

MEDIEVAL ANTIFEMINISM AND
THE WOMEN IN CHAUCER'S *FABLIAUX**

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I

The women of the medieval *fabliaux* reflected medieval antifeminism, the root of which lay in St. Paul's conception.¹

. . . and Adam was not disceyued *in feith*, forsoth the womman was disceyued *in feith*, in preuaricacioun, or *brekyng of the lawe*. (1 Tim. 2. 14)²

Since then, St. Paul's attitude towards Eve established the early Christian fathers' point of view about women. Although some Christian fathers such as St. Augustine, St. Anselm and Hugh of St. Victor admitted Adam's joint responsibility with Eve for the Fall from Paradise, most Christian fathers, including St. Jerome, who held St. Paul's view and who defined Eve as the origin of all evil, were inclined to blame only Eve for bringing about man's downfall, failing to refer to Adam's consent in the sin.³ Ascetic clerics, affected by the unfavourable view of Eve, have regarded women, the daughters of Eve, as the essence of carnality or the Tempter who hindered their prayers. Women's wickedness was the constantly recurring theme of their sermons, which were really addressed to men.⁴

St. Paul justified women's inferior position as well:

A womman lerne in-silence, with al subieccioun. Forsothe I suffre not a womman for to tech, nether for to haue lordschip into the man, or *hosebonde*, but for to be in silence. Forsoth Adam was first foormyd,

afterward Eue; (1 Tim. 2. 11-13)

Woman's submission to man is paralleled in the sermon of Chaucer's Parson:

For he ne made hire nat of the heved of Adam, for she sholde nat clayme to greet lordshipe./ For ther as the womman hath the maistrie, she maketh to muche desray. Ther neden none ensamples of this; the experience of day by day oghte suffise. (X, 925-6)⁵

The view that woman must naturally submit to man was formulated by the churchmen of the Middle Ages. In fact, women remained in perpetual subjection, at first, to their fathers and then to their husbands. In the early Middle Ages, when marriage was considered a matter of financial bargaining, a girl was the subject of a legalized exchange given by her father or bought by her future husband.⁶ In short, on the one hand, woman was regarded as a valuable piece of property for her father, on the other, as an object of purchase for her future husband. The complete subjection of woman to man, which had been a notion alien to the Germanic tradition of the Anglo-Saxons, was introduced with Christianity.⁷

The view of woman as a being at once inferior and wicked originated by the Church was supported in numerous ecclesiastical writings, such as St. Jerome's *Epistola Adversus Jovinianus* and permeated the thought and the morals of medieval society as a whole. In the late Middle Ages, antifeminist literature flourished, represented by *Le Roman de la Rose* or *Les XV Joies de Mariage*, and "the cursed book" which the Wife of Bath's fifth husband, Jankyn, took delight in reading. Especially, an intense contempt for women was repeatedly expressed in such bourgeois literature as *fabliaux*, *contes gras*, and the Cycle plays which the medieval, secular people enjoyed.

II

In *fabliaux* which have a strain of antifeminism in them, women are

depicted as evil beings. However, concurrently their subjection to men is represented as very imperfectly maintained, and the hen-pecked husband is a favourite theme.⁸

In real life, husbands expect that wives should be subject to themselves, but their expectation is often betrayed by wives who would strive to seek some liberty in the "cage of marriage" into which they had been forced regardless of their own desires. Some husbands of the middle-class might have been ruled by wives who brought in the family income. As Eileen Power points out, the equality which prevailed between a middle-class husband and a wife must have been depicted artistically as the popular theme of a hen-pecked husband and a nagging wife.

In *fabliaux*, characterization must be kept to a minimum so as not to hinder the speedy movement of action which is the greatest source of the *fabliaux*'s vividness.⁹ For this reason, a character was depicted as a stock figure or a conventional type by the use of a single epithet. The portrait of woman is not excepted. Women of *fabliaux* were described as two conventional types: one is the young, beautiful, and lascivious wife who resorts to the most ingenious shifts and stratagems to deceive her husband or to take revenge on him; the other is a nagging shrew who strives to rule her hen-pecked husband.¹⁰ Any man in *fabliaux* ends in being punished, while a woman escapes punishment till the end. However vicious men of *fabliaux* may be, they do not all cause antagonism in the audience because, without exception, they bungle badly and are compelled to pay for their evil deeds. The audience has a good laugh at the frowning face of a rogue, finding relief and satisfaction in the distribution of due punishment. The laughter softens the audience's feeling for the villains and converts it from hostility to sympathy. Compared with men, the vicious women of *fabliaux* are typically excused, the visitation of due punishment being delayed. As a result, the audience's hostility is directed only toward women. Thus the women of *fabliaux* were regarded

conventionally as the embodiment of evil itself, bringing shame on their husbands.¹¹ Every time the audience came across the *fabliaux* with its conventional presentation of women, the audience encountered a certain difficulty. Anticipating the embarrassment of the audience, one author of *fabliaux* warns men in vain, "Beat their bones and their backs."¹² Considering the fact that *fabliaux* were regarded as an amusing pastime by medieval people, the abuse of women in *fabliaux* might have helped men forget the pains and complaints of their daily lives. In a sense, the women of *fabliaux* can be thought of as scapegoats of medieval society.

