

THE ASCENT OF THE SOUL IN THE *WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE AND TALE*

by

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I dedicate this thesis to Justine and Calvin.

Timshel.

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## ABSTRACT

Of the three women who participate in the tale-telling contest in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath establishes herself as the most provocative and the most philosophically minded. For the past thirty years, criticism of the Wife of Bath has focused primarily on the social, political, and psychological aspects of her *Prologue* and *Tale*. However, the Wife of Bath's philosophic disposition and her explicit interest in the relationship between *experience* and *auctoritee* correspond with a broader philosophical interest in the two-fold division of philosophy between *practica* and *theorica*, as well as the ability of the soul to ascend to a higher mode of knowledge. As a result, the narrative and thematic structure of her *Prologue* and *Tale* exhibit a pattern that echoes the philosophical conception of the soul's ascent. This thesis proposes to reposition the Wife of Bath within the philosophical context she evokes throughout her *Prologue* and *Tale*, especially as it relates to both classical and Christian conceptions of the soul's ascent to a vision of a transcendent reality.

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## CHAPTER ONE

## PHILOSOPHY, MEMORY, AND THE WIFE OF BATH

Of the three women who participate in the tale-telling contest in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath establishes herself as the most provocative and the most philosophically minded. Whereas the Prioress begins her *Prologue* with a prayer, and the Second Nun begins with an admonition against idleness, the Wife asserts her self-reliance and opposition to all forms of authority that would presume to teach her about marriage. In the opening lines of her *Prologue*, she proclaims, "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is ryght ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage" (III.1-3).<sup>1</sup> The subsequent lecture is an intellectual tour de force as the Wife dismantles the teachings of revered *auctoritee*, which include famous philosophers, theologians, and the Bible itself. By engaging with a philosophical and theological tradition that extends back to the writings of ancient Greece, the Wife's *Prologue* and *Tale* participate in a larger intellectual context. Despite her specific interest in the teachings related to marriage and sexuality, her arguments surrounding *experience* and *auctoritee* also correspond with philosophical concerns regarding the truths of the human condition.

Historically, the Western philosophic tradition has regarded the human condition as a pattern of descent and ascent. In the works of Plato and in Neoplatonic philosophy, the soul undergoes a series of reincarnations based on the life it lives on earth and in its

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987.

pre-incarnate state among the gods. Christian theology also recognizes a similar pattern of the human condition in the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ: the teaching that God took on human nature, died a human death, resurrected from the dead, and ascended again into heaven. The effect of the incarnation is the salvation of human souls who had previously fallen into sin and will eventually ascend into heaven. Ultimately, the conception of the soul's ascent functions as a rite of passage by which a person undergoes intellectual, emotional, and spiritual purification. From a Platonic view, the soul needs to be purged of the confusion caused by its connection to the mortal body, while the Christian view would regard original sin—the result of Adam and Eve's decision to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil—as the reason for purification. In either case, both the Platonic and the Christian view recognize that the current condition of the human soul is the result of its failure to conform to a higher ideal standard.

The image and teachings related to the soul's ascent to a divine realm pervade medieval literature. One of the most famous and most influential literary depictions of the soul's ascent is Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Lost in a dark wood, when Dante the character meets Virgil, he begins his journey to paradise by first descending into hell; once he reaches the other side, Dante and Virgil ascend the Mountain of Purgatory, and then continue their journey upward into the realms of heaven, where Dante perceives a vision of God. Like many medieval writers, Dante's transcendent vision was partially influenced by the theme of ascent in Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae* [hereafter, *Consolatio*], one of the most important texts that linked the Latin Middle Ages with

ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. In the *Consolatio*, Boethius describes the consolation of philosophy as a method of dialectic that leads a person to a vision of a transcendent reality; this vision allows a person to rise above the vagaries of time and the unpredictability of fortune, and thus achieve a state of emotional and psychological stability. The *Consolatio* also influenced Chaucer, who not only translated the *Consolatio* into Middle English but appropriated many of its themes, including the ascent of the soul, in *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. Because of the Wife of Bath's philosophic disposition and her direct engagement with the epistemological tension between *experience* and *auctoritee*, I contend that the narrative and thematic structure of her *Prologue* and *Tale* exhibit a pattern of the philosophical conception of the soul's ascent and descent. Throughout her *Prologue*, the character of the Wife follows a consistent trajectory of descent into the realm of the Many which is reflected in her transition from a medieval debate style to autobiography. In contrast, the rapist knight of the Wife's *Tale* represents a successful ascent to a transcendent vision of reality which is signified by his submission to the loathly lady who then transforms herself into a beautiful and faithful wife. The Wife of Bath, however, is careful to undermine the happy ending of the tale: she moralizes the story by praying for submissive husbands, and by cursing husbands who refuse to grant women sovereignty in marriage. Not only does the Wife's intrusion reveal the incompatibility of the transcendent vision with reality; it also reiterates the thematic descent of her soul into the realm of the Many.

For the past thirty years, criticism of the Wife of Bath has focused primarily on the historical and psychological aspects of her *Prologue* and *Tale*. New Historicists have



“politicized the field of medieval literary studies by engaging with the intensely social issues grounding the works of Chaucer and his contemporaries” (Scala and Federico 2), and Psychoanalytic criticism, by comparison, has focused on the psychological forces which produce recognizable forms of subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> While New Historicism and Psychoanalytic criticism have contributed to a nuanced understanding of women’s social standing within medieval societies and have demonstrated the depth of character presented by the Wife of Bath, both forms of criticism have neglected to consider the Wife as an emblem of the Western philosophic tradition. The following chapters attempt to reposition the Wife of Bath within the philosophical context she evokes throughout her *Prologue* and *Tale*, especially as it relates to both classical and Christian conceptions of the soul’s ascent to a vision of a transcendent reality.

By raising the issue of *experience* and *auctoritee* in the opening lines of her *Prologue*, the Wife recalls the traditional twofold division of philosophy into the sciences of *practica* and *theorica*. *Experience* relates to *practica*, which is concerned with how a person can determine right action. Similarly, *auctoritee* relates to *theorica*, which represents the method of inquiry by which a person can “discover an underlying order in any field of study” (Celano), and is specifically concerned with questions of metaphysics. Thomas Aquinas, for example, makes a similar distinction between speculative reason and practical reason:

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of New Historicism and Psychoanalytic criticism in medieval studies, see Lee Patterson, “Chaucer’s Pardoner on the Couch,” and Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Federico’s *The Post-Historical Middle Ages*.

For, since the speculative reason is busied chiefly with the necessary things, which cannot be otherwise than they are, its proper conclusions, like the universal principles, contain the truth without fail. The practical reason, on the other hand, is busied with contingent matters, about which human actions are concerned: and consequently, although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects. (I-II, Q 94.4)

Because *theorica* focuses on “universal principles,” its proper conclusions can be trusted because a universal principle is unchanging, whereas the knowledge acquired through *practica* is contingent on temporal circumstances. In the Middle Ages, the study of *theorica* was closely associated with the written works of authoritative philosophers, theologians, and the Christian Scriptures. Thus, implied in the distinction between *practica* and *theorica*, and therefore between *experience* and *auctoritee* in Chaucer’s poetry, is the notion of ascent. The philosopher aimed for *theorica* in order to avoid descending into “matters of detail” wherein he would frequently “encounter defects.”

The debate surrounding *experience* and *auctoritee* “charged the intellectual atmosphere of Chaucer’s day” (Burlin 13), and by integrating it into his poetry, Chaucer implicitly calls to mind notions of philosophic ascent. Traugott Lawler argues that Chaucer’s use of *experience* and *auctoritee* corresponds directly to Neoplatonic notions of the One and the Many: “Authority is related to experience as one to many. Authority codifies the general experience of men, and treats it in a unified and unifying way, without allowing for individual exceptions” (83). According to Lawler, *The Canterbury*

*Tales* follows a pattern in which a character chooses a particular course of action which “violates some general or proverbial truth” (84), only to discover that the experience validates the authoritative teaching. The canon’s yeoman, for example, proclaims at the beginning of his second tale that “al thyng that which shineth as the gold / Nis nat gold, as that I have herd told” (VIII.962-63), and then tells the story of how a canon tricked a priest into buying an alchemical device that would spontaneously produce silver. The specific experience of the priest validates the teaching of the proverb, and implicitly supports the notion that universal truths inform the lower realm of individual experiences.

The relationship between both epistemologies, however, is depicted differently throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. Ideally, the evidence for the teachings of *auctoritee* would emerge consistently from *experience*. As Theseus says in *The Knight’s Tale*, “Ther nedeth noht noon auctoritee t’allege, / For it is preeved by experience” (I.3000-30001). But characters like the Wife of Bath demonstrate that *experience* and *auctoritee* “may not in every instance be equally available or, even worse, may be found contradictory and irreconcilable” (Burlin 9). In the opening section of her *Prologue*, the Wife points out a contradiction within Christian dogma between the Church’s teaching on virginity as the highest ideal and the fact that “God bad us for to wexe and multiplye” (III.28). The Wife’s argument highlights a contradiction within *auctoritee* in an attempt to dismiss its authoritative power. Some of the other pilgrims also note a disjunction between *experience* and *auctoritee*. Symkyn, the protagonist in *The Reeve’s Tale*, expresses the sentiment succinctly in his assessment of the university students he plans to swindle: “The gretteste clerkes been noht wisest men” (I.4054). The study of *auctoritee*, in other

words, fails to produce in its students the kind of intelligence required for domestic affairs which are generally unpredictable, multitudinous, competitive, and duplicitous, the implication being that *auctoritee* is useless for everyday life. Throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, different characters present the relationship between *experience* and *auctoritee* differently, but none of the iterations efface the implicit hierarchy between the two.

Characters, such as the Wife of Bath and the Reeve, who champion the epistemic worth of *experience* as more valuable and reliable than *auctoritee* represent a particular view of life that corresponds to the philosophic idea of the Many. As chapter three will demonstrate regarding the Wife of Bath, these characters of *experience* tend to protest any *auctoritee* that presumes to teach a higher form of knowledge. Thus, they become representations of the soul's failed ascent to a transcendent reality, as they descend further into the fragmented and isolating world of personal experience.

Another component of the Wife of Bath's *Prologue* and *Tale* which contributes to the image of the ascent of the soul is memory. Traditionally, memory is the conduit by which a person transcends the immediacy of the physical senses. For Plato, memory was synonymous with education, because it was the faculty by which the mind recalled the universal ideas suggested by physical sensations. In his dialogue *Phaedo*, for example, Socrates notes how two sticks of unequal lengths call to mind the idea of the Equal, a non-physical notion by which a person can judge the equality of all physical objects. Through careful prompting and rigorous study, the soul could ascend to the realm of bodiless ideas, and look upon reality itself without the cumbersome distractions of

physicality. The Wife uses a similar technique in her *Tale*. On the wedding night of the loathly lady and the knight, the knight is distraught that he has been forced to marry a woman who is old, ugly, and of low-birth. He despairs that his *gentillesse*—his social nobility—has been ruined by this marriage. The old woman, however, takes the opportunity to teach the knight the meaning of true *gentillesse*. And in the ensuing pillow-lecture scene, she stimulates his memory using *experience* to show how individual members of noble rank regularly behave ignobly. Such *experience* leads to her thesis that true *gentillesse* “cometh fro God alone” (III.1162), and is acquired through “gentil dedis” (III.1170). A society built around *gentillesse* functions as a sign of true nobility and should not, like the unequal sticks in Plato’s *Phaedo*, be confused with the idea itself. When the old woman transforms into a beautiful and faithful wife at the end of the lecture, the tale implies that the knight has ascended from the social world of *gentillesse* to a life lived in accordance with true nobility.

Chaucer also foregrounds memory in the Wife’s *Prologue*. Implied in the Wife of Bath’s argument regarding *experience* is her ability to accurately recall and assess her own personal experiences. She dedicates most of her 856-line *Prologue* to the stories of her previous marriages, recounting both her mistakes and successes as a wife of five different husbands. Her use of memory has a specific structure and purpose, since it also catalyzes her philosophic convictions. Her *Prologue* moves from general to specific, from abstract argumentation to an extended autobiographical narrative about her fifth marriage. The Wife’s memory, both in its structure and in its role in philosophic argumentation, parallels the practices and teachings related to medieval *ars memoria*—an

educational tradition which outlined both the practical strategies and the philosophical and theological reasons for training one's memory. Functionally, *ars memoria* structures the Wife's *Prologue*, and as a result connotes philosophical notions of the One and the Many, unity and multiplicity, and the purification of the soul in its ascent to an understanding of a transcendent reality.

With respect to the notion of unity in the soul's ascent, medieval *ars memoria* valued the practice of developing an artificial memory structure which could unify disparate experiences into a larger whole. The medieval practice of training one's memory had its roots in antiquity. The *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, a classical text on mnemotechniques often attributed to Cicero, and Cicero's *De oratore* formed the foundation for medieval *memoria*, which Carruthers describes as "fully institutionalized in education" (153). Both works describe memory in architectural terms: it requires that sensations and ideas be turned into vivid images and then placed "in a set of places, all easily visualized mentally and capable of being recalled and employed in precise order whenever necessary" (Rowland 1). In other words, memory in a classical and medieval context is artificial; it is a mental structure intentionally developed to house and organize individual experiences, both physical and emotional. Moreover, the relationship between memory structures and the content of memory is not accidental. The ability to arrange the contents of memory in a meaningful way must be learned; it is not passively acquired. For most medieval writers, "memory without a conscious design is like an uncatalogued library, a useless contradiction in terms" (Carruthers 39). A person uses a memory structure as a cataloguer for retaining and understanding isolated experiences, which then

affords the possibility to view the general moral purpose and effects of past decisions and actions. By looking back on her own life in the *Prologue*, the Wife of Bath performs a similar memorial act: she unifies her various experiences into an organized whole, and then expounds on the relevant moral lessons.

An artificial memory, however, was not ethically neutral. Although memory was originally classified as one of the arts of rhetoric, such writers as Cicero, Augustine, or Aquinas also regarded the practice and development of memory as an essential component of prudence. In the scheme of virtue, prudence is “the ability to make ethical judgments in the present context about both present and future matters” (Carruthers 239). To make such judgements, a person must be able to recall the past, without which neither the present nor the future has a meaningful context. Hence, Cicero describes the three parts of prudence as “memory, intelligence and foresight” (II.53). Throughout the classical era and the Middle Ages, a well-trained memory was regarded “not as a primitive learning technique but as the foundation of prudence, *sapientia*, ethical judgment” (Carruthers 219). Without a well-trained memory, a person would lack the capacity to behave virtuously. The Wife also recognizes the ethical implications of her memory in the *Prologue*. She deploys her memories of personal experiences offensively, attacking philosophical positions that would contradict her. Her insistence on *experience* is not a morally neutral claim; rather, she attempts to demonstrate how a life lived in accordance with *experience* is a morally viable alternative. Reflecting on her own marital choices in opposition to the Church’s teaching on virginity, she asserts that “everich hath

of God a propre yifte” (III.103); in doing so, she protests the moral legitimacy of her previous actions.

Further solidifying the connection between memory and virtue is the medieval understanding that a successful memory is more than an impersonal schematic. Unlike the modern image of memory as a filing cabinet, medieval *memoria* writers “all acknowledge the importance of tagging material emotionally as well as schematically, making each memory as much as possible into a personal occasion by imprinting emotional associations” (Carruthers 75). The Wife of Bath demonstrates a similar technique in her story about how she fell in love with Jankyn during her fourth husband’s funeral. She specifically mentions the image of Jankyn’s legs which were “so clene and faire,” the sight of which caused her to give her whole heart “unto his hoold” (III.598-99). The memory of Jankyn in this scene is marked not just with an image, but with all the emotions the image arouses. Moreover, tagging specific memories schematically and emotionally affords the possibility for recollection and its ethical implications. Recollection, according to Carruthers, is akin to reading (76): to recollect is to survey one’s memories and, like reading, evaluate and respond to those memories. If remembering an event is the incorporation and storage of it into one’s memory, then recollection is the activity of understanding the significance of individual memories in relation to the whole of one’s experiences. Recollection, in other words, generates self-knowledge and a sense of one’s moral standing. The Wife of Bath uses her memories and her power of recollection in the same way. Her persona and the effectiveness of her *Prologue* result from her ability to recall and evaluate her past experiences in the context



of her opening thesis statement, where she claims that *experience* is more reliable than *auctoritee*.

