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## THE WIFE OF BATH AND HER TALE

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Of the characters in the *Canterbury Tales* the Wife of Bath has aroused most interest and comment among modern scholars. She is seen as a character who developed in complexity as the poem progressed and consequently as one who fascinated her creator. This attitude is expressed most forcefully by R.A. Pratt:

In the course of years the poet's conception of her changed and developed; the complexity and appeal of her personality are no accident; for, when all the evidence is in, she appears to have interested Chaucer more, to have stimulated his imagination and creative power more fully and over a longer period, than any other of his characters.<sup>1</sup>

Pratt based this approach to her upon certain assumptions about the progress of the text of the poem. These are "that the Man of Law originally told the story of *Melibee*; that his Epilogue originally introduced the Wife of Bath; and that she originally told the tale of adultery now assigned to the Shipman".<sup>2</sup> Recent research into the manuscript tradition of the *Canterbury Tales* has made these assumptions less acceptable today and some have never been accepted by many scholars at all. It is necessary, therefore, to review briefly the state of manuscript scholarship for the poem.

Although many early scholars like Skeat accepted that Hengwrt (Hg) was an early, or even the earliest, manuscript and that Ellesmere (El) was an "edited" text, it has been customary to use El as the base manuscript of editions because it has been traditionally regarded as a good manuscript.<sup>3</sup> It was not fully appreciated until Manly and Rickert produced their edition of the poem in 1940 how good a text Hg was.<sup>4</sup> They relied principally on Hg but they did not use it as their base manuscript, partly because they believed in two types of manuscript production, commercial and non-commercial, and partly because Hg has an unusual order and excludes material traditionally accepted as Chaucerian. Since then editions have continued to use El, except that Donaldson took Hg as the base text of his edition and more recently the Variorum edition and Blake have used or are using Hg more exclusively as their base texts.<sup>5</sup>

Manly and Rickert thought that individual tales of the poem were circulated independently by Chaucer and that these tales existed in different authorial versions. However, the work of

Dempster on the text of the poem showed that there was a coherent manuscript tradition in which all manuscripts could be traced back to Hg and this made the postulate of previously circulating tales unnecessary.<sup>6</sup> More recently Doyle and Parkes have shown that most early manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* were produced by scribes working on a piece-work basis for an editorial committee.<sup>7</sup> These scribes were working in the London/Westminster area and there was a close link between the early manuscripts of the poem. Their conclusions indicate that the concept of commercial and non-commercial manuscript production is no longer valid, and that these early scribes were all probably working from the same copytext, which is likely to have been Chaucer's own working copy found by members of the editorial committee among his papers after his death. This situation helps to account for the state of Hg which, as outlined by Doyle and Parkes, represents the first attempt by this editorial committee to arrange a series of disparate fragments into a coherent whole. During the course of their first arrangement of the fragments in Hg they realised that certain changes in order were desirable; only some of these were introduced into Hg itself which was already being copied, and others were incorporated into the later manuscripts.<sup>8</sup> It is for this reason that Hg appears to us to be disorganised, although there is a recognisable principle of order in it. The order followed is not the dramatic one to which we have been accustomed, but a more formal arrangement by which tales were grouped according to the state of completion in which they were found. The arrangement of the tales in an order in Hg exposed certain gaps between those tales which were not provided with links, and so extra lines were added to the poem in the course of the fifteenth century in order to make it seem as complete as possible. In the light of our present knowledge it consequently seems safest to accept as genuine Chaucer only those parts of the poem which are in Hg. Thus the Man of Law's endlink, which was almost certainly composed to produce a link between two tales in a fifteenth-century order, should be regarded as spurious. It can therefore have no bearing on Chaucer's attitude to the Wife of Bath, as claimed by Pratt. Indeed it has not been accepted as genuine by all modern editors. This new understanding of the manuscript tradition supports the view that the poem consisted of no more than a series of fragments when Chaucer died and that these fragments or sections had not been arranged in an order by Chaucer. It also suggests that the allocation of tale to teller is something which happened late in the genesis of a tale, for it appears in Hg that some of the tales were allocated tellers by the scribe or the editorial committee rather than by Chaucer.<sup>9</sup>

The other two assumptions made by Pratt were that the Man of Law was first given TMel as his tale and that the Wife of Bath originally told ShT. Of these the latter is widely accepted by all scholars, though the former has won little general acceptance. The assumption about the Man of Law is based on the statement in his prologue that he will tell a tale in prose: "I speke in prose" (3:96). Yet there are several discrepancies between the tale and what is foreshadowed about it in the prologue, and it is not satisfactory to pick out this one alone as significant. Furthermore, it has recently been argued that "prose" may refer to the

rhymed stanzas of equal length as used by the Man of Law.<sup>10</sup> Even if this is not so, there is no evidence that it was TMel to which the Man of Law refers with his "prose". It could have been PsT or a tale that Chaucer intended to write, but never did; or the discrepancy could be of no significance whatever. There is therefore insufficient evidence to support this assumption.