III

How are the women of Chaucer's *fabliaux* described? Does Chaucer also inherit the antifeminist tradition of *fabliaux*? Are Chaucer's women presented as the embodiment of evil, without compassion? Would Chaucer's audience share an antifeminist feeling? We will here examine the women in Chaucer's *fabliaux*, and mainly in "The Miller's Tale," "The Reeve's Tale," "The Merchant's Tale," "The Shipman's Tale" and "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" was selected in this study of the women in Chaucer's *fabliaux* because it deals with the dominant theme of traditional *fabliaux*—married life between a hen-pecked husband and a nagging wife—and because its analogues have been found in old French *fabliaux*.¹³

The woman in the analogues to "The Miller's Tale" is briefly portrayed as a beautiful, lascivious and deceitful wife and further detailed descriptions are not given of her. The analogues to "The Miller's Tale" consist of three prominent motifs: the flood, the misdirected kiss and branding. In the analogue of the flood, a faithless wife enjoys a love affair with a priest while her cuckolded husband awaits the prophesied flood in a hanging tub. In the analogues including the misdirected kiss and the branding, a lascivious wife

promises her three lovers to satisfy their desires in turn one night when her husband is absent. When the second of the three lovers arrives, she hides the first in a tub. While the second favourite lover is still present, the third unwelcome lover comes too early and will not leave until he is promised a kiss, so he is tricked into kissing through the window the posterior of the second successful lover. The ill-treated lover returns and asks a second kiss and brands with a hot iron the successful lover's rump. At the cry of "water!" the first lover, in the tub, thinking the flood has really come, cuts the ropes and falls.¹⁴ In the analogues, according to the conventional manner of *fabliaux*, the speedy movement of action concerning the three prominent motifs is made more of than characterization as a device to induce laughter. The audience bursts into laughter at a series of comically awkward actions performed by the male-characters and their physical mishaps caused by a woman's wiles. As for the female-character who contrives the wiles, the audience shares in an intense antifeminist feeling, for only woman is neither disgraced nor injured.

Chaucer's Alisoun is given a detailed description, unlike her counterparts in the analogues. Reflecting the Miller's intention to "quite" (I, 3126) the Knight's "noble tale" (I, 3127) which has just been told successfully and which was admired by everyone in the company, the comic portrait of Alisoun is intended as a parody of such a courtly heroine of romance as Emily in "The Knight's Tale." The Miller of the bourgeois class compares Alisoun to something familiar in his own rural, middle-class life; therefore, the image of Alisoun turns out to be far different from the courtly heroine of romance. She is indeed described as a sexy, energetic and realistic middle-class woman whom the bourgeois Miller assumes as his ideal object of lust.¹⁵ For instance, remembering the portrait of Emelye:

That Emelye, that fairer was to sene

Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,
 And fressher than the May with floures newe—
 For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe, (I, 1035–9)

the Miller praises Alisoun in similar conventionalities:

She was ful moore blisful on to see
 Than is the newe pere-jonette tree,
 And softer than the wolle is of a wether. (I, 3246–8)

The phrase, "the newe pere-jonette tree" (I, 3247) reminds us of the infamous, pear-tree story in which a lascivious wife enjoys her lover on the pear-tree over the head of her duped blind husband that is told in "The Merchant's Tale." As a result, Alisoun's wantonness is suggested here. Alisoun's hue is fresh and bright, not as "the rose colour" (I, 1039), but as a new minted "noble" (I, 3256), a coin which is a symbol of worldly riches. She is a woman who deserves to be evaluated by the specific worldly price symbolized by the newly-forged and brightly-shining noble.¹⁶ In contrast to the lilywhite Emelye, Alisoun's whiteness of "morne milk" (I, 3236) is a figure applied not to Alisoun's body but also to her apron and her smock. Whiteness, which is the conventional word expressing an ideal heroine's purity, can be removed from Alisoun's body whenever she wills it.

