The sad note some hear in the voice of the Wife of Bath can be interpreted as "die letzte Süsse in den schweren Wein," a hint of sourness showing that, with age, her deep enjoyments have begun to turn. From the viewpoint of those who understand the Wife as a stock character, this sad note, if not attributed to critical ingenuity, is assimilated to the Wife's type as a picturesque, individuating detail or as the bitter recognition, coming amidst our common celebration of the created world, that time holds us "green and dying." Her "allas!," then, would be "the song of the indestructibility of the people," "of the finite with the vulgar interstices and smells, which lies below all categories."

... the Wife has made up a tale in which, without being altogether aware of doing so, perhaps, she submerges the fact of guilt within a dream of innocence.

However, to maintain that the "absurdity" of such characters as the Wife "inveigles us into . . . conspiring with them to make them real and lifelike," that she becomes lifelike by representing a class, and that Chaucer manipulates her "with an entire disregard for . . . psychological probability" seems to me to leave many parts of her performance in only the slightest connection with other parts. Assuming for the moment that the sad note is as close to her center as her willful gaiety and her insistence on fleshly enjoyment, I wish to throw in with those who believe that, in writing lines for the Wife, Chaucer was conceiving a human being.

A denial that the Wife's "make-up . . . is subtle or complex" seems to me to encounter difficulty with the third line she speaks:

Experience, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
To speke of wo that is in mariage.

This unhappiness in marriage is generally equated, *tou court*, with the defeats borne by her subjugated husbands. She does not need second-hand knowledge of this grief, she is taken to mean, because she knows it at first hand, having caused it. "These opening lines of the Wife's Prologue are actually an introduction not to the "sermon,"" R. A. Pratt has maintained, "but to the account of woe in marriage," not, that is, to lines 9-162, based upon Jerome's *Epistola adversus Jovinianum*, but to the parts of her Prologue which follow the Pardoner's interruption and draw on Deschamps, Theophrastus, and Walter Map as well as Jerome.
In the first place, however, as her first line anticipates, she does in fact proceed to dispute authority—principally the apostle Paul—although not about the misfortunes of milquetoasts. Secondly, it is not true that "the account of woe in marriage" begins only after the Pardoner intrudes. If "wo" and "tribulacion" mean the same thing, the mention of it seems to cause the Pardoner's interruption:

An housbonde I wol have, I wol nat lette,
Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,
And have his tribulacion withal
Upon his flessh, whil that I am his wyf.

No more than previously does she dispute Paul in these lines by misunderstanding the plain meaning of his words. With "wo" or "tribulacion" of the "flessh," she echoes 1 Corinthians 7:28 ("Si autem acceperis uxorem, non peccasti, et si nupserit virgo, non peccavit; tribulationem tamen carnis habeunt hujusmodi"), and she means, as Paul did, the painful test posed in marriage by the temptation to lubricity. As Augustine explains, "the Apostle . . . was unwilling to conceal the tribulation of the flesh springing from carnal emotions, from which the marriage of those who lack self-control can never be free. . ." In his comment on the same verse, Rabanus Maurus, having asked why tribulations of the flesh were greater for wedded folk than virgins, responds that these trials arise from the body itself, since these troubles were the satisfaction of the desires of the body. While the Parson will allow "that for thre thynges a man and his wyf flesshly mowen assemble," he knows that "scarsly may ther any of thise be withoute venial synne, for the corrupcion and for the delit." The tribulations, then, are the travail of continence, the efforts with which one controls the emotions that are "rebel to resoun and the body also"; further, they are the temporal punishment for the venial sin of incontinence in marriage. But they are also the appetite and its satisfaction; and by a familiar trick of religious language, the Wife like the Apostle is using "wo" to mean sexual pleasure.

