See E. Golenistcheff-Koutousoff, *L'Histoire de Griseldis en France au XIV^e et au XV^e siècle* (Paris: Droz, 1933), p. 156. In his own explanation Chaucer says that "sith a womman was so pacient / Unto a mortal man. . . ." (*CIT* E 1149–50). In other words, Griselda and her husband are exemplary rather than allegorical characters. Their relationship may resemble that between the faithful soul and God, but this does not mean that Griselda is the faithful soul or that Walter is God.

and satisfactions, these and related connotations being a classical inheritance reinforced among Christians by accounts of Eve's disobedience like that, for example, in Chaucer's *Parson's Tale* (I 321–35) and by tendencies to associate her with a kind of hedonistic weakness. To be truly "manly" was to act *viriliter*, or virtuously, facing trials and temptations, whether of the flesh or of the spirit, cheerfully and patiently in accordance with the precepts of charity. In some Hispanic circles this is still what is meant by "machismo," in spite of popular notions that this characteristic has something to do with violence. In her *Prologue* the Wife makes herself an exemplar of the disobedient flesh or sensuality in terms of both scriptural and classical imagery. As we shall see, she does not regard women very highly in her *Tale*, and I think that we can evaluate what she says more justly if we keep the figurative connotations of "wife" or "woman" in mind. Perhaps I should stress once more that these are "figurative" connotations, not to be taken too literally and applied as a stereotype, as John Knox may have done in his *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, which made him a despicable figure to that very "virile" lady, Queen Elizabeth I of England.

Returning to the *Tale* itself, we find that the knight roams far and wide seeking an answer to the royal question, only to find a variety of opinions not very complimentary to women. The Wife herself agrees at least partly with that opinion advanced by some that women have a weakness for flattery and attentiveness. Others say that women, no matter what they do, dislike being reprimanded or corrected, an idea that, as we shall see, probably derived from the advice of Amis in the *Roman de la Rose*. Others affirm that women like to be held trustworthy and capable of keeping secrets, though the Wife, having confessed that she betrayed the secrets of her old husbands, comments that "we wommen konne no thyng hele" and illustrates this point by mistelling the story of Midas, omitting the first part, altering the betrayer of Midas's secret so as to blame his wife rather than his barber, who whispered it into a hole in the ground, and the reeds, which whispered it again when they grew in the spot where the secret was buried. The Wife omits the reeds altogether. "Redeth Ovide," the Wife says, and that is very good

advice indeed, for, as Judson B. Allen and Patrick Gallacher have pointed out, "she has mistaken the moral tone of her exemplum."¹³ In fact, this is putting it rather mildly, for she has misinterpreted it completely and changed it in order to do so. Through a bit of masterful Chaucerian irony, however, the actual implications of what she says are not very different from those of the original.

To see this, we must examine Ovid's story. As he explains, Midas, who rescued and then wined and dined Silenus, the foster-father of Bacchus, first betrayed his foolishness by requesting as a gift from grateful Bacchus the power to turn everything he touched into gold. Bacchus granted the gift, but Midas found that his food turned to gold so that he could not eat and that wine mixed with water turned to molten gold when it touched his lips, so that he narrowly avoided the fate of Crassus (*TC*, 3. 1390–91), with whom Chaucer compared him. This turn of events may be said to illustrate the rather commonplace idea that miserliness prevents other fleshly satisfactions, even proper nourishment.¹⁴ In any event, when Midas in desperation again solicited the aid of Bacchus, he was offered a cure. He could bathe himself in a fountain at the source of the river Patoclus, afterward famous for the gold found in it, and there wash away his sin—a remedy that would have had rather obvious connotations to medieval readers.

Yet when he had accomplished this cure, Ovid assures us, Midas remained stupid—*pingue sed ingenium mansit*—or, somewhat more accurately, heavy and dull of understanding. True, he abandoned his passion for wealth, but instead of living in moderation,

¹³ Allen and Gallacher, "Alisoun Through the Looking Glass," p. 101. The authors go on to quote the moralization by Giovanni del Virgilio, which, though useful, pays insufficient attention, I believe, to the Ovidian context of the story.