The energetic and sensual aspect of Alisoun's personality is underlined by Chaucer's effective use of imagery of little animals: "wezele" (I, 3234), "a colt" (I, 3282), "a wether" (I, 3249), "piggesnye" (I, 3268), "any swalwe" (I, 3258), "kyde or calf" (I, 3260) and "a mous" (I, 3346). Besides the images of animals, images collected from rural life are also adopted for description of Alisoun: "morne milk" (I, 3236), "any sloo" (I, 3246), "the newe pere-jonette tree" (I, 3248), "a berne" (I, 3258), "bragot or the meeth" (I, 3261), "hoord of apples leyd in hey" (I, 3262), and "a prymerole" (I, 3268). Such imagery gives an impression of an untamed creature running freely in its primitive

instinctive way around the countryside. This kind of woman is ideal and truly attractive from the point of view of the Miller. He continues his admiring description of Alisoun innocently, implying that such an attractive wife deserves a better husband than the old carpenter, John. Continuing the image of Alisoun as a little animal, he says she deserves to be a lord's pet or to be the wife of a "yeman" (I, 3270) who attends upon wild beasts, wearing the green coat of a hunter or a forester. The Miller may be alluding to the Knight and his Yeman here.

The three men in "The Miller's Tale," John, Nicholas and Absolon, are each labelled by a single epithet. "Sely," "hende," and "joly," respectively express their conventional type, while the complex character connoted in each single epithet derives comic and ironic implications from their relations with the animal-like, lively and sensual young girl, Alisoun.¹⁷ Consequently, unlike the male-characters in the analogues, what plunges these three men into an ironic, miserable situation are their own characters rather than simply a woman's wiles.

The cuckolded old husband, John, labelled with the epithet, "sely" (deserving of pity, simple, innocent, pious, blissful, *OED*) foolishly takes a "wylde and yong" (I, 3225) wife. He is no match for her; therefore, he is always "inquisityf" (inquisitive) (I, 3163) of his young wife and shuts this animal-like creature into their house where their boarder, "hende" (near at hand, *OED*) Nicholas, has the chance to approach her.¹⁸ "Sely" John, suspicious of Nicholas's absence, dares to break into Nicholas's locked room and is thus caught in a snare prepared by this "hende" (skilful, clever, *OED*) Nicholas. Thinking that Nicholas has devoted himself so much to astrology as to go mad, "sely" (pious and blissful) John begins to "blessen" (I, 3448) himself; nevertheless, he comes to share God's "pryvetee" (I, 3454, 3493, 3558) with Nicholas, who takes advantage of John's pious ("sely") and suspicious character. Referring repeatedly to Christ, Nicholas succeeds in

involving John into his prediction of "Noes flood" (I, 3518). Thus, "sely" John proves to be a victim of his own character and innocently helps Nicholas fulfill his purpose of enjoying a night's pleasure with Alisoun.

"Hende" (near, skilful, clever, *OED*) Nicholas, understanding Alisoun's character, shows his "hendedness" when he approaches her. Perceiving quickly what Alisoun desires, he adopts a skilful and clever ("hende") technique appropriate to her character. First, he appeals to her five senses, moving his hand "skilfully"; then, upon Alisoun's threatening to call for help, he immediately cries "mercy" (I, 3288), like the courtly lover of romance to whom the word "hende" was applied in the sense of gentle, courteous, and pleasing to the sight.¹⁹ He promises Alisoun to observe "deerne love" (secret love) (I, 3200), a prerequisite for the hero of romance, but not because he wishes to preserve his lover's honour but because he wishes to succeed in their adultery. Yet even "hende" Nicholas also falls into an ironical and miserable situation because of his own "hende" (near, skilful, clever) character.

When Absolon, another lover, comes back to the window with a branding iron to take his revenge on Nicholas and Alisoun, Nicholas happens to be near ("hende") the window and tries to play a more skilful ("hende") trick on Absolon. Carelessly forgetting his promise of "deerne love," a prerequisite for the "hende" hero of romance, he puts his buttocks out of the window, and thus is branded by Absolon. At the cry "water!" John cuts the rope of the hanging tub and falls from the ceiling.

The character of Absolon, who is a loser in the love-rivalry game, is represented by the single epithet "joly" (fresh, finely-dressed, self-confident, arrogant, full of presumptuous pride, *OED*). "Joly" Absolon, who has shining hair and gray eyes and who walks elegantly on his fashionable shoes, is described in the terms applied to the conventional heroine of a romance instead of the hero.²⁰ Absolon appears fresh ("joly") and fine-dressed ("joly"),

like the heroine of a romance. Recalling the fact that he is not a woman but a man, we can imagine him as an effeminate and comically-caricatured man.

"Hende" Nicholas displays his "hendeness" to succeed in his love affair while this "joly" Absolon attempts to display his "jollity" similarly to succeed, but in vain. In contrast to Nicholas, Absolon adopts courtly conventions in his courtship of Alisoun, for this would-be courtly lover, Absolon, is proud ("joly") of his refined manners and speech. But his pretension to be a courtly lover is hardly effective on Alisoun, who is an animal-like, realistic woman.

