The Stereotype Confirmed? Chaucer's Wife of Bath

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[(essay date 2002) In the following essay, Treharne contends that in The Wife of Bath's Prologue, Chaucer reinforces many misconceptions of women's ability to manipulate and claim language.]

'I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man'\

Introduction: Methods of Analysis

This essay will focus on one of the most memorable English literary characters: Chaucer's Wife of Bath. I shall be taking a primarily sociolinguistic approach in interpreting her: drawing out interactions between language and gender, language and power that are as relevant now as they always have been in male-female relations, and in engendering and maintaining the powerful ideologies that drive both the social construction of identity and academic discourses of character and morality.

The complexity of interpreting Chaucer's Canterbury Tales arguably forms a major impetus for continuing to study the poet and his most famous work. As well as bringing to life his cast of pilgrims on their journey to Canterbury, Chaucer provides us with a multiplicity of generically and stylistically varied tales to entertain and engage us. The polyphony of the author, narrator, tale-tellers, and characters within the tales leads to a layered narrative in which the least distinguishable voice is that of the author. When readers seek to determine what the meanings of the text might be, both within its contemporary context, and to the modern reader, this obscurity of the author inevitably problematises any act of interpretation.

So it is that there is little that can be definitive in reading and interpreting Chaucer. This, naturally, is ideal fodder for critics, and among Chaucer's many controversial characters, one of the most ultimately indefinable is the Wife of Bath.

Critical Response to the Wife of Bath

Critical response to the Wife of Bath has been as diverse as it has been emotive. Early commentators such as William Blake found her to be 'a scourge and a blight'. He went on to comment that he 'shall say no more of her, nor expose what Chaucer has left hidden; let the young reader study what he has said of her: it is useful as a
scare-crow. There are of such characters born too many for the peace of the world." Of the Wife's Prologue itself, Dryden comments that: 'I translated Chaucer first [before Boccaccio], and among the rest pitch'd on The Wife of Bath's Tale, not daring, as I have said, to adventure on her Prologue; because 'tis too licentious.'

From these early, slightly prudish comments, twentieth-century criticism emerged to illustrate a continuing controversy in scholarly response, particularly to the Wife of Bath as a character. Kittredge's famous article on 'Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage' reveals (under the guise of the Clerk's anticipated response) that 'The woman was an heresiarch, or at best a schismatic. She set up, and aimed to establish, a new and dangerous sect, whose principle was that the wife should rule the husband ... She had garnished her sermon with scraps of Holy Writ and rags and tatters of erudition, caught up, we may infer, from her last husband.'

More recently, Tony Slade reaches a similarly critical judgement, claiming that 'The Wife's character has already been exposed in some detail in her Prologue, which rambles around the theme of "sovereynetee" in marriage; her tone is coarse and garrulous, and there is little evidence of that sort of delicate poetic beauty which some critics have professed to find in the Tale itself.'

Notably, these unfavourable readings are by male critics. One of the most significant developments in the interpretation of the Wife of Bath has come from those women (and some male) critics seeking to appropriate the Wife for feminist scholarship in the last three decades. These responses have extended across the full range of critical approaches, incorporating the psychoanalytic, the New Historicist or Cultural Materialist, to deconstructive affective stylistic and reader-response theory. Such methodologies have yielded readings of the Wife that see her as a shrewd businesswoman in an emergent bourgeoisie, a 'master of parody' providing a corrective to the 'truths' of conventional authorities; or a 'proto-feminist', an early independently minded woman seeking to reject oppressive patriarchy.

In discussing the manner in which the Wife engages with the writings of the anti-feminists cited throughout her Prologue, and takes issue with the ways in which women in contemporary medieval society are portrayed, Jill Mann comments that:

The double structure of the Wife's speech thus has a meaning of far wider import than its role in the Wife's individual experience. And yet it plays a crucial role in creating our sense of the Wife as a living individual. For what it demonstrates is her interaction with the stereotypes of her sex, and it is in this interaction that we feel the three-dimensionality of her existence. That is, she does not live in the insulated laboratory world of literature, where she is no more than a literary object, unconscious of the interpretations foisted upon her; she is conceived as a woman who lives in the real world, in full awareness of the anti-feminist literature that purports to describe and criticise her behaviour, and she has an attitude to it just as it has an attitude to her.

Further, citing Patterson's phrase, Mann comments that 'Chaucer could not invent a new "female language", and sensibly did not try to do so ... but the Wife's Prologue is designed precisely to make the reader conscious of the confining nature of "the prison house of masculine language".'

While there is a good deal of truth in these statements, I would suggest that Chaucer does nonetheless attempt to 'invent a new female language' inasmuch as he provides a voice for the Wife that deliberately attempts to emulate aspects of a woman's language, albeit from an entirely stereotypically conceived basis. Moreover, the textual dissemination of the authorities against which she speaks was such that the access she has had to them can only have come through an interpretative mediator—her fifth husband Jankyn with his impromptu evenings spent vernacularising the Latin auctoritas contained within the anti-feminist writings. Not only, then, does the Wife internalise the interpreted words of the Church Fathers, but she re-interprets them, uttering them in a language—English—that was itself marginalised, Other: in so doing, she further marginalises herself even as she seeks to situate herself within the realm of the authoritative.
Problematising the issue of verbal and social intercourse, the Wife is interpreted by Barrie Ruth Straus from a psychoanalytic perspective as 'participating in a homosexual exchange with the Pardoner' in the course of her Prologue, following the Pardoner's interruption. 'Under the guise of sharing with men the secret of the feigned appetite as one of women's ways of handling men, the Wife articulates the homoerotic nature of phallocentric sexuality: that it is masculine desire seeking only itself. When she makes the Pardoner her accomplice in betraying her husbands' secrets, she in effect puts the Pardoner in bed with her and her husbands.'