¹⁴ Cf. the remark of the Third Vatican Mythographer in G. H. Bode, *Scriptores rerum mythicarum Latini tres Romae nuper reperti* (Cellis, 1834; reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968), line 227: "Midas, that is, one called 'knowing nothing,' for a miser is so stupid that he does not know how to benefit himself." This is echoed by Thomas Walsingham, *Archana Deorum*, ed. Robert A. van Kluyve (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1968), pp. 161–62. In his chapter on how "Epicureans never attain their goal" (*Pol.* 8.24), John of Salisbury observes that "the miser hungers in the midst of wealth." Cf. Panofsky's remark on Poussin's painting, quoted below.

he devoted himself to the half-goat Pan, the god of nature and the ruling deity of Arcadia, and took up his habitation in caves. As Ovid tells us elsewhere, the Arcadians lived like beasts,¹⁵ for they devoted themselves to immediate fleshly satisfactions, usually unavailable, we remember, to misers. Leaving Ovid for a moment, we observe that what this meant in medieval Christian terms was that Midas began following the "law of kinde," as Chaucer calls it in *The Book of the Duchess*, or that of the Age of Nature between the Fall and the imposition of the Law of Moses,¹⁶ when, as Paul says (Rom. 5:13), "sin was not imputed." Everyone could do what he pleased without being called a "sinner," and as an act of self-defense men began arranging themselves in hierarchies and establishing laws, which would not be necessary if everyone behaved reasonably. We shall consider this concept later. Meanwhile, to return to Ovid, in whose works Christians could find many ideas parallel to their own, Pan grew proud, and, while singing songs to soft nymphs and playing on his pipes made of reeds held together with wax—the transformed Syrinx, who was turned to reeds in her effort to escape the unwelcome attentions of the half-goat—boasted that his music was superior to that of Apollo, god of truth and wisdom.

The mountain god Tmolus heard of this boast and decided to hold a musical contest between Pan and Apollo, where a judgment could be made about the merits of the two melodies. There Pan played on his seductive reeds, and Apollo played with great artistry upon his beautifully decorated lyre. Tmolus and all those assembled

¹⁵ *Fasti* 2. 289–92. Cf. the quotation from Samuel Butler in Erwin Panofsky, "Et in Arcadia ego," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York, 1955), pp. 297–98. Panofsky accuses Ovid of neglecting the music of Arcadia, but Ovid certainly does not do so in the story of Midas.

¹⁶ This was a commonplace idea. See, e.g., Thomas Wimbleton in his famous sermon "Redde rationem villicacionis tue," ed. Nancy H. Owen, *MS 28* (1966): 178. The "law" of the chaotic time between Adam and Moses that produced the Flood and the Tower of Babel resulted from a self-protective desire to establish hierarchies in human societies. Their governance was modified first by the rigorous law of Moses and finally by the New Law of Christ. The continued existence of hierarchies was thought to be made necessary by "natural" regressions toward the Law of Nature after the Fall or in the direction of the Law of Moses unfulfilled by the New Law, either of which might produce tyranny.

save Midas alone held the music of Apollo to be superior. For his foolish judgment Apollo caused Midas to grow the ears of a "slow-stepping ass" (*lente gradientis aselli*). The *asellus*, parenthetically, as distinct from the *asinus*, designated a small ass or colt noted not only for its figurative "deafness," as in the proverbial expression echoed by Horace (*Epist.* 2.1.199–200), "scriptores autem narrare putaret asello / fabellam surdo" but also in classical parlance for its use as an exemplar of lecherous persons. The Wife, of course, shares these characteristics.

It is not surprising, therefore, that she says nothing about all this, confining herself to a misrepresentation of what Ovid says afterward. This does not mean, however, that either Chaucer or many in his audience were ignorant of the entire story, for Ovid was a common schoolboy text. Indeed, it is highly probable that the "slow-stepping ass" offered the suggestion for the Wife's "amblere." Chaucer could hardly have presented a wealthy west-country clothier mounted on a small ass without creating a very clear absurdity, but he could put her on a slow-stepping "amblere" and then include a suggestive discussion of her "preamble." It is generally true that we can say of the pilgrims to Canterbury "by their mounts ye shall know them," or at least something significant about them. We can, in fact, attribute to the Wife the ears necessary to convert her mount.