Absolon's elegant serenade only calls forth Alisoun's rebuff. Disturbed while enjoying her "deerne love" with Nicholas, Alisoun drives Absolon away in a fit of anger, but "self-confident" ("joly") Absolon does not yet realize that Alisoun already has another lover, Nicholas. Making matters worse, Absolon mistakes Alisoun's refusal to accept his courtship for the conventional lady's shyness and this would-be courtly lover keeps on asking her importunately for a kiss. If Absolon had gone away, recognizing that he was not loved by Alisoun, he would not have been insulted. However, on hearing Alisoun's reply of "Wiltow thanne go thy wey therwith?" (I, 3718), he becomes so happy ("joly") as to utter the words "I am a lord at alle degrees, /For after this I hope ther cometh moore." (I, 3724-5), reflecting his pride and self-confidence ("jollity") as a would-be courtly lover. After the experience of the misdirected kiss, he awakes to the fact that Alisoun is not worthy to be the object of courtly love and that his pretension to be a courtly lover has only incited her mischievous joke. The true cause of his meeting the shameful "misdirected kiss" was his self-confidence ("jollity"). The audience must have burst into laughter at this appropriate punishment awarded the squeamish and self-confident ("joly") person rather than experiencing hostility toward Alisoun.

"The Reeve's Tale" is told within the context of the Reeve's determination

to revenge himself on the Miller for his tale; the Reeve, whose original trade was that of carpenter, was in a rage, taking the diddling of an old carpenter, John, for a scoff at himself. So Symkyn, in "The Reeve's Tale" happens to be a miller. Symkyn is arrogant, snobbish and proud of his cunning skill in stealing flour. In his contempt for two students who speak in the northern dialect and who watch the corn being ground so carefully that the miller cannot easily pinch half a peck, Symkyn attempts to outwit them cleverly. The students, in turns, who had their flour stolen from them take advantage of the miller's daughter and his wife as a stratagem to revenge themselves on the proud Symkyn.

In the analogues, the proud, snobbish character of the miller is not described. The two students do not speak in the northern dialect. They are not concerned with the theft when they discovered their loss of grain. Their approach to the daughter and the wife is not the result of revenge but either of simple love or of lechery. In the analogues, there is neither a contest between the miller and the students nor a detailed portrait of the wife and the daughter; those are all hallmarks of Chaucer's originality and add an ironical twist to the injury which Symkyn suffers at the tales's end.²¹

Symkyn's wife is introduced thus:

A wyf he hadde, ycomen of noble kyn;
The person of the toun hir fader was. (I, 3942-3)

In fact, she must have been an illegitimate daughter of the parson, who consequently paid her dowry.²² She is proud of her convent education and makes pretension to be a courtly lady, superciliously thinking that a lady ought to keep herself aloof. Everyone calls her "Madame" and dare not flirt with her because they do not want to be killed by the jealous, proud Symkyn. But, indeed, she is generally looked on with some contempt because of her tainted ancestry. A gap between the pride of the Symkyns' and public

opinion is suggested. This incongruity between the public view and that of the Symkyns' is further emphasized in the comical description of the daughter, Malyne.

The daughter is described as follows:

This wenche thikke and wel ygrowen was,
 With kamus nose and eyen greye as glas,
 With buttokes brode and brestes rounde and hye.
 But right fair was hire heer; I wol nat lye. (I, 3973–6)

This portrait of Malyne is an absurd combination of description of a sturdy peasant girl and the conventional depiction of the heroine of a courtly romance. Her grandfather and other members of her family intended to make her the heiress of their houses and lands. Indeed they want her to marry well into some worthy family of ancient lineage, for they believe their daughter with her "kamus nose" (I, 3974) and "butookes brode" (I, 3975) is truly "fair" (I, 3976)—although, in fact, her beauty can be found only in her eyes gray as glass and her hair. Her family's ambition makes it difficult for her to wed, though she is already, at twenty, an old maid by medieval standards.²³

We have observed how the snobbish Symkyn is proud of his wife and daughter; therefore we can understand how effectively the students can pay Symkyn back, who is vexed to find the country-bred, unrefined students are able to seduce his wife and daughter without difficulty. The wife, having enjoyed a night with one of the students, gives Symkyn the finishing blow. In the analogues, the wife, condemned to be found lying in bed with the student, discloses in a fit of anger the miller's theft and the whereabouts of the stolen flour. The wife in "The Reeve's Tale" assumes that she is lying with her husband, Symkyn, and she hits her husband exactly on his bald pate, taking it for the student's night cap. So she is not to blame for Symkyn's ironical downfall.

The daughter, Malyne, too easily receives the student who makes his way to her bed, in spite of her family's intention to marry her to a man of the upper class. Furthermore, she feels affection for the student. Deeply moved by the *aube*, the conventional parting exchange between courtly lovers, she discloses the whereabouts of the stolen flour as a lady's offering of a pledge,²⁴ therefore she betrays her father unconsciously. The betrayal results not from malice towards her father but from her sincere affection towards the student. She does not consider herself a victim of the student's revenge.

The audience, who has cheered the students' team in the contest between Symkyn and the two students, must have joyously applauded their great victory. Symkyn's arrogance has led him to this final, ironical downfall.

