

**Chaucer's Wife of Midas Reconsidered:
Oppositions and Poetic Judgment in the
*Wife of Bath's Tale***

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I

Contradictions, Oppositions, and Poetic Judgment in the
Wife of Bath's Tale

By the sheer vitality of her personality and the defiant aggressivity of her temperament, Chaucer's Wife of Bath has recently attracted a variety of critical assessments that emphasize her capacity to conduct an original argument along the lines of a "gendered" vocabulary, as much as they make of her a significant emblem of social protest that typifies an individual, or subjective, reaction to social and literary convention.¹ Other approaches suggest that the Wife has a point of view that merits a unique kind of critical attention, somewhat different from what can be attributed to Chaucer's other moral or social dissidents (male or female).² However, in this article, I wish to return to a somewhat more traditional, if unresolved, critical problem, which addresses the nature of Chaucer's poetic attitude toward the quality of poetic statement sustained by one of his most brilliant personae.³

In older traditions of scholarship on the Tale, Chaucer's attitude toward his teller has been characterized as ironic and moralistic, somewhat like the Wife's own arguments, which certainly represent a degree of involuntary

self-revelation.⁴ In her refusal of the Grace accorded to us by the Supreme Husband, she is the tortured exponent of a marriage bond that she cannot define, even as she negotiates her apparent theme of sovereignty, in her search for a sixth husband. But she also confronts, under the intense pressure of Chaucer's poetic vision, a host of major texts that have each their own poetic energy, among the most obvious of which are the declamations of La Vieille in the *Roman de la Rose*, and the counsels of Ovid's Dipsas in *Amores* 1.8.⁵ It is often assumed—correctly, in my view—that both Jean de Meun and Ovid develop an ironic attitude toward the arguments of the Old Woman, as a literary type, who claims to transpose her experience of love into an authoritative statement about human motivation in practical or moral terms, which might feature a certain novelty of social vision.⁶ Their argument would, in this way, serve to establish a woman's freedom from outmoded social or religious restraints, at the level of literary satire, but it is plain that both Jean and Ovid have also an interest in the Old Woman's arguments that is poetic, so that their irony is not merely one of comic ridicule, in a social or moral sense. That is, the authors' irony may also point toward an unstated question regarding poetic authority, as Jean's preceptors debate the contradictions of Amant's pursuit of the Rose with a view to its spiritual dimensions, suggested in the religious imagery of the narrative.⁷

In this way, Jean models part of his poetic attitude toward La Vieille's arguments on Ovid's interest in rhetorical and ethical irony, whereby the monologue of a speaker may conceal, or promote, a larger poetic statement than the speaker intends. What is lacking, however, in the *Amores* as much as in the *Ars Amatoria*, is a poetic judgment, expressed or unstated, as to the efficacy of the dramatic argument.⁸ But it has often been noted that many of the major mythological panels of Jean's narrative have, in their ironic mode of representation, not a little in common with the extended declamations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where the theme of a poetic judgment emerges much more clearly in the organization of the poem than it does in his earlier elegiac collections.⁹ Indeed, in the comic epic, we often have depicted for us the major theme of a poetic competition and judgment as to the poetic quality of a speaker's handling of a traditional legend, a topic that Chaucer will himself pursue with insight, as we shall attempt to demonstrate. As early as Book II of Ovid's text, Corvus and Cornix engage in a contest, or dispute, as to their power of prophecy in describing the secrets of the gods' role in human love: while Corvus, or the raven, intends to denounce the infidelity of Coronis to Apollo, Cornix, or the crow, attempts to restrain the other bird by warning it that a report by a mortal on the gods' secrets may

lead to little else than metamorphosis. In its own case, Cornix has been demoted from the rank of Minerva's attendant ("tutela Minervae," 563) to a status lower than that of an owl:

Et ponar post noctis avem. Mea poena volucres
Admonuisse potest ne voce pericula quaerant. (II.564-65)

[and I was ranked lower than the bird of the night. My punishment can serve to have warned other birds not to court danger by their chatter.]

The raven, of course, spurns the other's vain warning ("nos vanum spernimus omen," [597]), and is metamorphosed in turn — the point perhaps being that a poetic rendering of the secrets of Apollo's career as an earth-lover, whether justified or not in human terms, is hardly the proper subject of love-poetry, which of its nature transcends the brevity of mortal love.¹⁰ Rather, as readers of the *Manciple's Tale* may appreciate, an art of love should represent the gods not as mortals, but in a more transcendent form — as patrons of a better cosmic order, for example.¹¹ And the dispute between the raven and the crow is connected thematically to Apollo's frustrated pursuit of Daphne in Book I. Thus, we soon infer that a representation of the relation of human to divine love is certainly bound up with the topic of physical (and spiritual) metamorphosis: the gods abide forever in the poem, despite the attempt of various artists to represent them in degrading physical forms. But human loves and their narrators are subject to change and death.