Insofar as the Wife of Bath demonstrates that memory is a combination of remembering and recollection, the practice of *memoria* also has immediate consequences for conceptions of her ethical character. Carruthers connects the activity of recollecting with the activity of reading itself. According to a medieval understanding, reading does not make a distinction between “what I read” and “my experience” (Carruthers 211). The two activities go hand in hand because what is read in the contents of a book is then incorporated into and domesticated by one’s memory. For medieval writers, the incorporation of reading into the practice of *memoria* is best captured by Seneca’s physiological digestive metaphor:

The food we have eaten, as long as it retains its original quality and floats, in our stomachs as an undiluted mass, is a burden; but it passes into tissue and blood only when it has been changed from its original form. So it is with the food which nourishes our higher nature,—we should see to it that whatever we have absorbed should not be allowed to remain unchanged, or it will be no part of us. We must digest it; otherwise it will merely enter memory and not the reasoning power.

(Seneca LXXXIV)

The art of *memoria*, like the activity of digestion, is a process of transforming content into experience for the purpose of building character. In the same way that food, when transformed into blood and tissue, contributes to the growth and maintenance of the physical body, so the storage and recollection of one’s memories. Reading is not, as

Carruthers points out, a closed “hermeneutical circle,” but a “hermeneutical dialogue” between two memories “that approaches Plato’s ideal (expressed in *Phaedrus*) of two living minds engaged in learning” (212). The act of reading is, in C. S. Lewis’ words, an “enlargement of our being” (137). By encountering another person’s memory in a literary text, a person acquires new content and new structures for experience, thereby expanding her perception of reality. Thus, medieval *ars memoria* corresponds with the ascent of the soul in two ways: 1) it emphasizes the purification of the soul by demonstrating the connection between a well-trained memory and virtue; and 2) it represents the effect of memory as an enlargement of one’s perception of reality—a reality that inherently transcends personal experiences.

The Wife of Bath, however, represents a negative example of the soul’s ability to transcend its temporal circumstances by way of *ars memoria*. Although she demonstrates an impressive catalogue of remembered *auctoritees*, her reading practices have had the opposite effect on her character. Given that the trajectory of her *Prologue* moves from general to specific, her memorial practices imply a narrowing of her mind and character. The contracting of her mind is related directly to her disposition toward *experience* and the philosophic notion of the Many. If a person cannot transcend the immediacy of sense perceptions, then she cannot acquire understanding, since understanding is predicated on the ability to unify and catalogue disparate experiences. Without understanding, a person remains subject to isolated sense perceptions and other personal experiences without recourse to a higher, meaningful context. Fragmentation, in other words, leads to isolation and the diminution of knowledge. Similarly, the Wife’s interpretations of

various *auctoritees* in the first section of her *Prologue* do not lead her to transcendent, unifying truths; rather, her hermeneutics tend toward fragmentation of interpretation. She is, to paraphrase Lawler, the true author of multiplicities (18), which in the end leads to the tragic, though consonant reality that the Wife is alone and, based on circumstantial evidence, perhaps widowed for a fifth time. The fate of her fifth husband is unclear, but her final prayer that God “blesse his soule for his mercy deere” connotes that Jankyn may no longer be alive (III.827).

Given the Wife’s philosophical disposition and the correspondence between her *Prologue* and medieval *ars memoria*, the following chapters position the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale* more firmly in the context of the traditional conception of the soul’s ascent to a vision of a transcendent reality. Chapter two will survey variations of the soul’s ascent in Plato’s *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, and Boethius’s *Consolatio*. Plato is one of the first philosophers to articulate the components and purpose of the soul’s ascent. In *Meno*, he describes the ascent in terms of his doctrine of recollection, which explains how the mind can recall knowledge of the Forms—i.e., the Equal, the Just, the Beautiful, etc.—through careful prompting and study. The discussion of recollection in *Meno*, however, is relatively limited; it is more fully developed in *Phaedo*, where Socrates attempts to convince his friends of the pre-existence of the soul and of its survival after death. Finally, Plato’s doctrine of recollection culminates in the sweeping prenatal myth of *Phaedrus*, where Socrates gives a famous speech that depicts the tripartite nature of the soul as a chariot always attempting to ascend to the “plain where truth stands” (*Phaedrus* 248C). The second

section of chapter two focuses on Book X of Augustine's *Confessions*, highlighting the Christianization of the ascent of the soul in comparison to Plato's description. Whereas Plato's doctrine of recollection teaches that the soul's ascent is tantamount to liberating itself from the body, Augustine demonstrates both the insufficiency of the soul to ascend by its own power and the importance of bringing the physical body, with all its conflicting passions, into conformity with the transcendent vision. Finally, the third section of chapter two analyzes themes of ascent in Chaucer's translation of Boethius's *Consolatio*. Boethius, like Augustine, also recognizes the limitations of the soul's power to ascend, but he does not explicitly offer a theological reason for its deficiency. Drawing on a long tradition of translation and commentary, however, Chaucer's *Boece* emphasizes the latent theology in the *Consolatio*. By highlighting the underlying theological implications, Chaucer demonstrates his own nuanced view of how the soul can ascend to a vision of God.

Chapter three analyzes the Wife's *Prologue* and *Tale*, and attempts to situate the character of the Wife within the preceding philosophical context. The overall structure of the *Prologue* portrays a trajectory of descent: the Wife moves from a medieval debate style, where she engages with and refutes *auctoritee*, to an autobiographical narrative that recounts her personal experiences in marriage. Moreover, the *Tale* functions as a continuation of the Wife's descent. It mirrors the *Prologue* in its re-imagination of the relationship between *experience* and *auctoritee*; and in the loathly lady's pillow-lecture scene, it depicts the successful ascent of the knight who attains true *gentillesse*. The Wife, however, is not content to leave the pilgrims with a happy ending. She intrudes on the

ending, moralizing her tale as an example of why all husbands should give their wives sovereignty in marriage, and then curses all husbands who refuse to submit. Her final curse reinforces the tale's fictional premise, signaling that such a happy ending is not likely in real life. By undermining the happy ending of her tale with a curse, the Wife descends into the world of the Many, and becomes emblematic of a soul's failed ascent to a vision of transcendent reality.

## CHAPTER TWO

IMAGES OF THE SOUL'S ASCENT IN PLATO, AUGUSTINE, AND THE *BOECE*

One of the distinctive features of western philosophy is the notion that the soul can ascend to a transcendent reality through its memory. In most of the sources, the ascent is predicated on the recognition that understanding is akin to unity, while ignorance stems from fragmentation and multiplicity. In the neoplatonic tradition, the idea of unity became associated with the “One,” and multiplicity became associated with the “Many” (Sweeney). Traditionally the One is a divine and bodiless principle from which every creature and object perceived in the physical world derives its existence. By implication, the structure of the cosmos reflects the image of a pyramid: the One exists at the top and the Many, the various embodied manifestations of the world, cascades downward and outward. Insofar as the human soul exists within a body, it participates in the Many which predisposes it to confusion and ignorance. However, as most classical and medieval philosophers observed, the human soul has the capacity to unify its disparate physical experiences and achieve understanding, thereby indicating its divine origins. Originating with Plato and carried on by his disciples in the Neoplatonic tradition, many philosophers taught that through a process of rigorous study and careful prompting of one’s memory, the soul may ascend from its place in the created world and return to the One, its proper home.

The structure of the ascent remains relatively consistent throughout the writings of the most prominent philosophers in history. Some important differences, however, can be observed in the comparison between Plato, Augustine, and Boethius. Arguably, Plato

is one of the earliest, the most articulate, and the most influential proponent of the soul's ascent. He addresses it specifically in his doctrine of recollection, which he develops over the course of his dialogues *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*. In *Confessions*, Augustine foregrounds the ascent of the soul in his chapter on the nature and function of memory, wherein he attempts to rise above his memory in order to find God. Finally, Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae* [hereafter, *Consolatio*] depicts the ascent of the soul as the result of a scrupulous dialogue with Lady Philosophy. Some of the differences between Plato, Augustine, and Boethius are the result of their religious context: the Christian component of both Augustine's and Boethius's works results in a mutual recognition of the limitations of philosophy and rationality, which is absent in Plato's works given his pre-Christian context. Other differences arise simply due to the uniqueness of each author's project. The Platonic dialogues function primarily as an educative tool; Augustine's *Confessions* is an expression of his own spiritual journey; and Boethius's *Consolatio* is a literary synthesis of a wide range of philosophy and theology, and not necessarily meant as an expression of his own beliefs.

As a poet, Chaucer was firmly rooted in the western philosophic tradition. Much of the philosophic themes that lie just below the surface of his poetry stem from his familiarity with Boethius's *Consolatio*. Through Boethius, Chaucer became closely acquainted with the thought and history of western philosophy, and consequently it was "Boethius who made Chaucer a philosophical poet, and not simply a courtly maker" (Hanna & Lawler, *Boece*, "Introduction" 396). Boethius, however, was not the only philosopher with whom Chaucer came into contact. The numerous references and subtle

thematic allusions to a variety of prominent philosophers and theologians indicate his own familiarity with a broader philosophical context. In his poetry, for example, Chaucer references Plato by name three different times in *The Canterbury Tales*, and twice in *The House of Fame*. None of these instances denote that Chaucer had direct access to any of Plato's dialogues, but "like most of his contemporaries, he knew Plato . . . indirectly" ("Plato," *Riverside Chaucer*). Chaucer's acquaintance with Augustine, however, is more difficult to parse. Aside from a brief reference to the Augustinian order of Friars in the *Romaunt of the Rose* ("Augustyns," *Riverside Chaucer*), Chaucer never mentions Augustine or any of his works by name. Nonetheless, scholars have often drawn parallels between Chaucer's theological themes and rhetorical structure and Augustine's teachings. Rosemarie McGerr has argued that *Chaucer's Retractions* contains allusions to Augustine's own *Retractions*, embodying "Augustine's ideas about the workings of memory, experience, and literature" (98); and Helen Cooper has emphasized the rhetorical link between Augustine and Chaucer in the notion that "style should be pitched in three levels, low, middle, and high" (9). Given Chaucer's familiarity with the most influential philosophy and theology of his day, it is no surprise to find themes of philosophical ascent in his poetry as well. As will be addressed in chapter three, the Wife of Bath, "the most philosophic mind among all of Chaucer's characters in the *Canterbury Tales*" (Masi 65), is a relevant and poignant example of a soul struggling, and ultimately failing to make its ascent.



## 1. Plato: Recollection and the Ascent of the Soul

In *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*, Plato develops the theory of recollection in an attempt to account for how a person can acquire true knowledge. The developmental aspect of Platonic recollection is important because in each dialogue Plato formulates a distinct version of the doctrine in response to a different question and context. The trajectory of Plato's theory begins as a solution to the paradox of the nature of inquiry in *Meno*; it then transitions in *Phaedo* to a discussion about the way sense-perceptions suggest immaterial standards comprehended only by the mind; and finally, in *Phaedrus*, Plato composes a sweeping prenatal myth of the human person that presents the soul as divine and as retaining an epistemic link with a bodiless reality. The development of the theory of recollection is a development of Plato's eschatological vision of the human person.

The Platonic doctrine of recollection first appears in the *Meno*, which is “a transitional work, bridging the Socratic middle period dialogues” (Silverman). While the primary focus of the conversation between Socrates and Meno revolves around the definition of virtue and whether it can be taught, the majority of the dialogue addresses epistemological questions. Socrates' argument for recollection is a response to Meno's having raised the paradoxical issue of philosophical inquiry. Socrates has admitted that he does not know what virtue is, but he is committed to seek it out with the help of Meno. Meno, however, responds:

“And in what way will you seek, Socrates, for that which you know nothing at all about what it is? What sort of thing among those things which you do not know

are you proposing to seek for yourself? Or, even if, at best, you should happen upon it, how will you know it is that which you did not know?" (Plato, *Meno* 80D)

Meno wonders how an ignorant person can seek knowledge, since the desire to know something would require a prior awareness of the knowledge the person supposedly lacks. To resolve the paradox, Socrates argues that having a belief about the object of inquiry is adequate for inquiry itself. Although belief is distinct from true knowledge, it indicates some form of acquaintance with knowledge. He bases the notion of a previous acquaintance with knowledge on the authority of priests and priestesses who teach "the human soul to be immortal" and "never destroyed" (80B). Birth and death are components of a cosmic cycle, wherein the soul "has seen all things both here and in the house of Hades" (80B). Thus, "there is nothing it has not learned" (80C). Knowledge, in other words, is latent within the human soul, and philosophic inquiry is a matter of eliciting that knowledge through careful prompting.

Aside from Socrates' assertion and subsequent untested assumption of the immortality and lifecycle of the soul, Plato does not venture any broader claims about the relationship between memory and a higher bodiless reality in *Meno*. Instead, recollection echoes the Aristotelian conception of rationality as the unique and highest function of human persons. The emphasis in *Meno*, as A. E. Taylor argues, is that "knowledge can only be won by personal participation in 'research;' it cannot simply be handed on from one man to another" (136-37). Recollection is not an attempt to call up pre-existing ideas from within the soul; rather, it is a recovery effort, an attempt to rediscover a forgotten

understanding of the reality which the physical world can only suggest to human sense-perceptions. *Meno*, as Charles Kahn observes, gives arguments for direct knowledge by acquaintance, but it does not give the objects of such knowledge (Kahn 122).

In contrast, the *Phaedo* presents an explicit discussion about the objects of knowledge and offers the doctrine of recollection as evidence for the pre-existence of the soul. The dialogue is set in the hours leading up to Socrates' execution, and his companions are raising questions about the immortality of the soul. Simmias and Cebes are specifically concerned to know whether the soul existed prior to being born into a mortal body and whether it will continue to exist after death. To assuage their fears, Socrates reintroduces the doctrine of recollection to establish the soul's epistemic link with knowledge, and therefore its prior existence. He begins by noting the way human sense-perceptions prompt a recognition of a universal idea. For example, the comparison of two sticks of different lengths can put the observer in mind of the idea of "Equality" which is altogether separate from the sticks themselves: "We say that there is something that is equal. I do not mean a stick equal to a stick or a stone to a stone, or anything of that kind, but something else beyond all these, the Equal itself" (Plato, *Phaedo* 74A). Although the perception of the equality of the sticks is insufficient, it nevertheless indicates that the idea of the "Equal" exists somewhere beyond the physical senses. Socrates then argues that a person's soul must have become acquainted with knowledge of the "Equal" at some other point during its history.

After establishing the doctrine of recollection as evidence for the pre-existence of the soul, Plato ventures two more logical conclusions. First, Socrates concludes that if a

person's sense-perceptions call to mind an immaterial idea, then "our present argument is no more about the Equal than about the Beautiful itself, the Good itself, the Just, the Pious and, as I say, about all those things which we mark with the seal of 'what it is'" (75D). Recollection—activated by sense-perception—reacquaints the mind with Reality itself. Such knowledge, however, suggests a connection between the soul and reality. If the senses can only suggest a transcendent reality which the soul can recall and understand, then the soul must have some share in that same reality. Hence, Socrates argues:

"If those realities we are always talking about exist, the Beautiful and the Good and all that kind of reality, and we refer all the things we perceive to that reality, discovering that it existed before and is ours, and we compare those things with it, then, just as they exist, so our soul must exist before we are born." (76D-E)

According to Socrates, the soul can be reminded of reality because it is like reality. Kahn similarly argues that "the transcendence of the soul is entailed by its epistemic link, via recollection, to the nature of the Forms" (123). Although Socrates does not thoroughly explain his claim that the soul bears a kinship with a transcendent reality through recollection, it nevertheless sets the stage for the myth of the soul in *Phaedrus*.

