

Trade as Pudendum: Chaucer's Wife of Bath

Author(s): Stewart Justman

Source: *The Chaucer Review*, 1994, Vol. 28, No. 4 (1994), pp. 344-352

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25095858>

## REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/25095858?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/25095858?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



*Penn State University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Chaucer Review*

JSTOR

# TRADE AS PUDENDUM: CHAUCER'S WIFE OF BATH

by *Stewart Justman*

Chaucer both satirizes his society and leaves it strangely untouched. Of the three traditional divisions of medieval society—the nobility, the Church, the tillers of the soil—not one sustains a direct blow in the *Canterbury Tales*. There is no member of the high nobility, no magnate, on the pilgrimage, as though such a one were too great to be included in so miscellaneous a company. At that, the ranking pilgrim, the Knight, is idealized; or if Terry Jones is right and the Knight is a mere mercenary,<sup>1</sup> the irony of his portrait nonetheless escapes most readers where that of the portrait of the Prioress is recognized by all. Depicted as a romantic who has strayed from her vocation, an imitator of courtly ways who does not behave with the ease of a bred aristocrat, the Prioress is rightly seen as a study in Chaucerian irony. Yet the criticisms of the Prioress, softened and unvoiced as they are, in no way implicate the Church per se. And so it is with all of the clerical pretenders on the Canterbury pilgrimage: their shams are their own and do not reflect on Holy Church. As for the peasantry, it is present only in the person of the abstract Plowman, who is never set up as a target for others to shoot at because he never speaks. Chaucer's compact with his audience stipulates, it seems, that he may expose the pretender, he may even release the voices of confusion, provided that he does not attack the symbols of the social order too directly.

What of a sector of society unrepresented in the tripartite model but of manifest economic and political importance in Chaucer's England—the moneyed town dwellers, the bourgeoisie?<sup>2</sup> Here too Chaucer uses a strategy of deflection. It is true that the Guildsmen are portrayed in the *General Prologue* as peacocks, vain enough to consider the Cook a social embellishment. Yet like the Plowman they never speak, which is to say they are spared the exposure that the act of speech entails in a context of rivalry and ridicule. It is as though the Wife of Bath, who speaks torrentially and invites ridicule and enjoys a material prosperity like the Guildsmen's, spoke in their place. No other bourgeois undergoes the degree of exposure the Wife does.

---

THE CHAUCER REVIEW, Vol. 28, No. 4, 1994.

Copyright © 1994 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

And I believe it is her sex that makes Alice of Bath so eligible for the infamy that others like the Guildsmen are more or less shielded from. Her scarlet nature attracts scandal. She embraces shame. When the Guildsmen show off their fancy knives, it is recorded as a foible. When the Wife advertises her prosperity in her clothes, it is a breach of the sexual code barring women from wearing loud attire and making a public display of themselves. And as she advertises her wealth, so, unlike the Guildsmen, she publicizes herself in speech. In fact, true to the reputed impudence of her sex, the Wife of Bath boasts where others conceal. In the *Wife of Bath*, Chaucer pictures the folly of the bourgeoisie—its appetite for goods both social and economic—as the ancestral license of Woman.

Both anciently sinful and newly rich, both an icon of carnality out of the books of men and an enterprising woman of Chaucer's own day, the Wife of Bath possesses a duality that suits her ambiguous role. If she is an arch-woman (all women ever), she is also a player in the fourteenth-century cloth trade and marriage market who in her own way shares the most censured vices of the merchant class—pushiness, greed, guile, vanity, love of precedence. In the *Wife of Bath* all is feminized. And what above all enables this displacement is a certain congruence between economic and sexual desires, strong motives conditionally accommodated by the Church. When the Wife of Bath exploits the Fathers' reluctant tolerance of marriage, it is as though a profiteer were making the most of the Church's qualified acceptance of the pursuit of gain. When she defends the second-best status of marriage, we are perhaps reminded that trade too was an inferior good, that "no matter how much approval was bestowed on commerce and other forms of money-making, they certainly stood lower in the scale of medieval values than a number of other activities."<sup>3</sup> The Wife of Bath plays riotously with the order of values. Like carnival or sin, she turns the world "up-so-down."<sup>4</sup> That is to say, in the *Wife of Bath* bourgeois values are seen at their most ludicrous and illicit.