Moreover, Ovid's epic abounds in penetrating, if indirect, poetic assessments of the better rendering of permanence and change in love stories, as Chaucerians will think readily of the legend of Pyramus and Thisbe, which earns the narrator Arsispe, one of the Minyades, her "verpertilian" transformation into an emblem of poetic blindness.¹² Analogous themes of poetic judgment return in the victory of the Muses over the Pierides in a contest on the proper representation of divine authority in death and love,¹³ or in the defeat of Marsyas by Apollo,¹⁴ and, not least, in Midas's preferences for Pan's pipes over Apollo's lyre, a legend that Alisoun refashions to her own poetic purposes.¹⁵

If Chaucer returns often to the theme of Ovidian poetic judgment, we may expect that he will test the quality of Alisoun's interest in the contest between Apollo and Pan: in inventing the character of Midas's Wife, who alone is privy to her husband's shameful deformity, Alisoun seems to wish to make the point that women cannot keep a secret ("we wommen konne no thyng hele," III.950, echoed at 966 and 980), but this argument is somewhat inappropriate to the larger direction of the narrative. In fact, in the main

story, the young knight's crime is not a secret, though the object of his search presumably is — at least until the hag reveals the key that will save him from the executioner's ax. But, ultimately, his divulgation of the magic solution does not save him in the full spiritual sense, for the answer to the Queen's question ("Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee / As wel over hir housbond as hir love, / And for to been in maistrye hym above," 1038–40) supplied to the knight by the hag is probably wrong. That is, within the dynamic of the Tale, her own metamorphosis at the close of the pillow lecture leads to a series of self-contradictions that do not illustrate the point about her mastery over the young knight that she wished to make at the Queen's Court. Rather, the contradictions reveal that she has little control over her argument on nobility, poverty, and age,¹⁶ as she promises at the close of her lecture to be both young and faithful ("bothe fair and good," 1241) when she had argued that ugliness and age are great wardens of chastity (and, thus, of fidelity [1215–16]). She also says that she will obey the young knight ("Dooth with my lyf and deth right as yow lest," 1248, echoed at 1255: "And she obeyed hym in every thing"), though she has claimed to do as she pleases after having, presumably, obtained sovereignty over him:

"Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie," quod she,
 "Syn I may chese and governe as me lest?" (1236–37)

And the narrative dissolves into confusion with Alisoun's contradictory imprecations in the final lines.

And yet, the judgment of Midas in *Metamorphoses* XI, which Alisoun attempts to interpret to her own purposes, will reveal by poetic irony what the hag's lecture does not, that is, the correct, if unexpressed, answer to the overwhelming question of what women most desire (905). This, as we shall attempt to demonstrate, involves a better poetic judgment on the meaning of Chaucer's full narrative, a judgment that in turn will resolve the marital dilemma of Alisoun herself, of the hag and of the young knight — not to mention the hilarious indiscretions of Midas's Wife. In this manner, the better judgment is an indirect answer to the Queen's question that will give us a perspective on the theme of authority and experience within the broader context of the Tale as a whole. The perspective is, of course, rendered in the opposing arguments of the characters, which seem to invite a concluding judgment.¹⁷ Yet the concluding moral has often provoked the bemusement — or amusement — of critics, who search for a better point to the story than its overt moral, implicitly ridiculed in Chaucer's characteristic poetic irony. However, no judgment is finalized at the close of the *Wife of*

Bath's Tale in an explicit sense: rather, it is implied, in that Chaucer's ironic poetic vision evaluates the quality of argument conducted by each speaker, to test the level of their poetic participation in the thematic development of the Tale.

Thus, Alisoun herself would advance the thesis that experience is authoritative (although she begins her confessional by allowing that it is not) in the sheer length of her Prologue, and in its elaborate account of her relations with her five husbands. Both of these themes illustrate, of course, her defiance of the authority of the Celestial Spouse. And yet, in her attempt to come to grips with a satisfying representation of authority on the basis of experience — a paradox that torments her constantly — she is opposed by the young rapist in the Tale, who would dominate womankind by sexual violence, only to find himself at the mercy of an imaginary Court of Law. It will be obliged to acquit him of his act or argument (love is violence, or domination) that makes not much better sense than his later objections to his union with the hag, on their wedding night. In this way, we have not only an opposing view between Alisoun and the knight on marriage, but also self-contradiction, in that she cannot secure a poetic argument about authority on the basis of experience, while the knight's objections to the age, appearance, and social rank of the hag are oddly incongruent with his eventual submission to her ("I put me in youre wise governance," 1231). In turn, the hag, far from being Alisoun's *alter ego*, is yet another poetic antagonist in the narrative: her dissertation on the virtues of spiritual nobility, poverty and age differs from Alisoun's own view of happiness in marriage; (not to mention the knight's), while these arguments are in turn contradicted in a chaotic dramatic conclusion. There the hag, as we have argued, is old (faithful) as well as young (that is, both fair and good [1241]), and obedient to the young rapist, though she claimed to have mastery over him. Of course, her beauty and wealth, and her obedience to her new husband, are implied in her metamorphosis:

"And but I be to-morn as fair to seene
As any lady, emperice, or queene,
That is bitwixe the est and eke the west,
Dooth with my lyf and deth right as yow lest." (1245-48)

To this moment of fantastic self-contradiction we may add Alisoun's concluding moral, which is that Christ should send her husbands obedient, young and fresh abed who will soon die so that she may remarry (1258-60).¹⁸