As the culmination of Plato's doctrine of recollection, *Phaedrus* constructs a mythological prenatal image of the life of the soul as a divine festal procession. Although the dialogue itself does not explicitly address recollection, the myth is deeply rooted in the notion of the lifecycle of the soul to which Socrates originally alluded to in *Meno*. Socrates tells the myth because he felt prompted by a sudden conviction that his previous

speech was inappropriate since it had failed to justly represent the nature of love. Love, Socrates argues, is a “sort of madness . . . given us by the gods to ensure our greatest fortune” (Plato, *Phaedrus* 245C). However, in order to understand divine madness, “we must first understand the truth about the nature of the soul” (245C). Socrates begins with the psychology of the soul, describing it as “immortal . . . because whatever is always in motion is immortal” (245C), and that the soul’s structure resembles the image of a charioteer driving two winged horses. Each component of the chariot represents a different aspect of the soul: the charioteer represents rationality; the good horse is beautiful and responsive to the charioteer, while the bad horse is unresponsive and “drags its charioteer toward the earth” (247B); and the wings of the horses indicate the soul’s ability to ascend to “where the gods dwell” (246E). Socrates then summarizes the life of every soul as one that partakes in a celestial procession, led by the gods who circumnavigate the cosmos, ascending to “the place beyond heaven” where they can be nourished by a vision of bodiless reality—i.e., the Forms described in *Phaedo* as the Beautiful, the Good, and the Just (247C).

While the gods can easily reach the “plain where truth stands” (248C), human souls must struggle. In this struggle, few souls will succeed to take their place among the gods. For the others, the struggle will cause them to lose their wings and so descend to the earth to receive a bodily form. The bodily incarnation of a soul is determined by the heights to which it attained during the procession. Socrates clarifies that a soul cannot receive the body of a wild animal on its first incarnation, but depending on the quality of life it leads, it may eventually descend into an animal form. Souls can only recover their

wings after they have been incarnated into a human body. Only as a human can the soul recollect “the things of which [it] caught a glimpse when it was following the great procession of the gods, and it is only man to whom experiences of sense suggest these recollections” (Taylor 308). Specifically, it is the philosophical mind that will grow wings, “since its memory always keeps it as close as possible to those realities by being close to which the gods are divine” (Plato, *Phaedrus* 249C). In the myth of *Phaedrus*, memory is the primary catalyst for re-growing the soul’s wings because it is the process by which a person becomes reacquainted with a prenatal vision of divine life and of a transcendent reality.

Socrates concludes the myth not by drawing a didactic moral lesson, but by hinting at the close relationship between ontology and epistemology. He explains that “a man who uses reminders [i.e., sense-perceptions] of these things [i.e., Forms] correctly is always at the highest, most perfect level of initiation, and he is the only one who is perfect as perfect can be” (249D). Like the epistemic link implied between the soul and the Forms in the *Phaedo*, Socrates reinforces the psychological health of the soul as the result of remaining in contact with reality itself. As Kahn argues, the “deep meaning” of recollection is Plato’s “notion of kinship or formal identity between the mind and the world, between the soul and the Forms” (Kahn 131). Hence only humans can recover their wings and re-ascend to the divine procession. For Plato, recollecting a vision of a transcendent reality does not merely clarify the confusion of sense-perceptions, it transforms the moral condition of the soul as well. The chariot will be balanced—the

charioteer will have command, and the horses will respond appropriately having recovered their wings, becoming “perfect as perfect can be.”

With respect to Chaucer, his most likely connection to Plato would have come through Boethius’s *Consolatio*. Through Boethius, Chaucer would have been familiar with Plato’s cosmology and his doctrine of recollection. Boethius provides a clear depiction of Plato’s cosmology in Lady Philosophy’s famous hexameter prayer which is “closely linked to Plato’s *Timaeus*” (Marenbon, *Boethius* 107). In the prayer, Philosophy describes how the universe has its origins in God’s creative act, and more importantly that it is man’s purpose “to looke on [God], that is our ende” (Chaucer, *Boece* III.m.9.8-9).<sup>3</sup> Boethius also explicitly mentions Plato’s doctrine of recollection. In her song about how the soul can transcend its physical circumstances, Philosophy says, “And if so be that the Muse and the doctrine of Plato syngeth soth, al that every wyght leerneth, he ne doth no thing elles thane but recordeth, as men recorden thinges that ben foryeten” (III.m.11.43-47). Traces of both Plato’s cosmology and the doctrine of recollection can be found in *The Canterbury Tales*. For example, Chaucer references the *Timaeus* once in the *General Prologue* (I.741-2), and once in the *Manciple’s Tale* (IX.207). Additionally, as I shall argue in chapter three, the theme of the soul’s ascent surfaces in the Wife of Bath’s *Prologue* and *Tale* in two ways: 1) her debate concerning the epistemic worth of *auctoritee* and *experience* indirectly parallels the Platonic notion of the One and the Many, and 2) the Loathly Lady’s pillow-lecture enacts a variation of a philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Chaucer’s *Boece* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Edited by Larry D. Benson, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987.

dialectic that enables the knight to attain a vision of true *gentillesse* which transcends all worldly ties.

## **2. Augustine's *Confessions*: Remembering God**

Like Plato, Augustine of Hippo demonstrates in the *Confessions* that an awareness of a transcendent reality requires careful introspection and prompting of memory. The *Confessions*, however, represents a specifically Christian approach to the ascent of the soul because it is patterned on the incarnation of Christ. Augustine's argument first attempts to ascend to God by rising above memory, but his meditation ends with a descent, as he engages in the difficult task of conforming his desires and habits to God's command for continence. For Augustine, memory functions as a mediator which enables man's awareness of God by way of his own insufficiency to attain self-knowledge. Paige Hochschild has argued that "Augustine is not really interested in knowledge of God so much as conformity to God in the whole person, knowing in temporal living the stability and peace of the divine mode of being" (141). Unlike a Platonic ascent to the knowledge of divine unity, Augustine's pattern of ascent does not leave behind the sensible world. The flesh may be at war with the spirit which struggles to apprehend a bodiless reality, but the incarnation demonstrates "the total effectiveness of divine initiative" to reconcile the spirit with the flesh (151). Augustine foregrounds the eschatological significance of memory as one that parallels divine condescension in the person of Christ. Only when he recognizes the insufficiency of his ability to "rise above" memory does he finally discern the rest his heart desires (Augustine, X.viii.12).



Although Book X marks a significant transition in the narrative of the *Confessions*, it nevertheless reiterates Augustine's initial request: "Grant me Lord to know and understand (Ps. 118:34, 73, 144)" (I.i.1). The difference, however, is temporal. While the first nine books recount a series of events from his past, Book X shifts the narrative into the present. Augustine's acquired faith has properly oriented him to God as the highest object of knowledge, but he still lacks an understanding of who God is and his relationship to human persons. More importantly, Augustine desires to be conformed to truth: "Power of my soul, enter into it and fit it for yourself, so that you may have and hold it 'without spot or blemish' (Eph. 5:27)" (X.i.1). Understanding implies more than mere intellectual assent; it includes a palpable transformation of desire and behavior in the present.

Augustine's initial ascent to knowledge and understanding of God begins with a survey of the created world. He is certain of his love for God but he asks, "When I love you [God], what do I love?" (X.vi.8). Although he recognizes that no physical object corresponds with his love for God, he also recalls experiences of having discerned the object of his desire in encounters with physical objects, where, for example, "my soul is floodlit by light which space cannot contain . . . where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part" (Xvi.8). Nevertheless, when he reflects on the beauty of creation, and asks the various creatures of the world whether they are the God he is searching for, he is met with a resounding, "It is not I" and "He made us (Ps. 99:3)" (X.vi.9).

Having discovered that God is not in the created world, Augustine turns to look for God within himself. He determines that "what is inward is superior" because "all

physical evidence is reported to the mind which presides and judges of the responses of heaven and earth” (X.vi.9). The turn inward, however, forces a distinction: a) God should not be confused with the soul itself, since God “is for you the life of your life” (X.vi.10); but b) the ascent to God must be an activity of the soul since it is the “highest element” (X.vii.11). The search for God is simultaneously inward and upward. When he considers the specific faculty of the soul which enables a person to unify the disparate information received by the senses, he arrives at memory.

While Augustine’s depiction of memory contains elements of Plato’s doctrine of recollection, he develops it further. Henry Chadwick observes that Augustine expands on Platonic recollection because he “develops the notion of memory by associating it with the unconscious (‘the mind knows things it does not know it knows’), with self-awareness, and so with the human yearning for true happiness found only in knowing God” (185). Memory is a field and a vast palace that contains innumerable objects, including sense perceptions (Augustine X.viii.12), skills (X.ix.16), language (X.x.17), numbers and geometry (X.xii.19), affections of the mind (X.xiv.21), even the idea of memory and forgetfulness (X.xvi.24-25). More impressive to Augustine is the power of memory to recollect the variety of information it stores. The effect of memory’s power provides a sense of unity and self-coherence to otherwise isolated events and experiences, and it shifts the past into the present so that “whatever we think about . . . in some way alter[s] the deliverance of the senses and whatever else has been deposited and placed on reserve” (X.viii.12). As Rosemarie McGerr explains, memory creates “an artificial simultaneity that facilitates cognition” (103), mediating the sensible and intelligible.

Hochschild similarly observes that memory looks down or outward to the world of the senses and up or inward to a bodiless reality where God dwells (147). Augustine discovers that the objects contained within the memory are innumerable, exceeding his ability to circumscribe memory's limits: "The varieties there cannot be counted, and are, beyond any reckoning, full of innumerable things" (X.xvii.26).

Since memory gathers and unifies the information of the senses, Augustine recognizes that memory occupies a middle position between the created world and the place where God dwells. Thus, to ascend to God, Augustine's initial aim is to "rise above that natural capacity in a step by step ascent to him who made me" (X.viii.12). However, after exploring the various caverns and powers of memory, his attempt at transcendence fails. Memory itself is incomprehensible, the limitations of which remain out of reach (X.xvii.26). In his search for God, Augustine realizes he has encountered a paradox. God is not to be found as an object contained within his memory, yet ascending to God—i.e. to a place beyond memory—is not possible. If he were to find God outside of his memory, he could not be mindful of him, and "how shall I find you if I am not mindful of you?" (X.xvii.26). As a result, the nature of Augustine's inquiry changes. He transitions from searching for God as a separate entity and instead searches for God as a remembered state of joy, a state of satisfied desire commensurate with reality.

Unlike the parable of the woman who lost her drachma (X.xviii.27), remembering God is no longer a search for a lost object; instead, Augustine recognizes that he has lost a state of being. Rowan Williams argues that to remember God as "an encounter with . . . a reality wholly prior to and independent of us," Augustine must borrow "the language of

desire and sensuality” (9). Following in the tradition of his philosophical forebears, Augustine starts from the premise that all men desire happiness and that “the happy life is joy based on truth” (X.xxiii.33). Unlike his previous search among the mental objects of memory, joy is not an object for possession but a state “of attunement to reality which we seek to recover” (Williams 8). The shift from “object” to “state” allows Augustine to reconcile the seemingly antagonistic relationship between the sensible and the intelligible, between the immanent and the transcendent. James Wetzel has argued that Book X is essentially a failure of memory in the sense that Augustine fails to fully recollect all his experiences: “He has more to regret than he can possibly remember and more to hope than he can possibly anticipate” (158). It is by way of failure, however, that Augustine remembers God. Because memory itself is incomprehensible, Augustine “has had the experience of God interrupt his self’s soliloquy” (157). Augustine realizes that he is most absent from God when “I am more present to myself than to you [God]” (X.v.7). If he were to have completely comprehended and delimited memory, then he would not have been able to remember God because he would not have been aware of the way the incomprehensibility of self-knowledge interrupts and points to the transcendence of God.

Toward the end of Book X, Augustine’s argument turns from a contemplation of God in his transcendence and descends again to the world of the senses. Although memory has mediated his spiritual ascent, he recognizes that there remains “a struggle between my regrets at my evil past and my memories of good joys” (X.xxviii.39). The struggle between the flesh and the spirit, his tendency toward sin despite his desire for joy, are both components to his whole being which need to be conformed to the will of

God. Hochschild has noted that memory's role in the last half of Book X "is of continuing but ambiguous significance" (150), since it retains not only memories of joy but of Augustine's sinful habits. The ambiguity, however, points to the shift in Augustine's argumentative focus: if he cannot transcend memory and if God is not a remembered object, then the power of memory must retain deeper, symbolic significance for the relationship between God and man.

By the end of Book X, memory functions as a metaphor and signifier for the truth of the incarnation, and the work of Christ as "The true mediator" (X.xliii.68). After an extended survey of his continuing struggle with the flesh, Augustine identifies God's descent in the person of Christ as the model for the acquisition of self-knowledge and transcendence. He recognizes that he must embrace mortality and limit "in order to receive a life beyond mortality and limit" (Williams 12). Transcendence is not enough to satisfy Augustine's restlessness because a vision of a bodiless reality will fail to bring about a change in behavior and habit; it will also provide a false sense of self-confidence in having achieved a stable view of reality, when in fact memory attests to the incomprehensibility of reality and the self. Thus, Augustine ends with the frequent declaration, "I know myself less well than I know you" (X.xxxvii.62). It is the power of memory—not its mental objects—which points to God and to Christ, the *verax mediator*, who will bring into conformity the sinful habits that continue to plague Augustine and his desire for joy.

In the works of both Augustine and Plato, memory is inextricably linked to an eschatological vision of reality and human happiness. Plato's doctrine of recollection

emphasizes the human ability to transcend the particularity and fragmented condition of physical circumstances by ascending to the “plain where truth stands” (*Phaedrus* 248C). Augustine shares Plato’s notion of transcendence but he lacks a similarly stable vision of a bodiless reality and the inevitable change it would cause in the soul. Memory does not lead Augustine to God—i.e., in a “step by step ascent” to a place where he can gaze immovably on reality itself. Instead, memory protests his presumption for seeking God as an object of knowledge, and reinforces an awareness of his own intellectual limitations. Such limitations reveal memory’s power and symbolic significance as a mediator between the intelligible and the sensible; it is not an escape route from the temptations of the flesh. For Augustine, a vision of God in his transcendence is not enough to bring about the necessary changes of behavior and habits. The resolution to the inadequacy of philosophical ascent is found in the incarnation of Christ. In Christ’s incarnation, God descends into the human condition, initiating the unifying work that collects a person’s fragmented and isolated experiences. The realization of the effect of the incarnation “will be complete only eschatologically” (Cavadini 124), but the benefits are already experienced and remembered as moments of joy.

While it remains uncertain whether Chaucer had direct access to Augustine’s *Confessions*, a similar theme concerning memory emerges in the character and story of the Wife of Bath. The dual ability of memory to look upward/inward and downward/outward is present in the Wife of Bath’s *Prologue*, but it produces a different result. The autobiographical turn in the final section of her *Prologue*, for example, leads the Wife deeper into the solitary and isolated reality of her character. Unlike Augustine,

the turn inward does not afford the soul's ascent; instead, it prompts her descent into the world of experience. Augustine's inability to circumscribe memory's limits prompts him to recognize that the soul's ascent cannot be solely motivated by memory. The ascent must be supplemented by a renewed understanding that God—man's *summum bonum*—is not an object to be stored or possessed by the mind; rather, it is a recollection of a state of being in relationship to God's transcendent presence. The Wife's *Prologue* depicts a similar understanding of memory, but the multiplicity of her experiences do not dispose her to a transcendent moral vision. Her autobiographical narrative ends with the implicit death of her fifth husband, which recalls her eager expectation for a sixth husband, "whan that evere he shal" (45), and solidifies her portrait as a character confined to the fragmented nature of personal experience.