The context in which the Wife mentions the "tribulacion" of the flesh is her defense of sexuality in marriage: because man and wife maintain the other's honor by relinquishing power over the body to the other, the Wife will have a husband who will "be bothe my dettour and my thral." The context, then, has nothing to do with "tegumenta, . . . uxoris necessitas, mariti dominatio"—"tribulacion" belonging to "another tonne." Similarly with "dette." Before the Pardoner interrupts, the Wife's husbands pay their "dette" by collaborating with her in sexual satisfaction. The sexual organs must have been created "for esse / Of engendrure," she argues: "Why sholde men elles in hir bookes sette / That man shal yelde to his wyf hire dette?" If she were describing herself here as a "whippe," her husband could not possibly love her "weel," as she approvingly quotes Paul as telling him to do. When the husband takes the initiative and wishes to "paye his dette," the Wife says she will use her "instrument . . . frely." Again, the Wife disagrees with Paul about the dangers of carnal pleasure; but she understands "dette" as he did: the spouse's usual obligation, spiritual cost notwithstanding, to give sexual relief and solace. Where she had promised "experience," the Wife's Prologue to this point is highly theoretical—that is, hypothetical. And there is simply no way to predict that "tribulacion" will mean quarreling, and debt and thralldom the plight of the man whose wife will not suffer his advances until he promises to buy her a present.

Before the Pardoner interrupts, then, we have three points which are evidently inconsistent: (1) "wo . . . in marriage" the Wife surely knows to be unpleasant for someone; (2) she insists she may lawfully marry for sexual fruition; and (3) "tribulacion," debt, and thralldom are sexual and participate in that fruition.

This apparent inconsistency is removed if all of the Wife's Prologue up to the Pardoner's intrusion is, as I think, an enormous red herring. This is something quite apart from the invalidity of her arguments, however telling that might be. She no sooner mentions her five marriages to verify her knowledge of married "wo" than she uses the plurality of her marriages as a pivot on which to turn to a diversive defense, first of bigamy and then of carnal pleasure between husband and wife. The very argument for the lawfulness of this pleasure is irrelevant to the Wife, because nearly all of it, she goes on to recall, has been found outside her marriages. Even with Jankyn, fun in bed is explicitly part of that first phase of their marriage when he is "daungerous" to her; for after the night they "fille acorded," they "hadden never debaat." On their sexual relationship afterwards, she is significantly silent.
There is no question of sexual pleasure with the first three mates. As opposed to the (carnal) love for a woman which the married state pardons and the Wife misleadingly defends, the "love" won by the Wife from her three husbands takes the form of "lond and . . . tresoor"; on the attempts at love-making she derisively exacts from them ("love" in the sense parallel to "tribulacion" in 1 Cor. 7:28), she places no value. In fact, as we shall observe, she may not ultimately use sex for pleasure at all. She holds marriage to be good as a natural context for propagation and pleasure. Yet she herself has had no "delit" in "bacon" and is evidently childless. She insists that she will devote the best of herself to "fruyt of mariage," yet there has been no fruit either in the sense of children or, in her first four marriages at least, sexual fruitio. To protest that she is innocent, she exonerates marriage, while the "wo" actually arises with the uses to which she has put marriage.

The Wife's discourse, taking off from the experience of woe into an argumentative evasion full of theological categories and putative pleasure, includes the Pauline (that is, the metaphoric) use of "tribulacion" and "dette." The redundancy of "bothe my dettour and my thral" may be suspiciously vehement, however; and confronted by this aggressive and sturdy matron, the delicately constituted Pardoner penetrates far into her history by archly misinterpreting "tribulacion" in a reductive and literal way: "What sholde I bye it on my flessh so deere?" Since "tribulacion" as the Wife had used it means the temptation to sinful coitus, the Pardoner's question changes the sense of "tribulacion" to agree with his obvious inability to exchange sexual (or at least heterosexual) pleasure. His incapacity may even remind the Wife of her first three husbands'. To this changed sense of "tribulacion," then, she responds with a vengeance, accommodating her own meaning to the Pardoner's: of this "tribulacion in mariage," she says, "myself have been the whippe." And she turns to the notable abuse actually visited upon her mates. The change in meaning is equally clear in her treatment of the marriage "dette": before the Pardoner interrupts, she says that she uses her "instrument . . . frely" whenever her hypothetical husband likes to "paye his dette." After the interruption, she records that, whenever one of her first three husbands was similarly inclined, he found that nothing was free; the "dette" has become quite literal and pecuniary.