Although the view that the Wife of Bath originally told ShT is universally accepted by modern critics, the evidence for it is not reliable. At the beginning of this tale (ll.11-19) the narrator mentions that a husband must feed and clothe his wife. He does so by using the personal pronouns "we" and "us" to indicate the wife or women in general who are so looked after. These pronouns are felt to be inappropriate for the shipman, a male, and so scholars assume that they refer to the original teller of the tale who was a woman. The paucity of married women on the pilgrimage means that this woman can be only the Wife of Bath. Although this view seems superficially attractive, a consideration of the pronoun forms in the poem makes it less likely. First person pronoun forms are used for emphasis or local colour in other places in the *Canterbury Tales* and their use here need not be regarded as significant. Furthermore the pronoun forms are among those which are most frequently corrected by the fifteenth-century scribes. Yet these particular examples at the beginning of ShT are not altered by any scribe, and so it would appear that the scribes did not feel them to be so out of place as we today evidently do.<sup>11</sup> As we have already noted that in Hg there is evidence to indicate that the tales were often written before they were ascribed to a particular teller, it is more satisfactory to assume that at the beginning of ShT the personal pronouns like "we" and "us" were introduced for vividness and not that they are relics of an earlier version of the tale.

In the light of our present knowledge we may reasonably conclude that the Wife of Bath was not associated by Chaucer with any other tale and that she herself did not have a role in any linking sequence outside her own section. That section contains WBPT, FrT and SuT only. How that section came to be put together and in what order are unknown. Before the composition of this section is considered, its connections with other tales need to be looked at. In traditional scholarship WBPT is thought to introduce and be the principal tale in the so-called Marriage Group, though that idea has been under increasing attack more recently. Clearly if, as suggested by recent scholarship, the *Canterbury Tales* consisted at Chaucer's death of a group of unordered sections there can be no evidence that Chaucer intended a Marriage Group at all. All we can say is that Chaucer linked WBPT with FrT and SuT and made references to the Wife of Bath in ClT and MeT. Certainly when Hg was copied the scribe was not thinking in terms of a Marriage Group. The original intention in Hg was apparently to put the Wife of Bath section before PsT at the end of the poem. This may be, as has been suggested,<sup>12</sup> because the editor who arranged the sections thought the Summoner's concluding remark "We been almoost at towne" (2:2268) referred to Canterbury. This section was not ultimately placed before PsT in Hg because the scribe or editor realised that there were references to the Wife in ClT and MeT and that it was not

suitable for her tale to follow those tales; WBPT was therefore brought forward in Hg. As this realisation emerged only during the course of the copying of Hg, ClT and MeT cannot have been linked to the Wife of Bath in its exemplar. That Chaucer may have intended at some later stage to make some connection between WBPT and ClT and MeT is a possible hypothesis, but it is too speculative to be taken into account in a discussion of the poem's development. The only tales which are known to be linked by Chaucer to the Wife of Bath's are SuT and FrT, and the section they formed was an independent one among the fragments of the poem left by Chaucer when he died.

As for the composition of WBP it has been claimed that it consists of several parts and that these witness to various stages in the prologue's growth, which in turn reflect Chaucer's continued interest and involvement in the Wife herself.<sup>13</sup> The prologue may for critical purposes be divided into two parts, the 'sermon' on marriage and virginity on the one hand, and the description of the Wife's marriages on the other. This does not mean that the two parts were necessarily composed at different times. No manuscript contains only the one or other part, and so the only support for this idea of a serial-type composition is individual scholars' subjective reactions. Yet the prologue relies on several different sources, and the differences in tone and approach may reflect those sources. This is something that happens frequently in the poem. Thus the theme of poverty in MLT (3:99-133) fits in awkwardly with the tale of Constance, but we need not accept that this is because these two parts of MLT were written by Chaucer at separate times; they indicate the use of different sources. As there is no evidence in the manuscripts to support several stages in its composition, we may accept that WBP was written as one unit and that consequently by itself it provides no clue as to Chaucer's developing attitude to the Wife of Bath.