### 3. The *Boece*: Philosophy's Prayerful Ascent

The tradition of a philosophical ascent to a vision of the good—as depicted in Plato's doctrine of recollection and Augustine's exploration of memory—finds a uniquely literary-philosophical expression in Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae*, a text with which Chaucer was intimately familiar. Writing from prison, Boethius draws on recent autobiographical events and tells a story of his recent misfortune. While writing poetry that despairs of his false imprisonment due to a series of political events, he is visited by Lady Philosophy, a personification of the philosophic tradition, who attempts to restore him to a state of mind that is impervious to the mutability of Fortune. Like Plato and Augustine, Boethius's consolation is depicted as the ascent of the soul which is effected by memory.

Because of the blend of ancient philosophy presented in the *Consolatio* and because of Boethius's own historical context writing as a Roman at the end of the fifth-century, Boethius "has long been recognized as one of the most important intermediaries between ancient philosophy and the Latin Middle Ages" (Marenbon, *Stanford Encyclopedia*). After a period of relative obscurity, the *Consolatio* became one of the most popularly studied texts in the Middle Ages, creating a "living tradition" of translation and interpretation (Machan 155), evident by "the numerous surviving manuscripts, glosses, and commentaries that followed thereafter" (Phillips 221). The *Consolatio* was especially important for medieval Christian writers who saw the work as compatible with Christian teaching even if it lacks explicit Christian doctrine. Modern scholarship also corroborates Boethius's Christian subtext, since "Boethius was a Christian writer who had a Christian audience in mind" (Marenbon, *Boethius* 156). As a result, medieval translations acquire subtle theological coloring, and the Latin commentaries often explain philosophical concepts presented by Lady Philosophy in Christian terms.

Geoffrey Chaucer made his own contribution to the *Consolatio* tradition, writing his prose *Boece* in ca. 1380-85. Although he relied heavily on Jean de Meun's French translation and Nicholas Trivet's Latin commentary, Chaucer's translation demonstrates his awareness of Boethius's philosophical nuances and the potential theological subtext of the *Consolatio*. As John Marenbon has pointed out, Boethian criticism has centered on the incoherencies of Lady Philosophy's arguments in Books IV & V, and the interpretive difficulty these incoherencies pose for understanding the quality and effectiveness of



Boethius's consolation (Marenbon, *Boethius* 146). The result of Philosophy's medicinal remedies is not a vision of a monolithic bodiless reality, but a recognition of philosophy's limitations and an exhortation to prayer. Chaucer recognizes the trajectory of Boethius's consolation, and at various points in the *Boece* provides subtle interpretive cues that parallel the *Consolatio*'s theologically-informed tradition of translation and interpretation. By comparing the *Boece* with the *Consolatio*, the effect of Boethius's philosophic ascent more clearly derives its impetus from the inherent limitations of philosophy's mode of knowing, which is subsequently supplemented with the hope of ascent through prayer.

### 3.1 Forgetfulness and Misology

At the beginning of the *Boece*, Boethius the character is "wepyng" and composing poetry, "constreyned to bygyngen vers of sorwful matere" (Chaucer, *Boece* I.m.1.1-2). He has been exiled from his country and is now awaiting trial. His despair stems from what he perceives to be the fickle promises of fortune. Prior to his imprisonment, he reminisces about having been the recipient of fortune's favor. He regards the sudden change of fortune and his ensuing circumstances as the source of his despair. Amid his hopelessness, Boethius is visited by Lady Philosophy who identifies him as one of her own, a man that "hath ben norysed in the studies or scoles of Eleacticis and Achademycis in Grece" (I.pr.1.67-68). She banishes the muses that attend Boethius's poetry and sets to work diagnosing his mental condition and applying her medicinal remedies.

Philosophy recognizes that Boethius is in a state of mental confusion; his mind has “forleteth his proper clernesse” (I.m.2.2-3). Philosophy also sees that Boethius does not recognize her because of his confusion. Nevertheless, she is not concerned, because “he is fallen into literagye, whiche that is a commune seknesse to hertes that been desceyved” (I.pr.2.18-21). Specifically, Boethius has forgotten “hymselfe” because he has also forgotten philosophy (I.pr.2.22). While it is tempting to interpret Boethius’s “seknesse” as a mere literary device that anticipates the dialogue, Antonio Donato has argued that an understanding of Boethius’s condition “is the key for the understanding of the whole text” (463). Like the ascent through memory in Plato and Augustine, the *Consolatio*’s emphasis on Boethius’s forgetfulness indicates not merely the inability to recall specific philosophical doctrines, but a mode of existence that is in tune with a transcendent reality. Understanding Boethius’s mental condition, therefore, is necessary for understanding the quality and the effectiveness of Lady Philosophy’s consolation.

Philosophy further diagnoses Boethius when she questions him about the governing principle in the cosmos. Boethius can recall that “God, makere and maister, is govenour of his werk” (Chaucer, *Boece* I.pr.6.14-15), but he cannot recall how God governs the world, nor the “eende of thynges” (I.pr.6.48-49), nor “what thing is a man” (I.pr.6.60). Because of his forgetfulness, he believes he is exiled and stripped of his goods, the fluctuations of fortune are uncontrolled, and that wicked men prosper. Boethius’s poor memory leads Philosophy to a proper assessment of his condition:

The nature of thoughtes desceyved is this, that, as ofte as they casten away sothe opynyouns, they clothen hem in false opynyouns, of the whiche false opynyouns

the derknesse of perturbacion waxeth up, that confowndeth the verray insyghte.

(I.pr.6.94-100)

While Lady Philosophy remains optimistic about Boethius's recovery, her final diagnosis is more serious than the earlier passages would suggest. Boethius has not passively forgotten philosophy's teachings; he has actively "casten away sothe opynyouns" and clothed himself "in false opynyouns." Boethius, in other words, suffers from misology: he has rejected both his philosophic learning and his philosophic way of life.

In ancient philosophy, the concept of misology originates with Plato's *Phaedo*, where Socrates describes a common negative reaction to the tediousness and sometimes disappointing nature of philosophic discourse (88C-90E). Socrates explains that misology, like misanthropy, occurs when a person experiences a series of disappointments, having put "his trust in an argument as being true, then shortly afterwards believes it to be false" (90B). The result of such disappointment will then cause a person to "shift the blame away from himself to the arguments" (90D). Similarly, in the *Consolatio*, Boethius's forgetfulness implicitly results from a prior decision to reject philosophic discourse, which is evident in the vocabulary of the Latin and in Chaucer's translation of Philosophy's diagnosis. Philosophy uses the Latin word *abicerint* which means to give up or throw away ("abicio"). Specifically, the verb indicates that Boethius "no longer has faith in the discipline" (Donato 476). Unlike some modern English translations, Chaucer's *Boece* remains close to the Latin, translating

*abicerint* in the active voice as “casten away sothe opynyouns” (I.pr.6.94-100).<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, Philosophy’s medicinal remedies must restore Boethius’s faith in philosophy, which will require both the restoration of true opinions and a renewed resolve to pursue a philosophic life.

Of all the true opinions needed to heal Boethius of his misology, self-knowledge takes precedence. Through the images of the citadel, the well-ordered life, and man’s native country, Philosophy reminds Boethius that a man need not be subject to the whims of fortune. In the image of the citadel, Philosophy demonstrates how “resoun” will gather, lead, and protect philosophers from the “fleetynge errour” of wicked men by housing them within his “tour” (I.pr.3.74). Lady Philosophy then internalizes the image of the citadel in her song about the well-ordered life, in which she sings about how a man who is “cleer of virtue, sad and wel ordynat of lyvyng” can look upon both good and bad fortune “undesconfited” (I.m.4.1 & 5). Both the image of the citadel and the well-ordered life culminate in her discussion about man’s native country. Boethius has complained about being exiled from his city, but Lady Philosophy points out that his experience of exile is self-inflicted. He has forgotten his true city, the one from which he cannot be banished if he “levere founden therin his sete or his hous” (I.pr.5.28-29). Philosophy explains that Boethius does not suffer from a physical exile but from an intellectual exile because he has forsaken “the sete of thi thought” (I.pr.5.41-42). Lady

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<sup>2</sup> From S. J. Tester’s translation: “Men’s minds are obviously such that when *they lose* true opinions they have to take up false ones” (Tester 171, my emphasis). Tester’s translation “they lose” connotes a passive action instead of an intentional rejection.

Philosophy's initial remedy, therefore, is a reminder that the human person can and should orient himself toward a stable mode of existence.

The human soul's ability to withstand the mutability of fortune, however, is not only characterized by a retreat from the world of external goods. In her retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, Philosophy emphasizes that the soul obtains its security through a sustained effort of looking and moving upwards toward the "cleernesse of sovereyn good" (III.m.12.63). The ascent is possible because of the nature of the human soul. In her song prior to the Orpheus myth, for example, Lady Philosophy sings of the soul's "seed of soth":

For certes the body, bryngynge the weighte of foryetyngge, ne hath nat chased out of your thought al the cleernesse of your knowing; for certeynli the seed of soth haldeth and clyveth within yowr corage, and it is awaked and excited by the wynde and by the blastes of doctrine. For wherefore elles demen ye of your owene wil the ryghtes, whan ye ben axid, but if so were that the norysschynges of resoun ne lyvede yplounged in the depe of your herte? (*This to seyn, how schulde men deme the sothe of any thing that were axid, yif ther nere a rote of sothfastnesse that were yploungid and hyd in the naturel principles, the whiche sothfastnesse lyvede within the depnesse of the thought?*) And if so be that the Muse and the doctrine of Plato syngeth soth, al that every wyght leerneth, he ne doth no thing elles thane but recordeth, as men recorden thinges that ben foryeten. (III.m.11.28-47)

Although Boethius has been overwhelmed by passions and bodily desires, Lady Philosophy argues that he still retains the required element necessary for transcending his circumstances. The “seed of soth,” intrinsic to the soul, corresponds with a transcendent reality, echoing Plato’s notion of the soul as having a kinship with the Forms. Like the Platonic doctrine of recollection, the “seed of soth” must be “awaked and excited by the wynde and by the blastes of doctrine,” which will allow it to ascend to a state of immutability.

The Boethian ascent of the soul in Chaucer’s *Boece*, however, is not strictly Platonic. Ian Johnson, for example, has pointed out that Chaucer’s translation of the “seed of soth” passage aligns with the Christian translation tradition of the *Consolatio*. Following Jean de Meun’s French version, Chaucer translates the Latin *introrsum* [within, inwards, internally (“introrsum”)] as *corage* [heart, inclination, desire (“corage”)]; in doing so, he implies that the affective qualities of the soul are compatible with rationality. Additionally, the “seed of soth” both “haldeth and clyveth” to the *corage*, where “haldeth” indicates immovability of purpose, and “clyveth” connotes a willed emotional attachment (Johnson, “The Ascending Soul” 252). According to Johnson, Chaucer’s emphasis on the affective nature of the “seed of soth” aligns him with mainstream theological teachings which taught that “the virtues and grace necessarily involve the cooperation of God and humanity . . . and the conception of the soul as an image of divinity” (252). Where the vulgate *Consolatio* may appear ambiguous about the affective nature of the soul’s ascent, Chaucer foregrounds the combination of reason and

emotion, thereby evoking the perceived Christian subtext of Lady Philosophy's argument.

### *3.2 The Limitations of Philosophy*

Having addressed the nature of the soul and its ability to transcend its circumstances, Philosophy transitions to the stronger medicines where she explains the relationship between freewill and God's sovereign governance of the world. Marenbon identifies two distinct but closely related issues in Lady Philosophy's argument for freewill. She first addresses the "Problem of Providence," which concerns the way the human will can remain free despite the "causal chain of events" set in motion by divine providence (Marenbon, *Boethius* 127). Lady Philosophy resolves the problem, arguing:

"The whiche thingis natheles the lokynge of the devyne purveaunce seth, that alle thingis byholdeth and seeth fro eterne, and ordeyneth hem everiche in here merites as thei ben predestinat." (V.pr.2.43-48)

Within the order of providence, good and bad actions tend toward natural consequences. God is not a micromanager doling out punishments and rewards in every specific instance. Rather, he sets the context in which certain actions will naturally result in a corresponding outcome that will either be beneficial or detrimental to the agent. No action is predetermined, and every person can choose freely between a seemingly infinite number of possible behaviors since God has prearranged the system in which those actions will occur.

Although Lady Philosophy's argument resolves the problem of providence for Boethius, it also prompts a related question: how can a person act freely if all events are

foreknown by God? For if God knows beforehand “nat oonly the werkes of men, but also hir conseilles and hir willes, thane ne schal ther be no liberte of arbitrie” (V.pr.3.13-16). For Boethius, foreknowledge includes a man’s actions, thoughts, and plans. And if God’s foreknowledge cannot be mistaken, then the future must be fixed—hence, there is no possibility of freewill. Philosophy responds that knowledge and causation are distinct and separate capacities: just because God knows an event will occur does not mean that He has caused the event. Philosophy intuitively understands that the distinction between knowledge and causation is unsatisfactory for Boethius. So, she anticipates his objection: “But thou wolt seyn that, al be it so that prescience nis nat cause of the necessite of bytydyng to thingis to comen, algatis yit it is a signe that the things ben bytyden by necessite” (V.pr.4.55-59). Philosophy recognizes that she must delve further into the nature of knowledge itself. As she indicates in her response, even if knowledge does not cause an event to occur, the event *must* occur; otherwise, foreknowledge is non-existent and God’s knowledge is reduced to human knowledge.

To address the problem that knowledge of a future event implies fixity, Philosophy introduces the Modes of Cognition Principle. She argues that knowledge “must be relativized to the knower” (Marenbon, *Boethius* 132), not according to the object of knowledge. To clarify, she posits four modes of knowing in ascending order: *wit* [sensory perception (“wit”)], *ymaginacioun*, *resoun*, and *intelligence* (V.pr.4.152-54). Using the example of how these modes of knowledge understand a man, Philosophy explains that *wit* perceives man’s “enmattered shape” (Marenbon, *Boethius*, 133); *ymaginacioun* comprehends the shape of a man abstracted from matter; and *resoun*



comprehends a man's particular shape by placing it under a universal category (i.e., men). The "eighe of intelligence," on the other hand, beholds the simple Form of shape itself—the "simple Form" being that which exists eternally "in the devyne thought" (V.pr.4.166). Moreover, unlike the other three modes of cognition, *intelligence* is not bound by the discursive nature of *resoun*, *ymaginacioun*, or *wit* because it is an eternal perspective, not restricted by the sequence of time. Finally, Philosophy adds that each higher form of knowing encompasses the lower, while the lower forms "ariseth nat in no manere to the heyere strengthe" (V.pr.4.170-72).

The implication of Philosophy's Modes of Cognition is twofold. First, it solves, for Boethius, the problem of the question of whether God's foreknowledge excludes freewill because God's knowledge partakes of the mode of intelligence. She compares God's knowledge of the future to a person's knowledge of the present, in which an action is known by the fact of its occurrence, not because it was known beforehand. Similarly, God's eternal existence is not constrained by the sequential movement of time. His mode of knowledge is such that He can behold all events "by [o] strook of thought formely (*withoute discours or callacioun*)" (V.pr.4.189-91). Second, the Modes of Cognition Principle indicates that the philosophic capacity for knowledge is limited to the mode of *resoun*, and that Boethius will need to turn from logical argument to God in order to attain the divine perspective. Like Augustine who recognized the insufficiency of memory, Boethius's philosophic ascent through recollection is finite. Book V of the *Consolatio* is the climactic turning point of Boethius's ascent, and in the hands of Chaucer, it acquires a stronger religious theme.