The authorities assert that guilt--the arduous resistance to it, the consequences of it--is the "wo" in marriage. While the Wife contends otherwise, her own "experience" is conclusive. Anyone listening for the dominant's persistence in her narrative of married life will soon hear the language of the broker. The Pardoner sets the motif by speaking of buying marriage with his flesh, and the Pauline metaphors of "debt" and "payment" thereafter broaden into a whole vocabulary of commerce. The Wife will trouble to be agreeable only if it is profitable: "What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese, / But it were for my profit and myn ese?" On the other hand, her ability to carp and nag is also lucrative; for to buy relief from it, her husbands hasten to bring her "gaye thynges fro the fayre." Since a husband is a practical necessity, she is careful to buy one against her future needs: she is "purveyed of a make." There is a quid pro quo even in harsh words: she never took criticism without paying her spouse back for it. Because her fourth husband has been particularly difficult, she holds back on the money for his tomb. She and her first three live by the "cheste," and she disposes of the fourth by cheaply burying him in his. The commerce extends beyond this, for in marriage she approximates the condition of a prostitute. She imputes to the first three mates a statement that may apply to herself: an ugly woman, she makes them say, will covet every man that she may se,

For as a spaynel she wol on hym lepe,  
Tyl that she fynde som man hire to chepe.

Alice is quite clear that she sells her favors: if one of her old husbands ever stinted on the fee, then at night, when she felt his arm come over her side, she would leave the bed "Til he had maad his raunson unto me." Her body is her equity and no husband will expropriate it: "Thou shalt nat bothe, thogh that thou were wood, / Be maister of my body and of my good." He can deal or not, as he likes, but one of them he must "forgo." Although the husband is a rapacious beast, she must trade with him for her profit: 

With empty hand men may none haukes lure. 
For wynnyng wolde I al his lust endure,
And make me a feyned appetit.

At forty-plus, this Mother Courage has to work harder at her business. One argument for marriage offered sardonically by Jerome is that it is preferable to be a prostitute for one man than for many. While the Wife overlooks it (pointedly, I am tempted to say), some allusion to her being literally a whore is inevitable: you're a lucky man that I'm faithful to you, she tells one or more of her old husbands, "For if I wolde selle my bele chose, / I koude walke as fressh as is a rose." She keeps a green memory of her youth, but here is the fruit of her age: "Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle."

The "sovereignty" and "mastery" that the Wife exercises over her fifth husband (and that the Loathly Lady reveals to be what women most desire) are commonly understood as the Wife's power to obtain such things as fine clothes, her husbands' flattery, and freedom to roam—all the things, in short, we have just heard her buying with her sexual acquiescence. If sovereignty be the sum of these wifely prerogatives, it is curious that they appear in the Tale only to be discarded as wrong answers and that the Loathly Lady takes pains to dissociate herself from them. Before encountering the hag, the rapist knight polls the ladies:

Somme seyde wommen loven best richesse,
Somme seyde honour, somme seyde jolynesse,
Somme riche array, somme seyden lust abedde.

These and others (flattery, gallivanting, and so on) are precisely the profits won by the Wife with her hard bargains. They are also short of the mark, for they are not sovereignty, unless that is only the power to obtain all of them—and this would seem a barren quibble. What appears most striking is that the Loathly Lady, who will enjoy "maistrie" over her own knight even as the Wife has "maistrie . . . [and] soveraynetee" over Jankyn, repudiates exactly the commerce already surveyed in some detail. The knight tries to get her secret with a bribe: "Koude ye me wisse, I wolde wel quite youre hire," he says; but she will have no part of it. Constrained to marry her, the knight echoes exactly the commercial alternatives offered by the Wife: "Taak al my good, and lat my body go." But the Lady refuses to negotiate:

"Nay, thanne," quod she, "I shrewe us bothe two!
For thogh that I be foul, and oold, and poore,
I nolde for al the metal, ne for oore,
That under erthe is grave, or lith above,
But if thy wyf I were, and eek thy love."

