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# Absolving the Sin: Redemptive Feminine Figures in Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

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ABSOLVING THE SIN: REDEMPTIVE FEMININE FIGURES IN GEOFFREY  
CHAUCER'S "THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE" AND JOHN MILTON'S  
*PARADISE LOST*

by

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## DEDICATION

To Tim, for his enduring encouragement and support

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I owe a great deal of gratitude to Dr. Andrew Shifflett, who continuously encouraged me to grow and was always welcoming.

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## ABSTRACT

Geoffrey Chaucer and John Milton have been ceaselessly studied in isolation to one another, but undergraduate students must begin to study them in conjunction. Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" serves as social critique of medieval misogynist practices that allows students to study social practices as they study his language. Milton's Eve in *Paradise Lost* reflects the religious and social instability that marked the Interregnum of the English Civil War, allowing Eve to embody the culture's desire to return to a virtuous Church. Students will learn to examine the space of the authorial paradox, primarily the questions of authority that arise when an author attempts to instill the object of the writing with agency—the linguistic problems of making the object an active agent when its position requires being acted upon.

Each author escapes the potential failure of authority by constructing halves of an apology that, when brought together, achieve a full corrective image of femininity that undermines the core argument of pervasive misogyny. Alyson's sexual nature allows her the authority of experience, from which she is able to reclaim agency and sovereignty, but she lacks the ability to avoid misreading philosophy and Scripture. She balances the duality of her voice as the text of Chaucer's context while her body reflects the cultural practices that restore her sovereignty. Eve's sin is her desire to know God and Reason, which becomes a movement from God; her sin is redemptive in the space it creates for Man's salvation and fulfillment of God's plan. Milton absolves Eve of the Sin of the Fall

by proving her movement was both innocent and beneficial, marking women as intelligent and the bearers of potential Grace.

By studying these feminine figures of Alyson and Eve as partially redemptive feminine figures, undergraduate students in a British Literature survey source can begin to contextualize the shifts in the debate of gender politics. When held next to each other, these authors' language reveal the enduring strengths of one another, Chaucer's brilliant wit emphasizes Alyson's sexual knowledge, while Milton's richness of depth allows for Eve's sin to be meaningful, turning the Fall into Man's salvation.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

It is important for undergraduates studies to study Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath and John Milton's Eve and be acquainted with these two particular examples of feminine figures who push back against their cultural strains. In each context, the Medieval and post-Renaissance periods, a similar fracturing was occurring between the political, social, religious elements that formed those conditions, allowing each prominent author to construct their own partially redemptive feminine figure. The figures have been extensively studied, but only in isolation to each other and the influence of their words lose power when they are not examined in conjunction with one another. Both figures must be studied in relation to the circumstances that produced them, and their initial meanings viewed as different attempts to achieve the same goal—that is, as redemptive figures that reverse the ingrained practices of misogyny of medieval and post-Renaissance cultures.

These authors are arguably the most influential forces of British Literature and while the Wife of Bath and Eve are staples in the undergraduate survey of British Literature, confusion and surprise is magnified by the lack of critical examination that holds them in conversation with each other. Both Chaucer and Milton wrote in the midst of similar periods and were attempting to achieve the same purpose, and yet these authors are rarely spoken of in tandem. Each author was attempting to reflect back on to society

the flaws that allowed for the acceptance and prevalence of misogyny to flourish, yet because a man is unable to give full authority to a feminine voice he has constructed, each author fails. They are only able to offer a partially redemptive figure, half of an apology and a whole figure can only be constructed when their elements of forgiveness are brought together. In this way, both authors escape failure by combining their different elements of the ideal feminine figure to offer a figure that justifies women of their supposedly inherent inclination to fail.

This paper will address the lack of conversation that naturally includes Alyson, the Wife of Bath, and Eve as redemptive feminine figures, spanning across three centuries and directly inviting in the twenty-first century. Undergraduate students will experience the multiplicity of literature by negotiating these lasting literary figures in conjunction with the situations that produced them while also considering their themes in relation to each other and the students' relative positions. In these works, students can explore the way in which these works speak for their ideals, speak against their society, speak across time, and speak into the audience's perspective.

As the greatest poets of their time, Geoffrey Chaucer was a student of Latin, John Milton was recognized as the foremost Latinate of his time and both writers were influenced by the classical authors. As an influential writer of English, Chaucer influenced Milton's studies and writings, which creates a relationship between their portrayals of women. As citizens favored by the monarch's court, both men were well traveled and encountered different cultures and social structures that allowed them to articulate stories that superseded singular beliefs.