While this reading is puzzling, Straus's overall evaluation of the Wife is one that foregrounds the opacity of the text: that 'The Wife of Bath is the uncontrollable voice that eludes interpretative truth. The ultimate secret she reveals is that all who think they can control, penetrate, and master such texts as she represents are deluded. All the critics can do is create interpretations that double their own desire.' It surely is the case that the crucial aspect of Chaucer's work is the demands made on the readers' own interpretation and moral response. As Chauncey Wood succinctly puts it: 'it is not the text that produces readings but the readings that produce the text.'

But here, certainly in Straus's argument, and elsewhere in other scholarly comments, the critic appears to perceive the Wife as the shaper of her own Prologue and Tale, as a 'voice' that effectively propagandises a new 'truth'. Lynne Dickson, for example, argues that:

> Despite textual signals that Alison tries to control and disempower the antifeminist topos, it ultimately overwhelms her. The sheer length of her Prologue and the fact that she loses her train of thought six times support the reading that Alison experiences considerable discomfort with her speaking situation. One of the Prologue's strategies, then, seems to be to expose the tyranny of masculine discourse: it oppresses even a figure like Alison. This revelation is complemented by the text's method of hailing its reader as more complicated and open than the oppressively monolithic audience that Alison cannot escape.

And it is this that strikes me as most problematic: to read the Wife as if she were anything other than a fiction masterfully created by Chaucer is to fall into the trap of 'truth' that he sets through his vivid, realistic depictions.

There is no doubt that Chaucer ventriloquises his female fiction effectively. The Wife's is a voice that resonates loudly in Middle English literature, and that assists in making her stand out as one of the most memorable of all female literary characters. It is precisely this multi-layered speech-act that permits for a sociolinguistic analysis employing theories of language and power, and language and gender to determine the possible nature of the characterisation of the Wife, and the potential acuity of and purpose in Chaucer's depiction.

**Folklinguistic Stereotypes of Women's Language**

Sociolinguistics is the modern study of the ways in which language operates within society. It emerged, in part, from Saussure's analyses of language in the earlier part of the twentieth century, and the movement away from more historical modes of language analysis such as philology, dominant in the nineteenth century. Through sociolinguistic experiment, it has proven possible to determine, for example, the use by particular groups of speakers of variant forms of language. Where this usage correlates to a social, economical, or gendered group, relationships between language and power, language and class, and language and gender can be determined and analysed. The discipline, in principle, is not a judgemental one: no values are notionally placed on the results; rather, it collects and collates empirical data about variability within language and possible determining features.

There is no question about Chaucer's own language awareness. In The Reeve's Tale, the two students, John and Aleyn, are of Northern origin. Their speech is peppered with Northernisms that are interpreted by the editors of The Riverside Chaucer as 'apparently the first case of this kind of joking imitation of a dialect recorded in English literature'. Chaucer thus attempts, with relative success, the phonetic representation of variant forms of English within his text. Taking a wider linguistic perspective, Chaucer demonstrates himself to be very conscious
of his role as a transmitter of the vernacular, at a time when its prestige as a vehicle for literary production had yet to be firmly established. In his lengthy Romance, *Troylus and Criseyde*, Chaucer's narrator comments:

> And for ther is so gret diversite  
> In Englissh and in wryntyng of oure tonge,  
> So prey I God that non myswrite the,  
> Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge;  
> And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,  
> That thow be understonde, God I biseche!18

Furthermore, Chaucer's awareness of literary form is not only evident from his manipulation of it within *The Canterbury Tales* variety and versatility, but also from his comments through the voice of the Parson of the associations of alliterative verse in contemporary England:

> But trusteth wel, I am a Southren man;  
> I kan nat geeste 'rum, ram, ruf', by letter,  
> Ne, God woot, rym holde I but litel better;  
> And therefore, if yow list--I wol nat glose--  
> I wol yow telle a myrie tale in prose19

Chaucer's mockery of this poetic form in the mouth of the prose-telling, truth-telling Parson illustrates clearly the author's own linguistic acuity and observation.

The demands of ostensibly telling the truth by repeating the (fictional) words of the characters in his writing result in Chaucer's creation of a variety of realistic voices, each of which is suited in varying degrees to a particular pilgrim narrator. In the case of the majority of the pilgrims, the men, Chaucer's main concern may have been the representation of a register appropriate to each narrator; for example, in the choice of doctrinaire prose for the Parson; the courtly language and rhyme royal versification of the Knight in his philosophical romance; the classically-infused religious register of the Monk throughout his episodic tragedy; and the bawdy language and frequent colloquialisms uttered by the Miller in his complex fabliau. In the case of the three women who tell tales, however, the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, and the Second Nun, Chaucer has not only to find a register and style suitable to their respective status, but also an appropriate means of imitating the language usage of women.