### 3.3 Hope, Prayer, and the Boece's Christian Theme

In light of Philosophy's epistemic limitations, the dual nature of her consolation becomes apparent. Given Boethius's misogyny, the "seed of soth" that inheres in his soul not only needs to be "awaked and excited by the wynde and by the blastes of doctrine" (III.m.11.33-35); it requires a renewed trust in philosophic discourse and in his ability to attain the divine perspective. However, because philosophic discourse is not itself a sufficient end, Philosophy points beyond herself and exhorts Boethius to prayer. Her discussion about freewill transitions from argumentative proofs to the restoration of Boethius's hope that God hears and responds to his petitions.

Chaucer demonstrates his own awareness of the religious shift in Philosophy's discourse, and following in the *Consolatio* translation tradition, he heightens the latent devotional aspect of the argument. The first time prayer is mentioned, Philosophy explains the consequence of a determinist view of God's providence:

"Than nis ther no resoun to han hope in God, ne for to preien to God. For what scholde sight hopen to God, or why scholde he preien to God, syn that the ordenance of destine whiche that main at ben enclyned knytteth and streyneth alle thingis that men mai desire? Thanne scholde ther be don away thilke oonly alliaunce bytwixen God and men (that is to seyn, to hopen and to preien)" (V.pr.3.193-94).

As Megan Murton has argued, Chaucer's translation choices indicate his theological sensibility. Like Jean de Meun, Chaucer stresses the direction of prayer with the phrase "to God"—a phrase which does not have "precedent in the original Latin" (Murton 300).

Second, Chaucer chooses *alliaunce* for the Latin word *commercium* which is often translated as “intercourse and communication” in modern translations.<sup>5</sup> The use of *alliaunce* “introduces connotations of faithfulness, trust, and relationship” (Murton 301), which are not presented in the Latin version of the *Consolatio* for several more lines.<sup>6</sup> The effect of Chaucer’s translation choices colors the passage with a greater sense of the devotional component of Philosophy’s consolatory purpose.

In her concluding statement, Philosophy reiterates the necessity of hope and prayer for the remainder of Boethius’s ascent: “Withstond thane and eschue thou vices; worschipe and love thou vertues; areise thi corage to rightful hopes; yilde thou humble preieres an heyhe” (V.pr.6.302-310). Philosophy’s turn to prayer indicates a distinct transition in her language at the end of the *Consolatio*. Joel Relihan argues that Philosophy’s shift “points to that which is missing” in Philosophy’s consolation, namely the Christian “access to God through humble prayer” (61). God is no longer a philosophic puzzle of providence and prescience; instead, he has the personal traits of watching, judging, hearing, and responding to human prayers. The rightful hope to which Boethius must raise his *corage* is not a philosophical doctrine, but God Himself. Boethius’s ascent is not accomplished only through philosophic discourse, but through “humble preieres an heyhe.”

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<sup>3</sup> S. J. Tester’s translation states, “And so that sole *intercourse* between men and God will be removed” (Tester 401, my emphasis); and Victor Watts’s translation states, “And so the one and only means of *communication* between man and God is removed” (Watts 122, my emphasis).

<sup>4</sup> See the Latin text of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Loeb Classical Library, Harvard UP, V.pr.3.105 & 109.

When compared with the Latin, Chaucer's translation also adds rhetorical weight to the religious turn in Philosophy's conclusion:

Magna vobis est, si dissimulare non vultis, necessitas indicta probitatis, cum ante oculos agitis iudicis cuncta cernentis. (Tester V.pr.6.174-76)

Gret necessite of prowess and vertu is encharged and comaunded to yow, yif ye nil nat dissimulen; syn that ye worken and don (*that is to seyn, your dedes or your werkes*) byform the eyen of the juge that seeth and demeth alle thinges. (Chaucer, *Boece* V.pr.6.305-10)

As Murton observes, Chaucer translates all the important words with two English words: *indicta* becomes "encharged and comaunded;" *probitatis* becomes "prowess and vertu;" *agitis* becomes "worken and don;" and *cerentis* becomes "seeth and demeth" (Murton 305). The repetition of paired words (including the gloss, "dedes or your werkes") in quick succession reinforces the importance of Philosophy's exhortation. Chaucer's translation imbues Philosophy's conclusion with a Christian view of God and, consequently, foregrounds the religious component of Boethius's intellectual and spiritual ascent.

#### **4. Boethian Ascent in Chaucer's Poetry**

Although the *Consolatio* begins with a philosophic ascent of the soul rooted in the Platonic doctrine of recollection, Philosophy's argument ends with a gesture to her own limitations. Philosophic learning as a mode of knowledge is relegated to *resoun*, which makes it insufficient to console or heal Boethius's misery. Philosophy, for example,

demonstrates the insufficiency of *resoun* in her concluding remarks on the providence of God. Despite a series of claims that attempt to disprove a deterministic view of God's providence and prescience, she states:

For certis this strengthe of the devyne science, whiche that embraseth alle thinges by his presentarie knowynge, establissheth manere to alle thinges, and it ne oweth nawht to lattere thinges. (V.pr.6.281-85)

God appears to “establissheth manere to alle thinges” because he knows everything by the “srengthe of the devyne science.” In other words, by knowing himself, God knows everything. The problem with this view, as Marenbon argues, is that “it seems to bring with it God's causal determinism of everything that God knows: for how does God know all things through himself unless he sees himself as their cause?” (Marenbon, *Boethius* 144-45). The distinction between knowledge and causation appears to breakdown, and the question of man's freewill is left unresolved. In effect, Philosophy's argument for freewill results in the kind of disappointment that would cause misogyny to occur within a person, which would leave Boethius right where he started.

The final exhortation to prayer, however, indicates that Philosophy is aware of her limitation. She recognizes the need for a transcendent principle that guides philosophic discourse. Boethius's trust cannot be solely placed in the doctrines of philosophy; he must look higher, channeling his “philosophical insight into religious devotion” (Murton 294). In the *Boece*, Chaucer demonstrates his awareness of and interest in the religious subtext of Philosophy's conclusion by using theologically connotative words in his translation to guide the reader's interpretation of the *Consolatio*. The result is a

philosophical narrative in which logical argument and prayer are the two components required for the soul's ascent to a transcendent reality free from the potential misogyny posed by *resoun*.

The theme of philosophic and spiritual ascent in the *Consolatio* and its strong theological underpinnings in the *Boece* also indicates another important Boethian influence on Chaucer's poetry. Megan Murton, for example, has argued that Troilus's hymn and predestination speech in *Troilus and Criseyde* reflect the theological interpretive principles evident in the *Boece*. Ian Johnson also notes how the "workings of the soul in stirring itself towards God" surfaces both in Chaucer's translation practice and in the *Retracciouns* (245). The theme of ascent and the inherent ambiguity of how a person can cross the threshold from *resoun* to *intelligence* also have particular resonance in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. The portrayal of the Wife's memory in the *Prologue* and the portrayal of the soul's philosophic ascent at the end of the *Tale* have moral implications for her character. In the *Prologue*, the Wife repeatedly demonstrates the various ways theological arguments can be self-refuting and reinterpreted. Her disillusionment with *auctoritee* bears a striking resemblance with Boethius's misogyny. Furthermore, like Lady Philosophy, the Wife's *Tale* transitions from philosophical discourse to prayer, but the prayer transforms into a curse, with the implication that the Wife has descended from the heights of philosophic recollection. Ultimately, the Wife is unsuccessful in her ascent and remains bound to the limitations of *resoun*.

## CHAPTER THREE

*EXPERIENCE, AUCTORITEE, AND THE SOUL'S ASCENT**IN THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE AND TALE*

The philosophic notion that memory affords the possibility of a transcendent moral vision as expressed by Plato, Augustine, and Boethius, undergirds the characterization of the Wife of Bath. In the *Prologue* and *Tale*, Chaucer establishes the theme of memory and philosophical ascent in two ways. First, the *Prologue* invokes a contentious medieval debate concerning the epistemological relationship between *experience* and *auctoritee*. For the Wife, the practical knowledge acquired from personal experience outweighs the value of authoritative sources. She has little patience for *auctoritees* that expound universal principles governing the variety of everyday life. She will not assent, much less ascend, to the possibility of a transcendent reality. Second, in the *Tale*, the Loathly Lady's pillow-lecture employs a philosophic dialectic which parallels Lady Philosophy's attempt to console Boethius. The *Tale* ends with a successful ascent, but the Wife indicates her own distrust of such a happy ending when she intrudes with a prayer that is transformed into a curse for disobedient husbands. Like Augustine and Boethius, the Wife understands the limitations of rationality—e.g., it can be circular and contradictory. Such limitations dispose her to misogyny, and neither the *Prologue* nor the *Tale* indicate that she has or will recover the perspective that the limitations of philosophy point beyond itself.

## 1. The *Prologue*

### 1.1 *Scholastic Disputations and the Insufficiency of Auctoritee*

The Wife of Bath's *Prologue* can be divided into three sections: her parody of a medieval debate (III.1-192), the practical advice gleaned from her first three husbands (III.193-451), and the stories about her fourth and fifth husbands (III.452-828).<sup>7</sup> Although the Wife begins her *Prologue* by announcing her topic as the “wo that is in mariage” (III.3), her method of discussion and her invocation of *experience* and *auctoritee* suggest ulterior motives and a broader intellectual context. W. G. East argues that the Wife's *Prologue* “is not a scholastic debate about Marriage versus Virginity; rather, it is a debate about debates, a disputation about academic disputations” (79). The first section of the *Prologue* demonstrates not only the Wife's intellectual acumen, but her acute awareness of the limitations of rational discourse. She draws on her memory—an impressive mental florilegium of written authoritative sources—to demonstrate the unreliability of *auctoritee* when compared with *experience*.

The scholastic debate form was a dominant pedagogical exercise within medieval universities. Its popularity originated with Abelard, an influential twelfth-century French scholastic philosopher, who “set out on a search for truth amidst the conflict of authoritative doctrines current at the time” (Atkins xlvi). The purpose of the debate format was twofold. On the one hand, participants attempted to reconcile contradictory knowledge claims among a variety of authoritative sources. The debate, Atkins observes,

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987.



was an earnest attempt “to reconcile the contradictions, to arrive in the end at some positive truth” (xlix). On the other hand, such resolutions were not always possible, nor were they always pedagogically desirable. An equally important and concurrent purpose for debates aimed at improving the intellectual acumen of the participants. Interlocutors would learn to think quickly, respond eloquently, and to see both sides of an issue. The typical structure would follow a series of questions, answers, and refutations, much like the format used by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, and mirrored in the form and content of the Wife of Bath’s *Prologue*.

Formally, the Wife’s opening arguments exhibit the structure of a scholastic disputation. Throughout her speech, she poses a series of answers in response to questions about marriage and virginity:

“But that I axe, why that fifthe man  
 Was noon husbonde to the Samaritan?  
 How manye myghte she have in mariage?” (III.21-23)

...

“Wher can ye seye, in any manere age,  
 That hye God defended mariage  
 By express word? I pray yow, telleth me.  
 Or where commanded he virginitee?” (III.59-62)

...

“Telle me also, to what conclusion  
 Were membres maad of generacion,

And of so parfit wys a [wright] ywroght?" (III.115-17)

...

"Why sholde men elles in hir books sette

That man shal yelde to his wyf hire dette?

Now wherewith sholde he make his paiement,

If he ne used his sely instrument?" (III.129-32)

Following the formal scholastic method, the Wife responds to each of her questions by citing relevant *auctoritee*, including St. Paul, Jerome, the Gospels, and Genesis. She then proclaims her own verdict for each question. The first section of her *Prologue* captures both the sincerity and playfulness of medieval debates. Her argument against virginity, for example, highlights the hermeneutical difficulty of understanding scripture. She argues that scripture does not explicitly prohibit multiple marriages, and that St. Paul would "counseille a woman" to be a virgin, and "conseillyng is no comandement" (III.66-67). Much of her argument depends on her ability to split hermeneutical hairs: God never explicitly commanded virginity, but he "bad us for to wexe and multiplie; / That gentil text kan I wel understonde" (III.28-29). Her reliance on the explicit commands of scripture with regard to marriage and sexual intercourse not only infuses her argument with a certain level of comedic value, but also attempts to harmonize authoritative sources in opposition to the various ways "Men may devyne and glosen, up and doun" (III.26). She is suspicious of anyone who claims to understand the implications of a text, since such interpretations can always be turned on their heads. Nevertheless, her "entente nys but for to pleye" (III.192), and she presents herself as an

impressive and formidable intellectual opponent, well-versed in the structure and strategies of debate.

The Wife's proclamations about marriage and virginity, however, are rooted in a more serious epistemological concern. In the opening lines of her *Prologue*, the Wife states that "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me" (III.1-2). For a medieval audience, *experience* and *auctoritee* represent two different modes of apprehending truths about the human condition. Strictly speaking, *auctoritee* denotes written authoritative texts, usually from the remote past, which contain the wisdom of previous personal experience that has been verified, generalized, and is considered universally applicable to all men. Medieval writers relied heavily on *auctoritee* for theological reasons, since the highest form of written authority came from the Christian scriptures. Robert Burlin notes:

Overriding all such external matters . . . was the spiritual justification for all learning, the primacy of theology as the queen of the sciences, and the reverence for scriptural authority, the revelation for the divine Author, which was the model for all intellectual endeavor. (8)

Scripture stood at the top of the *auctoritee* hierarchy because of its revelatory status—it was not the product of rational discourse, but the direct revelation of God himself. Subsequently, various written works by famous philosophers and theologians were considered more-or-less reliable based on the quality of their relationship to the revelation of scripture. Ideally, to cite an *auctoritee* was to invoke an authoritative voice that would quell ambiguity. However, as the Wife of Bath shows, there are disagreements

and ambiguities among the *auctoritees* as well—even scripture. Hence, in the later Middle Ages, the purpose of citing *auctoritees* eventually devolved into the role of dialectical support, instead of authoritative pronouncements. Even so, the notion of an authoritative voice and a universal principle that could clarify difficult arguments remained prevalent among medieval writers who continued to advance philosophical and theological insight based on the work of revered *auctoritee*.

In contrast, *experience* is more ambiguous. The *Middle English Dictionary* [hereafter, *MED*] gives five different definitions, most of which correspond to the notion that *experience* is knowledge acquired by direct contact with one or more of the five senses. Insofar as it is related primarily to the senses, the knowledge of *experience* is not universal; rather, it is personal and unique to the perception of the individual. Although the *MED* emphasizes the empirical component of *experience*, medieval writers also developed a thorough explanation for the method by which one acquired experiential knowledge. The most influential explanation comes from Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, as well as his commentaries on Aristotle’s *Analytics* and *Metaphysics*. Burlin notes that Aquinas identifies three different processes at work in the conception of mental cognition related to *experience*: the *imaginatio* reproduces sensory experiences as mental images; *memoria* recognizes the mental image as an experience that belongs to the past; and the *sensus communis* synthesizes the mental images, which then imparts an impression and understanding of the experience itself (Burlin 16). In its ability to synthesize disparate sense perceptions, the *sensus communis* resembles the higher faculty of *resoun*, but “it is still attached to the particulars of sense experience” (Burlin 16). As a

result, knowledge acquired by *experience* does not ascend to an understanding of universal and abstract concepts because it is relegated to the information provided by the senses. In the words of Lady Philosophy, *experience* “ariseth nat in no manere to the heyere strengthe” of *resoun* or *intelligence* (Chaucer, *Boece* V.pr.4.170-72).