In this pattern of opposing arguments, we may suggest, in a broader perspective, that Chaucer's unexpressed poetic judgment on the claims of his speaking voices at the close of the Tale becomes increasingly demanding, as their inadequacy to sustain the energy of the narrative becomes the more evident: Alisoun herself has quite obviously lost control of her argument on sovereignty, when the hag traps the knight into a reply that may satisfy the Court of Law, but which is in other respects quite inconclusive. And the story ends not with the affirmation of female sovereignty, but on a dialectical question: indeed, if Alisoun had admitted in her Prologue that experience is not authoritative, the hag obviously claims that it is, since, in her fantasy, she would displace the Celestial Spouse as the true source of authority in the marriage sacrament. And the knight's criticisms of the hag's appearance and condition on their wedding night are likewise "experiential," in that his basic objection to the union should be that it is no better than his own act of rape. That is, the hag's magic answer is an exercise in sexual entrapment that hardly justifies a series of elaborate prevarications on spiritual nobility, poverty, and age, contradicted at the Tale's conclusion. At last, the Wife's final maledictions against unsubmitive husbands cannot resolve her need for the authoritative Spouse that her much vaunted experience with the five others has failed to provide. In this manner, the conclusion (and better meaning) of the Tale is lodged not in the dramatic arguments that oppose each other and themselves in the course of the narrative, but in the issue of an ironic poetic judgment, related to the Ovidian contests that Chaucer knew well, and which he transposes to his own purposes.

Thus, Midas's Wife may long to spill the secret about her husband's misjudgment of the poetic contest between Apollo and Pan, but she is incapable of telling us what is the proper assessment of the two gods' achievement in their competition. Yet her argumentative disability affects, at the level of structure and theme, the other dramatic oppositions in Chaucer's narrative. That is, in the insufficiencies of the confession of Midas's Wife to the waters of the marsh, we may observe a key to Chaucer's own attitude toward the other declamations of the Tale, as they compete to define in poetic terms the better meaning of sovereignty in marriage. Or, to put this point in different terms, the opposing arguments await a poetic judgment at the close that will be quite unlike the verdict of Midas in the poetic contest between Pan and Apollo. From Pan's defeat and Midas's punishment, the nature of Apollo's poetic victory over the half-goat can be inferred. This victory in turn influences the ironic judgment that Chaucer will bring to bear on his own opposing voices in the Tale, as they too attempt to define poetically the

nature of human loving in a sacramental perspective. Thus, we shall argue that Chaucer's handling of the divertimento on Midas silently appeals to the poetic competitions of the *Metamorphoses*. In this way, Chaucer, like Ovid, proceeds to an ironic evaluation of the poetic quality of his speakers' handling of the traditional story they participate in, and comment on, though they cannot identify its better meaning. Chaucer's characteristic mode of dramatic opposition in the Tale is also related to a distinction between the right and wrong use of poetry, in differentiating between human experience and divine authority in the representation of love. And this distinction may offer us a more definitive way of measuring the relative strength of the arguments on the better representation of marriage to which we are exposed in the course of the narrative.

II

The Poetic Strategy in the Confession of Midas's Wife

Alisoun's handling of the exemplum on Midas, though apparently self-contained and quite brief (III.952-82), is prefigured in the Prologue, and has a major impact on other parts of the Tale,¹⁹ where it resolves part of the question of the relationship of experience to authority. Yet part of our speaker's high rhetorical energy is also directed, in her initial remarks, toward her attempt to deny that any authority exists—as in her affirmations on our proper attitude toward chastity and virginity. If God has no commandment on this subject, then He and his Apostle “putte it in oure owene judgement” (68), she assures us. But, like her fantastic misconstructions of John, Paul, and Genesis,²⁰ her argument concerning the authority of human judgment on chastity and virginity has a larger poetic implication, for it suggests not only that God has no commandment to offer us in the broader sense (Exod. 20:1-17, Deut. 5:6-21), but also that she is the best judge of the meaning of sovereignty, as her principal theme. And this is a point that she will attempt to dramatize in her Tale: her elaborate Prologue, no doubt the product of a series of incremental revisions,²¹ is the less authoritative for the greater experiential detail it offers, and it is obviously in the Tale that she has the greatest difficulty in facing the rhetorical and thematic challenges she claims to have mastered. In this manner, at the opening of her exemplum on Midas, she wishes to convey the impression that the answer to the question of women's supreme desire is elusive, and that only she, as the sponsor of sovereignty, has a solution that is literally (and poetically) satisfying. However, in leading up to the Ovidian exemplum, she

acknowledges that at least some of the many contradictory replies the young knight considers, as he pursues his year-long search, are not far from the supreme truth that may save him:

Somme seyde that oure hertes been moost esed
Whan that we been yflatered and ypleased.
He gooth ful ny the sothe, I wol nat lye. (929–31)

Yet this suggestion of a possible truth that will satisfy the judgment of the Queen's court is promptly contradicted in the following lines:

And somme seyn that greet delit han we
For to been holden stable, and eek secree,
And in o purpose stedefastly to dwelle,
And nat biwreye thyng that men us telle.
But that tale is not worth a rake-stele.
Pardee, we wommen konne no thyng hele;
Witnesse on Myda — wol ye heere the tale? (945–51)

In Chaucer's complex set of poetic transitions, Alisoun seems to be arguing that some have claimed in women (and, perhaps, in all mankind) the need, or the capacity, for absolute constancy of purpose — but this is an argument that she denies. In effect, women have no standard of fidelity, or secrecy, to adhere to. In this manner, her swift rejection of the "truth" about woman's constancy illustrates her denial of any kind of social or moral obligation in marriage, as part of her thesis concerning a woman's freedom. In turn, this will be one of the points that she will attempt to depict in the ensuing Ovidian exemplum.