\* \* \*

It was in the town that medieval people found the "freedom of movement and contract" conducive to trade,<sup>5</sup> freedoms that have meaning for Alice of Bath, who likes to go places and regards the sexual act itself in the light of an exchange—her very bed is a Rialto. There attaches to the Wife of Bath not only the ill fame of the traditional figure of the wanton woman, but the aggressiveness of the bourgeois way of life as seen by traditional eyes. Animated with the spirit of bourgeois life, she dramatizes the novelty, at once tempting and repulsive, which as Jacques Le Goff reminds us distinguished the

towns.<sup>6</sup> The vigor of the towns, their commercial character, their challenge to traditional relations: all this is legible in the Wife. When she refers to “my profit and myn ese,” “my body and . . . my good,” “my land” (A 214, 314, 801), this woman of the town strikes a defiant commercial note that is audible at the distance of many centuries and must surely have been the more so in a society whose official ideology cast the individual as a subordinate member of a larger whole.

In the “commercial revolution” spurred by the towns, the “agrarian ideal of security based on permanent mutual obligations was slowly bending towards the commercial quest for opportunity based on temporary contractual agreements.”<sup>7</sup> The Wife of Bath exhibits that commercial spirit in her opportunistic readings of scripture, her understanding of wedlock as a cash-nexus, her marriages for the nonce.<sup>8</sup> As the Merchant boasts of his “wynnyng” (CT, A 275), so the Wife’s motto is “Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle” (A 414). Her *Prologue* takes us, then, into a realm of opportunity and bargaining, expediency and change—a life-world far from the eternal prescriptions of “auctoritee.” Her impudence and thrusting style; her highly uncertain status somewhere between widow, wife, and whore; her use of the Bible as a royal charter permitting her to practice her occupation: all this makes the Wife a most comical grotesque. Things bourgeois men wouldn’t have laughed at in themselves become comical enormities in the Wife of Bath. Her very nature is like a city, drawing things to itself—drawing the kind of disrepute that surrounds the Merchant but in his case is never really publicized or voiced. Well before the discovery of “economic man” (and allegations of his effeminacy),<sup>9</sup> Chaucer used a woman, Alice of Bath, to portray economic motives.

The life-force of the Wife of Bath dramatizes the “irrepressible desire for profit” that was recognized, though not affirmed, by economic theorists of the Middle Ages. “On the one hand,” write the authors of Volume III of the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*,

a moral tradition, bequeathed by antiquity and adapted by Christianity, curbed men’s freedom to transact business and even to possess goods; on the other, commercial activity and the irrepressible desire for profit called for latitude, tolerance and relaxation.<sup>10</sup>

The desire for profit called for latitude and tolerance, and so does the Wife of Bath. “God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wyse,” she claims in the spirit of latitudinarianism, “And everich hath of God a propre yifte” (A 102–03). Indeed, the duality just cited sketches out the dynamic of the Wife’s argument, with the speaker taking advantage of the tolerance extended to marriage but contending against a powerful

moral tradition. In the *Wife of Bath's* plea for freedom to transact love and possess husbands, then, Chaucer burlesques the clamorous economic desires of men. So it is that the *Wife's* discourse on the suspect-but-reluctantly-tolerated institution of marriage evokes the also suspiciously permitted pursuit of profit. Sexual motives map onto economic ones: as one might exploit the Church's conditional approval of gain, so Alice of Bath exploits St. Paul's hesitant concession to human frailty in the matter of marriage.

The *Wife* exploits the potential of a thing equivocally good (marriage);<sup>11</sup> the same could be said of a merchant making the most of the possibilities of trade. In the view of doctors including St. Thomas Aquinas, the ownership of things is an institution befitting an imperfect world, a second-best or equivocal good. As such, it opens up possibilities that the unscrupulous (like Chaucer's *Shipman*) can maximize, just as the legitimation of marriage creates an opening for the *Wife of Bath*. Ideally there would be no private property, for all belongs to God. But in the world as we know it, the common possession of things would not work. "What the state of innocence might have permitted has become impossible through the Fall"<sup>12</sup>—an argument adapted by the *Wife of Bath* in her own fashion. The *Wife* avows her fallen nature. She does not pretend to innocence. She will take the world as it is, the world where things are up for acquisition and exchange. If the doctors considered the need for private property "a question of experience," "experience" is the first word uttered by the *Wife of Bath*, her virtual battle-cry. If they deemed the institution of property suited to "an imperfect world," the *Wife* proclaims her own imperfection: Jesus "spak to hem that wolde lyve parfityly; / And lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I" (A 111–12). And if "no limit is set"<sup>13</sup> to the amount one can own in this fallen world, neither is any limit set to the number of times one can marry, a loophole the *Wife* exploits to the full. Like a man of trade capitalizing on opportunity, she will marry whenever the chance exists. In the *Wife of Bath*, then, economic motives appear at their most scandalous and comical.

