

# Contradictory Responses to the Wife of Bath as evidenced by Fifteenth-Century Manuscript Variants

Beverly Kennedy

Manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* which show clear signs of scribal interference have long been dismissed by editors as 'bad texts.' Now, however, these same manuscripts are being revalued by reception historians for the evidence they provide regarding the earliest reception of Chaucer's work<sup>1</sup> To be sure, most extant manuscripts of the *Tales* offer some sort of evidence regarding its fifteenth-century reception, in the form of illustrations, rubrics, marginal notes or doodles; however, it may be argued that striking scribal alterations of the text itself offer the best evidence of how Chaucer's near contemporaries responded to his work.

Those interested in the reception of the Wife of Bath are particularly fortunate in that her Prologue is by far the most altered piece in the *Tales*.<sup>2</sup> I think the primary reason for this is that her Prologue is both contentious and ambiguous: contentious in its discussion of marriage and ambiguous in its representation of the Wife's sexual morality. As a result, scribal interference with this text is not only frequent and striking, but often contradictory, leading me to hypothesize two different scribal receptions of the Wife's Prologue: one informed by clerical asceticism, misogyny and misogamy and the other by a more popular and positive attitude towards sex, women and the institution of marriage.

In what follows I shall trace these two scribal receptions through three types of variant: spurious links, minor variants which alter the sense of the text, and major variants which involve the omission or addition of substantial passages or significant revision of the text. I will also briefly consider the evidence of glosses and visual images, since these both support the contradictory response hypothesis suggested by the textual variants.

## The spurious links in La Bw Ld2 Ry2 N1

The two spurious links devised by scribes to connect the Wife's Prologue to a preceding text offer totally contradictory images of her. The first represents her as outrageously rude and coarse, while the second makes her appear courteous and at least conventionally pious.

The first link is unique to the very early Lansdowne manuscript where it is used to connect the Wife's Prologue to the Squire's Fragment immediately preceding. After reciting the first two parts of his tale, the Squire gallantly offers to postpone the rest until it is his turn again:

Bot I wil here nowe maake a knotte  
To e time it come next to my lotte

For here be felawes behinde an hepe treulye  
 at wolden talke ful besilye  
 And haue her sporte as wel as I  
 And the daie passe fast certainly  
 Therefore oste take nowe goode heede  
 Who schall next tell and late him speede  
 Than schortly ansewarde e wife of Bathe  
 And swore a wonder grete ha e  
 Be goddes bones I wil tel next  
 I will nouht glose bot saye<sup>3</sup> e text

The scribe who composed this link confronted two problems: the unfinished state of the Squire's Tale and the lack of a text connecting the beginning of the Wife's Prologue to any other part of *The Canterbury Tales*. He has solved both at once by having the Squire conclude his first story-telling stint with the second fitt since there are an hepe of felawes waiting to have her sporte. The Squire suggests that the Host choose who schall next ~~but~~ the Host is unable to reply before the Wife breaks in with her wonder grete ha e. For sheer rudeness, not to mention blasphemy, the Wife's interruption is matched elsewhere in the *Tales* only by that of the drunken Miller, when he insists on telling his tale out of turn (By armes, and by blood and bones 25.) This strong verbal parallel suggests that the Lansdowne scribe thought of the Wife as similar in character to the Miller, i.e. rude and immoral and possibly jolly, but not at all respectable.

In contrast, the spurious link which connects the Wife's Prologue to the conclusion of The Merchant's Tale in several later manuscripts (BL Royal 18.C.ii, Barlow and Laud 739) represents the Wife as being extremely polite:

Oure Ost gan tho to loke vp anon  
 Gode men quo he herkenyth euerychon  
 As euer mote I drynke wyn or ale  
 This marchant hath Itolde a mery tale  
 How Ianuarie had a lither Iape  
 His wif put in his hoode an ape  
 But here of I wil leue of as nowe  
 Dame wif of bathe quo he I pray 'ou  
 Telle vs a tale now next aftir is  
 Sir Ost quod she so god my soule blis  
 As I fully therto wil consente  
 And also it is myn hole entente  
 To done ou alle disporte as at I can  
 But holdith me excusid I am a woman  
 I con not rehersen as ise clerkes kune  
 And right a non she hath hir tale<sup>4</sup> by gune

Not only does Harry Bailly address the Wife respectfully as Dame and politely make his request (I pray 'ou / Telle vs a tale) but she responds to him in language which may even be overly respectful (Sir Ost). Moreover she gives the impression of being both pious and humble as well. The expression, so god my soule blis suggests piety and the admission that she can not rehearse as

these clerkes k<sup>s</sup> suggests humility. Of course, both phrases may be no more than hollow expressions of civility. Indeed, the humility may be double-edged with sarcasm, given what she will have later to say about clerks. But there can be no doubt of her bourgeois respectability.