Be that as it may, the judgment of Midas was a famous event duly celebrated in later European art, albeit in a somewhat indirect manner. Thus around 1630, Gaspard Poussin completed two paintings, companion pieces. The first showed Midas washing his face in the Patoclus to get rid of his first gift from Bacchus, and the second placed a tomb in the midst of Arcadia topped by a skull, perhaps reflecting Paul's (Rom. 5:14) "but death reigned from Adam unto Moses." Erwin Panofsky observed that "the two compositions thus teach a twofold lesson, one warning against a mad desire for riches at the expense of the more real values of life, the other against a thoughtless enjoyment of pleasures soon to be ended."¹⁷ Later on, the romantics changed the meaning of the expression *et in Arcadia*

ego into a nostalgic recollection of youthful pleasures, indicating that they had once been in Arcadia themselves.¹⁸ Indeed, the desire to escape from civilized restraints into Arcadias of various kinds seems to be perennial. The Garden of Deduit in the *Roman de la Rose*, reflected in January's garden in Chaucer and in many other places, still lures us.

In this connection it is significant that the Wife, as she describes her career in her *Prologue*, has undergone exactly the progress of Midas. That is, in her youth she devoted her efforts to the acquisition of wealth, perhaps early in her life with the connivance of summoners, but certainly in her marriages to her old husbands. But she abandoned all of this wealth when she was forty for the joys promised by the legs and feet "so clene and faire" of the twenty-year-old Jankyn. Significantly, this is exactly the reverse of the progress of one of her chief mentors and predecessors, La Vieille in the *Roman de la Rose*, who tells us that in her youth she wasted her energies in the pursuit of pleasure but learned when older and wiser to use her favors to acquire wealth.¹⁹ Chaucer's alteration of Jean de Meun, to whom we shall return shortly, in this respect was clearly influenced by the fact that he had Midas in mind. In her early career the Wife follows the teaching of La Vieille but not her example. Ultimately, she claims to have satisfied both her lust and her avarice by recovering the land she abandoned to gain Jankyn's solaces, thus embracing both of Midas's weaknesses at once. That this is a perilous course is well illustrated by the fates of her old husbands, who were both avaricious and lecherous. In Ovidian terms it does not speak well for her *ingenium*, and in terms of English law her specific stratagem was impossible if we regard her as a freeholder.

We have not yet examined the part of Midas's career that the Wife does use, and here we return once more to Ovid. In shame poor Midas sought to conceal the disfigurement wrought upon him by Apollo, but it was revealed indirectly by his barber, who discovered it. Unable to keep the secret of his master's disgrace, he whispered it into a hole in the ground and there buried it. Some "sly reeds," as

¹⁷ Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, p. 312.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 319, and illustration no. 94.

¹⁹ Langlois, lines 12,761–12,835, Dahlberg, trans., pp. 222–23.

James Joyce called them in one of his lyrics, grew up in the place and whispered the buried words, thus revealing them. The soft, complaining sound of the reeds into which Syrinx had been transformed had first suggested to Pan the possibility of using them to make his instrument, or "syrinx." Actually, therefore, just as the inadequacies of Pan were betrayed by his "syrinx," so also was Midas betrayed by the same agency. This is another way of saying that devotees of the "music" of Pan are betrayed by it, becoming in Boethian language "asses to the harp," having ears, but because of a certain dull bestiality becoming deaf to the harmonies of truth and wisdom.²⁰

The Christian parallel to this idea is not obscure. In Matthew 13, when Christ was asked by his disciples why he spoke in parables, he replied in part (13:13-15):

Therefore do I speak to them in parables: because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And the prophecy of Isaias is fulfilled in them, who saith: By hearing you shall hear, and shall not understand: and seeing you shall see, and shall not perceive. For the heart of this people is grown gross, and with their ears they have been dull of hearing, and their eyes they have shut: lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them.