It has long been the case that the perceived differences between men's use of language and women's have been thought worthy of judgemental comment, especially by male scholars and writers. These differences have until very recently been noted in order to indicate women's irritating habits, their deviancy or inadequacy in language usage in comparison to the norm--that is, men's language usage.20 This 'inferior' use by women of language is, of course, part of the paradigm of the social and familial subjugation of women, for perceived inequality in language usage reflects and contributes to actual inequality in society. Such attitudes to women's speech--that women are not as adept at language usage, or that there are particular forms of language use more appropriate to women--persist, however, in phrases such as 'girls' talk', or 'women talk too much', or 'ladies shouldn't swear'.

The myths surrounding women's use of language are ancient in origin, and their constancy and ubiquity is testimony to the stability of a social order which has undoubtedly been, until relatively recently, patriarchal, institutionally controlled, and exclusive. Chaucer's linguistic awareness yields interesting results in terms of his use of then-current (and in many cases still current), folklinguistic or anecdotal accounts of women as speakers. His ventriloquism as the Wife of Bath, and indeed as the Prioress and Second Nun, offers ideal material for analysis using socio-linguistic theory, and leads to the conclusion that he was very much immersed in, and quite content to perpetuate, the stereotypes of women's language use prevalent in late medieval academic (and therefore male) culture. An evaluation of the female pilgrims becomes, consequently, not so much a matter of what they say, but of how they say it.
Although Chaucer himself has been regarded by some scholars as a proto-feminist writer, this seems akin to anachronistic wishful thinking. Better, it seems, if one wants to regard him as proto-anything, is the conception of Chaucer as a proto-sociolinguist, or more properly perhaps, proto-folklinguist. He is a writer whose fictional creations deliberately raise issues of the relationship between language and social structures, and who question implicitly the status quo in crucial cultural relationships such as language and gender.

Before I outline the major aspects of mythical language use by women incorporated by Chaucer into his depiction of the Wife of Bath, I should like to offer a word of caution to allay any suspicions that my focus on this methodology may have prompted. First, sociolinguistic analysis focuses mostly on parole, that is the actual spoken utterance, and here, I will be applying it to written language, and moreover, a fairly formal versified language. Even so, it is a relevant approach, since Chaucer the author through his pilgrim narrator is claiming to be repeating the actual spoken words of his subject, the Wife of Bath. Second, sociolinguistics often analyses language synchronically. However, as it assists in explaining relations between language users and society, it can most fruitfully be used diachronically in order to illustrate and elucidate power relations in society at any given point in social evolution.

Perhaps the primary linguistic determinants of women's language, and it should be noted that these are also folklinguistic, are that women gossip, nag, verbally harass, give bad advice, cannot be trusted, and talk uncontrollably. This myth could be evinced by very considerable numbers of quotations from texts, both ancient and modern. The twelfth-century Proverbs of Alfred, numbers fifteen and sixteen, for example, reveal that:

Þus queþ Alvred:
'Ne wurþ þu never so wod
Ne so wyn-drunke,
Pat evere segge þine wife
Alle þine wille.
For if þu iseye þe bivore
þine iwo alle,
And þu hi myd worde
Iwreþþed hevedest,
Ne scholde heo hit lete
For þing lyvyinde,
Þat heo ne scholde þe forþ upbreyde
Of þine baleusyþes.
Wymmon is word-wod,
And haveþ tunge to swift;
Þeyh heo wel wolde,
Ne may heo hi nowiht welde.'
... Þe mon þat let wymmon
His mayster iwurþe,
Ne schal he never beon ihurd
His wordes loverd;
Ac heo hine schal steorne
Totrayen and toteone,
And selde wurþ he blyþe and gled
þe mon þat is his wives qued.
Mony appel is bryht wipute
And bitter wiþinne;
So is mony wymmon
On hyre fader bure
Schene under schete,
And peyh heo is schendful.

In these proverbs, erroneously ascribed to King Alfred, and surviving in a number of thirteenth-century manuscripts, oft-repeated criticisms of women's language usage are iterated. Women are 'word-wod' ('word-mad' or 'wild in speech') and cannot be trusted to hold their tongue; an infuriated wife's prolixity will inevitably result in her public reprimanding of the unfortunate husband in front of even his worst enemies; and women in general simply cannot control their verbosity, even if they try to. Such commonplace and stereotypical myths about women's language usage are entirely bound up, from the male perspective, with a woman's trustworthiness, her discretion, and her overall demeanour and appearance.

Such proverbial derogations of women's language, and the inevitable allying of 'shrewishness' with a more general female proclivity to unfortunate and unacceptable habits, are explicit in Chaucer. The Merchant, for example, tells his (clearly male) audience to: 'Suffre thy wyves tonge, as Catoun bit; / She shal comande, and thou shal suffren it'; and the host adds to The Merchant's Tale, that:

I have a wyf, though she povre be,
But of hir tonge a labbyng shrewe is she,
And yet she hath an heep of vices mo,

Women's loquaciousness thus becomes symptomatic of their general urge to 'comande' with the consequence that the male recipient--usually the husband--must endure excessive torment as a result. This insidious stereotyping of women, and wives in particular, is endemic in the writings of medieval male authors. Elements of this folklinguistic myth to which women have been subject are ancient, and develop in part from the most authoritative of sources, the Bible. In I Timothy 2.11-14, for instance, St Paul asserts: 'Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man; but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed; then Eve. And Adam was not seduced, but the woman, being seduced, was in the transgressions.' From such scripture and subsequent exegesis, therefore, emerges the ideal woman: a silent one. It is possible to go even further and to suggest that when women are supposed to be quiet, a talkative woman is one who talks at all.