This image of the Wife as a respectable bourgeois woman is taken for granted in the prologue to the anonymous Tale of Beryn (also known as The Canterbury Interlude) a spurious addition to *The Canterbury Tales* which survives in only one mid-fifteenth-century text (Northumberland MS 455) but was probably composed around the year 1420. After visiting the shrine, hearing mass and having dinner at the inn with all the company, she proposes to the Prioress that they spend the afternoon together:

She toke the Prioress by the hond: Madam, wol ye stalk  
Pryvely into the garden to se the herbes growe,  
And after with our hostes wyff in hir parlour rowe?  
I woll gyve yewe the wyne, and ye shull me also,  
For tyll we go to soper, we have naught elles to do.  
The Prioress, as womman taught of gentil blood and hend,  
Assented to hir counsell, and forth gon they wend....

This is not the sort of woman to interrupt her felawes with a wonder grete oath. Indeed, the images of the Wife created in the spurious Lansdowne link and Beryn Prologue could not be more different.

### Minor variants

Minor variants affecting words or phrases are not usually so indicative of scribal attitudes as spurious links and prologues. However, some of the variants which occur in the earliest manuscripts of the Wife's Prologue alter the text's meaning enough to be suggestive of scribal attitudes. Moreover, the alterations they make also point to a divided response to the Wife in that they imply either approval or disapproval of her arguments defending marriage and her behaviour as a wife.

The first pair of variants occurs at line 46. The reading familiar to us from modern critical editions appears in both Ellesmere and Harley 7334 (Gg lacks this leaf):

For sothe I wol nat kepe me chaast in al  
But Hengwrt, Corpus, Lansdowne and Cambridge Dd all have

For sit[Dd syn] I wol nat kepe me chast in al

The Ellesmere line can be read as a declarative statement complete in itself—and is so punctuated in the *Riverside Chaucer*—but the Hengwrt line is clearly a dependent adverbial clause, meaningless without the rest of the sentence:

Whan myn housbonde is fro the world ygon  
Som Cristen man shal wedde me anon

The difference between these two texts in terms of characterizing the Wife is considerable. In the first she appears to be boasting of her unwillingness to live in chastity (in the sense of celibacy.) In the second, she is simply explaining that she prefers one form of chastity to another, the third degree (marital chastity) to the second (celibate widowhood.) The Ellesmere variant is more likely to be scribal in origin, because its substitution of *sothe* for *sith* breaks up a complex sentence, making the sense unit coincide with the line, something which Barry Windeatt has shown scribes did frequently when copying Chaucer's *Troilus*.

The Ellesmere variant is also the more misogynous of the two insofar as it makes the Wife's justification of marriage and re-marriage as a way of avoiding sin (invoking the words of St. Paul in the line, *Bet is to be wedded than to brynnē*) appear hypocritical. The declarative *For sothe, I wol nat kepe me chaast in* implies that her real reason for marrying and re-marrying is not a desire for virtue (marital chastity) but a desire for sexual satisfaction. As a consequence, this alteration may also be taken to imply that the Ellesmere scribe does not approve the Wife's unwillingness to attempt the greater virtue of celibacy.

The other set of minor variants seems to have occurred in response to the inherent ambiguity of 'chastitee.' Medieval usage shows that this noun could denote any one of the three degrees of chastity: virginity, celibacy, or marital fidelity. In certain contexts this could lead to confusion. At lines 91-4 Hengwrt, Harley 7334 and Ellesmere offer an ambiguous text, which probably reflects Chaucer's original:

This is al and som[St. Paul] heeld virginitee  
 Moore partit than weddyng in freletee.  
 Freletee clepe I but if that he and she  
 Wolde leden al hir lyf in chastitee

The ambiguity occurs in the second couplet where the Wife responds to St. Paul's definition of marriage as frailty by saying that she, too, regards marriage as frailty unless ('but if that') the couple are willing to live their entire life in 'chastitee.' The word 'chastitee' remains ambiguous even in this 'definition-of-marriage' context because the medieval Church allowed spiritual marriage, a relationship in which man and wife lived together as brother and sister, without having a sexual relationship, and this type of marriage was thought to be more perfect than ordinary marriage (Elliott 1993.) As a consequence the Wife's utterance is confusing. Is she saying that marriage is 'freletee' unless the husband and wife live together as brother and sister, in which case 'chastitee' would mean celibacy? Or, is she saying that marriage is 'freletee' unless husband and wife are always faithful to one another, in which case 'chastitee' would mean marital chastity?

Among the earliest copyists, neither the Corpus nor the Dd scribe were satisfied with this ambiguity, for each tried to clarify it, albeit in totally opposite directions. The Dd scribe alters the second line of the couplet so that 'chastitee' clearly means celibacy:

Freltee clepe I but if that he and she  
 Wold here lyues lede al in chastitee

He has clarified the sense simply by changing the singular *hir* to the plural *here lyue* and shifting the position of *also* so that it now modifies the phrase *in chastitee*. The married couple are now depicted not as one flesh, but rather as continuing to lead their separate lives *al in chastitee* 'totally in chastity,' or, without sex.

On the other hand, the Corpus scribe appears to have wished to emphasize the fact that marriage itself is a form of chastity:

Freltee clepe I not but that he and sche  
Wolde leede here lijf in chastitee

In order to eliminate the possibility that *chastitee* be taken to mean celibacy, the Corpus scribe has simply removed *al* from the second line, even though its removal spoils the metre. He has also removed the *if* following the *but* in the first line and added a *not* before it, so that the meaning of the couplet becomes, 'I call it [weddyng] frailty, even though ['not but that' i.e. notwithstanding (the fact) that] he and she would be leading their life in chastity.' St. Paul may be right to consider marriage 'freltee' because it accommodates the weakness of the flesh, but the Corpus scribe wants to insist that faithful marriage is nevertheless a form of chastity.