Apollo, we may recall, was not only a god of prophecy, revealing the past, the present, and the future, but the god of healing. As Phoebus he also enabled those who could see to see. Meanwhile, it is significant that hearing and sight are coupled in the scriptural passage, and I believe that a failure to see has much to do with subsequent events in the *Wife's Tale*.

Before pursuing this topic, we should consider briefly what the Wife does with the story of Midas, to show that women can conceal nothing. In her version the wife of Midas, her own invention, discovers her husband's long, hairy ears, goes down to the mire, and there "booms like a bittern," urging the quiet waters not to reveal

²⁰ For the image in Boethius, see *Cons.* 1 pr. 4 in Robinson, p. 323. This became a popular figure in the visual arts.

the secret. She has little to fear from the waters, but the bittern, as the article on the bird in the eleventh edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* explains, has a very "loud and awful voice," so that it is quite unlikely that any further revelations were necessary to spread her message abroad. Who, we should ask, was the "wife" of Midas? The solution I am about to suggest may be somewhat easier to understand if we recall that under the laws governing real property in England a husband and wife were regarded as a single person, so that, for example, a husband could not confer lands on a wife, and a wife could not confer lands on her husband. A man might give a woman lands as a precondition of marriage, but he could not do so after the marriage took place. If we recall further the figurative connotations of "wife" referred to earlier, we may conclude that Midas was betrayed by his sensuality, though the Wife herself does not understand this, having made herself into a kind of exemplar of the sensuality and at the same time "deaf" to any wisdom that may be implied in a text. As Richard Hoffman observed, "Since, as we have seen, the Wife of Bath—even more than the Samaritan woman before her—was similarly deaf to the words of Christ and the New Law [and, we might add, to the words of Ovid], but most responsive to the fleshly Old Song of Pan, she too may be characterized with the ass's ears of Midas."²¹ That is, in effect, the Wife is both Ovid's Midas and her own "wife" of Midas, and she has been talking about herself without knowing it. In this respect she resembles her predecessor La Vieille, who does not understand her own exempla.²² The Wife's resemblance to these figures gives her, figuratively, those long, hairy ears of the classical *asellus* bestowed by Ovid on Midas, quite in keeping with her own deafness and lechery. Her voice, meanwhile, like that of the ass or that of Midas's wife, is by no means subdued. In short, she is herself quite sufficient to transform her "amblere" into a kind of image of Ovid's "slow-stepping ass."

Having pretty thoroughly explored the shortcomings of those who "hearing . . . hear not," Chaucer now turns his attention to

²¹ Richard L. Hoffman, *Ovid and the Canterbury Tales* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967), pp. 147-48.

²² See Chauncey Wood, "La Vieille, False Love, and Boethius," *RLC* 51(1977):336-42.

those who "seeing . . . see not," exemplified in the person of the Wife's protagonist, the young knight. In terms of Christ's words in Matthew, if a person cannot hear the message of wisdom, he cannot see either, remaining, as it were, blind, like January, for example, who is still blind after he recovers his sight, or Almachius, or other characters who like Chauntecler "wynken" when they should see. Our young knight, having discovered no consensus among those he has consulted to discover "what women most desire," turns homeward. On the way he encounters more than twenty-four ladies "upon a daunce," a rather fetching sight under ordinary circumstances, reminiscent of the "women enowe" dancing about the Temple of Venus in *The Parliament of Fowls*, who are there, Boccaccio says, because such sights "incite much when seen by the libidinous."²³ The knight's libido has cooled somewhat because of the impending court decision, and he approaches the ladies seeking wisdom (line 994) rather than more immediate satisfactions. And indeed he discovers an opportunity to exercise it, for the dancing ladies vanish, and there instead is a single woman, "a fouler wight ther may no man devyse." Allen and Gallacher observe that "it is obvious that the loathly lady is the Wife's surrogate, her representation."²⁴ But so are the "more than twenty-four ladies." That is, they represent the Wife of Bath as she might have been seen by her avaricious old husbands, a kind of paradise of earthly delights not unlike January's May, offering a round of solaces, not to mention the profits of her fulling mill. Just as the ears of the lecherous may find the seductive music of Pan attractive indeed, leading to a realm where "no sin is imputed" and one may do as one pleases quite freely, so those seeking wisdom at the feet of Apollo may find it contemptible. We have not witnessed a magical transformation, no miracle, but simply a shift in point of view. The best discussion of the Wife's "miracles," I believe, appears in Robert P. Miller's "*The*