There are, however, differences in the number of lines found in WBP in the various manuscripts. Hg, together with other early manuscripts like Harley 7334, has far fewer lines than some manuscripts. It does not have the lines which appear in the Group/Fragment lineation as 44a-f, 575-84, 609-12, 619-26 and 717-20. E1 itself does not contain 44a-f, but it does have the other sets of lines. The attitude of most editors is that these lines (with the possible exception of 44a-f) were added in revision by Chaucer, though it is never made clear if they were all added at the same time or how one can tell they are Chaucerian. Because they are not in Hg, it is more satisfactory to regard them as scribal rather than as authorial, for we know the scribes were active in adding to what Chaucer left of the *Canterbury Tales* at his death. In any event WBP is the most altered piece in the poem. Whether the additions are in fact authorial or scribal, there can be no doubt that the prologue once existed in a shorter version than the one in which it is now usually read. It is from this shorter version that studies on the development of the Wife of Bath should commence, since it is a fact in the manuscript tradition as against the surmises of who originally told which tale. This shorter version may give us some indication of the poet's original attitude to the Wife which the

later additions may have altered.

What then do these additional passages consist of? In the first (44a-f) the Wife claims she has extracted the best out of her husbands and that she represents the embodiment of the experience of having five husbands. In the second (575-84) she misleads her husband about her dreams and their significance. In the third (609-12) she claims to be compounded of Martian and Venerian elements. In the fourth (619-26) she maintains that she is marked by Mars and so cannot live moderately, but is willing to love any man. The final addition (717-20) mentions that Christ died to redeem a woman's fault for it was a woman, Eve, who brought mankind to ruin. This last addition is a typical piece of medieval moralising and is very different from the others. The import of those is to make the Wife even more colourful and outrageous. The reviser has increased the impact the Wife makes upon the reader. There is no attempt, for example, to increase the examples of wicked wives or to add to the more argumentative passages of the prologue; the additions, with the exception of the last one, are concerned with the character of the Wife herself. Although this may not surprise us, it indicates that when she was first created she was not meant to be so colourful; she became more "popular" as time passed. She grew bigger than her creator originally imagined or intended.

There is other evidence to support this suggestion. The Wife is the only pilgrim referred to outside the *Canterbury Tales*. In the *Envoy to Bukton* (conventionally dated about 1396) she appears as the typical tyrannical wife who makes marriage such a risky business. Here she has acquired the status of a symbol. Furthermore, the Wife is the only pilgrim mentioned by other pilgrims in their tales (as distinct from the links). The Clerk and Merchant refer to her explicitly. The former implies in a passing reference that she stands as the representative of her sex, probably in its more aggressive manifestations. The "song" with which his tale ends is a sop to placate the Wife for his tale about a patient and prudent wife. In MeT Justinus the wise counsellor refers to the Wife and her exposition of the marriage state in his claim that marriage is not likely to prove as happy as January imagines so he need not worry about spoiling his chances of going to paradise because of happiness in marriage. In these three examples in Chaucer's own work,<sup>14</sup> all of which must be dated after WBPT, the Wife stands as a symbol of the woman who tyrannises her husband and who asserts women's rights against men. She has grown so large that she can stand outside the framework of section 2 of the *Canterbury Tales* to represent a particular type of woman.

The relationship of WBP in its shorter version to the description of the Wife in Pro is less easy to decide. It is widely believed that Pro was composed before most, if not all, of the tales, though some scholars have suggested that its portrait of the Wife was touched up after WBP was written.<sup>15</sup> While there is nothing inherently improbable in this suggestion, it is unnecessary to posit a special case for the Wife's portrait unless compelling reasons exist to support it. As the Wife's portrait in Pro is in many respects quite contrary to what we learn of her in WBP, such reasons do not seem to exist. In Pro she is a weaver of excellence

with the implication that she acquired her independence and wealth from that profession. Consequently she considered herself the premier woman in the parish and was angry if others tried to usurp her position. Because of her wealth and position she dressed extravagantly. She had been married five times and she had also indulged in extra-marital affairs. Her constant journeys on pilgrimage were presumably undertaken to satisfy that particular proclivity. She was jolly and she knew all about love. There is no hint here of the tyrannical wife who made her husbands endure hell on earth. A straightforward reading of