Chaucer and Milton wrote in a time of political and social turmoil where hierarchies were challenged and disrupted, a context that allowed for arguments against an established culture which was made evident in their defenses of women. Their constructions of women attempted to be redemptive in their nature; that is, they sought to offer an alternative image of women that both secured their sovereignty as free authoritative agents and implied an apology for the previous patterns of subjection and voicelessness. However, these figures were only partial—Chaucer’s Alyson was hyper-sexualized in a way that enabled her to assert sexual sovereignty and intelligence, but she lacked a balance of sexual inclinations and unbiased readings of literary works. Milton’s Eve is embodied with intelligence and reason that supersedes her male help-mate, but Milton finds it necessary to correct and redirect her when she begins to idealize and sexualize herself outside of the boundaries designed by God.

## CHAPTER 2

### SOCIAL CRITIQUES

Undergraduate students must first be able to contextualize the feminist debate, if they are going to be able to critically examine authoritative voices and gender politics. This conversation begins in the Medieval period because it is where critics are able to concisely identify the beginning of misogynistic literary attacks. Henderson and McManus's assertion that the Medieval writers invited responses for their misogynistic attacks implies that Chaucer's motivation in *Alyson* was for her to function as a response to the growing negative voices of anti-feminist movements (8). Chaucer's social critique was not a sudden interruption of previous literary conversations, but rather a measured response that scathingly reflected on his society's practices. Because Chaucer wrote as social critic, by studying his texts, collegiate students are inadvertently studying his time period and beginning to understand the gender politics of medieval culture.

The enduring power of Chaucer's work is both his ability to intelligently critique the world around him and the artful way in which he manipulates language. "Geoffrey Chaucer, wrote on both sides of the issue with brilliant irony and engaging wit" (Henderson and McManus 10). The balance of Chaucer's work allows for the text to give a call and response dialogue, offering misogynists a chance to speak through the text before they are undermined by Chaucer's response in the *Wife of Bath*. The *Wife of*

Bath's Prologue embodies the lasting impact of Chaucer's work, not only as fundamental literary text for students, but as a fundamental text that examines the shifts in feminine portrayals. Students may often find that Chaucer's humor serves as a more accessible vehicle to approach and understand the medieval literary culture and through him, the medieval social culture.

A misstep students take is the assumption that because of the prevalence of misogynistic texts in the medieval period, that those texts serve as an example of all literary opinions of women. John A. Pitcher succinctly dismantles this argument when he asserts that "*Chaucer's text can serve as a corrective to the reductive notion of the culture of the medieval period as one of uncontested misogyny*" [emphasis mine] (39). Alyson is the dual text that breaks through the established forms of misogyny and Chaucer is successful in his attempt to rectify this prejudice through her familiarity with the effects of her society's ideals of feminine flaws. Pitcher's use of the word "corruption" is intensely accurate in its implications of the feminine inclination to fail in religious and sexual matters, and a fact that Alyson accepts, adopts and then manipulates in her discourse as a redemptive figure.

The contrast of the Wife of Bath against the backdrop of a society that emphasizes the premium of chastity is explicit in her language and command of authority through a reclaiming of sexual knowledge. Modern student readers must not confuse the context in which Alyson was written and the one in which they are reading her Wife of Bath cannot be seen as separate from and comparative to the culture from which she came, vocalizing her past use as a sexual text. S.H. Rigby argues that many critics assert their contemporary beliefs onto her and avoid the discrepancy between her actions and the

beliefs of medieval critics. (154). Modern readers identify with a more contemporary view of feminine agency and, in empathizing with her unfortunate youth, can unintentionally misread the disparity between her reclaimed agency and medieval beliefs. The contrast between the cultural demands of women and the manner in which Alyson reclaims her agency reflects the disparity between the traditional feminine treatment of knowledge and mobility in the church.

Simply remembering to keep the Wife of Bath in her own context is not enough though, students have to practice metacognition—they need to be aware of their thought process and must refrain from imposing their contemporary ideology on to her Prologue. There is a consistent thrust by modern readers to read the Wife of Bath's Prologue through the comfort of a more progressive cultural lens than the context in which Chaucer wrote it. Rigby argues against this inclination by noting "[as] a result, modern readers often come to judge the Wife according to their own values rather than by those suggested by late medieval moralists" (157). The problems of assuming an inconsistent critical lens that isolates the text from the environment in which it was created, is that it forces the text to fulfill a double standard. This double standard of modern feminism occurs by refusing to acknowledge the feminist thrust of the work and assuming a meaning into the text outside of Chaucer's voice. Forcing a text to fulfill contradictory interpretations simultaneously negates the message and intention of the text, and student readers then change the text to acquiesce to their reading. To examine literature as though it is created in a vacuum to deny the authorial voice the experience it brings, the space in which it functions and the substantial moves it makes.

Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* is a departure from the pervasive degrading view of women during his time because she is sexually empowered and confident, declaring that she wishes "were unto me / To be refreshed half so often as he!" (37-38) after slyly reminding her audience that Solomon is written to have had hundreds of wives. She acknowledges that while she was married off young, "sith I twelve yeer was of age" (4) and "[housbondes] at chirche more I have had fyve" (6), she was at least partially in control of her marriages. As her marriages left her with more wealth, her ability to direct her life by choosing her potential husbands was increased. By growing up in relationships that were originally founded in physical beauty and sexual potential, the Wife is able to turn the text of a marriage from her body to her wealth. Students will examine that the potential of her eligibility is no longer her physical self, which has lost its battle against time, but her wealth which has flourished with time. The Wife gives otherwise unwanted marriages a redeemable quality for women, by handing over the reins to those previously most likely to be controlled by them.

As David Armitage explains, Milton was writing during the Interregnum, a particularly fraught time to explore political and religious narratives and students must read the text with a piece that was mindful of opposing opinions, opinions which could have had a devastating effect of Milton (1). Because of this, Cedric C. Brown argues that "the poem 'suppresses its politics'; [...] we should therefore be specially on the look out for ways in which its message is encoded" (58). It was this confined society in which Milton lived that restricted his ability to speak freely; the context from which Eve is produced demands a more considerate reading than many audiences would initially apply, a reading that keeps present the knowledge that Milton's language holds

multiplicity. His words give the reader a safe, surface meaning that abides with his constraint, while the holistic works speaks of another politics. His epic battle follows a plot that meets the strict religious guidelines of his time, but discretely undermines these social demands by subverting the role of hero. If the student audience considers the poem's message to be analogous or suppressed, than they must also consider the way in which Milton works his language to construct dangerous messages in such conditions.

While separated by centuries of changing cultural climates, Chaucer and Milton forge bonds of familiarity as they carve out redemptive feminine figures against the grain of their time. Stanley Fish argues that in Milton's works "[when] the confrontation between good and evil occurs, it takes the form not of a conflict, but a contrast" (526). The feminine figures in Chaucer and Milton were contrasts framed against the structure of their society, the juxtaposition of Eve's innocent desire for knowledge against Alyson's sexual boasting serves to highlight the purity of Eve's desire for Reason. Raphael and Adam exclude Eve from their teachings, which is not singularly evil, but the exclusion of one from Reason, which is God, works against the teachings of the Bible. Eve is not examined as a single figure in Paradise, but as a woman who is compared to Man, God, Angels and Satan—Eve gains redemption as her accidental failing is minimized in comparison to Adam's purposeful decision to move from God.

Students who approach *Paradise Lost* will undoubtedly be familiar with the Bible's shorter version of events, however their previous knowledge must be held in comparison to Milton's portrayals of Adam and Eve. His figures shift the original story by providing more depth and detail, changes that students will be mindful of in this transforming religious climate. Nicholas von Maltzahn argues that Milton's work, instead

of being shamed as blasphemous or heretical, was desired by society because it craved a sensibility and rationalism in religion (230). Strict politics was exerting more control over the English Church with the Church's beliefs becoming more aligned with socio-political forces, and thus creating a space in which *Paradise Lost* was needed to reinforce true Christian values and messages. Milton's epic poem was successful in its own time by providing the culture with a response to its need for religious sensibility that had been stripped away, and it has been successful for modern audiences by its command of Scripture as a method of subverting pervasive misogyny and returning to the true image of women in the Bible. As will be explored more later, Eve not only functions as a figure of feminine redemption, but also as a return to Scripture; she embodies both the fracturing of the culture as it attempted to become more progressive and the return to the religious foundation on which the nation was built.

Milton's startling portrayal of Eve is made more prominent by the context in which it comes from, however much of the focus from modern critics and students is placed on the jarring distinction between conventional and antiquated views. Henderson and McManus highlight the problem with this thought process by noting that the focus of interest for many is the proliferation of these misogynistic ideas, not their spontaneity (50). Von Maltzahn and Henderson appear to be speaking at odds, but together they represent a significant shift in cultural views that both perpetuated misogynistic views and yet praised the epic poem that redeemed women: a culture signifying its self-reflexive nature by accepting Eve as a move that subverts the traditional structure of societal practices and beliefs. Henderson and McManus solidify this argument, noting that "[in] every age there is a relationship between society's values and activities and its

stereotypes of women” (50). Students will be to understand that by studying these literary figures as moments of time, students are also witnessing the reflecting shifts of cultural ideals. As people expressed a desire for a return to Christian values, so did they also reflect positive changing attitudes of women, proving that Alyson and Eve are the authorial responses for the cultural call for feminine redemption. The depth of Milton’s portrayal of Eve is her ability to represent a significant shift in how women are embodied in texts, becoming the redemption of past generations that repeatedly denigrated women.