²³ Boccaccio *Teseida*, ed. A. Roncaglia (Bari: Laterza, 1941), p. 418. On Boccaccio's notes, here quoted, see Robert Hollander, "The Validity of Boccaccio's Self-Exegesis in his *Teseide*," *M&H*, n.s., 8(1977):163-83. However, the point in question is clear enough without consulting Boccaccio.

²⁴ Allen and Gallacher, "Alisoun Through the Looking Glass," p. 103.

Wife of Bath's Tale and Medieval Exempla,"²⁵ in which a series of exempla illustrates the point that whether something appears to be fair or foul depends entirely on the point of view, or more specifically on whether it is regarded with the fleshly or with the spiritual eye, with the senses or with the understanding. Our knight has, in effect, seen Duessa unclothed.

The old hag has a close cousin in the Synagogue as it was used in medieval art to represent Old Law carnality, rather than a specifically Jewish place of worship. She appears quite attractive in her representation on the west portal of Strasbourg Cathedral, as indeed she should, for in medieval Christian terms she has attracted many followers and indeed appeals to almost all men and women, as do all those "false" or "partial" goods described in *The Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius. She may also be made to appear foul and old, however, as she is in Philippe de Mézières's *Figurative Representation of the Virgin Mary in the Temple*,²⁶ where she is "an old woman . . . with a worn-out tunic reaching to the ankles made of plain-colored cloth, and a torn black mantle." Like the Wife of Bath, whose Old Law carnality is fully revealed in the little sermon she delivers at the beginning of her *Prologue*, she is a comic figure, for Philippe makes allowance for laughter at the point in his presentation where she is expelled from the scene. In the same way the Wife's stubborn foolishness must have produced laughter in Chaucer's audience.

Midas, who had unseeing eyes as well as deaf ears, could well see the difference between Pan's fragile instrument of reeds and wax and the elaborately decorated lyre of Apollo, or that between the half-goat and the magnificent figure of the god of Truth. The Wife's protagonist, like Midas, remained "fat-headed" even when the nature of what he had been pursuing was revealed. This time he acted out of fear rather than lust, and his fear led him to seek salvation from the same source from which he had sought it before.

²⁵ Robert P. Miller, "*The Wife of Bath's Tale* and Mediaeval Exempla," *ELH* 32(1965):442-56. Cf. the conclusions reached by Bernard S. Levy, "The Wife of Bath's Queynte Fantasye," *ChauR* 4(1970):117-22.

²⁶ I quote Robert S. Haller's translation (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), p. 9.

In the Wife's narrative he promises to reward his newly perceived mentor for assisting him, granting her anything she requires if she can offer a solution to his problem before nightfall. In effect he has once more allowed his senses to overcome his understanding. She in turn offers to satisfy the queen, whispering her solution to his problem in his ear. The two proceed together to the court, where the queen, together with "Ful many a noble wyf and many a mayde," not to mention a "wise" widow, sit to render judgment. The knight presents the hag's solution to these justices assembled, averring (lines 1038-40):

"Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee
As wel over hir housbond as hir love,
And for to been in maistrie hym above."

This doctrine comes straight from the advice of Amis in the *Roman de la Rose*,²⁷ that cynical adversary of Reason who proceeds to remind his amorous disciple of the Golden Age, when all men were equally wealthy and men and women loved each other freely and naturally, before fraud, sin, misfortune, pride, covetousness, avarice, envy, and other vices created lordship and property. As Amis had described it elsewhere, the Golden Age was a time of flowers and idleness, a paradise of sensual delights like the Garden of Deduit or Pan's Arcadia. This is, of course, a distortion of the Golden Age as it was conventionally understood, a paradise of spiritual rather than sensual delights typified by Eden before the Fall.²⁸ Since the loss of this age, Amis says, women are not what they used to be, so that if a lover finds his beloved unfaithful, he should be blind to that fact and not chide her; he should neither mistrust

²⁷ Lines 9443ff. For the whole passage see Langlois *Roman*, trans. Dahlberg, pp. 170-77. Cf. Luria's summary in *A Reader's Guide*, pp. 102-103. I have omitted a few details for the sake of brevity and recommend the original.