The epistemological concern raised by the tenuous relationship between *experience* and *auctoritee* “charged the intellectual atmosphere of Chaucer’s day” because it was connected to the problem of universals (Burlin 13). In the Middle Ages, the “problem of universals is a logical, and historical, continuation of the *ancient* problem generated by Plato’s (428–348 B.C.) . . . theory of Ideas or Forms” (Klima). Medieval philosophers and theologians were interested in understanding how the mind achieves cognition of singular ideas amidst the multiplicity of physical sensations. Plato, for example, raises the issue of universals in the *Phaedo* where Socrates describes to Simmias and Cebes the way the mind conceives of the idea of the Equal when the physical senses encounter multiple sticks of varying lengths (74A).<sup>8</sup> The notion that a unifying principle existed and/or governed the multiplicity of every day sense perceptions not only motivated the prevailing intellectual pursuits of the Middle Ages, but set the framework for the traditional conception of philosophic and spiritual ascent. For example, in the *Confessions*, Augustine consistently struggles to reconcile the contradictory and fragmented impulses of his passions in order to raise himself—body and soul—into union with God; and Lady Philosophy must lift Boethius’s mind above the mutability and multiplicity of fortune in order that he might reclaim the security of a

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<sup>2</sup> See chapter two for a more detailed explanation of the discussion of Forms in *Phaedo*.

philosophic life. The Wife of Bath, having raised the issue of *experience* and *auctoritee*, similarly engages with the theme of a philosophic ascent which attempts to achieve an understanding of a universal reality that transcends the diversity, the singularity, and the contradictions of everyday experiences.

In the context of the Wife of Bath's *Prologue*, *auctoritee* relates to *experience* as the One to the Many in Neoplatonic philosophy. Traugott Lawler notes that "Authority codifies the general experience of men, and treats it in a unified and unifying way, without allowing for individual exceptions" (83). Ideally, in its relationship to *auctoritee*, *experience* would verify the universal propositions of philosophical and theological authorities, but the Wife of Bath consistently reminds her listeners that "experience woot wel it is noght so" (Chaucer III.124).

For the Wife, the teachings on marriage and virginity present an opportunity to address the inherent problems with *auctoritee* because marriage itself was considered an ideal form of unity among the most prominent *auctoritee* of the Middle Ages. She cites St. Paul who wrote that "He wolde that every wight were swich as he" (III.81)—i.e., that every person would desire to live a celibate life. However, in opposition to St. Paul's teaching, she argues that "everich hath of God a propre yifte" (III.103), which she claims to be applicable to a choice between marriage(s) and virginity. Then she supports her claim with two further scripture passages. The foundational authority for her argument is God's command that men should "wexe and multiplie" (III.28), which she mentioned earlier. Following her "propre yifte" claim, however, she also cites Christ as the example all men should emulate:

“Crist, that of perfeccion is welle,  
 Bad nat every wight he sholde go selle  
 Al that he hadde, and gyve it to the poore,  
 And in swich wise folwe hym and his fore.  
 He spak to hem that wolde lyve parfitly.” (III.107-11)

The Wife attempts to show how St. Paul’s teachings are in direct opposition to God’s express command and Christ’s example, even though all three belong to a single authoritative source. According to the Wife’s interpretation of St. Paul, virginity is the highest form of perfection in this life: if a widow, for example, chooses to marry again, she will have deviated from a life of holiness. In contrast, God’s commandment in Genesis and Christ’s example in the Gospels recognize and accommodate the multiplicity of everyday life. According to the Wife, “God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wys, / And everich hath of God a propre yifte-- / Som this, som that, as hym liketh shifte” (III.102-04). Given the Wife’s presentation of the evidence, scripture itself—the highest form of *auctoritee*—is self-contradictory.

Yet, the Wife’s argument only works if St. Paul’s teaching is taken out of context. In its entirety, the passage from which the Wife quotes reads, “For I would that all men were even as myself: but everyone has his proper gift from God; one after this manner, and one after that” (Douay-Rheims 1 Cor. 7:7). On closer examination of the primary source, the inconsistencies of scriptural authority are superficial. Not only has the Wife neglected to attribute her “propre yifte” argument to Paul’s own teachings, but “we realize that the true author of these multiplicities is the Wife herself, dividing the

sentence and exploiting it for her own . . . individual purposes” (Lawler 18). The Wife’s misuse of St. Paul’s teaching is not uncharacteristic. As Alfred David argues, “practically every reference the Wife makes to Holy Writ twists around its meaning and violates if not the letter, then the spirit of the law” (138).

Another important contextual component to the Wife’s arguments, however, is the underlying influence of antifeminist literature that circulated during the Middle Ages. Specifically, much of the Wife’s *Prologue* can be seen as a direct response to Jerome’s two-volume treatise *Adversus Jovinianum*. According to the Christine Hilary, within the first 192 lines of the Wife’s *Prologue*, there are over twenty-six instances wherein the Wife’s argument corresponds with one or more passages in the *Adversus Jovinianum* (Hilary 865-66). Jerome uses many of the same scriptures cited by the Wife of Bath in support of his claim that virginity is a higher state of being than marriage. Hence, as David points out, an additional subtext of the Wife’s *Prologue* is her direct confrontation with Jerome’s use of St. Paul’s teaching. It is plausible, therefore, that her misquotations of scripture stem from her knowledge of Jerome, and not necessarily from scripture itself (David 142).

Nevertheless, the Wife’s refutation of Jerome retains its larger philosophical and theological agenda, since she takes the opportunity to propound an equally extreme position. She introduces the scriptural teaching of the conjugal debt, but reinterprets it for approbation of female sovereignty in marriage:

“An housbonde I wol have – I wol nat lette –  
Which shal be bothe my detour and my thral,



And have his tribulacion withal  
 Upon his flesh, whil that I am his wyf  
 I have the power durynge al my lyf  
 Upon his propre body, and nocht he.  
 Right thus the Apostel tolde it to me,  
 And badoure housbondes for to love us weel.” (III.154-61)

Again, the context of St. Paul’s teaching remains absent from the Wife’s argument. In the famous passage on the conjugal debt, St. Paul writes, “The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband. And in like manner the husband also hath not power of his own body, but the wife” (Douay-Rheims I Cor. 7:4). St. Paul presents a balanced teaching in which both the wife and the husband pledge mutual submission to one another. By neglecting the first half of the passage, the Wife implies that the husband is the primary “detour.” The result of her hermeneutics, therefore, symbolizes her overall project. While marriage and her advocacy for female sovereignty remain her explicit topic, the force of her argument stems from her ability to undermine the authoritative power of theologians like Jerome and, more importantly, of the Christian scriptures. It is a double inversion: she subjects men to the sovereignty of women, and simultaneously, she drags *auctoritee* to the level of *experience*, in which there are only competing and contradictory claims of knowledge.

The Wife’s liberal and irreverent use of *auctoritee* points to the larger philosophical context. Having invoked *experience* and *auctoritee*, she embroils herself in the ancient philosophical debate concerning the relationship between the One and Many,

and she attempts to prove the superiority of *experience* as the only ground for knowledge. The disputation in the first section of the Wife's *Prologue* follows a pattern of division and multiplicity, sowing confusion about whether any text can mean any one thing. Between both the *Prologue* and the *Tale*, she cites an average of "one new literary or mythological reference to every twenty lines" (Schumaker 87). And given her propensity for rapid quotations and frequent misquotations, the effect is a dizzying collage of disparate and contradictory sources of information. For the Wife of Bath, the only universal principle is that there is no universal principle. All is *experience*. Seen through the lens of the problem of universals, the Wife's *Prologue* exhibits a downward trajectory as it "moves from authority to experience, from theological arguments toward an intimate domestic scene" (David 137). In the subsequent sections of her *Prologue*, the Wife descends from her debate with *auctoritee*, and begins to speak of practical, everyday wisdom she has acquired from her previous five marriages.

### *1.2 Praktike and the Knowledge of Experience*

At the end of her scholastic disputation, the Pardoner interrupts the Wife, describing her as a "noble prechour in this cas" (Chaucer III.165), and claims that he is convinced that he should not marry. The Wife ignores the Pardoner's compliment, and warns him not to make a hasty decision regarding marriage because "my tale is nat bigonne" (III.169); she will have the Pardoner "drynken of another tonne" (III.170), after which "maystow chese wheither thou wolt sippe / of thilke tonne that I shal abroche" (III.176-77). The Pardoner takes her advice and encourages her to "Telle forth youre tale, spareth for no man, / and teche us younge men of youre *praktike*" (III.187, my emphasis).

*Praktike* is a natural extension of the Wife's insistence on *experience*. The *MED* defines *praktike* as "the practical aspect or application of something; practice as opposed to theory" (*MED*). In the same way that *experience* opposes the universal principles expressed in *auctoritee*, *praktike* opposes the universalizing effects of abstract theories. Practical advice, by its nature, is both singular and multiple. It posits a series of strategies a person can use to acquire the greatest benefit from a particular set of circumstances. The Wife is happy to oblige the Pardoner, for her knowledge of the woe that is in marriage is not the product of book learning but of having had five husbands. The ensuing *praktike* of the Wife is grounded in everyday life and devoid of matrimonial idealistic notions.

The Wife's transition to practical advice resonates with the opening scene of the *Boece*. When he first notices Lady Philosophy, Boethius is struck by her appearance. She is "a womman of ful greet reverence by semblaunt" (I.pr.1.5), whose height and age seem incalculable. His eyes, however, are drawn to her clothing which "weren makid of right delye thredes and subtil craft and perdurable matere" (I.pr.1.20-22). In particular, he notices two embroidered letters:

In the nethereste hem or bordure of thise clothes, men redden ywoven in a Grekissch P (that signifieth the lif actif); and aboven the letter, in the heieste bordure, a Grekyssh T (that signifieth the lif contemplatif). And bytwixen thise two lettres ther were seyn degrees nobly ywrought in manere of laddres, by whiche degrees men myghten clymben fro the nethereste letter to the uppereste. (I.pr.1.28-37).

The theme of ascent is introduced alongside two different, though interconnected, epistemologies. In the *Boece*, the traditional twofold division of philosophy into *practica* and *theorica*, represented in the vulgate *Consolatio* by the Greek letters  $\pi$  and  $\theta$ , have been translated as “Grekissch P” and “Grekyssh T.” The division represents a lower and a higher form of knowledge, in which the aspiring philosopher must ascend the “laddres” from practical knowledge to theoretical knowledge.

More importantly, Chaucer’s explanatory notes which translate “P” as “the lif actif,” and “T” as “the lif contemplatif” indicates his own understanding of these two modes of knowledge. According to the *MED*, Chaucer is using “actif” in its ecclesiastical sense. It refers specifically to “worldly activity . . . (as opposed to the life of meditation or contemplation),” and to a “secular life (as opposed to monastic)” (*MED*).

“Contemplatif,” in contrast, refers to a life devoted to the “contemplation of God and the divine order” (*MED*). Ian Johnson also argues that Chaucer is primarily influenced by Nicholas Trevit’s gloss of the Boethian passage, and that he is intentionally imbuing the passage with theological connotations that are “compatible with a contemporary affective piety or devotionism” (418). Hence, the Wife’s lecture of *praktike* carries important philosophical and theological connotations. Not only is *praktike* a lower form of knowledge, it is exclusively concerned with worldly matters and confined to the world of *experience*. The Pardoner’s request and the Wife’s ensuing exposition of her *praktike* is another representation of descent in her *Prologue* as she moves from the theoretical knowledge of *auctoritee* to *experience*.

The Wife's *praktike* can be summed up in her description of a "wys womman" (Chaucer III.209). The "wys womman" treats love "like any other commodity to be bought and sold in the world's marketplace" (David 144). Thus, the "wys womman" will partake in the "lif actif;" she "wol bisye hire evere in oon" to acquire the love of her husband, even if she does not reciprocate that love in return (Chaucer III.209). As an example, the Wife says of her first three husbands that "thre of hem were goode, and two were bade. / The thre were goode men, and riche, and olde" (III.195-97). The qualities of the three good husbands hinge on their wealth and their age. In each instance, the wife clearly did not marry for love. She accuses all three husbands as "kaynard[s]" (III.235), "lecchour[s]" (III.242), "olde dotard shrewe[s]" (III.291), and "olde barel-ful[s] of lyes" (III.302). Given her criteria for marriage, the Wife realizes that she only needs to await the impending deaths of each husband; at which point, their wealth would pass wholly into her possession. Having married for wealth, marriage itself becomes a business transaction in which only one partner will receive the greatest benefit.

The wife, however, recognizes that to broker the best deal for herself, she must acquire sovereignty in the marriage. She demonstrates the way in which a woman acquires sovereignty by once again deploying the inherent contradictions of *auctoritee* in a series of false accusations against her three husbands. The morning after her husband has returned drunk and forgetful of the night-before, she fabricates a long list of ways that he has insulted her. Every accusation is preceded by a "Thou seyst" (III.257), and the content that follows usually originates from a source of antifeminist literature or is a direct quotation of an *auctoritee*. For example, she claims that women are caught

between two conflicting views: either they are beautiful and “men may nat kepe a castel wal, / it may so longe assailed been overall” (III.263-64), or they are ugly and so “coveiteth every man that she may se” (III.266). The entire passage, as David points out, is “lifted directly from the Theophrastus portion of *Jerome Against Jovinian*” (145). By demonstrating the contradiction, she then exploits it for the purpose of confusing and shaming her husband into submission. She bolsters her false accusation with a quotation from

“The wise astrologien, Daun Ptholome,

That seith this proverb in his Almageste:

‘Of alle men his wisdom is the hyeste

That rekketh nevere who hath the world in honde.” (Chaucer III.324-27)

Not only is there a contradiction within the popular antifeminist *auctoritee*, but now the Wife employs another authoritative source, which implicitly supports her claim that the husband should be content not to have “the world in honde.” The dialectical whiplash is impressive. In one fell swoop, she shows that *auctoritee* is self-contradictory, and therefore unreliable, only to wield an authoritative source as evidence for her overarching thesis that the woman should have sovereignty within marriage. The Wife’s *praktike* focuses on a woman’s ability to deceive her husband, as well as to exploit and appropriate every aspect of her marital circumstances. Like her argument for *experience*, the Wife uses *praktike* to create a chaotic authorial context in order to subject her husbands to herself.

### 1.3 *A Descent into the Domestic Life*

Despite the descent into *praktike*, the Wife's advice to "wys wyves" remains general in its scope. She has had three good husbands, but she does not bother to distinguish between the three. Her advice is a general outline of how she won control over all three, and her use of *auctoritee* continues to resemble her impressive mental florilegium exhibited in the first section of her *Prologue*. In contrast, the transition to the fourth and fifth husbands signals an autobiographical turn as she recounts specific events from her own personal life. The tone of the third section changes as well. She trades her witty and provocative banter for a nostalgic and somber description of her past experiences. She digresses more freely and reminisces about loved ones who have died. She mentions the lessons her mother taught her about how to catch a man, and she recalls her good friend, "God have hir soule! Hir name was Alisoun" (III.530). By the end of the *Prologue*, listeners are wholly immersed in the Wife's world of *experience*. The descent from theoretical knowledge is completed in the stories of her fourth and fifth husbands.

One of the defining features of the Wife's recollection of her fourth marriage is its relative lack of references to *auctoritee*. She briefly mentions the myth of Metellius who killed his own wife for drinking wine (III.460-62); she describes the connection between Venus and wine which potentially refers to Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* (Hilary 869); she employs two proverbial sayings (III.477-78 & 487); and finally, her reference to the shoe that bitterly pinched her fourth husband "probably echoes Jerome" (Hilary 869). In every instance, however, she never addresses *auctoritee* explicitly or exposes its contradictions. Instead, she prefers to digress, as if suddenly distracted by the nostalgia of personal

memories about her youth. She describes herself as “yong and ful of ragerye” (III.455), able to dance and sing beautifully, and to drink copious amounts of wine. With great joy, “whan that it remembreth me / upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee, / It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote” (III.469-71). The nostalgia, unfortunately, is haunted by the woe of *experience*. She notes that “In women vinolent is no defence -- / This knowen lecchours by experience” (III.467-68); and she is painfully aware of the passage of time: “But age, allas, that al wole envenyme, / Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith. / Lat go. Farewell! The devel go therwith!” (III.474-76). The recollection of her fourth husband is also a painful memory because he was faithless to her. Despite her digressions, the pleasant memories are never strong enough to forget the “wo that is in mariage” (III.3). Unlike Boethius who learned to raise himself above the contrary forces of fortune, the Wife’s insistence on *experience* eliminates any possible recourse for transcending her painful experiences.