Both women are examined not in isolation, but in relation to their cultural environment, drawing attention to the contrasts therein. Chaucer’s Alyson functions as a more social, sexually knowledgeable figure, while Eve is the more religious, cultural figure; a defining contrast between these two is sexual knowledge and experience, with Alyson embodying such knowledge and Eve as the innocent who is without knowledge. The periods of political instability that both Chaucer and Milton experienced were the necessary environments to allow these figures, redeeming the past limitations suffered by women, to be brought forward (Armitage 1). It was the fracturing of these periods, in the wake of unimaginable deaths and political restructuring, that allowed the emergence of radical figures for women to be not only acceptable, but successful. Chaucer and Milton move within the newly formed spaces between tradition and the advancing culture to challenge a preserved strain of the social consciousness.

## CHAPTER 3

### COUNTERING MISOGYNY

In breaking with the literary cultural tradition of portraying women in a derogatory manner, these authors wrote in a way that not only protected, but promoted women in a culture that was struggling to establish a stable religious hierarchy. In a society directed by strict religious doctrine which emphasized the belief and practice of female inferiority, these figures stood outside of the antagonistic environment as symbols of a progressive, but incomplete image of femininity. By redefining previous characteristics of inferiority as characteristics of authority and agency—of power—these figures redefined the standards of femininity and regained their positions of equality among men, giving hope to women. Chaucer and Milton wrote these figures out of their misogynistic environment and into works that would withstand time, allowing these women to transcend the voices of their aggressors each time they are read.

Although students will be familiar with satire by the time they encounter Chaucer, he still remains one of the pivotal writers that could mirror back on to a culture, the most degrading elements of itself. Rigby acknowledges the persuasive nature of Chaucer's satire, whose vehicle often voices Alyson's agency as the personified refutation of medieval misogyny, but dismisses student interpretations, claiming that Chaucer's work was not meant as a serious counter to misogyny (157). Students study Chaucer's society

by studying him; because his work is a satire of his time, it operates multiple spaces in which he acts a historical, keeping a record of his culture; a critic who emphasizes the flaws on society in Alyson; and the idealist that projects solutions to such flaws through Alyson's partial redemption. Rigby's assertion minimizes satire's potential and power as a vehicle less than able to dismantle an argument while humorously critiquing the reigning forces. Chaucer's critiqued these medieval cultural beliefs by offering a literary figure that was able to quote Solomon and practice Aristotle in the same breath. While studying a work outside of its context, a modern students of medieval works must keep in mind the original context of the text, a concept that allows Pitcher's argument to succeed and Rigby's to fail. The Wife of Bath remains corrective of medieval misogyny, personifying Chaucer's progressive view of women that moved against the current of medieval cultural beliefs.

As students progress through the British literary tradition, they should realize that Eve is not a figure made in isolation, but serves as a response to the treatment of similar contemporary literary figures. Armand Himy notes the pervasive nature of "the principle of analogy or proportion" in Milton's work and that his use of "opposition, image/idol" is what lead to "the rebellion of Satan and the Fall of Man" (122-123). Eve functions as an analogy for those who have been innocently blamed, those who have been made into a sacrifice for a larger purpose, and those who are prohibited from knowing. Eve's unwavering desire to know makes her a dangerous figure that must be suppressed, the image reflecting the pervasive practice of barring women from education and literacy that had been a hallmark of the Elizabethan era. Milton constructs Eve's sin as significantly smaller in proportion to Adam's sin; as the image, Eve unknowingly sinned in her

attempt to move closer to God, whereas as the idol, Adam purposely placed Eve above God and willingly rejected God. It is Eve's forgiveness and her creation of Man's potential for salvation that effectively counters misogyny, by undermining the foundational premise of misogyny—that women are lesser creatures.