The difference in meaning between these two versions of Chaucer's couplet implies quite different attitudes towards sex, marriage, and, by extension, towards the much-married Wife of Bath. The Dd scribe appears to have disapproved of sex, much as St. Paul did, and to have thought, regardless of St. Jerome's definition of marriage as the third degree of chastity, that one cannot have sexual relations and at the same time be chaste—at least, not in the sense of the word which is meaningful to him, that of being pure and chaste, without blemish. On the other hand, the Corpus scribe seems not only to have approved of sex within marriage but also to have been unhappy with the Pauline definition of marriage as 'freltee.' Perhaps the Corpus scribe felt that this term misrepresented the difficulty of remaining faithful to one spouse. Certainly he thought it was right to regard such faithfulness as a form of chastity.

Given their respective attitudes towards sex and marriage, we may safely infer that the Dd and Cp scribes could not have agreed upon an ethical judgment of the Wife of Bath. The Dd scribe would not have approved of her at all. To marry once is perhaps unavoidable, but five times points to a woeful lack of interest in the virtue of chastity as he understands it. On the other hand, the Corpus scribe might have had a good deal of sympathy for the Wife, interpreting her frequent re-marriage as an acceptable and far from easy way to guard oneself against the temptations of the flesh.

### Major variants: the renumbered husbands and 'added passages'

The first set of major variants is actually a sequence of what have been taken to be errors in the numbering of the Wife's husbands. Needless to say, these 'errors' have been corrected in all modern editions, so that a considerable effort of defamiliarization is necessary before one can see how they change the

meaning of Chaucer's text. Having made that effort, I am now convinced that they are not 'errors' at all. Rather, they are alterations designed to tighten the narrative structure of the second half of the Prologue. In so doing they also change the characterization of the Wife.

At that point in the text where the Wife begins speaking of her fourth husband (452-53), the Dd scribe has her begin all over again, with husband number one.

Now wol I speke of my first husbonde  
 My first husbonde was a reuelour  
 This is to sey he had a paramour  
 And I was yong and ful of rage (452-5)

Then, less than thirty lines later,

Now forth to telle of my secund husbonde  
 I sey I had in hert greet despit  
 That he of any other had (481-2)

Then twenty lines later,

Now, of my thridde husbonde wol I telle  
 God let his soule neuer come in helle  
 And yet was he to me the moost shrew (505-5)

And again, twenty lines later,

My ferthe busbonde, god his soule blisse  
 Which that I took for loue & no richesse  
 He somtyme was a clerk of Oxenford (625-7)

Twenty lines later still we are given the story of how she courted Jankyn, who was to become her fifth husband, and almost immediately after that she tells us,

Whan that my fierthe husbonde was on beere  
 I wep algate and made sory chere  
 As wyues moten for it is (587-9)

There follows the story of how she fell in love with and married Jankyn; however, she never refers to this Jankyn either as her fifth husband or as a clerk from Oxford.

The internal coherence of this revision of the last part of the Wife's Prologue, which may or may not have been done by the Dd scribe himself, is quite remarkable. It never openly contradicts what the Wife has told us in the previous part, where she classified her five husbands into two groups, the good and the bad. It rather elaborates upon what she has already said by describing each of her five husbands individually. The first was a 'revelour'; the second a philanderer; the third, the Oxford Clerk, was a wife-beater but she loved him the best anyway because he played hard to get and was great in bed; the fourth she married for love, not money, but he died when she returned from Jerusalem; and the fifth, Jankyn, was yet another well-educated wife-beater.

The sequence is swift and well organized, each husband's salient characteristic eliciting from the Wife either a reminiscence or a bit of proverbial wisdom. Remembrance of the first husband brings back her own joyous youth;

remembrance of the second, the philanderer, recalls how she got even by letting him think she was having an affair, too; remembrance of the third prompts her to remark on women's 'queynte fantasie' of preferring what is forbidden or hard to get; and remembrance of the fourth recalls how she betrayed his secrets and then, during his absence, courted his successor, Jankyn. Everything leads up to Jankyn, in whom the Wife finally meets her match.

The consequences of this revision for the characterization of the Wife are interesting. Gone is the garrulous old woman who keeps losing her train of thought and repeating herself. Instead we have the impression of a much younger, more vital woman, fully in control of her present narrative as well as most of her five husbands. What is more, this revised narrative suggests that she was obsessed with the sexual capabilities and activities of all of them.

The second set of major variants, the five 'added passages' in the Wife's Prologue have traditionally been taken to be late authorial revisions; however, they are more likely to be scribal interpolations, probably added by the Cambridge Dd scribe (Blake 1985).<sup>6</sup> They make their first appearance, together with the 'errors' in re-numbering the Wife's husbands, in the Cambridge Dd manuscript and they are monotonously misogynist in import, as even the most cursory reading will show:

Of which*{i.e.husbands}* I have pycked out the beste  
 Bothe of here nether purs and of here cheste.  
 Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes  
 And diverse practyk in many sondry werkes  
 Maketh the werkman parfyt sekirly.  
 Of fyve husbondes scoleiyng (~~411-15~~)

I bar hym on honde he hadde enchanted me  
 My dame taughte me that soutiltee  
 And eek I seyde I mette of hym al nyght  
 He wolde han slayn me as I lay upright  
 And al my bed was ful of verray blood.