Nor does the hag forgo wealth for sex, as the Wife tries to do with Jankyn. Neither before nor after her transformation does she exhibit a marked sexual interest in the knight; on the contrary, she knows what he likes and troubles to satisfy all his "worldly appetit."

For the moment I wish to put aside the question of the meaning of "sovereignty" in order to consider some of the effects of the Wife's having made her way by trading upon her youth and beauty. The basic consequence, of course, is guilt. "I koude pleyne," says the Wife, "and yit was in the gilt," and later: "be we never so vicious withinne, / We wol been holden wise and clene of synne." Hence her hatred of Jankyn's uncomplaisant book. Because "love" to her, when it is not income, is sexual fruition, it is found outside those marriages in which she must feign an interest in the "bacon." Love is "evere . . . synne" because for her it is either prostitution or adultery. Moreover, she seems to understand that sin, being unlovely, makes her unlovely, and that so far as she is not loved she is perceived as guilty. (In the Tale, conversely, the Loathly Lady takes the position that, if she is innocent, she is therefore lovable.) The revels of her fourth husband assume and reflect the very absence of virtue in her that she herself had to assume, from the age of twelve, in negotiating the price of her innocence. The "greet despit" in "herte" which he makes her feel is perhaps not merely sexual jealousy, but rather the suffering—an unredemptive "croce"—that comes from being perceived as unlovely; and the Wife brings death with her even
from Jerusalem. Her own guiltiness being a kind of hell (women's love is "helle," she says at one point), and the fourth husband having shown it to her, he is made to share it: "in erthe I was his purgatorie."

Because the husbands of her youth are old and thick with lust, the Wife overpowers and outwits them easily in driving her bargains. There are no sales, however, without buyers. And having conspired in the commerce, they share her guilt and take their punishment:

As help me God, I laughe whan I thynke
How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke!
And, by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor.

I sette hem so a-werke, by my fey,
That many a nyght they songen "weilawey!"

After dishing out such a drubbing, she might say:

Goode lief, taak keep
Howmekely looketh Wilkyn, oure sheep!
Com neer, my spouse, lat me ba thy cheke!
Ye sholde been al pacient and meke. . .
Suffreth alwey, syn ye so wel kan preche;
And but ye do, certein we shal yow teche
That it is fair to have a wyf in pees. . .
What eyleth yow to grucche thus and grone?
Is it for ye wolde have my queynte allone?
Wy, taak it all! lo, have it every deel!
Peter! I shrewe yow, but ye love it weel; . . .
But I wol kepe it for youre owene tooth.
Ye be to blame, by God! I say yow sooth.

Despite a possible nuance of tormented motherhood (she offers the "queynte" as she might have offered the teat), the pervasive tone is fiercely and sardonically patronizing. She knows that she is "in the gilt" and yet knows also, I think, that in a sense he is "to blame." The Wife invents a dream about her bed's being full of blood--blood that actually symbolizes gold, she says. In the Tale, the knight rapes the maiden and tries to bribe the lady; in the Prologue the twelve-year-old girl is raped by being bribed. The "haukes" lured to her hand leave the bed bloody with nobles and shillings. That Alice shares the guilt does not lessen the dishonor. As the wife of Midas had to reveal her husband's "vice," Alice admits that she could not keep it a secret if her husbands ever pissed upon a wall, or did anything like that. They do, and she can't.

For the sexual appetite to be imaged as fire is usual enough: the Wife's "queynte" is a kind of lantern, and a little later she describes "wommenes love" as "wilde fyr; / The moore it brenneth, the moore it hath desir / To consume every thyng that brent wole be." More remarkable is the thirst that goes with it for the water that might quench the flame. Women's love is a waterless land. Midas's wife, "hir herte . . . a-fyre," rushes to the marsh and lays her mouth against the water. With her "likerous mouth" and "tayl," Alice thirsts, paradoxically, for the same sexual experience with which she burns. She wishes she might be "refresshed" just half so often as Solomon. Christ may be the "welle" of perfection, but like this woman from "biside Bathe," the Samaritan with her five husbands is linked with another "welle"--the image of the unsatisfied "queynte."