It is Eve's desire to know more, her desire to move closer to God, that is her redemptive quality, because as her mistake creates the possibility of humanity's eternal salvation. However Fish critiques this movement, arguing that "the impulse to action... is always sinful because it has its source in a desire to be separate, to break away from...God" (520). But Eve's sin was not a move against God, it was an innocent move away from God that was necessary to fulfill His plan for Man's salvation through Jesus; she did not act as Adam did, choosing to purposely leave God, but rather unknowingly acting in accordance with His plan. As students continue to study *Paradise Lost* in depth, they will continue to understand that Fish's interpretation of Eve's flaw further absolves her of the entirety of blame for the Fall of Man—while her actions were sinful, her intention, her heart and soul, remained innocent and childlike. God made His creation "[sufficient] to have stood, though free to fall" and Eve functions as a pre-Jesus figure, a necessary sacrifice who creates the opportunity for something better to follow; she had to fall in order for Man to fully know the depth of God's Grace and the fullness of Man's faith (3.99).

Eve's innocent actions construct her as a redemptive figure which counters misogyny in Milton's time because her desires to know Reason and God are not sinful and, as students recognize now, her innocence gives mankind the potential to achieve salvation. Victoria Kahn moves away from Fish's argument with the same result,

asserting that “Milton argues that the Gospel frees men 'from the works of the law' so that they may engage in 'works of faith'” (Kahn 92). Eve’s questioning is then not sinful because it is a faithful action it is free man’s law that would normally govern actions within Paradise, since the Gospel exists in Paradise. Through examining the space of Paradise, students will examine why Eve’s actions are not sinful as she acts in the parameters of the Gospel and moves towards Reason are moves towards God. Directly contradicting Fish, Kahn implies a commending view of Eve’s actions even before they allow salvation outside of Paradise; her implication of Eve’s actions as exemplifications of faith relocate Eve as a more spiritual creation than Adam, reversing the hierarchy perpetuated in Milton’s cultural environment.

The strength of Milton’s work is his ability to illustrate how religion and reason are synonymous—Eve is redemptive because her affirmative feminine image is founded in reason. Even if students are not well versed in Biblical scripture, having a basic understanding of how the Bible functions as an integral part of society enhances their interpretation of Eve as an expanded upon figure. Kahn clarifies that “Scripture is itself a record of the trials and errors of God-given reason” (97). Eve is the embodiment of Milton’s push against the misogynistic structure of his environment; this embodiment’s ability to prevail across centuries is its foundation in Scripture, a cultural push based in religious doctrine. This epic poem begins to take on the pattern of Scripture by documenting the ways in which humanity rises and falls with free will from God. It is this marriage between Scripture and reason that Milton’s audience craved, while allowing the redemptive feminine figure to surpass the feminist zeitgeist and remain relevant centuries later.

Many critics highlight Adam's attributes as being superior to Eve in beauty, grace and intellect, focusing on Milton's declaration that "[hee] for God only, shee for God in him: / His fair large Front and Eye sublime declar'd / Absolute rule" (4.299-301). Roger Lejosne undermines this argument by asserting that the reader "should notice that no mention is made of Adam's 'authority' or 'power': in an unfallen world, he might have been an object of reverence, no doubt, but not a king" (115) Lejosne moves against the majority of critical movements in this statement, casting a more critical eye on the often perceived and implied importance of Adam in Paradise. He makes certain to explicitly state that Adam is not the ruler in Paradise, even before noting Adam does not wield power, only admiration from Eve and the reader. The lack of explicit authority undermines the superiority often ascribed to Adam and begins to reverse the power dynamics, raising Eve as Adam becomes less of the ideal image, even as he remains "an object of reverence". Students should note that this switch in power, while a subtext of the work, generates the foundation of Milton's absolution of Eve.

When considering these two characters in conjugation with one another, it is critical to note the ways in which both women, when joined together, redeem and negotiate problems of sovereignty; Eve's redemption gives way to Alyson's sovereignty. While each figure is constructed in similar but diverse contexts, Rigby concisely argues that their uniting force, that "[misogyny] was thus a philosophical error, not a revealed truth, a matter of fallible human opinion rather than of true faith" (152). This "philosophical error" draws the Wife of Bath and Eve together, the error acting as the source of degrading practices of women. The presence of opinion instead of a religious ideology offers both condemnation and redemption; Rigby condemns those who failed in

their philosophy and the ability to make logical decisions, yet redeems medieval audiences by acknowledging that their mistakes are not spiritual blunders and thus could be fixed without forcing one to abandon a core belief system.