But yet I hope that ye shal do me good,  
 For blood bitokeneth gold, as me was taught.  
 And al was fals; I dremed of it right naught  
 But as I folwed ay my dames loore  
 As wel of this as of othere thynges (~~570-84~~)

For certes, I am al Venerien  
 In feelynge, and myn herte is Marcien.  
 Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse  
 And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynes (~~609-12~~)

Yet have I Martes mark upon my face  
 And also in another privee place.  
 For God so wys be my savacioun  
 I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun  
 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 defour (~~619-26~~)

For which [i.e. Eve's sin] that Jhesu Crist hymself was slayn  
 That boghte us with his herte blood agayn.  
 Lo, heere expres of womman may ye fynde  
 That womman was the los of al mankynde (D.7-20)

Whoever added these five passages was clearly a misogynist who thought it reasonable to hold women responsible for the woes of 'al mankynde.' He was also interested in blackening the Wife's character in specific ways. The first passage makes it appear that from the age of twelve she was so greedy and lecherous as to choose all her husbands for their wealth and sexual potency. The second emphasizes her duplicity and that of all women in dealing with men. The third emphasizes her lechery and aggressiveness and the fourth makes her boast of a lifetime of sexual promiscuity.

Even though modern critical editions continue to follow Walter Skeat's lead (1894) and treat these passages as late authorial revisions, there are several good reasons, quite apart from their content, for thinking that they are more likely to be scribal interpolations. First, subsequent to their initial appearance in the Dd manuscript, they achieved a very limited and erratic manuscript attestation.<sup>7</sup> Second, within the A and B groups of manuscripts they almost always appear in conjunction with the scribal error of the re-numbered husbands.<sup>8</sup> Third, upon examination, they all prove to be rather awkwardly inserted and either repetitious or contradictory of other universally attested passages (Kennedy 1995.) Finally, if they were to be omitted, the continuity of expression in the remaining text would not be impaired in the least (Fisher Forthcoming.) On the other hand, there is only one good reason for thinking they might be late authorial revisions—their ostensibly Chaucerian style. Indeed, this is the only reason, according to Manly and Rickert, why the authenticity of these passages had 'never been questioned' before their time (2:191.) But as Norman Blake and others have since observed, stylistic analysis is a highly subjective undertaking and hardly fool-proof (Blake 1985, 46-8.) Moreover, recent research shows that what we call 'authority' was in fifteenth-century manuscript culture 'quite intentionally dispersed,' being 'most of the time not the property' of the individual we would identify as the author (Hanna 1992, 122) and that late medieval scribes working in the vernacular 'could be quite willing to rewrite substantively the text they were copying' (Machan 1992, 5.) Nor should we assume, as many Chaucerians seem to do, that no fifteenth-century scribe could possibly have imitated Chaucer's style well enough to fool us, certainly not when we are dealing with relatively short passages.<sup>9</sup>

If these five passages are scribal interpolations then the Cambridge Dd scribe is an excellent candidate for their authorship, because his marginal comments show that he was both a misogynist and a misogamist. Examples abound in the margins of the Wife's prologue. Opposite her boast that no man can half so boldly... / Swere and lyen, as a womman (D.27-28) he writes, 'Verum est!' (f.69v.) Opposite her admissions that women have a propensity to desire what is forbidden them (D.519-20, f.73r) and konne no thyng hele (D.950, f.78r), he responds in exactly the same way. Later, like the Hengwrt

and Ellesmere scribes, he responds with a *nota* to Jankyn's proverb that a man who suffreth his wyf to go seken halwes / Is worthy to been hanged on the galwe (D.657-58, f.74v.) He then finds equally notable Jankyn's saying that wives are so wikked and contrarious / They haten that hir housbondes loven a (D.780-81, f.75v.) Such examples of misogamy are also to be found in the margins of the Merchant's tale. Indeed, the Dd scribe seems to have particularly enjoyed the Merchant's sarcastic mode of expressing his hatred of marriage. For example, opposite the Merchant's ironic assurance, A wyf wol laste, and in thyn hous endure / Wel lenger than thee list, paraveren (E.1317-18), he writes 'Verum!' And to the Merchant's equally ironic assurance that If [her husband] be poore she helpeth hym to swynke (E.1342), he responds playfully, or to drynke

The Dd scribe's responses also indicate a prurient interest in sexual relations between married partners, with perhaps a special interest in their sado-masochistic potential. In the margins of The Merchant's Tale he responds with a '*nota*' to January's first meditation upon the beauty of May, but to his meditation upon the pain he must inflict upon her on their wedding night, the Dd scribe responds with a '*nota bene*' in the right margin and in the left margin draws a hand doodle with index finger pointing to the passage (f.112r.) Likewise he responds with a '*nota*' to the Wife's admission that Jankyn could always gloose her into bed whenever he wolde han [her] beal ~~chere~~ though he had just beaten her on eury bot (D.509-10, f.72v.) And there are other indications of his particular interest in the Wife's own sexuality. At the top of the same folio (72v) he draws a hand doodle with finger pointing to her proverbial remark that a likerous mouth must han a liker (D.466) and later he responds with a '*nota*' to the boast that her husbands told her she had the best quoniam that mygh (D.608, f.74r.)