Housbondes at chirche-dore she hadde fyue  
 Withouten oother compaignye in yowthe -  
 But therof nedeth noght to speke as nowthe. (l: 462-4)

implies that her many marriages were embarked on to indulge sexual appetite and not to acquire wealth or to give scope for her bullying behaviour. In Pro the Wife is a rich, jolly oversexed woman who must satisfy her desires either in or out of marriage. Her wealth and position give her the opportunity to indulge herself in this way. There is no reason, therefore, to suggest that this portrait was written after WBP or in any way influenced by the information given there. If Pro was written before the majority of tales, this would fit in with the view that the portrait of the Wife in Pro precedes the description of her behaviour in WBP.

From the foregoing discussion it is possible to suggest there were at least four stages in the development of the Wife of Bath. The first is represented by Pro where the Wife appears as a rich, companionable woman whose primary interest in life is sex; she was experienced in the art of love. This is natural in a character modelled on La Vielle in *Le Roman de la Rose*. The second is found in the shorter version of WBP in which the Wife is portrayed as a tyrant because of the role she fills in that section of the poem. The third is represented by the references to her in the *Envoy to Bukton* and the tales of the Merchant and Clerk. Here the Wife is taken out of the context of her tale and she is treated as a symbol of the tyrannical wife pure and simple. The Wife has developed a life of her own outside her tale: she has become a "character". The fourth is represented by the additions in WBP in which her stature as an independent character has influenced her role and representation in her own prologue. While the first three stages may be accepted as Chaucerian, the last may be (and almost certainly is) scribal. As we have seen, the early scribes probably worked from one exemplar and as the majority of early manuscripts (with the exception of El) omit these extra lines of the last stage, it is probable that they were not in the exemplar.<sup>16</sup> If they were included in the margin by Chaucer as a revision of his text, we should need to know why the early scribes ignored them. It is more reasonable to assume that the passages were introduced by a scribe or editor during the early fifteenth century.

The proposals that have been put forward to explain the genesis of Pro are varied and need not be discussed in detail here. Among them the suggestion by Dr Mann that Chaucer was influenced

by medieval estates satire seems most satisfactory to account for the portrayal of the Wife.<sup>17</sup> She stands as the representative of woman, a recognised type for criticism in that literature, and many features Chaucer included in Pro exploit the contemporary moralist's attitude towards women. This concentrated on women's sexual role, which was evaluated against the ideal woman in courtly love who was a passive partner. Hence the aspects stressed by Chaucer are the Wife's independence, assertiveness and sexuality - features not associated with the perfect medieval woman in literature. Instead of remaining faithful to her husband or his memory, she glories in sex: she marries five times and has the odd affair. This feature is sufficient to show that Pro preceded WBP in the Chaucerian canon. In sexual affairs variety and prowess are important attributes, as they are in Pro. When in WBP the Wife becomes a tyrant, the five husbands become an embarrassment. To solve the difficulty Chaucer amalgamated three of the husbands - an indication he was dealing with intractable material. The Wife's independence which she gains in Pro through her weaving business is another feature which is important in Pro but has no relevance to WBP where it is ignored. This independence enables her to follow her sexual passion. She is a woman who chases her quarry rather than acts as the object of a man's service, and consequently she is distanced from the ideal woman. Independence is not necessary in WBP where Chaucer wanted to portray a tyrant who had little reason to act in that way since she had sprung from such humble origins. She tyrannised her husbands and appropriated their wealth. Her behaviour is typical of the usurping tyrant who does not know how to behave properly because she is not born to that status. Her jaunts on pilgrimage in Pro are a further mark of her independence; she goes to satisfy her sexual desires. In WBP this feature is not developed because the Wife stays at home to tyrannise her husbands. Similarly her love of finery and her pride over her fellow wives which are important characteristics in Pro are not stressed in WBP where her relations with her husbands are more important. Indeed, she criticises her husband because she is not so finely dressed as her neighbours.