By grounding misogyny in “error” and “opinion”, Rigby artfully shapes misogyny as a one’s mistake as they moves further away from God, and thus one can be redeemed by moving closer to God. He later specifies that “therefore, the misogynists and misogamists who, if their claims were taken literally, were heretic[al]; it was those who attacked women who perverted spiritual truth and were disloyal to God” (152). Chaucer and Milton are the figures of how one remains loyal to God and preserves spiritual truth by constructing Alyson and Eve as figures who move against the grain of “heretics”. These two feminine figures inadequately extol the Biblical virtues of women. Rigby elegantly clarifies why Alyson and Eve are extraordinarily meaningful to students, magnifying the lack of dialogue that holds both women in conversation with each other. Examining the medieval and post-Renaissance critics as heretical allows students to gain a deeper understanding of the depth of Chaucer and Milton’s works, perceiving the layers Alyson and Eve weave by contradicting religious and social practices.

## CHAPTER 4

### DUALITY

The power of Alyson's dichotomy resonates with medieval and modern audiences, reminding readers of the inherent worth placed in knowledge and learning, as Alyson becomes the space for which knowledge and duality function as reinforcements of each other. The feminine voice is what Anne McTaggart called "a wonderfully fruitful paradox", explaining that the Wife of Bath "claims for women and for herself the right to 'maistrie' and 'sovereynetee' in marriage, but she does so by articulating the discourse imparted to her by the 'auctoritee' of anti-feminism" (41). This power of authority over the paradox of the feminine condition in Chaucer's environment reinforces the sovereignty Chaucer embodies in Alyson, positioning her as the interpretive voice of anti-feminist authority. She is knowledgeable from her previous encounters with anti-feminist readings and beliefs, but her authority is supported by her switching of anti-feminist sentiment into pro-feminist proof. Students who study Chaucer will experience the manner in which those who disagree with pervading beliefs, adopt them as the first step in undermining them.

Echoing Rigby's earlier dissatisfaction with Chaucer's effectiveness in constructing valid counterarguments to misogyny, McTaggart believes that the reader never discovers what is that women *really* want. She states that "insofar as the old

woman's claim that women desire sovereignty above all is undermined by her surrender of sovereignty to her young husband, we never do find out, once and for all, what women want" (41). It is Alyson's paradoxical form that undermines her ability to stand in the place of a redemptive figure, her duality ending in her lack of a conclusion and resulting in her demise. McTaggart argues that the crossing of dichotomous roles prevents Alyson from achieving a full understanding of sovereignty, as her duality results in her inability to be a satisfactory redemptive feminine figure.

She notes that "in her tale, Alisoun is imagining herself in the dual role of powerful enchantress and beautiful young woman, she seems to betray an aging temptress's desire both to dominate men and to fulfill male desire" (42). Alyson's duality offers the space and opportunity to speak for both ends of the feminine spectrum, specifically the feminine forms that are most reduced by the medieval misogynistic culture. However, her duality also prevents her from achieving fulfillment; while she plays the roles of "enchantress" and "woman", she is unable to bridge the gap between the two roles and create a solution that validates both existences as redemptive figures of woman.

Reaffirming the sovereignty of women is an active process that requires one to engage the dominant belief structure so that it may be changed; the Wife of Bath is partially successful because she actively seeks to take control over her story. Rigby accurately asserts that "the ethical irony so frequently employed by Chaucer certainly means that readers have to respond actively to his text in order to obtain its moral fruit rather than just passively receiving his lesson" (154). If a reader simply reads the surface meaning Chaucer's work, the power of the text is minimized as only a story; but if a

reader genuinely reads into his work, by recognizing the multiple tones and subtle messages, the movement forward becomes apparent. Both Alyson and the student reader are charged with actively responding to the text—the reader must respond to the physical text Chaucer offers up, while Alyson must engage the text of her authority and the text that is her body.

Despite the transformative nature of Chaucer's culture, it would still have been difficult to convince an entire society to drastically alter the way in which it thought, and so humor became the ideal vehicle for offering up the Wife of Bath. "In such passages, Chaucer's comedy does not detract from his underlying moral message but rather, in satirically deriding human folly and vice and *drawing attention to the gap between the ideal and the supposed state of the world* (as represented by anti-clerical literary stereotypes), is itself the vehicle for expressing that morality [emphasis mine]" (Rigby 154). The power of the Wife of Bath's Prologue lies in Chaucer's ability to eloquently emphasize the discrepancy between what is believed and what really is, forcing the student reader to acknowledge the significance of these disparities.