It is often assumed by Chaucerians that Midas's Wife, who replaces the king's barber from Ovid's text (*Metamorphoses* xi.180–93), can be identified as a creation of Alisoun in service to her own poetic purposes, by which she would illustrate her characteristic lack of discretion, or her ongoing denial of authority.²² The king's Wife would thus function as another *alter ego* of the teller, in the complex web of arguments and counter-arguments on a definition of sovereignty in marriage that becomes more intricate as the Tale advances. But, further consideration of the Ovidian exemplum will reveal that Chaucer has an interpretation of its detail that is more incisive — and insistent, in its depth — than the casual manner of its introduction into the Tale might suggest. In the Latin text, Midas has just recovered from the error of his golden touch, but has not improved his wits, despite his escape from that nearly fatal misjudgment:

Pingue sed ingenium mansit; nocituraque, ut ante,
Rursus erant domino stultae praecordia mentis. (148-49)

[Yet he remained thick-witted; however, this foolishness of intellect would once again be harmful to its master, as it had been before.]

At Tmolus, Pan boasts that his light melodies on a waxen reed ("cerata . . . harundine," 154) exceed in quality the harmonies of Apollo's lyre (155), while the mountain, now personified as an eponymous deity, is invited to judge the unequal contest between the two gods. The outcome is obvious to all, as Apollo plucks with his plectrum the strings of his magnificent instrument, and, in turn, the mountain god invites Pan to acknowledge his defeat in a decision approved by everyone except Midas:

Iudicium sanctique placet sententia montis
Omnibus; arguitur tamen atque iniusta vocatur
Unius sermone Midae. . . (172-74)

[The judgment rendered by the sacred god of the mountain is pleasing to all; yet it is condemned and called unjust only by the voice of Midas. . . .]

As Apollo now furnishes our foolish judge with ass's ears, his barber, unable to keep the secret, digs a hole in the ground into which he whispers his confession, which he then buries. It is then grown over with reeds ("harundinibus," 190) that will whisper the truth of the king's secret as the south wind blows (192-93).²³

Chaucer's divertimento contains some significant changes, the first of which is that Midas already has earned his ass's ears for preferring Pan's pipes to Apollo's lyre. In addition, he has a wife whom alone he trusts with his secret "vice" (955):

That, save his wyf, ther wiste of it namo.
He loved hire moost and trusted hire also;
He preyede hire that to no creature
She sholde tellen of his disfigure. (957-60)

The "vice" here refers to Midas's poor poetic judgment, but it is obviously related also to the question the young knight must answer to save his neck — though the relationship between the question of what women desire most and the ass's ears of the king is none too evident, and demands further explication. Of major interest also, in Chaucer's addition, is the comportment of Midas's Wife, though we should point out that she is not an original creation of Alisoun's fertile brain. To be sure, the new Wife is unable to keep her husband's secret, for she assumes that she knows the truth of his "vice,"

much as her boisterous sponsor would interpret the truth about the knight's shame in the main story, and the correct answer that will save him. And yet, the Wife does not dig into the ground as did Ovid's barber, but runs, as if chased, toward a "mareys," (970) or marsh, with heart afire (971). And, like the booming bittern ("bitore bombleth," 972), she speaks the awful revelation:²⁴

"Biwreye me nat, thou water, with thy soun,"
 Quod she; "to thee I telle it and namo;
 Myn housbonde hath longe asses erys two!
 Now is myn herte al hool; now is it oute.
 I myghte no lenger kepe it, out of doute." (974-78)

Yet the reference to the bittern in the divertimento does not address the theme of gluttony, but is rather an onomatopoeia that underscores the ineptitude, as well as the urgency, of the confession of Midas's Wife. In that regard, it is better to argue that we have here a brilliant onomatopoeic transposition by Chaucer of Ovid's "crepitante ciconia" ("clacking crane," *Metamorphoses* VI.97) appearing on the border of Minerva's tapestry, and serving as a warning to the insane audacity of Arachne. She claims that her art permits her to challenge in an artistic contest a divinity such as Minerva (VI.30-34). And yet, after the goddess has woven her ordered portrait of the founding of Athenian justice, with the Olympians seated in council, she represents at the border of her tapestry a series of bestial transformations of mortals who have defied the gods: the Trojan Antigone compared herself to Juno, and is then transformed into the crane with clacking bill.²⁵

In turn, Arachne's tapestry represents the gods in a series of unflattering disguises, as seducers of mortals, a theme that suggests the work of a religious illiterate. As artist, she is now reduced to a spider (VI.139-45), and we may observe that competitions in the epic between artists and divinities often reveal a comparison by Ovid: on the one hand, Minerva celebrates a function of poetry that is authoritative, and whose object is fate, while, on the other, Arachne pursues a materialistic view of this function, and thus is punished. Thus, if Chaucer compares the confession of Midas's Wife to the noise of the bittern, we may assume that her confession is not better than the work of chattering birds, and cannot yield an account of the reasons for Midas's shame.