At bottom, the Wife thirsts for innocence, relief from the fact of guilt. Thanks to her nativity, she says,

I koude noght withrawe
My chambre of Venus from a good felawe . . .
For God so wys be my savacioun,
I ne loved nevere by no discretion,
But evere folwede myn appetit,
Al were he short, or long, or blak, or whit;
I took no kep, so that he liked me,
How poore he was, ne eek of what degree.

"Just as long as he liked me." Here is every nymphomaniac, whispering in the dark, "Love me a little." In the first phase of their marriage, Jankyn is such a "good felawe," periodically interrupting his clerical castigation of her to "glose" her into producing her "bele chose." Leading through infinite adultery, thus exacerbating the guilt ("Alas! ala! that evere love was synne!") and revealing itself as basic to the Wife's sense of "wo" in marriage, this thirst is self-defeating: the more it burns, "the moore it hath desir / To consume every thyng that brent wole be." She attempts to quench it with the "queynte," which is fire itself. Not only the Pardoner has a deadly barrel thrust to his lips.

This "coltes tooth"--not merely undiminished sexual vigor, but, motivating it, a longing that the buried and dishonored child has never ceased to feel--leads on to her bad bargain with Jankyn of the well-turned legs. He entertains her with his pleasant anthology of authors who take her categorical imperatives of instability, violence, and lechery and give them the maddening amplitude and inevitability of history. What maddens her most may be its incompleteness. She has not, after all, done this to herself all by herself:

By God! if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.

Holding the trump of sexual uninterest, Jankyn evens an old score by reciting at his leisure the same charges the Wife had imputed to her earlier husbands: the uxorious spouses doubtless knew that the charges were true, and yet knew as well that they had not made them. Therefore, obliged to confirm and deny at the same time, they were too weakened by desire and too confused to do either, and the Wife had swept the field. But Jankyn reads on implacably, overpowering her first in one way, then in another:

And whan I saugh he wolde nevere fyne
To reden on this cursed book al nyght,
Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght
Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke
I with my fest so took hym on the cheke
That in oure fyr he fil bakward adoun.
And he up stirte as dooth a wood leoun,
And with his fest he smoot me on the heed,
That in the floor I lay as I were deed.
And whan he saugh how stille that I lay,
He was agast, and wolde han fled his way,
Til atte laste out of my swogh I breyde.

Leaving the Wife for a moment at the point of this utter and ludicrous defeat, we may revert briefly to the matter of sovereignty. In the Middle Ages, marriage was sometimes considered the *iurata fornicatio*, in which sexual pleasure was not something freely given, but encumbered and obligated. The thirsty Wife would invoke the *iurata fornicatio* (the "statut") with her Pauline "dettours." Each mate constrains the other, the only question being who gets to the mill first. The Wife believes that each old husband would lock her in his chest if he could or employ Argus as a "warde-cors." Nevertheless, because "love"--that is, wealth--has been exacted from them, even a superfluity of it is valueless for her: "They loved me so wel, by God above, / That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love!"

In the Tale, the knight is "constreyned" to marry the Loathly Lady. The ability to constrain is power. In bartering
with her first three husbands, the Wife pits one kind of power against another. The coolness of Jankyn and the blow which, permanently deafening the Wife, leaves her prostrate and stunned epitomize the Wife's married life to that point.