Alyson's authority in her Prologue is grounded in the imbalance of the misogynistic message perpetuated by Chaucer's culture—Alyson's husband Jankyn, claims that "[of] Eva first, that for hir wikkednesse / Was al mankynde broght to wrecchednesse", beginning his argument that all women are at fault and the source of men's misery, beliefs Rigby previously explained as heretical, placing such voices as the ones at fault (715-716). Chaucer's manipulation of humor plays with the dual spaces Alyson occupies as both a partially redemptive figure and the space for society to glimpse a potential solution. By using a light tone to demonstrate the flaws of misogyny, he

structures Alyson as the dual space. Milton also constructs Eve as the dual space of blame and forgiveness, the space in which blame offers the path towards forgiveness.

Just as Alyson, Eve explores the dual spaces that offer forgiveness through blame. Himy argues that “Paradise Lost from beginning to end is based on the opposition image/idol, image of God opposed to *eidolon* (false image)”, a consistent pattern of opposition supported by Fish’s earlier argument of contrast as the methodology of Milton’s work (122). The juxtaposition of the image with the idol lends itself to the placement of Eve as both the image and the idol—Eve is the image of the human capacity to seek God and Reason, of innocence that although “sufficient to have stood” falls because she must as the necessary sacrifice so that the ways of God can be justified to Man. Eve is the idol of sacrifice, an ideal sacrificial image of a woman who would willingly give for all humanity and give up themselves for God. As image and idol of feminine sacrifice, Eve personifies the complexities of sacrifice that often confined women to submission without acknowledging the truth and grace of sacrifice. Eve’s placement as the true image of God subverts the prevalent belief that Adam was the true reflection of God, a belief that struggles in the face of Eve’s redemptive sacrifice, a placement that reframes her as the image of potential salvation.

Eve functions as a redemptive figure in the cultural, religious sphere, absolving women of the sin of the Fall and attempting to begin reversing centuries of misogyny based on the manipulated interpretation of scripture. Brown states that “[recent] editors have said that the poem ‘suppresses its politics’ [...] This is as if to say, that Milton really wanted to be more political in this poem, that he really wanted to write a political poem, as twentieth-century discourse might require, instead of one about spiritual discipline, but

was constrained” (58). Milton wrote under the rule of the Lord Protectorate, Oliver Cromwell, a period which oversaw a great deal of censorship and oppression of art and independent thought. Milton’s work was censored, and a religious poem is an ideal vehicle for expanding upon dissenting political opinions, but while Brown focuses on Milton’s work against the politics of the ruling authority, Milton’s work also functioned against the gender politics of the time.

Constraining and encoding the language as a means of surprising the politics does remind the reader to once again, slow down and examine the multiplicity of the language. Milton’s portrayal of Eve is encoded in the language of her description and innocent mistake, constructing her duality through text that simultaneously reveals and conceals her, leading her into an innocent trap of Reason and redeeming her with such Reason. In her awakening, Milton endows her with faith stronger than Adam’s. She describes waking up in Paradise with “unexperient’t thought” (4.457) and soon finds herself enraptured by her own image, evoking Narcissus as she gazes “fixt / Mine eyes till now and pin’d with vain desire” (4.465-466). Her childlike intelligence allows her inability to distinguish between her reflection and another body, and yet she briefly recognizes that presence of vanity in her gaze. In 1663, “vain” was described as “devoid of sense or wisdom; foolish, silly, thoughtless; of an idle or futile nature or disposition”; not quite the esteem image of God’s newest creation (OED 3).

This childlike fascination though is both temporal and telling, as Eve struggles to interpret and fully understand the image in front of her but sees it as a separate entity, which means her vanity is not Narcissus’ self-reflexive vanity, but a love for the beauty in front of her. Her vanity is not a devoid sense of wisdom or thoughtlessness, rather Eve

is a child in the process of coming into a wholistic understanding. While a lack of Reason in Paradise would be an example of failing, Milton reveals that it is Eve's early moments that will save her, her thirst for understanding and her faith in God becoming the tools of salvation. God speaks knowledge into Eve, telling her "[what] there thou seest fair Creature is thyself" (4.468), and less than a moment later she acknowledges that she both come into knowledge and faith in God, confessing "what could I do, / But follow straight, invisibly thus led?" (4.475-476) Eve needed nothing more than to be told by God, and her childlike fasciation becomes childlike faith, completely devote and devoid of hesitation.

Eve's redemption is revealed in the analogy of her opposition, as her complexity unravels to expose the strain of truth Milton weaves through her. The movement towards Reason and God is a sin that causes Eve to Fall from Grace, a Fall that condemns the human creation but is not evil. Student readers should note that the blame of the Fall is not fair or just—Man had to fall from Grace so that they could know the depth of God's love and their capacity to seek God. Eve's sin of seeking knowledge justified her Fall and made the redemption and salvation of the human creation possible. Milton forges Eve to absolve her blame of the Fall, to restore her to a place of innocent virtue, to a position in which one desiring to God more fully is the ideal image of humanity.