Unlike the women discussed thus far, May in "The Merchant's Tale" may provoke the intent hostility of the audience because she herself makes the plan to hold her love affair in a pear-tree over her blind husband. Indeed, the Host expresses an antifeminist feeling on the completion of this tale. As for the analogue, it is natural that the audience should feel a strong antagonism for the woman, for the focus of the pear-tree story is on woman's wiles used to deceive her husband. But in Chaucer's tale, the pear-tree episode takes up only the last third of the whole story, and the rest is taken up by the description of Januarie, his view of marriage, his motivation for marriage, his choice of his wife and his married life, which are not found in any analogue and which are the central, amusing parts of Chaucer's tale rather than its description of woman's wiles.²⁵

The sixty-year-old knight, Januarie, decides to get married to amend his sin of fornication before he dies and goes to heaven. But, in fact, in choosing a wife, he hates to pick an old woman because he assumes he won't be able to find any pleasure with her and might then seek pleasure from other women. He is afraid that his adultery will plunge him into hell. So he insists on marrying a young wife. His ostensible intention is to marry to amend the

lechery he has committed during his life as a bachelor; in fact, it is revealed that he intends to satisfy his sexual desires in marriage, regarded as sacramental. His selfish and hypocritical motives for marriage arouse the audience's strong antipathy; on the other hand, his destined future wife has already provoked their sympathy by the time she appears, for they know she is to be treated as the object of an old man's lust in marriage.

When he consults his friends about his plan to marry a young wife, Januarie is given the opportunity to avoid stepping into a miserable situation. One of his friends, Justinus, advises him that an old husband will repent marrying a young wife, that she may become his purgatory. However, Januarie rejects Justinus's advice and shows no response to his next warning:

And that ye plese hire nat to amorously,
And that ye kepe yow eek from oother synne. (IV, 1680–1)

Instead, he hastens to marry the young, beautiful wife, May. He plunges himself into an ironical, unhappy situation. It is suggested that May cannot feel any affection for Januarie in her heart, repulsed at seeing him singing in high spirits with his neck so shrunken and lean on their wedding night:

The slakke skyn aboute his nekke shaketh
Whil that he sang, so chaunteth he and craketh.
But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte,
Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte,
In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene;
She preyseth nat his pleyng worth a bene. (IV, 1849–54)

Januarie pretends to show "gentillesse" (IV, 1917) in sending his wife to see Damyan, who has been ill in bed since their wedding day. However, as soon as his wife comes back, he begs her to strip naked to satisfy his lust. Although May patiently accepts Januarie's rude behaviour, who treats her

merely as the object of his lust, she feels disgust with her husband while feeling sympathy for Damyan, ill in bed with love-sickness:

“Certejn,” thoughte, “whom that this thyng displese
 I rekke nocht, for heere I hym assure
 To love hym best of any creature,
 Though he namoore hadde than his sherte.” (IV, 1982–5)

Thus the audience can understand why May gradually inclines to love Damyan in this description of her married life with Januarie.

Concealing her true feelings, she obeys all of her husband’s orders and pretends to be his faithful wife. She is so careful as to dispose of a love letter from Damyan at her toilet.

May, who is addressed as a “trewe deere wyf” (IV, 2164) and who swears her chastity to her blind husband, is busy making plans to deceive him with Damyan. Here again, Januarie is given another opportunity to choose his destiny. Pluto, the King of Hades, (the King of Hell), plans to restore Januarie’s sight in order to convince him of his wife’s unfaithfulness. If Januarie is convinced of May’s adultery and suffers in “purgatorie,” as Pluto plans, he could amend his sin and be saved from hell after death. However, Proserpyna plans to give May a good excuse. When Januarie cries out, accusing her of infidelity, May absolves herself by explaining that she was wrestling with a man in a tree in order to heal his eyes. As soon as May jumps down from the pear-tree, Januarie embraces her with great joy. Januarie intends to amend his sin of fornication through marriage, but, in fact, he abuses holy marriage for the sake of satisfying his lust. In spite of several warnings, he will not amend his sinful life. So, the audience must have been disgusted at Januarie’s frailty and spiritual blindness.²⁶ The Host who prefers earthly happiness to heavenly, has no insight into Januarie’s hypocrisy and selfishness and, thus, expresses an antifeminist feeling, but

the detached audience must have felt hostility toward Januarie, who has neglected a chance to avoid his fall, and who has eagerly stepped towards his own downfall.

The wife in "The Shipman's Tale" surpasses May in wit and cleverly-devised excuses. In the analogue known as the "Lover's Gift Regained" type,²⁷ the story focuses on woman's cupidity. When he knows the woman's sexual favours can be won only through a gift or money, the lover is so shocked at her avarice that he resolves to humiliate her. He gives her money borrowed from her husband in return for her favour when his friend is present as a witness. Then he informs her husband that he has returned money to his wife in the presence of this same witness and the wife, so the wife is forced to give up her scheme of profit.