This is the easiest myth to evidence as replicated by Chaucer in his creation. The Wife has by far the longest Prologue in the Tales, and one where the narratorial subjectivity is more pronounced than elsewhere, other than the feminised Pardoner's Prologue. Moreover, confirming the stereotype of the verbose woman are the speeches within the speech by which the Wife recalls her own words to her husbands, condemning the successive husbands' anti-feminist commonplaces, while simultaneously confirming them. The myths of women's inability to maintain privacy, their tendency to gossip, and to speak of 'trivial' matters--such as love and relationships--are shown to be part of the operative mode of the Wife. When she discusses Jankyn, who went to board with her friend Alison, we learn that the Wife tells Alison everything:

She knew myn herte, and eek my privathee,
Bet that oure parrishe preest, so moot I thee!
To hire biwreyed I my conseil al.
For hadde myn housbonde pissed on a wal,
Or doon a thing that sholde han cost his lyf,
To hire, and to another worthy wyf,
And to my nece, which that I loved weel,
I wolde han toold his conseil every deel.
And so I did ful often, God it woot,
That made his face often reed and hoot
For verray shame, and blamed himself for he
Had tool to me so greet a pryvetee.
Here, the Wife takes obvious pride in recounting her indiscretions that occur 'ful often', not only to her best friend, but also to another woman, and to her niece. These intimate news reports include the revelation of secrets told to her by her husband, even those where disclosure would have cost him dearly. Her delight in these activities, no matter how positively they can be read,\textsuperscript{29} serves to confirm the stereotype of the 'gossiping' woman, incapable of remaining discreet, incapable of earning trust. The Wife's pleasure and self-approval in these activities, the lack of censure she appears to receive, reinforces those proverbs and myths that warn men of the danger of telling women their secrets, and then subsequently blame the same men for the foolishness they show in trusting their wives. Such confirmation of the 'truths' about women (and, one might add here, too-trusting men) perpetuated by male authors like Chaucer actually weakens the Wife's position, and stereotypes her even as she tries to throw the anti-feminist stereotyping back at her husbands. And, while the length of the \textit{Prologue} itself is the most obvious evidence of the woman's mythical inability to be brief, Chaucer invites us to look more closely at the Wife's language through the ample amount of evidence he provides for her in mimicking the voice of the late fourteenth-century widow. Her \textit{Prologue}, in effect, becomes a handbook to observations on women's language, some five hundred years before a sustained thesis was advanced.

\textbf{Language and Gender}

When Otto Jespersen wrote his famous book on language and its origins in 1922,\textsuperscript{30} he ostensibly presented empirical evidence to validate his work. In his chapter entitled 'Woman' (with, significantly, as pointed out by various later twentieth-century linguists, no comparable chapter for 'Man'),\textsuperscript{31} he signalled that women's language requires its own discussion and set of comments, because it is not the norm; rather, it is to be measured against the normative language usage of the white, middle-class male. Chaucer's lengthy characterisation of the Wife of Bath similarly marks her out as beyond the norm. While this positively questions social roles, it also highlights the manner in which the Wife is outside; in providing the Wife with an opportunity to talk about herself at a length and in a manner not afforded to any other pilgrim, Chaucer marks her out as 'unusual' or 'remarkable' (in a positive reading) and as 'deviant' (in a negative). As she is representative of the non-standard, it is almost inevitable that she can be read as being depicted derogatorily in comparison with the norm,\textsuperscript{32} particularly within the fourteenth-century cultural and social contexts of male dominance and female subordination.

Jespersen and Chaucer have a good deal in common as proponents of folklinguistic stereotyping of women's language: Jespersen provides a list of the folklinguistic myths to which sociolinguists in the 1970s and 1980s felt compelled to reply, and not always with a rebuttal. Much of Jespersen's 'evidence' is based on anecdote rather than objective and empirical observation, but it is cited as (his) truth because of the permeation of long-held derogatory views about women's language usage. Similarly, Chaucer is able to manipulate stereotypical facets of women's language usage through his creation, and he, to a significant extent, pre-empts in a literary framework what Jespersen would go on to write within a linguistic structure some five hundred and more years later.

Jespersen's account of women's language provides a blueprint for the promulgation of folklinguistic stereotyping, iterating commonplaces about women's particular characteristics of language usage that owe more to the medieval proverb than they do to the objective collation of data. Among the key features he notes are the divergences between the 'lower and higher registers of language':

The difference between the two 'languages' is one of degree only: they are two strata of the same language, one higher, more solemn, stiff and archaic, and another lower, more natural and familiar, and this easy, or perhaps we should say slipshod, style is the only one recognized for ordinary women.\textsuperscript{33}

He goes on to discuss the use of hyperbolic lexis and intonation in women's speech:
Another tendency noticed in the language of ... women is pretty widely spread among French and English women, namely, the excessive use of intensive words and the exaggeration of stress and tone-accent to mark emphasis.34

This he expands upon with the remarkable series of examples and explanations:

the fondness of women for hyperbole will very often lead the fashion with regard to adverbs of intensity, and these are very often used with disregard of their proper meaning ... There is another intensive which has something of the eternally feminine about it, namely so ... The explanation of this characteristic feminine usage is, I think, that women much more often than men break off without finishing their sentences, because they start talking without having thought out what they are going to say.35