Of course, the Dd scribe's marginal comments do not prove that he is responsible for the five 'added passages.' He may have found some or all of them in his copytext, just as he may have found rather than invented the 'errors' of the re-numbered husbands. We will probably never know who first added these passages to Chaucer's text, because the manuscript evidence is inconclusive. However, their hermeneutic impact suggests that it could not have been Chaucer himself (Kennedy 1995, 1996.) Therefore, they should be regarded as yet another example, among many, of a negative scribal response to Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

It is important to note that all of the examples of a negative reception discussed above originate in two small genetic groups of manuscripts, Manly and Rickert's A and B groups.<sup>10</sup> With few exceptions, explainable by contamination, they do not appear in manuscripts belonging to the much larger C and D groups.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in many of these C and D manuscripts there is evidence of a more positive scribal attitude towards the Wife and marriage. For example, Barlow and Lincoln, like the very early Harley 7334, omit 605-8. This omission could be explained as either scribal error or authorial cancellation.<sup>12</sup> However, it could also be explained as a case of deliberate omission by a scribe who thought the passage did not 'fit' the Wife's character. Barlow, it will be remembered, is one of the three manuscripts which has the

spurious link representing the Wife as polite and conventionally pious, not the sort of woman likely to call herself 'yong' at the age of forty or to boast of the excellence of her 'quoniam.'<sup>13</sup> Next we have Northumberland, an eclectic manuscript which Manly and Rickert classify as a D\* manuscript throughout the Wife's Prologue, which offers the unique Prologue to The Tale of Beryn representing the Wife as a respectable matron and suitable companion of the Prioress. Finally, the Corpus scribe, followed by other C or D manuscripts (e.g. La, Pw and Sl<sub>1</sub>) expresses a positive view of marriage in his alteration of lines 93-4, by insisting that faithful marriage is a form of 'chastitee' and therefore, we may infer, a good thing.<sup>14</sup>

In short, the evidence of the manuscript variants supports the hypothesis of a divided scribal response to the Wife of Bath, one negative, originating in the A and B groups of manuscripts and one positive, originating in the C and D groups. As we shall now see, this hypothesis is in large measure borne out by an examination of the marginal glosses in these two groups of manuscripts.

## The glosses

Most extant manuscripts, like the very early Harley 7334 and Cambridge Gg 4.27, have no Latin glosses at all in the margins of the Wife's Prologue, while many others, like Corpus, Lansdowne, Northumberland, Petworth, and Sloane 1685 have very few. Ellesmere has the greatest number and Egerton 2864 (En3) slightly fewer, but neither set of glosses is widely dispersed in the manuscript tradition.<sup>15</sup> Naturally, it is not possible to draw any conclusions regarding scribal attitudes from the presence of glosses which may have been copied will-nilly; however, we can draw conclusions regarding the attitude of the scribes of origin. What we find is a striking correlation between misogynous scribal revisions in the text and multiple scholarly glosses in the margins, on the one hand, and, on the other, a similar correlation between the absence of misogynous scribal revisions in the text and few or no scholarly glosses in the margins. What is more, the scholarly Latin glosses which originate with Ellesmere and En3 argue against the Wife (Caie 1976; Caie 1984; Schibanoff 1988), whereas those which originate with the ancestor of the C and D groups support her argument on marriage.

Only two scribes adopted a scholarly approach to Chaucer's text: the Ellesmere scribe, or whoever supervised his work, and the scribe of Egerton 2864 (En3), or whoever copied his exemplar. Either the Ellesmere scribe or his supervisor was a man of scholarly inclination. The sheer number of Latin glosses throughout his manuscript suggests that he 'interpret[ed]' *The Canterbury Tales* as a 'compilatio,' approaching Chaucer's text like a scholar looking for authoritative pronouncements, 'sententiae and aphorisms on different topics' which he could indicate by 'marginal headings' (Parkes and Doyle 1978, 191.) He inserts more of these headings into the margins of the Wife's Prologue than any other manuscript, the vast majority of them being quotations taken from St. Jerome's treatise, *Against Jovinian*. The Egerton scribe appears to have been even more scholarly than the Ellesmere scribe. The Egerton manuscript has fewer

marginal notes than Ellesmere, but its Latin glosses are frequently fuller and come almost exclusively from Holy Writ.<sup>16</sup>