²⁸ See the excellent discussion in John Fleming, *The Roman de la Rose* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 145-54. The "worldly" version of the Golden Age is more or less natural among "worldly" people. It is not surprising, therefore, that when old Gonzalo in jest envisages a new Golden Age on the newfound isle Antonio should respond, "All idle - whores and knaves."

nor reproach her but freely allow her to do as she pleases. If she beats or reviles him, or even pulls out his nails, he should not complain. If he takes another mistress, he should conceal the fact or beg for mercy if his fault is detected, using flattery and caresses, including sexual solaces. He must not boast about his beloved and must pamper her when she is ill. But, Amis adds, women are so changeable that they are as hard to hold as is an eel caught by the tail in the Seine. In other words, women are pleasure-loving and fickle and desire always to have complete sovereignty, not unlike the women described in Pope's *Epistle to a Lady*, whose ruling passions are "the Love of Pleasure and the Love of Sway." These strictures, Amis says, do not apply to good women who govern themselves with virtuous restraint, a principle with which Pope would have agreed; unlike Pope, however, who celebrated a virtuous woman, Amis says that, although he has tested many, he has never found one virtuous.

Jean de Meun did not expect his readers to disregard the ironic implications of what his "characters," if we may call them that, said. It is clear on reflection that Amis is actually complaining about conditions that in many respects parallel conditions in Arcadia in his own Golden Age, actually the Age of Nature, when everyone did as he pleased before either the civil constraints of "lordship" or the spiritual constraints of the Law of Moses were established. As Paul aptly puts it (Rom. 3:20), "By the law is the knowledge of sin." Unfortunately, the "knowledge of sin" is not very helpful, and the Old Law was harsh and literal, remaining so until the New Law brought grace and a motivation to do the right thing and tempered justice with mercy to the repentant. Amis, however, finds himself in a world in which women are unrepentant sinners and recommends that men behave in the same fashion to protect themselves. Just as La Vieille believed that women are "naturally" promiscuous²⁹ and that there are no good men, so Amis finds men "naturally" promiscuous and believes that there are no good women. Both urge that one follow his or her "natural" inclinations in full freedom.

To return to the *Tale*, we find that the ladies of the court agree

²⁹ Langlois *Roman* 13,875-966, trans. Dahlberg, pp. 238-39; cf. lines 13,265-82, trans. Dahlberg, p. 229.

with the hag's teaching as it is repeated by the knight (lines 1043-45):

"In al the court ne was ther wyf, ne mayde,
Ne wydwe, that contraried that he sayde."

Clearly there were no "good women" there, only devotees of Pan who wished to behave "naturally" and did not hesitate to echo the judgment of Midas, or, rather oddly, the teachings of Amis. The old hag, naturally delighted with this decision, immediately calls attention to her bargain with the knight and demands marriage as her reward, freely admitting that she is foul, old, and poor. What is worse, she also demands to be the knight's "love." The knight, who has actually been under her dominion ever since he went riding "fro river," is loath to accept his "wife" or "love" as he now perceives her, albeit without any real understanding. In other words, he has not yet recovered his amorous desire, and he says, with ironic truth, that she will be his damnation, adding (lines 1068-69):

"Allas! that any of my nacioun
Shoulde evere so foule disparaged be!"

As a matter of fact, persons of all ranks and estates in England had very clearly been pursuing wealth or Epicurean satisfactions, or both together, for some time. A glance through the Rolls of Parliament, the Statutes of the Realm, the Peace rolls, and borough court records will easily reveal the unpleasant facts, as indeed will a study of Chaucer's *General Prologue* to the *Tales*. It is almost as if justice in England had degenerated into the sort of thing represented by the decision of the queen and the assembled ladies as the Wife envisages them.