This hyperbole of intensifiers helps assist, perhaps, in making more emphatic and startling the woman's subject of discourse, because, according to Jespersen, women are incapable of what might be loosely termed 'straight-talking'; hence, their preference for euphemism:

But when ... we come to ... vocabulary and style, we shall find a much greater number of differences ... There is certainly no doubt, however, that women in all countries are shy of mentioning certain parts of the human body and certain natural functions by the direct and often rude denominations which men, and especially young men, prefer when among themselves. Women will therefore invent innocent and euphemistic words and paraphrases, which sometimes may in the long run come to be looked upon as the plain or blunt names, and therefore in their turn have to be avoided and replaced by more decent words.36

Considering that women are so innovative in language, having to 'invent innocent ... words and phrases', it comes as something of a surprise to discover that:

the vocabulary of a woman as a rule is much less extensive than that of a man ... Woman as a rule follows the main road of language, where man is often inclined to turn aside into a narrow footpath or even to strike out a new path for himself ... Those who want to learn a foreign language will therefore always do well at the first stage to read many ladies' novels, because there they will continually meet with just those everyday words and combinations which the foreigner is above all in need of, what may be termed the indispensable small-change of a language.37

The fact that women are adept at the 'small change' of language, that they talk before they have thought through what they are going to say, and that they pepper their speech with intensifiers and phatic words, is summarised by Jespersen's general explanation:

The volubility of women has been the subject of innumerable jests: it has given rise to popular proverbs in many countries ... The superior readiness of speech of women is a concomitant of the fact that their vocabulary is smaller and more central than that of men. But this again is connected with another indubitable fact, that women do not reach the same extreme points as men, but are nearer the average in most respects ... Genius is more common among men by virtue of the same general tendency by which idiocy is more common among men. The two facts are but two aspects of a larger zoological fact--the greater variability of the male.38

And the causes for the major linguistic distinctions evinced between the sexes are:

mainly dependent on the division of labour enjoined in primitive tribes and to a great extent also among more civilized peoples. For thousands of years the work that especially fell to men was such as demanded an intense display of energy for a comparatively short period, mainly in war and in
hunting. Here, however, there was not much occasion to talk, nay, in many circumstances talk might even be fraught with danger. And when that rough work was over, the man would either sleep or idle his time away, inert and torpid, more or less in silence. Woman on the other hand, had a number of domestic occupations which did not claim such an enormous output of spasmodic energy. To her was at first left not only agriculture, and a great deal of other work which in more peaceful times was taken over by men; but also much that has been till quite recently her almost exclusive concern—the care of children, cooking, brewing, baking, sewing, washing, etc.—things which for the most part demanded no deep thought, which were performed in company and could well be accompanied with a lively chatter.39

While it is easy enough to dismiss Jespersen out of hand for his subjective descriptions of women's language usage and domestic habits particularly in the light of more recent sociolinguistic theory, it is the case that his analyses, anecdotal as they may be, reflect commonly held beliefs about the way women use language—not only in 1922 when his book was published, but also in the present day. It is precisely because these folklinguistic myths about women's language have a millennia-old history, and are ubiquitous, that it is possible to ascertain Chaucer's own use of them in the depiction of, arguably, his greatest literary fiction, the Wife of Bath.

**Man Writes Woman**

If repetition, euphemism, hyperbole, unfinished sentences (and illogicality), limited vocabulary, volubility, and a contextual focus on domestic issues are characteristic of the deviant speech of women, and any indication of the limited nature of one's language, then certainly Alison is made a chief exemplar.40 Throughout the **Prologue**, she is ventriloquised using hyperbole and phatic fillers: empty phrases such as 'by my fey' (line 203) and 'God woot' (used six times in a variety of combinations).41 Such phrases are generally not only phatic, in that they add little to the semantic context, but they are, cumulatively, hyperbolic, giving an exaggerated effect to her various points. In its most positive interpretation, the Wife's apparent insistence on placing considerable emphasis on 'truth', and the witness of God's testimony in her text through the use of 'God woot', acts ironically to undermine the authority that she claims here for herself.

Hyperbole and the use of intensifying adverbs are well illustrated throughout the **Prologue**. I have already mentioned the use of 'God woot', but a different kind of hyperbole is yielded by the frequent use of the adverbs 'wel', 'full', 'verray', 'so' (alone, 49 times) and 'ofte(n)'. These intensifiers are used throughout the **Prologue**—one hundred times, every eight lines or so, a percentage that is higher than other **Prologues**, such as that of the Pardoner (one every 15 lines), or the Miller (one every 10). The receptive consequences of using intensifiers in speech is to add to the exaggerative, emotive, and individuated nature of the discourse; judged against the 'norm' of language usage, the result is that the authority of the speaker is weakened. The following sample quotation from lines 27-30 illustrates this use of intensifiers (in the repetition and insistence on the truth of her personal knowledge in line 27, in particular):

'But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye,
God bad us for to wexe and multiplye;
That gentil text kan I wel understonde.
Eek wel I woot, he seyde myn housbonde ...'