In other words the Wife of Bath is portrayed as two different types in Pro and WBP. In the former Chaucer uses the theme of the satirised woman of estates literature, whereas in the latter he uses the theme of the tyrant in its special form of the tyrannical wife. Consequently many features in Pro are not developed in WBP because they are inappropriate to the new character the Wife assumes there. Some features in Pro do recur in WBP, such as her deafness and her gat-toothed mouth; even the marriage to five husbands is repeated. But these features are either mentioned in WBP only in passing or they are handled in a different way because of her different role. It is also not unimportant to note that in section 2 WBPT is linked with the tales of the Friar and the Summoner and that WBP is interrupted by the Pardoner who compliments her on her preaching. These three pilgrims linked with the Wife are among the least attractive on the pilgrimage. They are all hypocritical and motivated by greed. While it does not follow that the Wife is motivated in the same way, it can hardly be fortuitous that she is linked with such unsavoury characters. This grouping implies a less favourable attitude towards her on Chaucer's part



here than in Pro, one which is consonant with the transformation of the jolly, oversexed woman into the tyrannical wife.

In WBPT the tale and the Wife's portrayal in her prologue may be considered separately so that their relationship can be evaluated. The tale itself is uncomplicated and is characterised by its anonymity. The fairytale past is unlocalised apart from its associations with King Arthur. The participants are unnamed: they are referred to as "the knight", "the maiden", "the queen", and "the old woman". None is described in detail or given any distinguishing attributes. Apart from Arthur, the only person named is Midas who appears in an exemplum. In this respect this tale differs from many others in the poem, though PdT is similar. Although that tale is set in Flanders, no exact location or time is specified. Its participants are also referred to by circumlocutions such as "the oldest rioter", "the host" and "the old man". The effect in both cases is to create a tale which has more the nature of an exemplum, though in each case it lacks the liveliness and narrative force of its prologue.

WBT is little concerned with action or narrative. After a brief introduction the scene is set in a mere thirty lines (2: 856-86). In them we learn of the knight, the rape, the death sentence and the postponement of the sentence for a year so the knight can find an answer to the question of what women most desire. The possible answers he receives constitute a long section, as does the exemplum about Midas. The meeting with the old woman and the events at court form a relatively brief middle section, which is overshadowed in length by the discussion in bed between the knight and his new wife on their wedding night. In this discussion the knight complains that his wife is so ugly and meanly born that his heart will break because of his marriage to her. The wife launches into an account of what true nobility is. The burden of this account is that true nobility comes from virtue rather than from birth or worldly possessions. Her disquisition has little to do with the knight's complaint and is part of a common medieval theme. But her claims attack the knight at his weakest spot for he was forced to marry her through lack of virtue: his rape of the maiden was the ultimate cause of his predicament. The knight is punished for his lack of virtue. His rape is an expression of selfishness which he must atone for by submission through marriage to an old and ugly wife. This submission is increased when he allows her to resolve the question of whether she will be ugly and faithful or beautiful and fickle. In this way she achieves what all women desire, rule over their husbands.

'Thanne haue I gete of yow maistrye,' quod she,  
 'Syn I may chese and gouerne as me lest.'  
 'Ye certes, wyf,' quod he; 'I holde it best.'

(2: 1210-12)

The outcome, however, is unexpected. The wife accepts this sovereignty and then acts as though she is the subservient partner by obeying her husband in everything. She slips into the pattern of the courtly wife to whom obeisance is paid, but who does

everything to support the marriage and to uphold the dignity of her husband. The knight for his part also achieves the ideal of the courtly lover in marriage, for he puts his wife above him. He is no longer the selfish bully who takes his pleasure where he will; he is the submissive lover who promotes the benefit of his beloved. The result is an ideal happy marriage, such as that of Arveragus and Dorigen in *FkT*.

His experience shows that those who suffer for their previous misconduct as the knight himself does in the quest for an answer to the queen's question and in marrying the old hag may win through to happiness and honour. The tyranny of the knightly class over the poor as exemplified by the rape is expunged by the triumph of the poor over that class as exemplified by the marriage - and the result is social equilibrium and harmony. Each recognises the other's rights.