Chaucer's England may have been, as Alan Macfarlane believes, "a trading nation, with . . . a keen interest among its inhabitants in profit,"<sup>14</sup> but this doesn't mean that ideology had caught up with reality or that "auctoritee" now saw the quest for profit as a civilizing pursuit. (It's the *Knight* who is portrayed as a civilizer.) "Auctoritee" seems rather to have accommodated the interest in profit, with reservations. The conditional legitimacy, which is also to say the probable turpitude, of trade is attested by Chaucer's *Parson*, who grants that "ther moote been marchantz byryngen fro that o contree to that oother hire marchandises," then at once subjoins, "That oother mar-

chandise, that men haunten with fraude and trecherie, with lesynges and false othes [the Wife of Bath's tricks], is cursed and dampnable."<sup>15</sup> Gain is licit as long as the pursuit is platonic—a point made still more authoritatively by St. Thomas Aquinas:

It is lawful to desire temporal blessings, not putting them in the first place, as though setting up our rest in them, but regarding them as aids to blessedness, inasmuch as they support our corporal life and serve as instruments for acts of virtue.<sup>16</sup>

It's as though the Wife of Bath made of this statement a warrant for marriage and re-marriage. Especially is her attention caught by the words "it is lawful." Isn't the thrust of her philosophy that it is lawful to marry and re-marry, let men say what they will? The Wife concedes that she doesn't deserve "the first place," which she handsomely allows to virgins like the Prioress;<sup>17</sup> she claims merely the second-rate blessedness of a corporal being, on the order of the lesser goods St. Thomas adverts to. In effect, she transmutes an economic argument into sexual terms, seizing on the lawfulness of marriage with lusty avidity. The bond between the sexual and the economic is all the more persuasive in that the sexual condition of marriage enables the Wife to get rich, and all the more provocative in that economic appetites are tolerated *distrustfully*. "Because they are powerful appetites, men fear them."<sup>18</sup>

Men's fear of women is a commonplace that needs no documentation, but if we needed it we would find it in the stories recited by the Wife's fifth husband, stories of women who have brought men to ruin. The Wife herself is evidently a consumer of men: her dangerous nature as a woman in the high tradition equips her for the role of carrier of motives that men fear, including economic ones. What "better" choice to bear the appetites of the bourgeoisie than a woman of that class who "evere folwede myn appetit?" (A 623). A powerfully carnal being, the Wife of Bath dramatizes motives that can't be blotted out but at best contained, like the sexual motive itself; dramatizes them and turns them to laughter.

The containment of economic motives means, for instance, that property "is to be tolerated as a concession to human frailty, not applauded as desirable in itself."<sup>19</sup> As we have seen, this concession is comically transposed, or "carnivalized," in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. The Wife freely admits her frailty and moral ugliness, joins in applauding those more perfect than herself, and greedily exploits the concessions of the Fathers. Thus she makes a mockery of the language of "auctoritee." And so where medieval officialdom regards the desire for gain as what Max Weber calls "a pudendum,"<sup>20</sup> the Wife boasts of her pudenda (literally "things to be ashamed of"), vaunting the shame-

lessness and the perverted reason that were long said to be women's by nature. As trade enables us to act on a desire for wealth that in itself is suspect, so marriage allots a place to desires that in themselves are dangerous, and the Wife seizes on this allowance in the spirit of opportunism—maximizes it. What is more, in contrast to the intimated irony of the portrait of an adventurer like the Shipman, the Wife of Bath proclaims her policy in all the colors of audacity and scandal.