Alison is here made to emphasise the veracity of her experience, but in a manner that is less declarative and assertive than defensive and exaggerative. Chaucer's mimicry of the stereotypical features of a woman's speech, then, renders the content of that speech less authoritative, more subjective and less effective than it might otherwise have been.

From this brief survey, Chaucer's encapsulation of stereotypical aspects of women's speech pre-empts many of the same elements described in Jespersen's account of the variation between the sexes' use of language in his
To these folklinguistic characteristics can be added others that have been proposed by more modern socio-linguists in the last few decades. Robin Lakoff, in *Language and Woman’s Place*, for example, asserts that adjectives such as ‘adorable’, ‘charming’, ‘sweet’, ‘lovely’, and ‘divine’ belong to women’s speech. These adjectives are ‘terms that denote approval of the trivial, the personal; that express approbation in terms of one’s own personal emotional reaction, rather than by gauging the likely general reaction.’ In terms of syntax too, according to Lakoff, ‘women’s speech is peculiar’. Women use tag-questions: ‘used when the speaker is stating a claim, but lacks full confidence in the truth of that claim’. Other characteristics would include the tendency of women to being open to interruption by men in mixed sex conversations. Each of these so-called traits of women’s language have been shown to be questionable, measured as they were against the norm of male ‘standard’ patterns of language usage. These conclusions by Lakoff and other linguists have rightly been the focus of corrective criticism by subsequent empirical research, particularly because the conclusions drawn from these early observations was that women’s language use was inferior to that of men: less assertive, less convincing, less credible.

It is only the recent late twentieth-century corrective criticism of feminist linguists that has succeeded in beginning to reposition women’s speech as different from but equal to that of men. Thus Chaucer’s fourteenth-century replication of stereotypical features of women’s speech in his portrait of the Wife of Bath succeeds in producing--for him and for his contemporary audience—a fictional woman who is ultimately ‘deficient’ in her discourse in comparison to the norm of the male pilgrims. He fundamentally accomplishes the depiction of a woman who is undermined by her own prolixity and hyperbole, and who, furthermore, exhibits virtually all the major elements of women’s stereotypical language usage in her *Prologue*.

In this respect, in addition to the features noted above, the Wife’s discourse frequently demonstrates the use of tag questions, rhetorical questions, and questions that are answered intratextually—39 times in all: when she tells her audience that she often went to vigils, processions and the like (lines 555-8), and wore her scarlet robes (559), ‘Thise wormes, ne thise motthes, ne thise mytes, / Upon my peril, frete hem never a deel; / And wostow why? For they were used weel’ (lines 560-2); or, again, ‘What rekketh me’, she says, ‘though folk sete vileynye / Of shrewed Lameth and his bigamye?’ (lines 53-4), showing here both colloquial language as well as rhetorical questioning, seeking approval or co-operation from her audience in the claim of her often-married status. In relation to the declaration by Jespersen and others that women avoid language that directly pertains to taboo subjects such as sex or parts of the body, the Wife engages in euphemism, as well as underlining her point with a rhetorical question, ultimately seeking agreement from her audience:

Of uryne, and oure bothe thynges smale
Were eek to knowe a femele from a male,
And for noon oother cause,—say ye no?
The experience woot wel it is noght so.

The number of such questions within this text contrasts with one question in the *Pardoner’s Prologue*, and one in the *Parson’s Prologue*, each of them a shorter text than the Wife’s *Prologue*; the proportional disparity is evident enough.

As regards interruption, the Wife of Bath is interrupted twice: once by the laudatory Pardoner at lines 163-92, and once by the Friar’s laughter at line 829. The first of these interruptions is worth citing in context:

Up stirte the pardoner, and that anon:
'Now, dame,' quod he, 'by God and by seint john!
Ye been a noble prechour in this cas.
I was aboute to wedde a wyf; allas!
What sholde I bye it on my flessh so deere?
Yet hadde I levere wedde no wyf to-yeere!'
'Abyde!' quod she, 'my tale is nat bigonne.
Nay, thou shalt drynken of another tonne,
Er that I go, shal savoure wors than ale.
And whan that I have toold thee forth my tale
Of tribulacion in mariage,
Of which I am expert in al myn age,
This is to seyn, myself have been the whippe,--
Than maystow chese wheither thou wolt sippe
Of thilke tonne that I shal abroche.
Be war of it, er thou to ny approche;
For I shal telle ensamples mo than ten.
--Whoso that nyl be war by othere men,
By hym shul othere men corrected be.--
The same wordes writeth Ptholomee;
Rede in his Almageste, and take it there.'
'Dame, I wolde praye yow, if youre wyl it were,'
Seyde this pardoner, 'as ye bigan,
Telle forth youre tale, spareth for no man,
And teche us yonge men of youre praktike.'
'Gladly', quod she, 'sith it may yow like;
But that I praye to al this compaignye,
If that I speke after my fantasye,
As taketh not agrief of that I seye;
For myn entente is nat but for to pleye.'\(^{52}\)

In this particular excerpt, many of the facets of the stereotypical woman's language usage are exemplified. Not only is the Wife interrupted (albeit to be asked to give advice), but she does not hold her train of thought (demonstrating the lack of logicality or sequenced thought so often attributed to women); she cites authority to lend weight to her argument but attributes the proverb wrongly to Ptolemy; and she exaggerates for effect in declaring that she will tell more than ten examples of, presumably, tribulation in marriage. While other pilgrims are interrupted--Chaucer the pilgrim, for example, in the telling of \textit{The Tale of Sir Thopas}--and while other pilgrims use hyperbole, such as the Physician in his formulaic description of Virginia, for instance, it is the bringing together of all these features in the \textit{Wife of Bath's Prologue} that marks her character out as employing, to a considerable extent, the stereotypical characteristics of women's speech labelled (until recently, that is) 'deficient' or 'deviant' in relation to the norm of male language usage. Through these characteristics, Chaucer effectually renders his literary creation 'powerless' in the face of masculine oppression: an oppression filtered through judgements about language use, reflecting and contributing to patriarchal social and cultural paradigms.