In reaction to the *iurata fornicatio*, there seems to have arisen, at least in twelfth-century France, an ethic of love beginning with generosity. In her beautiful softness, the woman is perceived to be the source of goodness, bestowing her gifts or not according to what she judges to be worthy. Outside the *iurata fornicatio*, power can do nothing but put itself at the service of goodness, and the woman remains free to be good. This giving without constraint is what the Loathly Lady means by "gentillesse." Henri Dupin distinguishes ten qualities signified by "gentillesse" or "courtoisie" as these synonymous terms occur in French poetry, "contes et . . . romans," and moral works of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; and elsewhere in Chaucer they have much of this complexity. The Loathly Lady's meaning, if vague, seems nevertheless reasonably simple: "gentil dedes" depend upon grace. This means, unless she is a heretic, that these must be deeds of charity, "heigh bountee." She distinguishes the uncanny and spontaneous nature of "gentillesse" from the natural functioning of fire: one can set a fire in an isolated house, vacate the house, and still the fire will do its "office naturel . . . til that it dye." It cannot stop burning of its own accord, and yet folk can cease to be generous. Here the grace to do a generous deed is exactly opposed to that fire which the poem identifies with the unquenchable "queynte."

Because the sense of "sovereignty" which comes all too readily to mind with the Wife fits the circumstances a little uneasily, we might consider the alternative. The name given by the man to the lady whom he serves because she is good is *domina*. Aurelius, for example, uses the convention when he tells Dorigen, "Nat that I chalange any thyng of right / Of yow, my sovereyn lady, but youre grace." A woman may well "desiren to have sovereynetee / As wel over hir housbond as hir love," because it is the hegemony of gracious liberality over legalized violence.

As the Wife bestirs herself from her swoon, she says,

O! hastow slayn me, false theef? . . .
And for my land thus hastow mordred me?
Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee.

Jankyn kneels down beside her and vows never to hit her again. He puts the bridle in her hand, as she says, and burns his book. Why does Jankyn cease to preach? To answer that the Wife has mastered him would be simply tautologous. It is equally futile to believe, as many readers do, that she tricks Jankyn into coming within range and overwhelms him with a dying slap. For this fails to explain not only why he puts a permanent end to his hitherto successful strategy but also why she then goes on to be kind to him where she had abused the others. If this is only a matter of his so satisfying her sexually that she never had cause to chide, it is odd we do not hear of her reveling in "a bath of blisse"; indeed, she recalled that he was "in oure bed . . . so fressh and gay" at the same point she was remembering him as "the mooste shrewe." By contrast, after she has got "the soveraynetee," she describes their emotional relationship as simply "kynde" and "trewe."

Jankyn burns the book because it no longer mirrors the Wife. Have you murdered me for my money? she asks.

"Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee." The slap she actually gives him does not disconcert him and seems little more than the vestige of a habit dying hard--of always having "the bettre in ech degree" turned now from "substaunce into accident." She depicts it as a gallant effort and her surrender, therefore ("Now wol I dye, I may no lenger speke"), as pathetic. Nevertheless, rather than by a trick, she "masters" Jankyn by appearing in a new way. "Truth comes in blows." At the moment of ridiculous defeat, grace irrupts into her experience. With the offer of one kiss, for the first time in 800 lines she proffers something for nothing. In place of a kiss he gets the nominal slap. But kisses are cheap, the pay-off to a "good felawe," as no one knows better than she. Instead, where she had vowed she would "noght forbere hym in no cas," she does exactly that. By being good--having honor to keep--she is sovereign: Jankyn defers to her because of the way he perceives her. She has described forbearance in a kiss, and he forbears; then she forbears in substance. In recalling the episode, she uses her habitual words, "maistrie" and "soveraynetee," although their meaning has changed. After the arid restlessness of a youth in which
everything was up for sale, she becomes another woman with this "gentil dede." And where, in her guilt, she had heaped excruciating abuse upon those who had conspired with her to suborn herself, she pours kindness and fidelity upon Jankyn while he lives and blessings upon him after he dies.

It will be enough simply to record the parallel with the Loathly Lady and the knight. Where the Wife had the grace to do a "gentil dede," the Loathly Lady knows not only gentilesse but what women desire and what men ought to desire. The knight's marriage to her can be constrained, but his love must be given. After her bolster sermon, in the dark, the only universe of which he is conscious is her voice, and the unmoved mover of that world is her vision of the good. He at last vents many sighs, but they perhaps arise from the kind of turmoil that might precede an act of faith; for it is to her knowledge of goodness that he finally defers: "Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance, / And moost honour to yow and me also." He amends the dishonor to the maiden by submitting to the honor of the Lady.