Both sets of glosses originate in manuscripts which also include misogynous textual variants. Ellesmere reads 'For sothe' rather than 'For sith' at l. 46 and it also includes four of the 'added passages' (575-84, 609-12, 619-26 and 717-20.) Egerton 2864 includes all of the 'errors' in numbering the Wife's husbands. Moreover, both sets of glosses reveal an ascetic and anti-Wife, if not anti-matrimonial bias. The Egerton scribe's Latin source glosses are more openly critical of the Wife than those of the Ellesmere scribe. For example, at l. 455 the Egerton scribe inserts a number of scriptural admonitions against drinking and the lustful impulses of youth and at l. 660 a series of proverbs on the virtues of accepting correction and the vices of neglecting reproof (Schibanoff, 79-80.) The Ellesmere scribe expresses his disapproval of the Wife in a more direct and less scholarly way through a series of English headings. At l. 193, he writes, 'Bihold how this goode Wyf serues her iii firste housbondes whiche were goode olde men (f. 65r.)' At l. 453 he continues, 'Of the condicioun of the fourthe housbonde of this goode wyf and how she serued hym (f.67v),' and at l. 503, 'Of the fifthe housbonde of this wyf and hou she bar hire ayens hym' (f.68r.) The language of these headings suggests that the Ellesmere scribe identified with the Wife's husbands, especially the three 'goode' old ones, and saw all of them as victims of her wickedness.

This positive correlation between scholarly Latin glosses in the margins, misogynous variants in the text and a misogynous attitude on the part of the scribe of origin should not surprise us. The better educated a man was in Chaucer's day, the more likely he was to be antifeminist, since his university education would have exposed him to the Latin tradition of misogynous and misogynous literature. This being the case, it may at first seem surprising that the Dd scribe should have introduced only one Latin gloss into the margins of his manuscript and not a particularly scholarly one at that (a proverb from Ptolemy's *Almagest*, fol. 69r.), since he seems to have introduced both sets of misogynous variants characteristic of the A and B groups of manuscripts—the 'added passages' and the 'errors' of re-numbering the Wife's husbands. Was the Dd scribe not so well educated as the Ellesmere and Egerton scribes? Or did he simply think that scholarly Latin glosses were inappropriate to Chaucer's vernacular text? Most likely the latter, for the available evidence suggests that he was university educated.

The Dd scribe identifies himself several times in the margins of his manuscript as 'Wytton' and his handwriting shows that, while he was a practiced writer, he was not a professional scribe. Manly and Rickert hypothesize that he was the Richard Wytton who became master of Mickle Hall, Oxford, in 1426. If they are right, then this Richard Wytton, like the Wife of Bath's fifth husband, not only learned his misogyny as a student at Oxford but also acquired the habit of copying out favorite texts for his private reading pleasure.<sup>17</sup> The small size of the Dd manuscript, its careless make-up from uneven sheets of vellum and paper, and the personal nature of its marginal comments, all suggest that Wytton copied it, not as a scholar looking for instruction but as a man looking for entertainment.

In contrast to Ellesmere and Egerton 2864, the C and D groups of manuscripts have very few Latin glosses in the Wife's Prologue; even more important, the biblical source glosses among them appear to support the Wife's defense of marriage. Steven Partridge has concluded that the common ancestor of these two groups of manuscripts included the following glosses: at line 31 a quotation from either *Genesis* 2:24 or *Ephesians* 5:31, St. Paul's directive that a man should leave both father and mother and cleave to his wife, becoming 'one flesh' with her; at line 52, a quotation from *1 Corinthians* 7:9, St. Paul's advice to those who may not practice abstinence to marry; at line 108 (where the Wife reminds us that Jesus Christ counselled, but did not command, every human being to 'lyve parfitly'), a quotation from *Matthew* 19:21, Jesus' counsel of perfection to the rich young man; and, finally, at line 158, a quotation from *1 Corinthians* 7:4, the scriptural basis for the doctrine of the marriage debt, which legitimates sexual activity within marriage as a means of avoiding sins of the flesh.<sup>18</sup> Whoever copied this ancestral manuscript understood the Wife's arguments in favour of marriage and re-marriage and recognized their source in Holy Writ. I think this series of four biblical glosses indicates his appreciation and support of her arguments; however, all I can say with certainty is that he did *not* include any of the more misogynous glosses characteristic of Ellesmere and Egerton 2864.<sup>19</sup> He did include three Latin glosses translating proverbial antifeminist notions expressed in the text at lines 358, 401 and 776, and also added a '*nota (bene)*' in the margin opposite a fourth at line 655. However, there is a world of difference between this kind of popular and proverbial antifeminism and the more ascetic and scholarly kind expressed by the Ellesmere and Egerton scribes, who usually do not even bother to mark these proverbs.<sup>20</sup>

An analysis of marginal glosses thus appears to strengthen the hypothesis suggested by the textual variants, namely that there were two diametrically opposed scribal responses to Chaucer's Wife of Bath in the fifteenth century. Moreover, it supports the further hypothesis that these two responses originate at or near the root of two distinct groups of genetically related manuscripts. The negative reception, characteristic of the A and B groups, was both scholarly and misogynous (Dd, El and En<sub>3</sub>), while the positive reception, characteristic of the C and D groups, was more 'popular' and sympathetic to the Wife (Ha<sub>4</sub>, Cp, Pw, N<sub>1</sub> and Bw.) The negative reception is expressed by means of multiple Latin glosses in the margins and misogynous variants in the text, while the positive reception is expressed by a lack of such Latin glosses, the presence of variants which may be interpreted as pro-matrimonial or pro-Wife, and the absence of misogynous variants in the text.