After a secret and at least on the knight's part woeful wedding, the couple retire to bed, where the husband continues his lamentations and maintains his distance from his bride. Discomfited, the bride inquires whether the treatment she is getting is the "lawe of Arthures hous"; it is certainly not the law as seen by the queen and her ladies. She adds that she not only is his wife and his love but she

saved his life, a dubious claim, since she, in her other guise, endangered it in the first place. In his reply the knight complains that she is loathly, old, and of low lineage, characteristics that he should have recognized much earlier in his career. For this complaint, however, he receives a long and salutary lecture echoing, so to speak, the lyre of Apollo, but his mentor knows that because of his Epicurean inclinations he will not be able to understand its implications.

To his objection concerning her "kynde," or lineage, she replies that inherited lineage is worthless, since true nobility is a matter not of lineage but of virtue, citing correctly the views of some distinguished authorities like Dante and Boethius to make her point, a point also made, we may remember, in Chaucer's *Gentillesse* and illustrated vividly in the person of Griselda, who, we might observe, would have given small credence to the hag's conception of what women most desire. The doctrine, however, is conventional, frequently used to illustrate the point that persons of high estate have a special obligation to be virtuous, as part of their responsibility in governing others. She continues by praising voluntary poverty, using some well-known commonplaces to support her argument, and concludes by reminding her husband that the elderly should be respected, presumably because long experience has made them wise. All of this is followed by an amusing and, insofar as the knight is concerned, confusing non sequitur (lines 1217-18):

"But natheless, syn I knowe youre delit,
I shal fulfille youre worldly appetit."

Perhaps we should pause for a moment to consider why this is a non sequitur. If true nobility rests on virtue, then a noble person restrains his or her worldly appetites out of consideration for his or her fellows or sisters in whatever kind of community he or she belongs. A failure to discover women practicing such restraints, we remember, led Amis to the conclusion that there are no good women. Nor can one fulfill worldly appetites by willingly embracing poverty, like some obedient nun immured in a convent, as the very popular and somewhat "revolutionary" French poet Colardeau once

movingly, but not very thoughtfully, demonstrated.³⁰ Finally, an old person like our old hag, however experienced she may be, is not an attractive object for a young man's sexual appetites, even though he may respect her for reasons that are, in the present circumstances of the marriage bed, irrelevant. For Chaucer's audience as for Shakespeare's, and even indeed for the Puritan audience of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," an error in logic by a speaker constituted a joke, a fact often missed by modern readers taught to rely on their feelings so that they tend to be serious-minded. More than an error in logic is here involved, however, for the old woman has, in effect, echoed both the music of Apollo and that of Pan. Which will the young knight choose?

Having heard all of this, the knight is confronted by a choice. He can choose between having his new wife, or what seems to him to be his new wife, either foul and old and faithful or young and fair but unreliable. This is also a choice described by Amis in his account of the jealous husband. Having cited "The Golden Book of Theophrastus" from Jerome's treatise *Against Jovinian* on the inconveniences of marriage, Amis complains that if a wife is both well-to-do and beautiful "everyone will run after her . . . until in the end they will have her," a fact of which the Wife as she describes herself in her *Prologue* took full advantage. But if she is ugly, he adds, "she wants to please everybody," a conclusion that leads to the further observation that any woman, beautiful or ugly, can be led astray. Since the world is full of tyrants like the jealous husband, even though the ideal situation would be a return to Golden Age conditions where what might be called "the Franklin's Solution" (much hailed by modern Chaucerians) prevails,³¹ the lover has no recourse but to submissiveness and deliberate blindness based on the assumption that there are no good women.

Our lover, however, has no need to pretend to be blind, for, as we have seen, submission to the music of Pan causes one to become

³⁰ See D. W. Robertson, Jr., *Abelard and Heloise*, ed. Norman Cantor (New York: Dial, 1972), pp. 207-14.