WBP falls into two parts. The first (2: 1-162) contains the sermon on marriage and virginity, in which the traditional teaching of the Church on virginity is put in a different context. Marriage is claimed as part of the divine purpose for man and hence as praiseworthy as virginity. The sermon ends with the Wife's claim that she will exact full sexual payment from her husbands. The Pardoner interrupts her to compliment her on her preaching and to exclaim in horror at the dangers of marriage on which he was about to embark. The Wife replies by reiterating her claim that she was a scourge to her husbands:

And whan that I haue toold thee forth my tale  
Of tribulacion in maryage,  
Of which I am expert in al myn age  
(This is to seye myself hath been the whippe),  
Thanne maystow chese . . . (2: 172-6)

She underlines her new character as the tyrannous wife. She is no longer a jolly sexual extrovert; she is a scourge. The Pardoner's interruption serves to reinforce this new character.<sup>18</sup> The sermon on virginity and marriage has led the Wife through the position that marriage is praiseworthy to the statement that in marriage sex should be indulged freely with the rider that it is the wife who will in that case be the dominant partner because she controls the sexual act. A wife emerges therefore as a potential tyrant. If virginity leads to self-denial, marriage is an institution where one partner can exploit and so tyrannise the other. This situation is discussed in general terms in the sermon; the second part of WBP (2: 193ff) relates it to the Wife's own marital affairs. WBP proceeds from the general to the particular.

In this second part the Wife relates her experiences with her five husbands. As we have seen, Chaucer amalgamated the first three. They are neither differentiated nor named. They were, as she says, "goode and ryche and olde" (2: 197). They were too old to satisfy the Wife's sexual demands, though she made them try. They gave her their wealth, but she flouted and tyrannised them. They did all they could to soothe her anger and tantrums, but she berated them

unmercifully. This behaviour is not the satisfaction of sexual passion, but the abuse of power. She then gives the pilgrims a long example (2: 235-378) of the things she said to her husbands to torment them. They did not, as she admitted, merit these attacks; but feeling that attack was the best form of defence, she gave them no respite. After these three had died leaving her a rich widow, she married her fourth husband. This husband is somewhat underplayed by Chaucer because he wanted to create a balance between three "good" and two "bad" husbands (cf. 2: 196), but did not want to destroy the climax of the final bad one. Hence the fourth husband's situation is enigmatic. He is unnamed and the details of the marital situation are kept noticeably vague. He had a mistress, but his wife got her own back by making him jealous. Even though he suffered such pangs of anger and jealousy that he deserved to go to heaven, we are not told the details of how this triumph was accomplished. Instead of giving us information about this conflict, the Wife embarks on a series of reminiscences when discussing her fourth husband. It is not clear whether these reminiscences, which deal with the jolly life she led, refer to this period of her career or to her youth in general. The reminiscences are a literary device of filling in space while dealing with the fourth husband without actually dealing with the marriage itself. Chaucer is forced to fudge the fourth husband so that the Wife may seem to be still at the top of her tyrannical power when she encounters her fifth husband against whom the final and conclusive battle is fought, although at the same time he wanted to suggest a relatively neat division of the five husbands into a group of three and a group of two. These irreconcilable demands on the treatment of the fourth husband are a further indication that the description of the husbands in *Pro* precedes the account in *WBP*.

The fifth husband is a clerk named Jankin and the episode involving him represents a reversal of the Wife's earlier marital situation. She is now old and rich, and her partner has youth and poverty on his side. Previously she had been poor and young, and her husbands had been rich and old. Indeed, as soon as she marries, she gives Jankin all her wealth just as her previous husbands had bestowed their wealth upon her. Where she was free, she is now restrained; and where she used to preach at her husbands, she must now submit to the preaching of the fifth husband. The many examples from Jankin's book of wicked wives form a straight parallel with the verbal assaults the Wife used to inflict on her husbands. The tables have been turned in a manner which is not dissimilar to that found in her own tale where the poor who are exploited at the beginning come out on top at the end. The crisis in *WBP* comes when she tears out three leaves of her husband's book of wicked wives and he retaliates by hitting her so hard that he fears he may have killed her. The outcome here is as unexpected as that in *WBT*. The husband repents of his attack, gives the Wife back all her wealth, and agrees that she shall have absolute sovereignty in the marriage. Far from exploiting this situation, the Wife of Bath exercises this sovereignty to their mutual benefit. She no longer puts her own interests and pleasures first. From that moment she becomes a model wife who pursues common, instead of personal, aims in marriage. She has undergone a complete *volte face* which is no less amazing than the

transformation of the old hag into a beautiful woman. The theme is again that of the ideal marriage. By courtly love traditions a man should surrender everything to his beloved and become her creature. This is what Jankin does, what the knight in WBT did, and what Arveragus in FkT had done. By the same token a woman should not abuse the power entrusted to her: she should employ it to the glory and honour of her husband.