Like a brightly painted decoy, the Wife of Bath doubles for men of greed and appetite like the Shipman. Because cupidity supposedly exists in woman in its natural or naked form, she is a “natural” for this role. Moreover, the proverbial inconstancy of woman makes her an evocative image of the class that holds its wealth in unstable forms like money or small property rather than in what seems eternal, land. All at once widow, wife, and whore, scrambler of traditional distinctions, the Wife sensationalizes the displacement of the middle classes left out of the three-part model of society. No doubt the association of woman with excessive desire and moral vagrancy was perfectly irrational, but for that reason it was deep. In turn, so firmly associated with women was commerce that later theorists would rail about the effeminacy of commercial society—a line of argument culminating, perhaps, in Nietzsche's ravings against the degeneracy of bourgeois man, likened by him to a “hideous old woman.”<sup>21</sup> What makes Alice of Bath a particularly cunning image of the commercial class is that she's a sort of trader herself, in effect having exchanged one husband for another many times over, “multiplying” husbands the way a usurer would multiply money. If medieval people could think of usurers as fornicating with money or of merchants as “screwing society”;<sup>22</sup> if they complained of women gadding about markets, buying their beauty, and conducting trade through their ports, there's enough of an affinity between economic and sexual pursuits for Chaucer to satirize the lust for socio-economic goods in the ancestral carnality of the Wife of Bath.

In his study of medieval usury (which finds that the taking of interest was both generally censured and conditionally permitted), Le Goff observes that money was “the most detested of all the earthly values that were gaining ascendancy [in the later Middle Ages]—detested even though, materially, it was becoming increasingly sought after.”<sup>23</sup> Also inspiring both disgust and desire is the Wife of Bath, a figure of grotesque ugliness who nevertheless attracts men. Perhaps the garish contradictions of the Wife's nature—she can't live without men and can't live with them, she invokes the same “auctoritee” that condemns her, she boasts of infamy, blesses and curses her husbands, lays aside



her cynical realism to tell a fairy tale—perhaps all this duality is but a projection of men’s own double attitudes toward the mover and medium of the commercial economy, money. Both repulsive and titillating, both a monster and a bride, the Wife of Bath partakes of the powerful ambiguity and the character of temptation that surround money itself. In any case I cannot help but think that the Wife evokes something else. It is not just that Chaucer was too bright to use the stereotype of the scarlet woman—a preachers’ caricature<sup>24</sup>—without an ulterior purpose. Not only this, but the contrast between the Guildsmen’s silence and the Wife’s garrulity, their little follies and her reckless embrace of shame, their group identity and her use of the first person singular, is too suggestive. She is an effigy, a substitute for them and their like, serving to deflect the question of commerce into the woman question. Whether or not the Wife is intended as a joke on the antifeminist tradition as we would like to think, her glaring nature—her portrayal as the eternal Woman—serves to cover for others of middle rank subtly ironized in the *General Prologue*. She is highly available for this diversionary role not only because of her sensational colors, commercial mentality, and diverting speech, but also, as we have seen, because of the manifold resemblances between the discourse of sexual and economic motives, both narrowly distrusted and conditionally accommodated by “auctoritee.”

\* \* \*

The Wife of Bath is the most public and vocal representative on the Canterbury pilgrimage of those middle ranks absent from the tripartite model of society, and in her ambiguous status somewhere between wife, widow, and whore this placelessness is taken as it were to the second degree. In his recent study of Chaucer, Lee Patterson argues that the Canterbury Merchant suffers from the same lack of ideological standing. “If the medieval social model of the three estates effaced the commercial classes,” he writes,

if moralists and social theorists provided relentlessly negative critiques of merchants, and if the merchant class itself failed to develop a coherent and assertive self-definition, then in the Merchant’s Tale Chaucer explores this condition from the inside.<sup>25</sup>

In her *Prologue* the Wife offers a self-definition that is assertive to the point of parody. As we know, in the first part of her discourse, she justifies herself by the written word that condemns her, boldly converting its prohibitions into grants of liberty. “Th’apostle seith that I am free” (A 49). It is as though she simply seized the kind of justification



the Merchant lacks. If marriage and re-marriage are not absolutely forbidden by the Church Fathers, then by reading the letter of the patristic text (a literalism that re-appears in the *Merchant's Tale*), the Wife can live as she likes with the blessing of men. If trade is a pudendum, a subject of shame, the Wife of Bath defends her trade in husbands with the tactics of impudence. In keeping with his strategy of indirection, then, Chaucer publicizes a merchant's lack of legitimacy in the figure of a scarlet woman. Were not women subjected to a critique quite as "relentlessly negative" as those aimed at merchants?