Jankyn comes late in a life saturated with the experience of "wo . . . in mariage," and the Wife may well be less than fully conscious of why she blesses him. Except for the gracious interlude with Jankyn, her Prologue establishes the facts of guilt, of a nostalgia for a lost goodness, of factitious gaiety, and of perseverance, not toward a hint of light, but in the gathering darkness. The diminished categories of her realized thought are fairly indicated by the closing lines of her whole performance, in which she wishes for young husbands who are "fressh abedde" and scorns "olde and angry nygardes of dispence." Where the transformed Lady "obeyed" her husband "in every thyng," five lines later the Wife prays for "grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde." With a more conscious and far more sardonic example of the same kind of self-punishing meiosis, the Pardoner, another guilty soul, will make his obscene pitch to Harry Bailley. This notwithstanding, the Wife has made up a tale in which, without being altogether aware of doing so, perhaps, she submerges the fact of guilt within a dream of innocence. And we may conclude by having another look at the Tale.

In the Tale, the rapacity which the Wife imputes to friars with her triumphant joke anticipates the dishonor done a solitary girl, presumably of the lower class, by one of Arthur's knights: "By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed." This rape appears in none of the analogues. As we have already noticed, the knight is doomed to rehabilitation: where force had destroyed the cleanness of virginity, it ends by putting itself at the service of virtue. We have not yet noticed, however, the simple and significant structure of the Tale.

Having been dishonored, the maiden becomes a hag. When honor is vested in her once more, she becomes a maiden again. Logic identifies the post hoc fallacy; poetry thrives on it. In the plot, the rape of the maiden is the way to the Loathly Lady; therefore, the rape of the maiden causes the Loathly Lady. Chaucer has not only added the rape to his sources; he has left out the motive for the Lady's ugliness found in the principal analogues. At bottom, the rapist is not simply--or perhaps not at all--a cut of red meat calculated to excite the Wife. His "verray force" reintroduces all the violence done to her own innocence when she dangled it to lure the hawks. The passing years, the Wife declares in her Prologue, poison everything. But the years of the hag are the instant tetter of a poison which frustrates all refreshment, the guilt of married prostitution and the thirst for infinite adultery. Age and poverty, however wisely she will analyze them, are also a metaphor for her lost innocence; and thus the "leeeve mooder" reintroduces to all appearances the salacious experience of Alice's own "dame." She is foul with all the jolly sins that buried the child.

In this dream, age and ugliness will drop away like rags, the child will stand revealed, because the knight will restore her honor by perceiving it; you are good, he will say, you decide. But since the Loathly Lady has minted a fortune in the nasty sty, it is she who in the same bed must cause the man to make the perception--to have him say, without the sexual inducement, that he liked her. The Wife dreams a second chance for her, in which she can ask, "What is my gilt?," and wait for an answer; for there in the dark she can talk as if her chastity were still to be kept and there were yet "gentil dedes" to be done.

Tell me, says the Wife to the pilgrims. . . Tell me, says the hag to the knight, as she recites in the dark her implacable, inviolable praise of impossible virtue. . . Tell me I was a good girl once.
And there in the dark, he does.

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The Wife of Bath refers to many of these texts in her Prologue. Her fifth husband, she tells us, owned a book that was an entire collection of such texts, from which he used to read to her every evening. Because of this tradition, an antifeminist stereotype of women had taken shape. It held that women were lustful, dishonest, blabber-mouthed, greedy gold-diggers; sound like anyone you know? In the Wife's transformation from caricature to character, we begin to see the way stereotypes fall short when it comes to capturing the complexities of everyday existence and everyday people. What is The Canterbury Tales: The Wife of Bath's Prologue About and Why Should I Care? You know that movie starring Mel Gibson and Helen Hunt called What Women Want? The Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale. Experience, though no authority. Ruled in this world, would be enough for me. And all was false; I never dreamed of aught, But by way of following mother's lore, In things like that as well as others more. The Wife of Bath's Tale. In the olden days of King Arthur, Of whom Britons speak with great honour.