The message of WBP is the same as that of WBT: an abuse of power, marital tyranny on the part of the Wife of Bath and exploitation of the poor on the part of the knight, is checked by some other power so that the abuse is neutralised and then converted into a form of social harmony. Though both have a similar message, the prologue is so much more colourful that its resolution of disharmony in marriage might suggest that the principal theme in both WBP and WBT is that of harmony in marriage. This harmony in WBP is to be understood as a symbol for a greater social harmony, for we understand that vice of whatever kind can be corrected and abated so that there is a restoration of that equality and harmony which the vice disrupted. There are naturally subsidiary themes such as the conflict between youth and age, between poverty and wealth, between nobility and virtue, and between experience and authority. They support the main theme because in them each attribute claims to be better than its opposite, though in the tale true harmony can only be realised when each recognises the demands and interests of the other.

It may be appreciated from the foregoing that WBP and WBT form a single unit and so there is no need to assume that parts of WBP were composed at different stages. If WBPT is understood in the way I have outlined it follows it was written after the description of the Wife of Bath in Pro and there are no grounds for thinking that that description was modified after WBPT was written. If it is accepted that Pro was written before most or all of the tales that follow in the poem, there is nothing in the development of the Wife of Bath which would militate against that view. In Pro Chaucer used estates literature as a model for a description of a jolly, extrovert woman interested in sex. In WBPT he was more concerned with the theme of tyranny and so converted the Wife into a tyrant. In this process many features of the Wife in Pro were abandoned or adapted. The inappropriateness of some of those features and the difficulty Chaucer had in using them in their new environment are sufficient proof for the later composition of WBP. Although both WBP and WBT end in harmony, what we remember from each is the picture of the Wife of Bath as a tyrant rather than as a submissive partner and the picture of the old hag lecturing her husband rather than the beautiful girl. For it is the tyrant and the hag who have the largest roles in their stories and who are the most colourful. Hence it is hardly surprising that Chaucer should have come to think of the Wife particularly in her guise as the tyrannical woman for this is her most memorable aspect. It is hardly surprising that later scribes who were equally impressed by the colourful nature and forcefulness of this character should have augmented the description by adding further passages to WBP. It is not possible to tell whether these additions were made by one or by several

scribes.

One final point needs elucidation. WBPT is usually regarded as part of the Marriage Group, though as we have seen that grouping has recently been called into question. WBPT was grouped with FrT and SuT by Chaucer, and that is the only association he is known to have provided for it. If WBPT is concerned with tyranny, one might expect the other two tales to have some reference to that theme. This is indeed so but there are important differences: in the latter two tales the tyranny is not sexual and there is no resolution into harmony. In FrT we see the tyranny exercised by a summoner over the poor, particularly over a widow. The widow tries to resist him and wishes him to the devil. The devil who is accompanying the summoner asks her to confirm this gift, which she does if the summoner refuses to repent. He is adamant in his refusal; so he is taken off to hell. In this tale the tyranny is pecuniary exploitation. The tyrant is given an opportunity to repent, but refuses. His refusal leads to his destruction. This refusal contrasts with the willingness to abandon a former way of life as exemplified in WBP and WBT.

The summoner in FrT is matched by the friar in SuT, for he is equally rapacious and exploits the laity for gain. One of those who had given generously in the past is so angry with the friar and his behaviour that he plays the practical joke of the fart on him. The friar in anger goes to the neighbouring lord for help against this insult, threatening to abuse his office as friar to slander and attack him. Instead of exercising charity and restraint as urged by the lord, the friar exhibits only anger and spite. The court does not take the friar's complaint too seriously and the lord's squire makes a proposal which humiliates the friar even further. He is ridiculed by all. The friar's refusal to accept a rebuke leads to his further humiliation.