The story of her marriage to Jankyn is the most detailed and the most personal of her *Prologue*. Consequently, it is also the most symbolic. If the Wife is an embodiment of *experience*, then Jankyn, a young “clerk of Oxenford” (III.527) who obsessively reads his book on “wikked wyves” (III.685), embodies *auctoritee*. Ironically, the Wife marries Jankyn “for love, and no richesse” (III.526), foregoing her previous strategy of treating marriage as a business transaction. She may have married for love, but in retrospect she considers it her fateful mistake. The result is a violent confrontation between *experience* and *auctoritee*. The Wife once again regains matrimonial sovereignty, but at the price of a happy marriage.



The marriage between the Wife and Jankyn begins at the funeral of the Wife's fourth husband. She had previously flirted with Jankyn while he boarded at her friend's home during the spring. At the funeral, Jankyn was a pall-bearer, and while she processed behind the casket, the Wife could not help noticing how "clene and faire" his legs were (III.598). So, not desiring to remain a widow, she gave her heart "unto his hooold" (III.599). The image of falling in love while burying her husband is emblematic of the Wife's character. On the one hand, the "image of the old husband being carried out horizontally, intersected by the new one coming in vertically" represents the "eternal cycle of weddings and funerals, death and renewal" (David 150). But the readiness and the speed with which the Wife gives herself to Jankyn is indicative of the deeper philosophical context of her story. The Wife is a multiplier of husbands, as she is a multiplier of contradictory interpretations of *auctoritee*. The listeners know that Jankyn was only the most recent husband since she has already proclaimed her eagerness for a sixth husband "whan that evere he shal" (III.45). The ominous beginning of her marriage to Jankyn presages the ensuing tumultuous events of their relationship, and simultaneously casts a shadow on the epistemic merits of her insistence on *experience* in opposition to *auctoritee*.

Although Jankyn marries the Wife "with greet solempnytee" (III.629), prompting her to give him "all the lond and fee / That evere was me yeven therbifoore" (III.630-31), she recalls that the relationship was abusive. He was the "mooste shrewe" to her (III.505), having beaten her and "nolde suffre nothyng of my lyst" (III.633). But for the wife, the worst aspect of the marriage was that Jankyn "often tymes wolde preche, / And

me of olde Romayn geestes teche” (III.641-42). Specifically, Jankyn would read stories from his book on “wikked wyves,” which the Wife identifies as a compendium of antifeminist *auctoritees* that included the writings of Jerome, Theophrastus, and Tertullian. The book of wicked wives includes stories of Eve, Delilah, Dianyre, Xanthippe, Phasipha, Clitermystra, and others who were considered the downfall of their husbands. The compilation of stories is “a typical medieval catalogue that tries to prove a point by piling up examples” (David 151). One evening, while Jankyn is reading from his book, the Wife rips three pages from its binding, and punches him in the face, knocking him backward so “that in oure fyr he fil backward adoun” (III.793). Jankyn retaliates: “he up stirte as dooth a wood leoun, / and with his fest he smoot me on the heed / That in the floor I lay as I were deed” (III.794-96). Based on the Wife’s account, it is not clear whether she sincerely believed she was dying or if she intentionally took the opportunity to dramatize the scene to her advantage. Nevertheless, when she scolds him afterwards, it has the desired effect. Not only does Jankyn repent, but he willingly gives her “governance of hous and lond, / And of his tonge, and of his hond also” (III.814-815); and, more importantly, she makes him burn his book—that prized catalogue of *auctoritee*.

The imagery of the Wife’s descent in the final scene with Jankyn occurs on three different levels. First, Chaucer characteristically mirrors his theme in the action of the plot: both Jankyn and the Wife have fallen to the ground as a result of the violent conflict between the Wife’s *experience* and Jankyn’s *auctoritee*. Second, the Wife successfully forces Jankyn to burn his book. The *experience* she gained from her previous marriages

triumphed over Jankyn's *auctoritee*. Consequently, her ability to acquire sovereignty within the marriage recalls her previous arguments that would invert the social order, giving women matrimonial mastery instead of men. Finally, although the violent confrontation results in the Wife's success, the peace that obtains in their relationship rings hollow. Their fight has left Jankyn utterly submissive. And although the evidence is circumstantial, her tone suggests that Jankyn is now a figure of the past. The *Prologue* does not end with a "happily ever after," but with a prayer for Jankyn's soul. The Wife is a solitary figure once more, possibly widowed for the fifth time. Her tirade against *auctoritee* and its underlying correspondence with the soul's ability to ascend to a vision of a transcendent reality, and her insistence on *experience* have left her confined to the vagaries of time and fortune. She is no longer a young woman, nor has her marriage for love resulted in a happy union. She has descended into the limited and isolated world of her experience.

## 2. The Tale

The Wife is also aware of the tragic arc of her *Prologue*. Earlier she attributes her poor decisions to the stars:

"Allas, allas! That evere love was synne!

I folwed ay myn inclinacioun

By vertu of my constellacioun;

That made me I koude noght withdrawe

My chamber of Venus from a good fealwe." (III.614-18)

She believes that she cannot be held completely responsible for her actions or her sexual proclivities. Presumably, she would also consider her preference for *experience* over *auctoritee* a result of her astrological disposition. Thus, as if in response to the *Prologue*, her *Tale* reimagines her life with Jankyn with a happy ending. It is a self-conscious fiction devoid of any distracting specifics, but imbued with all the qualities of the Wife's personality and memories. And although the "olde wyf's" climactic pillow-lecture mirrors the form of the Wife's disputation in the first section of the *Prologue*, it imagines in contrast a successful correspondence between *experience* and *auctoritee*, effecting the repentance of the rapist knight and the transformation of the loathly lady. The result of the pillow-lecture is a philosophical ascent to a vision of an ideal marriage in which both the husband and the wife exchange love and mutual submission to one another. But once again, the Wife's narration does not end with "happily ever after"; instead, it ends with a prayer that transforms into a curse, reminding the listeners that the philosophic height of the *Tale* is a fiction incompatible with *experience*.

Like the *Prologue*, the *Tale* also divides into three distinct sections. The first section recounts the knight's crime against a maiden, his subsequent trial before the queen and women of Arthur's court, and the imposition of a quest that will allow him to save his life: the queen tasks him to learn what women desire most (III.857-918). The second section describes the challenges the knight encounters on his quest, his meeting of an old and ugly "wyf" who promises to give him the answer to his question, and his eventual betrothal to that old wyf (III.919-1082). Finally, in the third section of the *Tale*, the knight and the old wyf engage in a philosophical dialogue about the nature of true

*gentillesse*, as well as the merits of poverty and old age, which the wyf recognizes as the sources of the knight's unhappiness in their marriage.

The parallels between the Wife's relationship with Jankyn and the *Tale* emerge in the characterization of the knight and the loathly lady. The knight is described as a "lustly bachelor" (III.882-83), which indicates that, like Jankyn, he is both single and virile. He is also returning from hawking for waterfowl (III.884), a further indication that he is young. Finally, by the end of the story, he is married to a woman much older than he is, not unlike the twenty-year age difference between Jankyn and the Wife of Bath (III.600-01). Similarly, the Wife associates herself with the old wyf, who is an embodiment of *experience*: her obvious old age bespeaks a woman well-acquainted with many years of life experience. The wyf's pillow-lecture also imitates the Wife's earlier disputation style—posing questions and answers that draw on a variety of *auctoritees*. Additionally, both the old wyf and the "lustly" knight remain nameless, which sets the parallels into sharper relief. Martin Puhvel, for example, argues that the old wyf is "very much the Wife of Bath's alter ego or imaginary stand-in; giving her a name would tend to obfuscate this" (291). Names and other concrete character details would invest the characters with a unique identity in contradistinction to the otherwise evident correspondence between the knight and Jankyn, the old wyf and the Wife of Bath. By ensuring the obvious connections between her *Prologue* and the characters of the *Tale*, the wife draws attention to the fact that the story is a fiction and a product of her own experience. Under the guise of fiction, the Wife is free to seriously reimagine her life

under a different set of circumstances, while also reminding her listeners not to take her tale too earnestly.

The setting and the repeated narrative intrusions also contribute to the *Tale* as a self-conscious fiction. The story is set in the “old dayes of the Kyng Arthour” which conjures idealistic notions of chivalry and a “land fulfild of fayerye” (III.857 & 859). The point of the setting, however, is that this chivalric and fairy-filled world no longer exists. The Wife emphasizes the fictive quality of the setting by poking fun at the Friar, a fellow pilgrim, who had insulted the Wife both by laughing at the end of her *Prologue* and complaining that it was a “long preamble of a tale” (III.830). According to the Wife, the contemporary world of the pilgrims is overrun by Friars, “thikke as motes in the sonne-beem” (III.868), who, having blessed the whole land with prayers, have left “noon oother incubus but he” (III.880). The Arthurian ideal, in other words, is incompatible with a society swarmed by friars.

The narrative intrusions begin in the second section of the *Tale* after the knight’s quest is underway and he has already encountered various contradictory answers to the question, “What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren” (III.905). Amid the variety of opinions, the Wife intrudes to provide her own assessment and qualifications of the opinions. Not only are the opinions the knight encounters a rehearsal of the contradictions within antifeminist literature presented in the Wife’s *Prologue*, but her narration also changes from third person, “Somme seyde women loven best richesse. . .” (III.925), to first person plural, “Somme seyde that *oure* hertes been moost esed. . .” (III.929, my emphasis). The intrusions occur a total of four times in the second section. The longest

intrusion transpires when she recites Ovid's tale about Midas (III.951-82). Of all the intrusions, the story of Midas represents the most abrupt break from the *Tale* because it takes up the most narrative space. Additionally, she misrepresents the original tale as a story about women's disposition toward gossip, which is "stylistically consistent with her prologue" (Benson 873); and the Wife intentionally leaves the tale unfinished, telling her listeners to "Redeth Ovyde, and ther ye may it leere" (III.982). Effectively, the Wife disrupts the narrative with her own personality, which reflexively foregrounds the imaginary aspect of the *Tale*. In doing so, she prepares her listeners to suspend their *belief* for the most unlikely component of her story: a happy marriage in which a woman retains her sovereignty.

Because the Wife is closely associated with the loathly lady, the narrative intrusions subside after the old wyf is introduced toward the end of the second section of the *Tale*. For the remainder of the story, the wyf functions as the mouthpiece of the Wife of Bath. After a litany of contradictory opinions, the knight receives the answer from the "olde wyf" (III.1000), but only after he has pledged to do whatever she may require of him next. At this point, the narrative moves quickly: they return to court, he gives his answer, and he is acquitted by the queen and all the women of the court. As soon as the loathly lady requests that he marry her, the knight's true character emerges. The quest has not changed him. Her demand for marriage fills him with shame and self-loathing. Nevertheless, his miserable state catalyzes the main theme of female sovereignty in the Wife's tale, and prompts the disputation-style pillow-lecture wherein the Wife reengages with and reimagines the relationship between *experience* and *auctoritee*.

Although the pillow-lecture scene and the eventual transformation of the old wyf summarizes and resolves the Wife of Bath's marriage theme, it also recapitulates her epistemological concern regarding *experience* and *auctoritee*, and the possibility of a philosophical ascent. Formally, Chaucer signifies the larger philosophical context in two ways. First, the pillow-lecture resembles the first section of the Wife's *Prologue* because it imitates the style of a medieval scholastic debate. The old wyf raises contentious questions and then provides answers laden with *auctoritee*. Second, the pillow-lecture is shot through with references and parallels to the *Boece*. The Boethian parallels can be observed in the power relationship between the wyf and the knight. In the same way that Boethius depicts Lady Philosophy as a physician and Boethius the character as a patient, the wyf comes to the knight and claims that she "koude amende" his suffering (III.1106). Similarly, from a rhetorical perspective, Kenneth Eckert argues that the *Boece* also "may have served as a template for the Wife's rhetorical purposes" (379); the wyf presents Lady Philosophy's arguments in reverse order—i.e., the benefits of fortune are illusory, "wealth brings insecurity, and prestige or high birth will not necessarily bring moral goodness or virtue" (381). Michael Masi also shows that the wyf's method of argumentation "advances in the form of contrasting opposites" (66), which mirrors Lady Philosophy's method in the *Boece*. These Boethian parallels as well as the recapitulation of the *Prologue*'s scholastic disputation style represent the Wife of Bath's continual engagement with a larger philosophical context.

In contrast to the *Prologue*, the pillow-lecture scene represents a successful philosophical ascent. The wyf's lecture succeeds primarily because she reconciles



*experience* and *auctoritee* as they relate to *gentillesse*. Historically, *gentillesse* refers to a person's social rank. The primary definition in the *MED* defines *gentillesse* as "Nobility of birth or rank," and as "People of rank, aristocracy, gentry" (*MED*). The term, however, can also refer to "nobility of character" (*MED*), and it is this definition which the wyf emphasizes in her pillow-lecture. She is prompted in her lesson by the knight himself who, within the span of thirty-two lines, twice complains that his recent marriage marks his own damnation: "Allas, that any of my nacioun / Sholde evere so foule disparaged be!" (Chaucer III.1069). He then explains that the disparagement is caused not by how old and ugly the wyf is but because she "comen of so lough a kynde" (III.1101). Scholars like Alistair Minnis have argued that the knight's complaint against the wyf's ancestry is meant to heighten the ridiculousness of the situation. In the traditional medieval narrative of the "loathly damsel," an ugly old woman would entrap a knight in marriage and obtain a promise of sovereignty in the relationship. Whereas in the analogues the knight dreads the "purgatory of physical loathsomeness into which he is about to be plunged, here the arrogant aristocrat's main worry is that his new wife is—simply of the wrong class" (316). Despite the ridiculousness of the situation, the wyf takes the opportunity to seriously engage with the knight's concern by pointing to the way both *experience* and *auctoritee* disprove the knight's understanding of *gentillesse*.

The wyf begins with *experience*, demonstrating that neither family lineage nor institutional association function as reliable indicators of true *gentillesse*. After the knight's initial complaint, the wyf responds, "Fareth every knyght thus with his wyf as ye? / Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures hous? / Is every knyght of his so dangerous?"

(Chaucer III.1088-1090). In the form of rhetorical questions, the wyf constructs a syllogism that not only undermines the knight's own social standing but the social status of knights in general. Since the knight does not display traditional chivalric virtues to his own wife, and since he is a knight of Arthur's court, then every knight from Arthur's court (and by implication the court itself) must also lack chivalry. Implied in her critique is the idea that if a social institution cannot ensure virtuous behavior among its individual members, then any person's affiliation with that institution cannot be taken as a sign of his/her own personal virtue.

The wyf continues to use *experience* to deconstruct the knight's false beliefs concerning nobility, but she begins to transition to *auctoritee* when she uses Christ as an example of true *gentillesse*. Immediately following her series of rhetorical questions, the wyf asks what she can do to amend the knight's grief. To which the knight responds:

“Amended?” quod this knyght, “Allas, nay, nay!

It wol nat been amended nevere mo.

Thou art so loothly, and so oold also,

And therto comen of so lough a kynde,

That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and wynde.” (III.1098-1101).

By reiterating the issue of “lough kynde” and emphasizing that by its nature it cannot be amended, the knight prompts the second half of the wyf's lesson. She explains that the whole situation could be amended if he would behave well (III.1108). She then launches into a philosophical lesson that defines *gentillesse* as a combination of God's grace and noble deeds. The “grestest gentil man” is the man who is “moost virtuous always, / Pryvee

and apert and moost entendeth ay / To do the gentil dedes that he kan” (III.1113-16).

More importantly, she continues, “Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentillesse, / Nat of oure eldres for hire old richesse” (III.1117-18). Not only does the knight have his source for *gentillesse* wrong, but he fails to recognize his own agency in acquiring and maintaining it. By focusing on the example of Christ in the scriptures, the wyf redefines true *gentillesse*: it is at once a divine grace given by God, and insofar as a knight would claim *gentillesse* of Christ, he must also model his life on Christ’s. In this view, genealogical or institutional affiliation is an unreliable source for individual virtue, which instead is determined by a person’s resolve to emulate the life of Christ. By referencing the example of Christ in the scriptures, the wyf begins to shift the discussion from *experience* to *auctoritee*.