The wife in Chaucer's tale makes such a bargain to grant Daun John her sexual favours in return for a hundred francs; however, her husband also is responsible for her bargain. Chaucer described this merchant husband in detail. The merchant is so obsessed by trade, busily counting money in a counting-house, that he cannot afford to pay his marriage debt to his wife nor to pay for her clothes. Such characterization of the husband cannot be found in any analogue and wordplay based on "debt," which correlates the realms of marriage and trade, is also added by Chaucer. The commercialization of the marriage relationship is the chief ironical point of this tale rather than woman's avarice.²⁸ Therefore the husband's obsession with trade ironically causes Daun John, the monk, to pay the marriage debt to the wife instead of the husband; then at the tale's end, the wife offers to compensate the husband for the financial debt of a hundred francs by paying it in terms of sexual favours.

Unlike the avaricious woman of the analogue, Chaucer's wife does not offer to satisfy the lover's will in return for money; instead, in the course of a dialogue between the wife and the monk, they reach a mutual agreement.

While the merchant shuts himself in the counting-house early in the morning, the wife and the monk, Daun John, meet in the garden and talk, discovering a reciprocal tender feeling. Asked by Daun John, the wife confesses her sorrows in marriage. Daun John, who assumes that the husband has not paid the marriage debt to his wife, offers to help her, informing her that he is calling her husband "cousin" because he loves her best. After she repeatedly hints of her complaint about her husband's neglect of the marriage debt, the wife cunningly shifts her husband's niggardliness in the marriage debt to his financial niggardliness and suddenly asks Daun John to lend her a hundred francs. She swears any loyalty and service to him, just like a hero of romance swore to the heroine; but for money, not love. Of course, the "deerne love" requisite for courtly love is promised. The code of courtly love is comically and ironically parodied by Chaucer's application of it to a pragmatic, commercial world.

The wife's ability in trade is shown in course of dialogues with her husband. On returning to his house, the husband, who has been informed by Daun John that the borrowed hundred francs has been returned to the wife in his absence, scolds her for not having told him of Daun John's repayment. The wife answers that she has spent the hundred francs on finery, thinking it a present in return for the hospitality which Daun John has received. Her answer is convincing, for Chaucer has already described in detail the fact that Daun John was one of the frequent visitors to their house and that he and the merchant and his wife were so intimate as to call each other "cousin." The wife then accuses her husband of delaying his payment of the marriage debt to her and offers to compensate it with the hundred francs she has spent. "Dette" in the Middle English denotes the financial or moral obligation and also refers to the obligation of offering sexual satisfaction to one's spouse, as derived from I Corinthians 7.3:

The hosebonde zelde dette to the wyf, also sothli and the wyf to the hosebonde.

The payment of the marriage debt was one of the three purposes of marriage admitted by the Medieval Church.²⁹ It was also preached by Chaucer's Parson as "[a man and his wife should] yelden everich of hem to oother the dette of hire bodies. . . ." (X, 939) Therefore, the wife's condemnation to her husband can be justified. The medieval audience must have enjoyed the witty trick concerning the "debt" which the clever wife has played on her husband and on Daun John. Her ability in trade merits the applause of the audience rather than provoking its antagonism.

IV

The women in Chaucer's *fabliaux* whom we have dealt with thus far have been young, beautiful wives who pretend to be obedient to their old husbands but who really betray them after the fashion of the old *fabliaux*. However the kind of actual middle-class wife mentioned by the pilgrims to Canterbury reflects a shrew who nags a husband; two examples are the Host's wife, who is referred to in "The Prologue of The Monk's Tale," and one of the pilgrims, the Wife of Bath.

The Wife of Bath is often regarded as a dreadful and vicious woman who embodies antifeminist tradition. However, does the audience really harbour only hostility towards her? In the course of her autobiographic confession, we can catch a glimpse of her sorrow, deserving our sympathy, as well as such likable aspects of her character as her vivacity and frankness. As she herself admits, she may have been regarded by her husbands as being their "purgatorie" (III, 489) or "the whippe" (III, 175) and may have tortured them sorely; however, she had reasons for taking such an attitude. If she had been a happy wife, loved by her husbands, she would not have been hostile

towards them. Her frustration is a result of the medieval antifeminist tradition and the medieval marriage system, which was a matter of financial bargaining. Most medieval women were born the property of their fathers; on their marriages, this right was transferred to their husbands. From the age of twelve, the Wife of Bath also was forced to marry a succession of three old husbands, regardless of her own will; she was seen as the subject of a legalized exchange between her father and her husbands. A self-assertive woman like the Wife of Bath must have been unable to submit to such contemptuous treatment as being regarded as her father's or her husband's property.