Such contradictory receptions is what we might expect from scribes of different educational background and marital status who lived at a time of heated literary debate on the nature of woman and the benefits of marriage (the so-called '*Querelle des Femmes*.)' Therefore, it is not at all surprising to find the same contradictory receptions figured in fifteenth-century visual images of the Wife, also. The well-known Ellesmere illustration, and to a lesser extent the Cambridge Gg illustration, emphasize the Wife's sexual and aggressive qualities. Both portray her with whip in hand, but the Ellesmere illustration

also portrays her in a sexually suggestive position, sitting astride her horse. On the other hand, the less familiar wood-cut used in Caxton's second and Pynson's first editions emphasizes her respectability and piety by showing her sitting side-saddle, a rosary draped over her arm.

Almost all modern editions of *The Canterbury Tales* perpetuate the misogynous reception of the Wife by accepting one set of variants characteristic of the A and B groups (the five 'added passages') as authentic while rejecting the other (the series of 'errors' which re-number the Wife's husbands) as spurious. I think that many modern readers might prefer a text of the Wife's Prologue that rejects both sets of misogynous variants, a text more like that found in Hengwrt, for example.<sup>21</sup> Yet, despite the increased prestige of Hengwrt in recent years, almost all contemporary editors still prefer the more scholarly and misogynous text found in Ellesmere and Cambridge Dd.<sup>22</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Until the appearance of Seth Lerer's *Chaucer and His Readers* (Lerer 1993) reception studies of 'bad texts' focussed primarily on the aesthetic judgments implied by scribal variants; see, for example Windeatt 1979 and Harris 1983. In chapter 3 Lerer discusses very 'bad texts' like Helmingham and Huntington HM 140, 'idiosyncratic, personal productions,' which he believes not only 'broadly reflect current tastes' but also constitute 'important witnesses to individual response' (Lerer 1993, 115.)

<sup>2</sup> The extraordinary textual variance in the earliest manuscripts of the Wife's Prologue led Dr Peter Robinson to choose it as the test case in Middle English for his software programmes, *Transcribe and Collate*. I am grateful to him for allowing me access to the results of his project as these have become available, especially the electronic text transcriptions and lists of variants.

<sup>3</sup> The text is taken from Manly and Rickert 1940, 6:3. It is also available in slightly modernized form in Bowers 1992, 43-44.

<sup>4</sup> Manly and Rickert 1940, 6:3; slightly modernized version also available in Bowers, 46-7.

<sup>5</sup> Bowers 1992, 65-66.

<sup>6</sup> My hypothesis that the passages were added by someone other than Chaucer is based primarily on the hermeneutic evidence provided by the text itself (Kennedy 'Reambiguating,' 1995, 1996), and, in my view, strengthened by the evidence of contradictory scribal responses presented in this article. For an alternative hypothesis, namely, that Chaucer himself wrote the passages and later cancelled them, see Peter Robinson's argument, based upon his stemmatic analysis, in this volume; also Solopova 'Authorial Variants' in this volume.

<sup>7</sup> The five passages appear in their entirety in only thirteen manuscripts, less than a quarter of the total extant (Manly and Rickert's five A and four B manuscripts, and four others which seem to have acquired them by contamination: Ch II Ry<sub>1</sub> Se; the three early printed editions after Cx1 also include the passages.) By the same means, another six manuscripts include anywhere from one to four of the passages, but no two are alike in terms of

which passage(s) they include. For example, E1 is the only one to exclude only the first passage (44a-f.)

<sup>8</sup> Among those manuscripts which have the entire group of five passages (see above, note 7) only Ch, one of the those which acquired them by contamination, has none of the renumbered husband variants. This pattern is reversed, however, among the six manuscripts which acquired only some (1-4) of the passages by contamination (viz. E1 Gg Ha2 Ld1 Ra3 Se; but for the view that E1 has these passages by descent rather than contamination see Robinson in this volume.): only one of these (Se) has any of the renumbered husband variants. Two very late manuscripts, Ad1 and En3 (one of Manly-Rickert's constant pairs), have acquired all five of the re-numbered husband variants but none of the passages. This could be taken to suggest that the two sets of variants originated in independent sources. On the other hand, Charles Owen has argued that the En3 scribe must have encountered the passages in his copy text and rejected them (Owen 1991, 87-88 and personal letter to me, dated January 19, 1994.) Owen does not speculate as to the scribe's reasons for rejecting the passages. However, it is clear from the En3 scribe's copious marginalia that he was a misogynist as well as a biblical scholar. And therefore it is tempting to speculate that even though as a misogynist he must surely have appreciated the content of the passages, as a scholar he might nevertheless have rejected them if he knew, or had good reason to suspect, that they were spurious.

<sup>9</sup> At the present time we have no objective method capable of distinguishing Chaucer's style even from that of his contemporaries, Gower and Lydgate, in relatively short passages (Reimer 1993.)