Alisoun assigns a moral to the story, to which we have already referred:

Heere may ye se, thogh we a tyme abyde,
 Yet out it moot; we kan no conseil hyde. (979-80)

But this conclusion is patently inadequate, for, while it is true that the water may not whisper in as indiscreet a fashion as do the reeds of Ovid's text, to reveal the barber's indiscretion, Midas's Wife has still experienced a manner of relief ("Now is myn herte al hool") in her betrayal of her husband's secret. At issue here, then, is not only the theme depicting the woman who cannot keep a secret, but also the obvious, if mysterious, relief she feels in her breathless course toward the water. There she may divulge her knowledge to a witness that, paradoxically, is not likely to be able to interpret it, much less repeat it. Yet the detail of Chaucer's original additions reveals that there are important literary forces at work here that differ markedly from Alisoun's oversimplified moral of feminine indiscretion, perhaps tinged with her attempted subversion of a (dubious) male superiority.²⁶

It is clear, for example, that the haste of Midas's Wife as she runs to the water is not an incidental feature of Alisoun's own impatience and anxiety, but a careful revision by Chaucer of Hermes's truncated narration, addressed to Argus in *Metamorphoses* 1: sent by Jupiter to kill the watchman over Io, Hermes, disguised as a shepherd, having constructed a reed pipe on which he begins to play ("structis cantat avenis," 677), will now charm Argus to sleep. Thus, by long stories and the lulling melody of his pipes, he induces Argus to inquire as to the origin of the new instrument he is playing:

Quaerit quoque (namque reperta
Fistula nuper erat) qua sit ratione reperta. (1.687-88)

[And he asks also (since the reed pipe was only recently invented), to know the story of its invention.]

At this point, Hermes obligingly embarks on the legend of Syrinx chased by Pan, as she has been by other woodland satyrs and gods, but, as the last of the watchman's one hundred eyes begins to close, Ovid breaks off Hermes's narration. There follows a summary of the story, featuring images and themes that return in full detail in Chaucer's text:

Restabat verba referre
Et precibus spretis fugisse per avia nympham,
Donec harenosi placidum Ladonis ad amnem
Venerit; hic illam cursum impredientibus undis,
Ut se mutarent, liquidas orasse sorores;
Panaque, cum prensam sibi iam Syringa putaret,
Corpore pro nymphae calamos tenuisse palustres;
Dumque ibi suspirat, motos in harundine ventos
Effecisse sonum tenuem similemque querenti;
Arte nova vocisque deum dulcedine captum:

"Hoc mihi colloquium tecum" dixisse "manebit,"
 Atque ita disparibus calamis compagine cerae
 Inter se iunctis nomen tenuisse puellae. (700–12)

[It yet remained to report the words [of Pan] as to how, in rejecting his suit, the nymph ran through the wilds until she reached the placid waters of sandy Ladon; and how, her running steps impeded there by the currents, she prayed to her sisters of the waters to transform her; and how Pan, who, though he thought that he had now seized Syrinx for himself, held only the reeds of the marshes, rather than the body of the nymph; and, while he thus breathed a sigh, how the winds blown through the reed produced a light sound, similar to a complaint; and how, the god, charmed by the new art and the sweetness of its voice, remarked: "this will remain for me a means to speak with you;" and then how, in bringing together the reeds of unequal length by means of the joining of the wax, they memorialized the name of the maiden.]

The passage is, of course, rendered in reported statement, perhaps to suggest an effect of condensation that would mimic the process by which Argus's attention has finally been overcome by a soporific. The theme of sleep may itself be related to the dullness of Midas's listening capacity, represented in the ass's ears, but other highlights of Hermes's story return in Chaucer's own inset narration: the breathlessness of Syrinx as she is pursued in the love chase (a common topic of the *Metamorphoses*),²⁷ her arrival at the water's edge, where she is transformed into a reed of the marsh, and the musical lament produced by the reed that commemorates the quality of Pan's melodies, no match, of course, for Apollo's lyre. In fact, we have noted above that it is precisely with the waxen reed (XI.154) as his instrument that Pan is defeated by Apollo in the contest before Tmolus in Book XI.²⁸

From the relationship of theme and image in these two passages of Ovid's text, we are now in a better position to understand the nature of Midas's misjudgment of the poetic contest, in particular as it applies to Chaucer's own variation on the legend: Pan's reeds, which Midas preferred, are a symbol of the experience of physical love, by which the half-goat pursued Syrinx before her metamorphosis. That Midas should prefer Pan's melody suggests his own materialistic—or experiential—approach to the song of love, not unlike the appetite that he had revealed in his experiment with the golden touch. In turn, the Wife feels the need to report on the shame of her husband's behavior, except that her words are compared to the noise of the booming bittern on the edge of the tapestry of Athena, in her contest with Arachne. From this astute analogy, Chaucer alerts us to the fact that the breathless confession of the Wife has a sacrilegious quality—or an insane audacity, like Arachne's boasting of her own artistic gifts—in that it reduces

her husband's shame to a mere physical deformity. The confession should rather reveal the quality of the husband's (and her own) basic illiteracy, in their attempt to represent the art of love as a commemoration of an erotic experience (Pan's music on the Syrinx), rather than in the sublime harmonies of Apollo, president of the Muses, daughters of Memory, the consort of Zeus, agent of fate.²⁹ In addition, the breathlessness of the confession by the marsh suggests that the Wife, like Syrinx, is in the process of being chased by Pan's appetite, while awaiting her metamorphosis into the new instrument. The confession is, thus, paradoxical in that it is probably untrue, to the extent that it does not reveal to us the cause of her husband's "vice" — or, even, why it is reprehensible.³⁰ Rather, the truer ironic meaning of the Wife's confession is that the melody she would produce — if, like Syrinx, she were metamorphosed into a panpipe — would be inadequate as a love poem, and doomed to be defeated by the consummate harmonies of Apollo. Her confession is perhaps also a condensation of Alisoun's own secret answer as it is proffered by the hag to save the knight from his shame, an answer that both women long to divulge — although it has no more truth, in Chaucer's brilliant irony, than the booming noises of Minerva's bittern.