A more important reason why she revolted against her husbands was that she was annoyed by the age's noisy abuse of women. As we have seen, a constantly recurring theme of church sermons was women's wickedness, and husbands repeated these sermons at home. The Wife of Bath retorts to her husband, who enumerates women's faults. Although she says,

And al was fals, but that I took witesse
 On Janekyn, and on my nece also.
 O Lord! The peyne I dide hem and the wo,
 Ful giltelees, by Goddes sweete pyne! (III, 382-5)

We cannot believe that her husbands were really guiltless of attacking women, considering the fact that antifeminism pervaded medieval society. The Wife of Bath herself excuses her nagging her husband thus:

I koude pleyne, and yit was in the gilt,
 Or elles often tyme hadde I been spilt. (III, 387-8)

In her antifeminist society, in which "wife beating" was recommended, her attitude toward her husband represented one of her ways to defend herself and to live in a world permeated by this antifeminist tradition.

Her revolt against the antifeminist tradition reached a climax when she married Jankyn, her fifth husband, who was twenty years younger than her and to whom she had given all her land and property. The age's attacks on women are further reinforced by Jankyn, who reads aloud with great joy a "cursed book" (III, 789) comprised of proverbs, sermons, and legends about women's vices and wiles. The Wife of Bath had to endure Jankyn's spiteful behaviour in silence. She reveals the anguish of her grief in the following:

Who wolde wene, or who wolde suppose,
The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne? (III, 786–7)

Her indignation bursts out at last when she sees that he will never cease to read "the cursed book." She gives him a strong blow, with Jankyn responding by smiting her on the head so that she became somewhat deaf. When she became reconciled with Jankyn after their violent fight, she regained her rulership over him and her property; furthermore, she made him burn "the cursed book" which had cost her deafness in one ear. Jankyn's kind phrases to her, such as "Myn owene trewe wyf, / Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf;" (III, 819–20), make her the ideal wife. For a long time, the Wife of Bath has wanted her husbands or the public to address her thus:

. . . "Wyf, go wher thee liste;
Taak youre disport; I wol nat leve no talys.
I knowe yow for a trewe wyf, dame Alys." (III, 318–20)

What she has most desired is that her husbands or the public should trust her as a woman. In the antifeminist tradition, men were inclined to be hostile to women and considered that women's inferiority and necessary subjection to their husbands were matters too natural to question. This male attitude, neglecting women's individuality and attacking them as evil beings, is responsible for the Wife of Bath's revolt, as she remarks:

And sith a man is moore resonable
 Than womman is, ye moste been suffrable. (III, 441-2)

The Wife of Bath, who wonders why love is sin though the Church teaches the importance of love, must have been the target of antifeminist attack with respect to the tradition which ascetic clergy had developed, depicting earthly love as carnal love. Her revolt against medieval antifeminism must have provoked sympathy among the females of her audience.

V

As we have seen, Chaucer describes women as more charming and complex individuals than the women of the old *fabliaux*, who were the embodiment of the antifeminist tradition, though he also employs some of the conventional descriptions of women used in old *fabliaux*. In old *fabliaux*, women alone are blamed for men's downfall because they resort to discomfiting stratagems. Men's own responsibility for their downfall is never questioned, just as Eve alone was blamed for bringing about man's downfall while Adam's consent in the sin is never referred to. On this point, Chaucer's *fabliaux* are definitely different. His characterization of males as well as of females in his own *fabliaux*, is more or less original; its effect is to reduce women's responsibility for men's downfall and increase men's responsibility. The miserable destiny of his men is not caused by women's wiles but by men's own dispositions, their ways of thinking and their behaviour. That is why Chaucer offers the men of his tales several opportunities or warnings to avoid fate. His women represent, however unintentionally, the means by which the men about them come to develop and express their weaknesses of character, leading to their ironical downfall. His men themselves produce the causes of their own downfall in their relations with women. Therefore the audience cannot feel antagonism towards women in Chaucer's *fabliaux*.

Why did Chaucer refuse to describe women as the embodiment of antifeminist tradition after the fashion of the old *fabliaux*? His addition of men's responsibility for their downfall in his *fabliaux* reminds us that some Christian theologians such as St. Augustine acknowledged Adam's joint responsibility with Eve for the Fall from Paradise. Most Christian theologians like St. Jerome blamed Eve alone. Was Chaucer fully aware of or sympathetic to the position of women in the medieval antifeminist tradition? It seems still difficult for us to know whether Chaucer was really feminist or antifeminist at heart. After the story of a submissive wife, Grisilde, his *Leuoy* warns husbands not to try to test wive's patience in vain; however, he ironically recommends that wives be nagging shrews. He seems sympathetic towards wives but his sympathetic pose also reflects his pragmatic insight into middle-class marriage, where husbands are typically unable to dominate their wives. He must have had a complex point of view about women, partly affected by the antifeminist tradition yet partly sympathetic to the feminist position. Still, it is certain that there were many women in the audiences listening to him read his *fabliaux*. Chaucer must have taken the existence of his many female listeners into consideration and anticipated their reactions when he wrote his work. His complex point of view about women is indirectly expressed by the Nun's Priest:

Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;
 Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo
 And made Adam fro Paradys to go,
 Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese.
 But for I noot to whom it myght displese,
 If I conseil of wommen wolde blame,
 Passe over, for I seyde it in my game.
 Rede auctours, where they trete of swich mateere,
 And what they seyn of wommen ye may heere.
 These been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne;

I kan noon harm of no womman divyne. (VII, 3256–66)

Notes

- * This is a revised version of a paper I read at the symposium on "Women in Late Medieval English Literature" at the 2nd Congress of the Japan Society for Medieval English Studies held in Nagoya on 6 December 1986.
- 1 Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. M. M. Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), p. 16.
- 2 All references to the Bible are to *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, with the Apocryphal Books, in the Earliest English Versions Made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his Followers*, ed. J. Forshall and F. Madden (1850; New York: AMS Press, 1982).
- 3 Angela M. Lucas, *Women in the Middle Ages: Religion, Marriage and Letters* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1983), pp. 3–18.
- 4 Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady, the Priest: the Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, trans. Barbara Bray (London: Allen Lane, 1983), p. 211.
- 5 All the quotations from Chaucer's works are from Larry D. Benson et al., ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987) based on *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed.
- 6 Duby, p. 39.
- 7 Lucas, p. 68.
- 8 Power, p. 11.
- 9 Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and The French Tradition* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973), p. 63.
- 10 Alan Eknight, "The Farce Wife: Myth, Parody and Caricature," in *A Medieval French Miscellany: Papers of the 1970 Kansas Conference on Medieval French Literature*, ed. Norris J. Lacy (Univ. of Kansas Publications, 1972).
- 11 Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, Nouvelle édition (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1973), pp. 193–207.
- 12 Robert Hellman and Richard O'Gorman, trans., *Fabliaux: Ribald Tales from Old French* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965), p. 189.
- 13 Beryl Rowland, *Companion to Chaucer Studies* (London: Oxford Univ. Press,

- 1968), p. 250.
- 14 As for analogues of Chaucer's *fabliaux*, see W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, ed., *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (New York: Humanity Press, 1958); Larry D. Benson & Theodore M. Andersson, ed., *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1971).
 - 15 S. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), p. 243.
 - 16 P. Q. Ruggier, *The Art of the Canterbury Tales* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 60.
 - 17 Keiko Hamaguchi, "Chaucer no Konaya no Hanashi ni okeru Jinbutsu Byōsha (Characterization in 'The Miller's Tale')," *Core 8* (Doshisha Daigaku Eibun Gakkai [English Literary Society of Doshisha Univ.], 1979), pp. 1-20.
 - 18 P. E. Beichner, "Chaucer's Hende Nicholas," *MS*, XIV (1952), p. 151.
 - 19 E. T. Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: The Athlone Press, 1970), p. 17.
 - 20 Cf. D. S. Brewer, "The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature, Especially Harley Lyrics, Chaucer and Some Elizabethans," *MLR*, L (1955), pp. 257-269.
 - 21 Keiko Hamaguchi, "*The Reeve's Tale* ni okeru Dōkizuke ni tsuite: Ruiwa tonon Hikaku ni oite (The Motivation in *The Reeve's Tale*: Comparative Study with the Analogue)," *Shuryū* (The Main Current) 43 (Doshisha Daigaku Eibun Gakkai [The English Literary Society of Doshisha Univ.], 1982), pp. 42-59.
 - 22 Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 850.
 - 23 E. T. Donaldson, ed., *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Ronald, 1975), p. 910.
 - 24 R. E. Kaske, "An Aube in the Reeve's Tale," *ELH*, XXVI (1959), pp. 295-310.
 - 25 Keiko Hamaguchi, "*Shōnin no Hanashi* ni okeru Januarie no Kekkō (Januarie's Marriage in *The Merchant's Tale*)," *Technical Bulletin of Tokushima Bunri Univ.*, 30 (1985), pp. 99-112.
 - 26 Keiko Hamaguchi, "For Hoolynesse or for Dotage: Januarie's Spiritual Blindness in *The Merchant's Tale*," *Technical Bulletin of Tokushima Bunri Univ.*, 33 (1987), pp. 171-182.
 - 27 Cf. John Webster Spargo, *Chaucer's Shipman's Tale: The Lover's Gift Regained*,

- Folklore Fellows Communications, No. 91 (Helsinki, 1930), pp. 11–27.
- 28 Albert H. Silverman, "Sex and Money in Chaucer's Shipman's Tale," *PQ*, 32 (1935), pp. 330–331.
- 29 St. Augustine, "On the Good of Marriage," trans. C. L. Cornish, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, Vol III, ed. P. Schaf (Buffalo: the Christian Literature Co., 1887), p. 401.