It may be accepted, therefore, that this section of the *Canterbury Tales* consists of four episodes, i.e. WBP, WBT, FrT and SuT, in each of which one character tyrannises others. However, in the first two this behaviour when checked is abandoned so that harmony within the social framework is restored. In the latter two any check leads not to repentance but to a desire for revenge and excessive anger. The result is total humiliation as the perpetrators are removed from the scene of their previous activities. They have no place in the harmony of the social fabric. In this way the four episodes may be said to form a cohesive group. It was because of the needs of this theme that the character of the wife in Pro was changed to the tyrannous woman in WBP and it was as the tyrannous woman that she developed into that symbol which caught the imagination of its creator as well as of so many other readers. The Wife of Bath does exhibit a development, but it is not the one which previous scholars have presented to us.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> R.A. Pratt, "The Development of the Wife of Bath", in *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of A.C. Baugh*, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia, 1961) p.45.
- <sup>2</sup> *op.cit.* pp.46-7.
- <sup>3</sup> W.W. Skeat, *The Evolution of the Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer Society 2nd ser. 38 (London, 1907).
- <sup>4</sup> J.M. Manly and E. Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, 8 vols. (Chicago, 1940); see particularly vols. 1 and 2 *passim*.
- <sup>5</sup> E.T. Donaldson, *Chaucer's Poetry* (2nd ed., New York, 1975) and N.F. Blake, *The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer* (London, 1980). For the use of Hg by the Variorum editors see D.C. Baker, "The Relation of the Hengwrt Manuscript to the Variorum Chaucer Text", *The Canterbury Tales: Geoffrey Chaucer: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Hengwrt Manuscript*, ed. P.G. Ruggiers (Norman, Oklahoma, and Folkstone, 1979) pp.xvii-xviii. The Hengwrt manuscript is quoted from Blake's edition (1980) and the sectional lineation used in it is also used here. The Ellesmere manuscript is quoted from J.H. Fisher, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York, 1977) where the traditional Group/Fragment lineation is used. Unless otherwise stated all references in the poem use the lineation in my edition. The tale titles have been abbreviated according to the system in Manly-Rickert (1940) and Blake (1980).
- <sup>6</sup> See particularly her "A Chapter in the Manuscript History of the *Canterbury Tales*", *PMLA* 63 (1948) pp.456-84, and "The Fifteenth-Century Editors of the *Canterbury Tales* and the Problem of Tale Order", *PMLA* 64 (1949) pp.1123-42.
- <sup>7</sup> A.I. Doyle and M.B. Parkes, "The Production of Copies of the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio Amantis* in the Early Fifteenth Century", in *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts & Libraries: Essays Presented to N.R. Ker*, ed. M.B. Parkes and A.G. Watson (London, 1978) pp.163-210.
- <sup>8</sup> N.F. Blake, "The Relationship between the Hengwrt and the Ellesmere Manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*", *Essays and Studies* n.s. 32 (1979) pp.1-18.
- <sup>9</sup> The tales in question are SqT, FkT, MeT and NuT; see further Blake, *Essays and Studies* n.s. 32 and *Canterbury Tales* (1980).
- <sup>10</sup> M. Stevens, "The Royal Stanza in Early English Literature", *PMLA* 94 (1979) pp.62-76.
- <sup>11</sup> This matter is discussed further in my "Chaucer's Text and the Web of Words", a paper delivered to the Second International Chaucer Congress (New Orleans, April 1980) and to be published in the Proceedings.
- <sup>12</sup> *A Facsimile and Transcription of the Hengwrt Manuscript*, p.xxviii.
- <sup>13</sup> R.F. Jones, "A Conjecture on the Wife of Bath's Prologue", *JEGP* 24 (1925) pp.512-47.

- <sup>14</sup> *The Envoy to Bukton* is accepted as Chaucerian because of the ascription to Chaucer in Fairfax 16, one of two manuscripts in which the poem is found, and because of the reference to the Wife of Bath in it. These reasons are hardly conclusive, but it seems best to accept the traditional ascription.
- <sup>15</sup> See E.P. Hammond, *Chaucer: A Bibliographical Manual* (London, 1908) pp.296-7, and Pratt *op.cit.* p.59.
- <sup>16</sup> Using the Manly-Rickert system of abbreviations, all the extra lines in WBP are found in manuscripts of groups *a* and *b*, and in Ch, Ii, Ry<sup>1</sup> and Se. Some of the extra passages are found in El, Gg, Ad<sup>3</sup>, Ha<sup>2</sup> and Ld<sup>1</sup>, though there is no consistency in their appearance in these manuscripts.
- <sup>17</sup> J. Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge, 1973).
- <sup>18</sup> See also A.K. Moore, "The Pardoner's Interruption of the *Wife of Bath's* Prologue", *Modern Language Quarterly* 10 (1949) pp.49-57.