'Experience, though noon auctoritee'--the opening gambit of the Wife--is, then, precisely the point; she has no authority, either through her inability to read and interpret the authoritative texts she cites, or through her teaching and preaching in the manner Chaucer permits her. But any pretence at authority that Chaucer allows, and which is seized upon by positivist readings of the Wife, is undermined conclusively by Chaucer's stereotypical and perceptibly inferior forms of women's speech recorded and employed by him.

The emphasis on the Wife and her spoken language is most clearly pointed up by the semioclastic act in which she engages when she literally and deliberately destroys the written word contained in Jankyn's book. This act privileges metaphorically the Wife's reliance on the spoken word for authority as well as symbolising her derision of everything Jankyn's book represents. This foregrounding of the vocal, the supposed domain of women, extends to the gendered aspect of actual spoken discourse: that is that women are reliant on the uttered word--theirs primarily by virtue of exclusion from formal education--but that it can never be superior to, or more authoritative than, men's reliance on the written word, on traditional \textit{uctoritee}.
Moreover, the Wife, in contrast to the other female tellers, is not ‘literate’: the level of traditional literacy she attains, she attains through hearing, not reading the Latin texts. Whereas the Prioress and Second Nun have access to (at the very least in the vernacular), and repeat, traditional tales in a manner very much according both with their positions and their stereotypical gendered roles, the Wife is ostensibly free of these ideologically imposed constraints. Although at times the Wife immerses herself in the discourse of patriarchy, presumably to be heard—to sound authoritative—she is ultimately unable to overcome this discourse because of her verbal powerlessness: the way in which, through Chaucer, her words render the argument ineffectual.

Illustrating this most effectively is the analysis of that spoken word within the framework of sociolinguistics or, more appropriately, folklinguistics. It is here, within that analysis, that the nexus of her power is located, for it is here that Chaucer is operating at his most indefinable level: one might wonder what it is that he intended in ventriloquising so effectively the voice of the woman. Depending on how one interprets the text, the author has either created a female fiction whose power is defined by what she says, or a female fiction who becomes powerless through the manner in which she speaks, no matter what she actually says.

Chaucer's awareness of language usage and the power of language is everywhere evident. He creates an opaque text through his multi-layered approach, breaking many of the rules of conversation between reader and writer that demand clarity of meaning, a process of implicature where the relationship between what is stated and what is implicit is clear, and where there is explicit co-operation. The lack of explicitness in the creation of the Wife has led inevitably to the problematising of what she is meant to stand for, and what Chaucer intended through her depiction. She has been labelled as the worst of women, as a proto-feminist, appropriated by scholars to meet their own requirements. The same, of course, is true of Chaucer. What is certain is that as author he questions issues of language and power, of typical fourteenth-century gender roles and social relationships in a way that is itself didactic. Ironically, perhaps, the ultimate powerlessness of the female voice is that, in reality, it does not exist, for this is not a woman speaking here giving voice to the concerns of female experience, it is a male author enacting the role of woman, silencing her as effectively as the female audience of texts such as Hali Meidhad and Ancrene Wisse are silenced.

Chaucer has the opportunity to subvert social expectation, to undermine stereotype, but it is not an opportunity he exploits here, though he may appear to be doing so at the surface level. On the contrary, as a man of his day, he confirms the stereotypes of women, but also indirectly raises issues about the validity of ideological norms that he subsequently refuses to clarify. No matter how much or how little Chaucer and subsequent critics sympathise with the character of the Wife of Bath, may celebrate her creation as a wonderfully independent, free-thinking woman or might condemn her as the harridan of the anti-feminist diatribes she so joyously appropriates, she is ultimately powerless: powerless not so much through what she says, but through how she says it. And that makes her a fourteenth-century victim of patriarchal ideology, no matter what our own view of her might be.

In the Envoy to Bukton, the Wife is presented as a humorous case study against the recipient's imminent marriage, and against women like her in general. While we may be meant to laugh at her, even find her a joyous and exuberant creation, she is, in the final analysis, a stereotype. It is precisely because Chaucer adopts, with considerable success, the stratagem of replicating women's speech that critics and students are so frequently momentarily beguiled into believing they are reading the real words of a real woman. Chaucer's linguistic acuity and his ability to deceive—despite the formal restraints of the written verse form—are what make his observations, not only of social mores and culture in late fourteenth-century England, but also of social and communicative interaction so interesting. Aspects of gendered language use are brought to the fore in the Wife's Prologue that would not be the focus of sustained scholarly research for another five hundred years, and in this, as in so many other things, Chaucer's innovation is remarkable.

Notes


6. Many of these perspectives are well exemplified in Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson, ed., Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect (London: Routledge, 1994). The editors' Introduction (pp. 1-21), in particular, situates recent scholarship within the overall context of feminist criticism.