For, if the right answer to the overwhelming question of what women most desire were indeed sovereignty over men, the tale would at least address, perhaps on a trumpeted concluding note, the notion of a fulfilled femininity. But it dissolves in the confusion of competing voices (between Alisoun, the hag, the knight, and the Queen's assent to the acquittal — not to mention the desperate whisperings of Midas's Wife), none of which seems to be able to reach beyond the contradictions and self-contradictions of its own argumentative position. Yet Chaucer comes silently to judge the competition of arguments in a manner far more trenchant than would Midas.³¹ Indeed, if sovereignty over men is the wrong answer to the Queen's question as to what women most desire, in part because the Tale does not justify such a thesis in its closing contradictions, we may infer that the better, if unstated, answer is contained in the ineffable harmonies of Apollo's lyre: what women want most is what men want most (as readers of Ovid's and Chaucer's love poems), namely, better art than a song resulting from the chase of Pan after Syrinx. This is not much different from the story of the knight's rape of the maiden, the contradictions of the hag's pillow lecture, or Alisoun's concluding invocation to the perpetual renewal of young spouses fresh abed, who would alone be able to satisfy her.

In all, Alisoun claims to deny physical experience as the proper subject of her discourse on marriage, while she looks for an authority that is supreme,

no doubt linked to the sacrament established by the Celestial Spouse. But her handling of the divertimento on Midas reveals that her poetic judgment has opted for a material vision of the function of poetry much like the song of Pan, which has a history in the love chase, rather than in Memory, mother of the Muses, sponsors of Apollo's ineffable harmonies.³² Moreover, Pan was frustrated in his quest for material gratification with Syrinx, as well as in his poetic ambitions: from this we may infer that Chaucer wishes us to understand that Alisoun will endure a similar frustration in attempting to apply the Muse of poetry, represented by the (ironically absent) god of prophecy in the Ovidian divertimento, to the frantic carnival of death and remarriage on which her own argument closes. Moreover, the contradictions and self-contradictions of the speaking voices of the Tale probably owe something at the thematic and structural level to the oppositions and poetic judgments of Ovid's narrative, so that we may expect at the close of Chaucer's tale a silent, ironic assessment of his own voices' claims to define the nature of sovereignty. Chaucer's judgment will be like Tmolus's on Apollo and Pan: in the Latin text, Apollo has no legendary song to sing, beyond his occasional laments over a human metamorphosis, because poetry reaches beyond language and circumstance in its ulterior mnemonic meaning, while, in turn, Chaucer's ironic Muse will triumph over the confession of Midas's Wife (and the other competing voices of the Tale). This is because it silently celebrates a transcendent marriage of which Christ spoke when he went once only to a nuptial feast (at Cana, III.10-11), as much as he reproved the common-law union of the Samaritan woman, at the well (III.14-20).

Midas's Wife is glad to unburden herself of her secret, which is not that her husband has misjudged the function of poetry in crass physical terms — that is already common knowledge — but that she herself, in her hasty course toward the water with heart afire, wishes to escape the embraces of Pan at both the physical and poetic levels. She, too, longs to be transformed into an instrument better than a panpipe — or a booming bittern — and quite unlike the contradictory metamorphosis of the hag into a figure of paradoxical fantasy, unable to resolve the thematic energies of the Tale. At last, Midas's Wife also represents in her confession by the marsh the secret longing of Alisoun herself to be judged as the instrument of Christ's sovereign authority in a poem about a timeless union beyond youth and age, or beyond the perils of the love chase. This is the central meaning of Chaucer's handling of the Ovidian divertimento on Midas, by which we may see more deeply into his characteristic mode of poetic composition. He is able to express an authoritative meaning overriding the tormented oppositions

and fantastic half-truths of the speakers in the Tale, partly on the example of Ovid's ironic poetic judgments: these award the laurel of victory to those speakers whose poetic argument reaches beyond the ephemeral, to celebrate a legendary thematic order under the dominion of fate. In the guise of the authority of Christ's sacrament, Chaucer in turn can express a silent judgment on the representation of marriage in his Tale that is the more eloquent for being wordless, or beyond the reach of the comic oppositions of the characters' experience, as he appeals, in his supreme ironic vision, to the sovereign power of his poetic Muse.

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NOTES

¹ On recent critical approaches to a possible link between Alisoun's interest in glossing and her erotic drive, I have found the heavily documented discussion of Catherine S. Cox to be useful. The intensity with which Alisoun's character is imagined has, of course, stimulated critical responses that see in her rhetoric the exploration of a somewhat private, or subjective world: see, for example, the essay of Lee Patterson.

² Sheila Delany studies the various modes of "flaunting and suppression" in Alisoun's manner of citing from authoritative texts, as part of her bid to define the means of cultural production in relation to the function of art and social power (50-51).

³ The contradictory nature of the Wife's argument, spoken as both a rebel against conventional views of marriage and a surprisingly conservative exponent of domestic bliss, is examined by Susan Crane.

⁴ A classic discussion of Chaucer's ironic approach to the Wife's exegetical abilities in her Prologue is that of D.W. Robertson, Jr.

⁵ *Heroides* and *Amores*. William Matthews traces the history of the topic of the Old Woman from Antiquity to the cultural context of mediaeval works in Chaucer's immediate background.