³¹ Lines 9,421ff., trans. Dahlberg, pp. 169-70. On the Epicurean character of this "solution," see Robert P. Miller, "The Epicurean Homily on Marriage by Chaucer's Franklin," *Mediaevalia* 6 (1980):151-79.

both deaf and blind. The old woman has promised him that she will satisfy his worldly appetite, and, having no wish to argue with her, he leaves the decision up to her and freely grants her the sovereignty or "maistrie" she so strongly covets. Having acquired this, she promises to be both fair and good and (lines 1255-56)

obeyed hym in every thyng
That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng.

As R. P. Miller very appropriately remarks concerning the Wife:

In her scheme the delights presented to the sensual will (or *worldly appetite*) are true; the vision of clerks produces the illusions. Her hero, then, is saved because he has joined the ranks of those who have achieved the state of mind in which, as Vincent of Beauvais described it, "that which is truly foul seems to them fair, and that which is harmful seems to them delightful."³²

When sensuality dominates the reason, in other words, it can do no wrong. The queen's justice has succeeded only in returning her knight to the condition he suffered before he raped the maiden, and the Wife has inadvertently explained the nature of the marital bliss into which she led young Jankyn after she (an old woman) had obtained "al the soveraynetee."

Chauncey Wood says, regarding the misuse of exemplary stories by La Vieille, who is, like Horace's *asellus* or the Wife herself, deaf, that "this kind of literary joke is a delightful ornament if and when observed."³³ The Wife's misuse of the story of Midas is, indeed, a delightful ornament devised by Chaucer for the Wife's *Tale*. It evokes memories of *The General Prologue* and the Wife's long "preamble," lending added significance to both, and at the same time forms a thematic background for events in the *Tale* subsequent to its introduction. Moreover, once we have discovered the Wife's omissions and alterations in the story of Midas, we can also share in the laughter with which Chaucer's audience must have greeted the

³² Miller, "*The Wife of Bath's Tale* and Mediaeval Exempla," p. 456.

³³ Wood, "La Vieille," p. 341.

judgment of the queen and her ladies and the persistent foolishness of the protagonist. Instead of berating his wealthy female clothier as Gower might have done, Chaucer allows her to expose herself, for all the characters in her *Tale* except for the wronged maiden, who does not appear in person, are, in one way or another, reflections of the idea she represents, little images of the Wife dressed in new guises. Her solution to the problem of the tomb and skull in Arcadia, briefly glimpsed by her knight, is an old one: simply grow very long ears and blear the eyes so that the message of these omens cannot be heard and they become invisible. In times when most persons thought that they had immortal souls whose destinies were of some importance, the implications of these unpleasant presences were much more profound than they might be today. The memento mori in its various forms, from early lyrics like "Death's Wither-Clench" to Poussin's painting, was designed not to encourage "Arcadian" attitudes like those expressed by the "riotours" in the second chapter of *Wisdom* but to induce repentance, for which Chaucer provided some sound instruction in the last of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Affective Stylistics and the Study of Chaucer

Chauncey Wood
McMaster University

NEITHER "reader-response criticism" nor its close relative "affective stylistics" has made much of an impact on the study of Chaucer, and this ineffectual condition is shared by semiotic approaches, deconstruction, and other contemporary critical modes. While many factors undoubtedly contribute to our positive and negative critical enthusiasms, I should venture to argue that the Chaucerian's characteristic preoccupation with texts and textual interpretation has made criticism that puts the reader and the text on equal footing appear to be contrary to our customary priorities. We imagine the texts we study to be, like Love in Dante's *Paradiso*, fixed in the center with worshipers circling around, and an approach that denies the primacy of the text is greeted with the same warmth customarily accorded any other heresy.

With this in mind, it is useful to recollect that no less an authority than Saint Augustine championed the "reading" of a text over the text itself, arguing that "when, from a single passage in the Scripture, not one but two or more meanings are elicited — even if what he who wrote the passage intended remains hidden — there is no danger if any of the meanings may be seen to be congruous with the truth taught in other passages of the Holy Scriptures." There is no "intentional fallacy" here, for Augustine is interested in the doctrinal rather than the authorially intended meaning. Someone like Saint Augustine, who can speak of the "heretical punctuation" of a text, is not a formalist critic.¹ Indeed, insofar as Augustine favored

¹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958), pp. 101–102, 79.