In the Wife's *Prologue* we meet with the naturalistic vision of realism. In her tale she turns to romance. It is as if she wished for an end to her war with "auctoritee"—her struggle to accredit herself by force or fraud—for in the tale the books are all on the side of her surrogate, the loathly lady; even the king of the antifeminists, Juvenal, is at her disposal. In the tale traditionally read as the resolution of the marriage debate, the *Franklin's Tale*, the teller undertakes to reconcile not only woman and man but the modes of realism and romance themselves, the one telling of stubborn facts of experience, the other of improbable wonders and spiritualized love. The Franklin imagines the ennobling passion of love within the constraints of marriage. He speaks in the name both of a reality-based ethic of forbearance (a sort of genteel version of the Wife's tolerationist argument) and of the idealism of romance. As if he, a country gentleman, and not the commercial classes occupied the "middle" of the social hierarchy, the Franklin offers a mediating vision, purporting to harmonize the realistic and romantic modes that the Wife of Bath cannot.

Although his tale has been taken as the end of the marriage debate, at the end of the tale itself the Franklin is no longer concerned with women, but with a competition in "gentillesse" whose contestants are all male. In other words, by the end the tale's premises are forgotten: no longer is it a story of man and woman, but of men alone, men who outdo one another in acts of liberality, at once rivals and brethren like Palamon and Arcite in the *Knight's Tale*. In the world of pageantry acts are theater, and in their acts of generosity Arveragus, Aurelius, and the mage demonstrate quite impressively that they are altogether above the kind of self-interest that motivates the commercially-minded. In the resolution to the tale that supposedly resolves the central debate of the *Canterbury Tales*, two things are decisively left out: women and self-interest. This double exclusion confirms the identity of women and commerce that produces the speech of the Wife of Bath.

*The University of Montana*

1. Terry Jones, *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* (Baton Rouge, 1980), passim.
2. On the exclusion of the burgesses from the tripartite model, see Derek Brewer, "Class Distinction in Chaucer," *Speculum* 43 (1968): 290–305.
3. Albert Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, 1977), 9.
4. *Parson's Tale*, I 263 in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston, 1957). All references are to this edition.
5. M. M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society: An Economic History of Britain, 1100–1500* (Berkeley, 1972), 212.
6. Jacques Le Goff, *Medieval Civilization*, trans. Julia Barrow (Oxford, 1988), 293.
7. Robert Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950–1350* (Cambridge, Engl., 1976), 157.
8. Note in this connection the dating of contracts in the *Shipman's Tale*, originally assigned to the Wife of Bath. The merchant's wife has a loan to repay "A Sonday next" (B<sup>2</sup> 1370); the monk asks for a loan "for a wyke or tweye" (B<sup>2</sup> 1461); and so on.
9. See, for example, J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985), 114; Stewart Justman, *The Autonomous Male of Adam Smith* (Norman, 1993).
10. M. M. Postan, E. E. Rich, and Edward Miller, eds., *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, (Cambridge, Engl., 1963), 3: 570.
11. On the reluctant toleration of marriage, see for example, Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady, and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York, 1983), 23–32.
12. Postan et al., *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, 3: 558.
13. Along with the preceding quoted phrases, this is from Postan et al., *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, 3: 558.
14. Alan Macfarlane, *The Culture of Capitalism* (Oxford, 1987), 150.
15. *Parson's Tale*, I 778–80. The notion that merchants serve a divine scheme by transporting goods from one country to another was an article of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ideology of commerce; on which see Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, for example, 59–60. Chaucer's time records no comparable belief in commerce as a "gentle" or civilizing pursuit. Nowhere, perhaps, is the semi-legitimacy of trade more curiously illustrated than in the figure of Meed (cupidity, bribery, profit, reward) in *Piers Plowman*. Meed is described both as a bastard and as being of honest birth in the same Passus (II) of the B text.
16. *Summa Theologica*, Part II, second part, Q. 83, art. 6; cited by R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London, 1926), 31.
17. "I graunte it wel, I have noon envie, / Thogh maydenhede preferre big-amye . . ." (A 95–96).
18. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, 31. On the sexual economy, see Sheila Delany, "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Minnesota Review* 5 (1975): 104–15.
19. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, 32.
20. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, 1930), 73.
21. Cited in Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 40.
22. Thomas Hahn, "Money, Sexuality, Wordplay, and Context in the *Shipman's Tale*," in Julian Wasserman and Robert Blanch, eds., *Chaucer in the Eighties* (Syracuse, 1986), 243.
23. Jacques Le Goff, *Your Money or Your Life: Economy and Religion in the Middle Ages*, trans. Patricia Ranum (New York, 1988), 69.
24. See for example, G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1963 [1933]), 385.
25. Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, 1991), 337.