⁶ I suggest an analogy between Ovid's handling of Dipsas's arguments and Jean's own mode of composition in my *Latin Poetic Irony in the Roman de la Rose*, 43-47.

⁷ Although Jean's *La Vieille* does not specifically refer to the topical Golden Age examined by other speakers in the *Roman*, often in a religious context, she does refer to a glorious former age when wars were fought for the conquest of women (13893-905), as part of her attempt to render the human experience of love in ideal terms. I cite from the edition Félix Lecoy.

⁸ On the role of cultural value and rhetoric in Ovid's elegiac satires, see Molly Myerowitz, 17-40. There is an indirect authorial comment at the close of *Amores* 1.8, in the anger the lover feels against Dipsas, whose hypocrisy is as great as his own. On the other hand, in the *Ars Amatoria*, the preceptor must sometimes reckon with the Muses themselves, who sit in a kind of indirect judgment on the truth of his erotic (and poetic) conquests (*Ars* 1.25-30). See the detailed discussion by Godo Lieberg.

⁹ An obvious example of a major panel from the *Metamorphoses* that is redeveloped by Jean is the lengthy meditation on Pygmalion (20787–21184): see the ample discussion of Roger Dragonetti. The best general survey is that of Thérèse Boucher.

¹⁰ An able discussion of these kinds of poetic contests is conducted by Heinz Hofmann, with additional remarks by Henri Le Bonniec. References to the *Metamorphoses* in this article are keyed to the edition of Georges Lafaye. I examine Chaucer's handling of the Cornix episode in "The Manciple's 'Cosyn' to the 'Dede'." Renderings of Latin citations in this article are my own.

¹¹ Consider the detail on Minerva's tapestry, depicting the history of the foundation of Athenian justice under the jurisdiction of the Areopagus, with the twelve Olympians seated in council (*Metamorphoses* vi.70–82). I refer below to the artistic strategies represented in the spinning contest between the goddess and Arachne, and to the ultimate poetic judgment of Arachne's folly.

¹² *Metamorphoses* iv.55–166, reworked in Chaucer's *Legend of Thisbe* (LGW F 706–923). References are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed.

¹³ *Metamorphoses* v.315–31: the Pierides tell the story of the Giants' attempted overthrow of the Gods, which is followed by the reported epyllion of Calliope on the marriage of Pluto and Proserpina. In the Introduction to the *Man of Law's Tale*, the teller specifically refers (CT II.90–96) to the defeat of the Pierides in their contest with the Muse, perhaps in apprehension of his own inability to deal with the legend of Constance that he is about to address.

¹⁴ *Metamorphoses* vi.382–400, specifically invoked by Chaucer in the *House of Fame* (III.1229–32):

And Marcia that loste her skyn,
Bothe in face, body, and chyn,
For that she wolde envien, loo,
To pipen bet than Appolloo.

On the change of gender from Marsyas to "Marcia," see Alfred David.

¹⁵ *Metamorphoses* xi.146–93. Two significant studies of the mythographic background to Chaucer's treatment of the Midas legend are by Judson B. Allen and Patrick Gallacher, and by D.W. Robertson, Jr.

¹⁶ This is not to deny that the hag's lecture cannot address substantial texts and issues: see, e.g., Patrick J. Gallacher. But, as Gallacher suggests, "the hag's proposal of how to guarantee constancy (1213–16) is ludicrously imperfect" (291).

¹⁷ The ending of the Tale is inconclusive, as we argued above, in that the question of what women want most is not fully resolved by the opposing arguments. On the subject of narratorial inconclusiveness in Chaucer, see, more recently, Rosemarie P. McGerr. Larry Sklute includes a chapter on endings in the *Canterbury Collection* in his *Virtue of Necessity*.

¹⁸ The pattern of contradiction in the dialectic of the speakers' exposition applies also to other tales in the Collection. I review the Latin poetic background of this feature in my "Contradictions and Self-Contradictions in Chaucer's Poetic Strategy."

¹⁹ Alisoun's reference in the Prologue to Argus (III.358) as a guardian of a woman's chastity may well have a passage in La Vieille's declamation as an immediate model (*RR* 14351–54 [ed. Lecoy]), suggested in the Riverside annotation, but the ensuing development in Jean de Meun's text reveals an obvious extrapolation from the story of Io in *Metamorphoses* I. This panel in turn prepares us for the defeat of Pan by Apollo in

Book XI, as we shall observe. Likewise, the earlier reference in the Prologue to a husband's wooden and golden vessels (III.99-101) may well refer to 2 Tim. 2:20, but it seems also to prefigure the experience of Midas and his golden touch.

20 Lawrence Besserman conducts a bibliographic review of critical comment on Alisoun's handling of Scriptural material in this passage, and in others (80-90).

21 The Prologue underwent a series of expansions, with the addition of new material. The classic discussion by Robert A. Pratt examines the manner in which Chaucer moves toward a firmer grip on his satiric vision of the Wife's personality and argument.

22 John Stephens and Marcella Ryan, especially 71-72: "The paradigm for this process of withholding and disclosure is presented *en abyme* in the story of Midas (lines 951-82). . . . Whereas the knight of the tale is in search of something unknown to him or the reader, Midas' wife is in possession of knowledge she should conceal but feels constrained to disclose."