<sup>10</sup> In addition to the variants they share with the A group, the four manuscripts of the B group insert from one to three spurious lines after 332, ascribing coarse language to the Wife and making her appear to admit openly to adultery. This negative and prurient scribal reception of the Wife has, like the other AB variants, found its way into a few other manuscripts by contamination (Ii, Ld1, Ry1 and Se.) Some manuscripts have the first and second lines, others the first and third, and some have only the first or second. In every case, however, the line(s) serve(s) to embellish the Wife's assurance to her old husbands that they 'shul have queynte right ynogh at eve' (332.) In explicitness of language ('be thow neuer wroth with myn instrument / though it be [som tyme] to a good felaw lent' (Cx1, TC2 and Ii), or, 'but thow fynde therinne a nother man is tent' [Se, also Ld1, Ry1]) they closely resemble the spurious B group lines which embellish the pear tree episode at the end of the Merchant's tale.

<sup>11</sup> A major exception here is, of course, the spurious link found uniquely in Lansdowne, a C group manuscript thought to have been copied directly from Corpus. In addition, there are three D or D\* manuscripts which have acquired some of the misogynous A and B group variants. Ha2 has picked up two of the 'added passages' in its margins (609-12, 619-26) and indicated space for a third (717-20.) Ld1 and Ry1, which Manly and Rickert classify with D (D\*) throughout *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, also pick up some of these passages, one in the case of Ld1 (619-26) and all five in the case of Ry1. These four genetic groups have recently been confirmed by O'Hara and Robinson (1993, 69), though they find that C and D are really one group only.

<sup>12</sup> Manly and Rickert reject the possibility of scribal error (eyeskip) and also that of authorial cancellation; however, their argument in each case assumes that the copytext would have included the third Dd passage, 609-12, but since none of the extant manuscripts which actually omits 605-8 include this or any other of the five Dd passages, their arguments appear to me to be irrelevant. They suggest that '605-8 had not been written when the ancestor of Ha<sub>4</sub> Bw Ln came from O,' thus implying that it might be an authorial revision (2:194), but I think it might just as well be a very early scribal revision, given that it works so well in tandem with two of the Dd passages (609-12 and 619-26) to deflect the reader's attention away from the Wife's 'herte' onto her 'quoniam' as the more likely referent for 'chambre of Venus.'

<sup>13</sup> In this regard, I find it significant that several scribes felt obliged to alter 605-8 so as to avoid either the apparent contradiction of the Wife's describing herself as 'yong' at the age of forty (Gg, Ii, Ps, and Ra<sub>1</sub>) or to avoid the inappropriate latinate euphemism 'quoniam' which they replaced with her more customary usage, 'queynte' (Ii, Ld<sub>2</sub>, Ne and Tc<sub>2</sub>.)

<sup>14</sup> It is noteworthy that this same small group of C and D manuscripts also omit the adultery-in-the-pear-tree conclusion to *The Merchant's Tale*, possibly out of deference to the dignity of marriage (cf. Blake 1985, 106-7.)

<sup>15</sup> The Ellesmere glosses are regularly shared by only three other manuscripts (Ad<sub>3</sub>, Ra<sub>1</sub> and Tc<sub>2</sub>), while the independent Egerton glosses were copied only by the scribe of Ad<sub>1</sub> either directly from En<sub>3</sub> or from its immediate ancestor (Manly and Rickert 1940: 3, 496.)

<sup>16</sup> Manly and Rickert think the copying of En<sub>3</sub> or its 'immediate ancestor was obviously supervised by a "learned clerk"' (1:146.)

<sup>17</sup> Manly and Rickert connect the Dd manuscript to Oxford through the signature 'hungerford' on fol. 8, which may be that of Walter Lord Hungerford who died in 1449 and was in his youth a student at Mickle Hall (1:104-5.) In the CD-ROM edition of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* Dan Mosser argues on linguistic evidence that the scribe is not likely to be the Oxford don. At the same time, however, he notes the existence of 'another university-educated Wytton who lived until at least 1412,' and worked in and around London as a priest.

<sup>18</sup> I am indebted to Steven Partridge for this list (letter dated June 24, 1994.)

<sup>19</sup> Schibanoff has taken Ellesmere's inclusion of the Pauline glosses from 1 Corinthians and Ephesians at lines 159-62, after first citing Jerome at line 156, to mean that the Ellesmere scribe supported the Wife's position on these points (Schibanoff 1988.) However, she bases this attribution of motive upon a very questionable prior assumption: namely, that the Ellesmere scribe's 'choice' of a 'secular' text (i.e. Jerome) rather than Holy Writ as the primary source of his glosses, implies that he supports the Wife's right to interpret scripture for herself (83.)

<sup>20</sup> According to Partridge, the Latin glosses are: 'Argus habuit mille oculos' at line 358; 'ffalere flere nere statuit deus in mulier' at line 401; and 'Solo melius est habitare' at line 776. I find it significant that the scholarly manuscripts do not generally share them. Dd has none of them while En<sub>3</sub> has only the third and El the second.

<sup>21</sup> Blake's edition of *The Canterbury Tales* is still the only one to be based rigorously on Hengwrt, while loyalty to Ellesmere remains strong, especially in North America (Blake 1980; Hanna 1989), even though Hengwrt has been adopted as the base-text of the *New Variorum Chaucer*. John Fisher will include all five Dd passages in the text proper of the *Variorum* edition of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, bracketing them to indicate their omission from Hengwrt. His judgement is that the present state of our knowledge does not allow us to determine whether they are authorial revisions or scribal alterations. I am grateful to Prof. Fisher for allowing me to see this part of his critical apparatus in advance of publication.

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