For the remainder of her pillow-lecture, the wyf uses *auctoritee* to support her thesis concerning true *gentillesse*. According to the wyf, true *gentillesse* has a threefold definition: 1) it is a matter of integrity both “pryvee and apert” (III.1114); 2) it “cometh fro God allone” (III.1162); and 3) it results from “gentil dedis” (III.1170). To support the notion that *gentillesse* is a matter of integrity, the wyf borrows Lady Philosophy’s example of fire, which will “as faire lye and brenne” whether men see it or not (III.1142).<sup>9</sup> She quotes Dante’s *Purgatorio* which verifies that God “Wole that of hym we clayme oure gentillesse” (III.1130).<sup>10</sup> Finally, she lists Valerius, Seneca, and Boethius as *auctoritees* who have proven that “he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis” (III.1170). The

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Boece* III.pr.4.64-69

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Purgatory* VII.121-23

effectiveness of the wyf's argument is in its demonstration of the coherency between *experience* and *auctoritee*. *Auctoritee* confirms the inconsistency between social nobility and personal nobility. Furthermore, the wyf's use of *auctoritee* clarifies the significance of the discrepancy. Personal nobility is a higher virtue, one that is characterized by noble deeds and spiritual humility. Social nobility, on the other hand, is "nat worth an hen" (III.1112), since it cannot ensure nobility of character or action. The wyf, much like Lady Philosophy, uses the combination of *experience* and *auctoritee* to redirect the knight's gaze. She raises his eyes from "erthly thinges" that he may "lede his thought into the sovereyn day" and behold the source of true nobility (*Boece* III.m.12.61-62).

After her discussion of *gentillesse*, the wyf continues to employ *auctoritee* in her arguments concerning the merits of poverty and old age. She argues that "Glad povertie is an honest thyng" (III.1183), and cites the life of Christ, Seneca, and Juvenal as authorities who demonstrate the dignity of a life lived in poverty. For old age, she does not cite any specific source; rather, she appeals to the etiquette of social nobility which "seyn that men sholde an oold wight doon favour / and clepe hym fader, for youre gentillesse" (III.1210-11), and then confidently concludes that she could easily find "auctors" who would support her claim. By the end of her lecture, the wyf has established harmony between *experience* and *auctoritee*. She clarifies the truth behind the discrepancies related to nobility, poverty, and old age by appealing both to the knight's experiences of each and to the teachings of authoritative sources.

The union of *experience* and *auctoritee* foreshadows the final marital union between the wyf and the knight at the end of the *Tale*. After the pillow-lecture, the wyf

presents the knight with another set of potential discrepancies: either she can transform herself into a beautiful but unfaithful wife, or remain ugly but loyal. The dichotomy in the wyf's proposal echoes the Wife of Bath's earlier complaint related to antifeminist literature:

Thou sest som folk desiren us for richesse,  
 Somme for oure shap, and somme for oure fairnesse,  
 . . . . .  
 Thus goth al to the devel, by thy tale.  
 Thou seyst men may nat kepe a castel wal,  
 It may so longe assailed been overal.  
 And if that she be foul, thou seist that she  
 Coveiteth every man that she may se. (III.257-58, 262-66)

The oppositions posed by the wyf parallel the disjunction between *experience* and *auctoritee* in the antifeminist literature the Wife of Bath finds so appalling. Thus, when the knight chooses the hidden third option by deferring to the wyf's preference, the wyf's response and physical transformation symbolize the consummation of the marital and philosophical themes running throughout the *Prologue* and the *Tale*. The wyf's conversion from old and ugly to young, beautiful, and faithful in conjunction with the narrative assurance of a secure and joyful marriage, functions as an image of reconciliation between *experience* and *auctoritee*.

Scholars have responded to the wyf's transformation with polarizing analyses. Carolyn Dinshaw and Elaine Tuttle Hansen, for example, argue that the "old hag" has

essentially conformed herself to the knight's desire. Dinshaw writes that at the end of the tale "the patriarchal paradigm is still in place; the trade of the captive woman . . . and, as before, the Wife exploits the commodification of woman's sex that is the basis of the paradigm" (129). Kathryn McKinley, however, notes that the "hag's transformation into a female both 'fair and good' . . . is possible only after the knight has lost, or so he thought, any such possibility" (370). McKinley goes on to argue that the knight's submission, his willingness to sacrifice his own desires in subjection to the will of the wyf, indicates an inner transformation that allows for his wife's external change. The changed attitude of the knight, McKinley points out, resembles the teachings of *auctoritee* and the example set by Christ. Instead of being a moment where the wyf loses her *mastrie* by fulfilling the sexual desire of the knight, the transformation represents the consummation of *experience* and *auctoritee*.

Nevertheless, the pillow-lecture and the wyf's transformation are part and parcel of the Wife of Bath's fiction, and while the *Tale* ends with a successful philosophical ascent, the Wife remains immersed in the world of *experience*. The Wife intrudes on the happy ending to clarify the moral of the story and to curse husbands who do not follow the knight's example:

"And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves  
 That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;  
 And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,  
 God sende hem soone verray pestilence!" (III.1261-64)

The Wife's disruption of the story has an important effect: it reminds the readers that the story is only a fairy tale, which casts doubt on the possibility of a happy ending in reality. Kathleen Biddick similarly argues that the Wife's intrusion and "curse mimics the menace of the rapist knight" at the beginning of the *Tale* (458). In effect, the Wife's intrusion is a sober reminder of the disjunction between *experience* and *auctoritee* in everyday life. Although her concluding remarks begin with a prayer request for "Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fresh abedde" (III.1259), it changes into a curse as if to frighten men into abiding by the lesson of the *Tale*. The curse also bears personal significance for the Wife—she is on the prowl for her sixth husband. Presumably, she would also like for her sixth husband to be "meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde" and as teachable as the knight. Although the *Tale* ends with a harmony of *experience* and *auctoritee*, and the knight's transcendence of worldly life, the Wife's intrusion symbolizes the fact that her experience of reality bears little resemblance to such idealism portrayed in her *Tale*.

Unlike Boethius, the Wife of Bath continues to suffer from misogyny at the end of her *Prologue* and *Tale*. Despite having proven her intellectual acumen in scholastic debate, and her ability to replicate a philosophical dialectic that results in the transcendence of worldly circumstances, she returns to the confinements of *experience*, a life subject to the passage of time and the competition inherent in human relationships. Lady Philosophy's final diagnosis of Boethius's condition is equally relevant to the Wife of Bath:

The nature of thoughtes desceyved is this, that, as ofte as they casten away sothe opynyouns, they clothen hem in false opynyouns, of the whiche false opynyouns the derknesse of perturbacion waxeth up, that confowndeth the verray insyghte.

(Chaucer, *Boece* I.pr.6.94-100)

That the Wife has “casten away sothe opynyouns” is made evident by her vast knowledge of philosophical and theological *auctoritees*. Lady Philosophy could easily say of the Wife, as she says of Boethius, that she is one of her own, a woman “noryssed in the studies or scoles of Eleacticis and Achademycis in Grece” (I.pr.1.67-68). But the Wife disregards *auctoritee*, casting it away in favor of her own practical knowledge. Similarly, the notion that misogyny also causes a person to “clothen hem in false opynyouns” particularly resonates with the Wife of Bath. In the *General Prologue*, the narrator devotes eleven of the thirty-one lines of the Wife’s description to her clothing, and informs the readers that “Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt” (I.447). Insofar as the Wife suffers from misogyny, she also appears to embody it. She is an image of *experience*, changing and recreating herself in response to the palpable variety and contradictions of everyday experiences.



## CHAPTER FOUR

## THE SOUL'S ASCENT AS AN INTERPRETIVE LENS

In the preceding chapters, I briefly outlined the development and differing iterations of the image of the soul's ascent to a transcendent reality in the works of Plato, Augustine, and Boethius. All three authors represent the pervasive thematic influence of the soul's ascent and some of its variations between classical and Christian conceptions. While Plato's doctrine of recollection posits the soul's innate ability to ascend to a bodiless reality through philosophic study, Augustine and Boethius address the limitations of philosophic discourse to enact a successful ascent. Augustine recognizes that he cannot escape himself to find God, and Boethius subtly inserts a religious shift in Lady Philosophy's argumentation. Instead of encouraging Boethius to continue philosophizing, Philosophy exhorts him to pray to God that he might attain the peace and transcendence he desires. I also demonstrated that Chaucer was familiar with the classical and Christian conceptions of the soul's ascent, specifically because of his translation of Boethius's *Consolatio*. Although some of Chaucer's other poetry, such as *Troilus and Criseyde*, show Boethian-influenced ascent structures, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* demonstrate his nuanced understanding of why a soul may fail in its ascent. The Wife, like Boethius, clearly suffers from a form of misogyny. Despite her impressive knowledge of *auctoritee*, she casts away all forms of philosophical and theological teaching in the opening section of her *Prologue*, and instead focuses on the tangible facts of her personal experiences. As a result, Chaucer's concluding image of the Wife depicts

a woman alone and anxious for the arrival of her sixth husband, “whan that evere he shal” (III.45).

Analysis of the soul’s ascent in the Wife’s *Prologue* and *Tale* also converges with criticism concerning the underlying eschatology of the *Canterbury Tales*, especially in Chaucer’s implementation of the pilgrimage image. Fascination with the Christian eschaton pervades medieval literature. Most notably *The Divine Comedy*, *Pearl*, and *Piers Plowman* are dream visions where the protagonist encounters people, events, and scenes that correspond with apocalyptic imagery in the book of *Revelation*. While the *Canterbury Tales* itself is not based on an explicit eschatological vision like *The Divine Comedy*, Robert Emmerson and Ronald Herzman have shown that eschatological interpretations of the *Tales* are both inevitable and useful. The pilgrimage image is part of a long tradition in Christian literature that depicts the salvation of an individual person as a journey from this life to the Heavenly Jerusalem, “from the worldly to the otherworldly” (Emmerson and Herzman 414). The image of the pilgrimage also functions as a representation of salvation history, recalling the story of Israel in the Old Testament *Exodus*. A pilgrimage “displays both a personal and a universal dimension” (Jankowski 129), since it describes the movement “from creation to doomsday” (Emmerson and Herzman 414), and the salvation of individual souls who participate in the journey. As a result, the image of a Christian pilgrimage naturally parallels the philosophical notion of the soul’s ascent. Pilgrims undergo a process of sanctification as they move from a worldly life to a heavenly life, a movement that echoes the soul’s ascent from the Many to the One.

Moreover, supplementing Emerson and Herzman's eschatological observations with the philosophic image of the soul's ascent can further illuminate the nuance and complexity exhibited in the *Canterbury Tales*. For example, through Boethius, Chaucer would have been familiar with the philosophic conception of God as the *summum bonum*—the belief that God is the highest good which all men seek. The doctrine of the *summum bonum* is discussed explicitly by Lady Philosophy in the *Boece* book III; and not only is it compatible with Christian teaching, but it provides additional philosophical and theological connotations for the pilgrimage image itself.

In book IV.pr1 of the *Boece*, Boethius expresses his consent to Philosophy's argument that God is the highest good which all men seek, even if they mistake lesser goods for the highest good and/or ignorantly seek the highest good by the wrong means. But Boethius is still puzzled by the fact that wicked men seem to prosper and good men suffer. Philosophy's response is strikingly counter-intuitive; she claims to be able to convince Boethius that

the gode folk ben alwey mighty and schrewes ben alwey outcast and feble; ne the vices ben neveremo withouten peyne, ne the vertus ne ben nat withouten mede; and that blisfulnesses comen alwey to good folk, and infortune comit alwey to wykkide folk. (IV.pr.1.50-56)

Her argument hinges on the notion that "God is . . . completely non-interventionist: merely by being the highest good, which everything desires as its end, he regulates the universe" (Marenbon, *Boethius* 114). Unlike the eschatological perspective which

presumes God's eventual judgment on all mankind, as well as the restoration of the created world, Lady Philosophy shows how God's judgment is already enacted in everyday events. By choosing to behave wickedly—whether intentionally or ignorantly—a person brings misery upon his own head because he has failed to fulfill his desire for the *summum bonum*. When applied to the *Canterbury Tales*, this philosophic perspective affords a simultaneous focus on the individual and on the immediate cosmological significance of personal actions. The judgment anticipated in the eschatology of the pilgrimage is not deferred, but is part and parcel of the pilgrimage itself.

The Wife of Bath stands as a helpful test case concerning the compatibility between the interpretive frameworks of classical philosophy and Christian eschatology. Wife of Bath criticism has generally been preoccupied with highlighting the ways in which the Wife asserts her individuality in opposition to prevailing gender discourses (Dinshaw) and/or socio-political circumstances (Patterson). More recently, Sachi Shimomura has similarly explored the way the Wife of Bath demonstrates an ability to evade eschatological judgment, arguing that “[the Wife’s] narration consistently eludes endings or other points of reference that allow final judgments other than her own” (85). Effectively, Shimomura’s argument depicts the Wife not as a pilgrim, but as an individual who has somehow removed herself from an otherwise universal and inescapable spiritual journey implied by the pilgrimage image. Shimomura foregrounds the Wife’s individuality as a character quality in opposition to a Christian eschatology. Within the context of the soul’s ascent, however, the Wife’s actions retain their eschatological significance. Because of her misogyny, the Wife enacts judgment upon

herself. Her insistence on *experience* naturally leads her deeper into a life of isolation, which in turn subjects her to the vagaries of time and the unpredictability of fortune. The Wife may be on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, but it is not clear whether her soul is ascending to heaven.

Eschatological analysis of the *Canterbury Tales*, however, has been relatively minimal. For example, searching “eschatology” in the *Chaucer Bibliography Online* produces only twelve results. As Robert Emmerson and Ronald Herzman have pointed out, “Critics rightly have been suspicious of attempts to fit the great variety of *The Canterbury Tales* into a restrictive all-encompassing, structure” (406). The concern stems from the reductive tendencies of strict allegorical interpretations, where characters and events function only as representations of Christian apocalyptic imagery—e. g., antichrist or the establishment of the New Jerusalem. However, if criticism included notions of God as *summum bonum* and of the philosophical notion of the soul’s ascent, then the *Canterbury Tales* in eschatological perspective would reveal a much larger and more complex vision of how the individual tales and characters relate to each other. It would be interesting, for example, to map each character’s trajectory according to the image of the soul’s ascent. Likely, such an analysis would result in a complex web of ups and downs. Thus, not only would critics acquire a new perspective on the overall structure of the *Canterbury Tales*, but the image of the soul’s ascent would disrupt the tendency to conceive of the pilgrimage as a monolithic narrative structure. In a literal sense, all the pilgrims are headed to Canterbury, but not all of them are headed to the New Jerusalem.

Finally, unlike the Christian eschatology of the pilgrimage, the classical conception of the soul's ascent does not defer judgment. Actions and behavior have immediate ramifications: either the soul is ascending to the transcendent vision of reality, or descending further into the world of the Many. Despite the Wife's insistence on the validity of *experience*, it has not saved her from the physical and emotional suffering of her marriages. Similarly, despite having won some form of peace in all five marriages, she has not yet experienced a marriage characterized by the mutual love and deference depicted in her *Tale*. As a result, she descends further into the world of the Many and fails to transcend her circumstances. Nevertheless, there is still hope for the Wife. From a Christian eschatological perspective, she is not dead yet, and so has not reached God's final judgment of her soul; she still has time to repent and reorient herself to the Heavenly Jerusalem. Likewise, because the classical conception of the soul's ascent holds to various doctrines concerning reincarnation and the immortality of the soul, it affords hope for the Wife as well. There is still the opportunity after death that the Wife's soul will rejoin the procession of the gods, as described in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where she may ascend to the "plain where truth stands" (248C).

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