11. Mann, Chaucer, p. 80.


15. Lynne Dickson, 'Deflection in the Mirror: Feminine Discourse in The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale', Studies in the Age of Chaucer 15 (1993), p. 79. Dickson does go on to say that 'Drawing lines between the fictional and the actual in The Wife's Prologue is problematic because Alison herself is not an actual speaking woman but a fictional construct' (p.85, n.50). There should not, of course, be any difficulty 'drawing lines between the fictional and the actual' since the entire Prologue is a fiction however realistically the fiction might be portrayed.


17. The Reeve's Tale, lines 4084-9, for example, illustrate a multitude of Northern spellings [in small capitals] in the quotation below:

"Allas," quod John, "Aelyn, for Cristes peyne
Lay dowen thy swerd, and I wil myn alswa."
I is ful wight, God waat, as is a raa;
By Goddes herte, he sal nat scape us bathe!
Why ne had thow pit the capul in the lathe?
Ilhayl! By God, Alayn, thou is a fonne!"


20. The derogatory comments of male commentators on women's language subsequently led to the proposition that women's language is powerless, indicative of women's inferiority in verbal communication. In recent years, this 'powerlessness' has been reappraised and shown to be demonstrative of women's communicative strengths of co-operation, lucidity, and solidarity. See, for example, Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge, 1980), Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1985), and Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1993).

21. That is, long perpetuated myths, which are still highly visible in social interaction and communication today, and to which this author does not, in any way, subscribe.


26. As discussed by Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language*, pp. 33-6, illustrated by a number of medieval and Renaissance literary sources.


29. Some critics have read this narration of the Wife's network of female friends as demonstrating the close and powerful communities that women formed in this period. This may well, indirectly, be the case, but it remains that Chaucer is depicting here a less-than-positive picture of women's volubility as the norm. Susan Signe Morrison, 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell: The Wife of Bath and Vernacular Translations', *Exemplaria* 8 (1996), 97-123, discusses this same passage at pp. 115-16, and suggests at p. 116 that: 'The anxiety the Wife's husband feels reflects the anxiety felt among those men who opposed vernacular translations; once privileged men no longer maintained exclusive access to knowledge, society itself would be threatened with subversion'; and at p. 117, 'the ability or tendency for women to reveal secrets only heightens their own power'.


32. As Jenkins and Kramarae state: 'Both the theory and the methodology [of the stratification approach taken by sociolinguists] are based on the implicit assumption that the communicative experience of white middle class males is prototypical ... the experience of women, other ethnic groups and classes are treated as deviations', cited in Feminist Linguistic Theory, ed. by Deborah Cameron (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 45, from Mercilee Jenkins and Cheris Kramarae, 'A Thief in the House: The Case of Women and Language', in Men's Studies Modified, ed. Dale Spender (London: Pergamon, 1981), p. 16.


34. Ibid., p. 243.

35. Ibid., p. 250.

36. Ibid., p. 245. Elaborating on this characteristic (which he labels 'affectation'), Jespersen goes on to say at p. 246: 'There can be no doubt that women exercise a great and universal influence on linguistic development through their instinctive shrinking from coarse and gross expressions and their preference for refined and (in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions.'

37. Ibid., p. 248.


39. Ibid., p. 254.

40. As a model of the non-standard, the ab-norm-al, deviating from the norm (the powerful male hegemony), the Wife is a fictional example of the powerless mode of discourse.

41. The analysis of fillers is made more complex by the verse form, which by virtue of the couplets occasionally demands phatic phrases to complete the scansion and rhyme.


43. Ibid., p. 227.

44. Ibid., p. 228.

45. Ibid., p. 229.

46. For a critique of which see Spender, Man Made Language, pp. 43-5.

47. See, for example, Spender, Man Made Language, pp. 8-9; Cameron, Feminism and Linguistic Theory, 33-4.

48. Lakoff 'states that women lack authority and seriousness, they lack conviction and confidence. In her view, in comparison with the (ostensibly) forceful and effective language of men, women are tentative, hesitant, even trivial, and are therefore "deficient": Spender, Man Made Language, p. 8.

49. See above, page 107.

50. Wife's Prologue, lines 121-4.

51. The number of interrogative structures, whether rhetorical or direct, will, to an extent, depend on the editorial process. The majority of them are unequivocally provided by the syntax.

52. Wife's Prologue, lines 163-92.

54. Which would be Carruthers' reading in 'The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions'.

55. In both these earlier texts, the authors imagine their audiences' responses and questions in a series of indirectly reported questions framed by 'You ask ...', and in rhetorical questions seeking the audiences' approbation. See B. Millett and J. Wogan-Browne, ed., Medieval English Prose for Women from the Katherine Group and ‘Ancrene Wisse’ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

56.

This lytel writ, proverbes, or figure
I sende yow; take kepe of yt, I rede;
Unwys is he that kan no wele endure.
If thou be siker, put the nat in drede.
The Wyf of Bathe I pray yow that ye rede
Of this matere that we have on honde.
God graunte yow your lyf frely to lede
In fredam, for ful hard is to be bonde.

Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton, in the Riverside Chaucer, pp. 655-6, lines 25-32.

57. I should like to thank Professors Greg Walker, David F. Johnson and Roy M. Liuzza for their helpful comments on an early draft of this paper.

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