23 A full survey of the Hellenic archaeological background in myth and art is offered by Lynn E. Roller. In Chaucer's own cultural context, mythographic interpretations of Midas tend to emphasize his greed, which they link to his misjudgment of the contest of Pan with Apollo. The remarks of the Third Mythographer elaborate on this in G.H. Bode. John of Garland refers briefly to Midas's golden touch, and to his asinine judgment in *Integumenta Ovidii*, 69. Allen and Gallacher invoke (101) other mythographic material, including Giovanni del Virgilio's exposition, which identifies the deformity with exegetical obtuseness. This theme is followed in the comments of Robert of Walsingham, 62-63.

24 It has been argued (e.g., by Lee Patterson 348, n.8) that the detail of the "booming bitter" in the confession of Midas's Wife can be traced to the following passage in Guillaume de Deguileville, 325:

Les iex esroulle comme un tor,
 Por nient n'ai mie com butor
 Deuz ventres, quar butordement
 Parle a la gent et lourdement. (10471-474)

The context is a description of gluttony, compared to the two stomachs, and hence the large appetite, of the bitter. This association returns in the English version of John Lydgate, 354 ("lyk a botore . . ." [13301]), and the "booming" sound of the bird is probably generated by the clacking of its bill on the water, suggesting its large appetite: see M.C. Seymour, vol. 1, 635-36.

25 Useful studies of the important panel include M. Von Albrecht, and Anne-Marie Tupet.

26 Alisoun's social and literary protest, as we suggested initially, has attracted a wide variety of critical responses. Barrie Ruth Strauss adopts a contemporary hermeneutical approach, while Alisoun's own sexual appetite has been represented in terms of her use of "bacon" (III.217, 418) in two articles by Beryl Rowland.

27 Betty R. Nagle draws a portrait of the theme of mortals chased by gods in Ovid's narrative.

28 Jean Marc Frécaut appropriately links (153-55) the reed represented by Syrinx as she is chased by Pan in Book I to the satyr's instrument in his contest with Apollo in Book XI.

29 On Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses, see, e.g., *Metamorphoses* v.280. Apollo is characterized as the president of the Muses by the Third Mythographer, ed. Bode, p. 201, while Zeus remarks to Ceres that Pluto's marriage to Proserpina involves a decree of the Fates that he cannot rescind: *Metamorphoses* v.532.

30 That is, the divulgation by Midas's Wife of her husband's "vice" to the waters is insufficient, or irrelevant, for she merely reveals his deformity without explaining how it came about — a question central to Chaucer's ironic poetic judgment of his speakers' argumentative positions in the Tale as a whole.

31 Aside from the oppositions in the poetic contests of the *Metamorphoses*, there are, obviously, other literary influences that account for Chaucer's dialectical and dramatic mode of composition in this Tale, as in others. Among these, we may refer not only to the patterns of contrary exposition on love in the *Roman de la Rose*, but also to the tradition of contemporary French debate poetry at the Court of Love represented in the narratives of Guillaume de Machaut and his circle, as well as to the native tradition recently studied by Thomas L. Reed, Jr.

On the other hand, the pattern of opposition of dramatic voices here also involves the question of the validity of multiple perspectives on a central poetic theme. In this regard, the much-studied question of Alisoun herself ("Who peyntede the leon, tell me who?" III.692) in the course of her defiant apology for a feminist point of view, affords another useful analogue to Chaucer's development of opposing perspectives in his poetic argument. In Marie de France's fable, "Del leün e del vilein," the first lion asks the peasant, in the context of a discussion of their joint heritage ("lignage," 4), who painted the mural displaying a man axing a lion. The intention of Chaucer's Alisoun in her question is no doubt to suggest that if the lion (or a woman) had painted the mural, its subject and meaning would have been quite different, for her thesis in the Midas exemplum is exactly that — namely that art should serve to reveal a material fact, like ass's ears, which alone is true. Thus, if we had from her a *Husband (or Lion) of Bath's Tale*, its presumed point would be that men or lions must have sovereignty over women or lionesses by experience, which alone is true.

But this is not quite the meaning of Marie's fable (nor of Chaucer's Tale), which shows that the mural, as art, has an authoritative effect on the fast friendship of the intellectual lion and the peasant quite different from the mural's own content. The answer to Alisoun's question as to who painted the lion is, therefore, to be found with Apollo and his agents, that is, with artists such as Marie and Chaucer. They deliver us by the authority they have in their reading of tradition and memory from an experience of marriage (and lions) that has left Alisoun (and her readers) somewhat confused by her own literal argument, very much in need of figurative interpretation. Or, to put this point somewhat differently, the answer to Alisoun's question about the painting of lions is that only artists can paint murals that are authoritative, just as only artists can satisfy us on the question of what women most desire.

Two significant discussions of the role of the fable in the Wife of Bath's argument are Marjorie Malvern and Mary Carruthers, especially 209: "The fable of the painting of the lion teaches that the 'truth' of any picture has more to do with the prejudices and predilections of the painter than with the 'reality' of the subject, and that truthful art (and morality) must take into account this complexly mutual relationship."

In this note I cite from Marie de France, *Fables*.

32 Alisoun's deafness (I.446), perhaps the result of her altercation with the fifth husband ("And with his fest he smoot me on the heed" III.795) has been studied in its Patristic context by Melvin Storm, who links her infirmity to her lack of spiritual understanding. This theme relates to the classical topic invoked by Boethius in *Consolation 1*, prose 4 ("Artow like an asse to the harpe?"), and by Pandarus in *Troilus* I.730–35.

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