## CHAPTER 5

### PROVING INTELLIGENCE

Affirmative views are often based on one's ability to be intelligent, a trait that both Alyson and Eve exemplify. Chaucer's Alyson proves she is wiser than her husband, identifying his mistakes and purposeful misreadings of his bible while referring to it as "this cursed book", reflecting Jankyn as Rigby's definition of a heretic (789). Alyson balances his clerical knowledge learned through only reading of others' actions with her knowledge gained through her occasionally less-than-Biblical actions. She defines the importance of a knowing that comes from living a life not confined to misinterpreted texts as she proves that she has the ability to understand such texts. Eve, as already touched upon, has intelligence that is lacking in her male counterpart, God's given help-mate and was able to reserve set positions, temporarily becoming the teacher.

Chaucer embodies his figure with knowledge outside of her gender and position, imparting authority in her voice as it exemplifies a mastery of classical philosophical learning. Alyson counteracts the tradition of misogyny in part through her persuasive techniques that are applicable outside of their time. This particular type of philosophical knowledge primarily imbibed in men is paired in a repetition of duality with the more feminine type of knowledge, that is the carnal knowledge of various lovers. Alyson's proud claim that "[housbondes] at chirche dore I have had fyve" is mirrored by her

reminder to the audience that her knowledge is intellectual as well, due to Jankyn's scholarly teachings (6). While a student of the intellectual powers, she is the master in sexual and manipulative abilities that have allowed her to reclaim her sovereignty as she takes agency in both contexts.

It is Alyson's ability to understand Jankyn's purposeful misreadings that alerts the reader to his misinterpretation of Eve, “[lo], heere expres of womman may ye fynde, / That womman was the los of al mankynde”, clarifying the willful misrepresentations of Eve (719-720). It is in this moment that the reader identifies both the source of Chaucer's strength—his ability to definitively move against these prevalent beliefs—and linking of two integral figures, Alyson and Eve. Jankyn exemplifies the practices and language of his society's misogynistic views and as functions as the space where the Wife of Bath and Eve unite and naturally converse with each other. He continues to read about the first woman aloud to Alyson,

Of eva first, that for hir wikkednesse  
Was al mankynde broght to wrecchednesse,  
For which that jhesu crist hymself was slayn,  
That boghte us with his herte blood agayn (715-718)

Jankyn places the blame for the “wrecchednesse” of “al mankynde” on “eva”, focusing on “hir wikkednesse” as the source of all his previous tales of wicked women. It is the immediate conditioning of the first sin though that is most important—the acknowledgement that this sin provided the possibility for “jhseu crist hymself was slayn, / That boghte us with his herte blood agayn” and save all of humanity. One woman's innocent mistake provides the path for another woman to illustrate the fallacies of the

population that perpetuates a purposeful misinterpretation of women because of this mistake.

While Alyson can correct Jankyn's misreadings, she unwillingly commits a misreading or purposeful exclusion of her own. She reflects on King Solomon's multi marriages as an excuse for her "marriages" to many husbands, "here's the wise king, lordly Solomon / I do believe his wives were more than one." While this is an easy analogy to make, it does intentionally exclude later passages of Scripture in which Solomon reflects back on his life's actions and decides that

Now all has been heard;

here is the conclusion of the matter:

Fear God and keep his commandments,

for this is the duty of all mankind. (*NIV*, Eccles. 12:13)

Solomon arrives at the conclusion that the proper duty and source of happiness is to serve God faithfully, following the commandments instead of living for one's own pleasure, a recognition that Alyson does not share. Her intelligence is limited—she is either unable to see the logical end to her choices that contradict her position as a sexually knowledgeable or she is unwilling. Either of these limitations in her interpretation damage her character by reducing her ability to serve as an example of feminine redemption that is based in sexual experience.

It is Alyson's ability to take authority over these elements that forge her as a partially redemptive figure, controlling her body as a text to be read and as the space of redemption and feminine authority that makes her a living character who exists across time. Pitcher describes her marriage as the space where she can prove "her skill at

manipulation and deceit” (40), relegating control again to the Wife as the dominating force in her marriage, a space usually shared between a husband and wife. It is his acknowledgement of her “skill at manipulation” though that speaks most heavily, noting the depth of her ability to understand and wield the tool of manipulation through the tenets of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*.

Aristotle makes clear that persuasion is an essential element of conversation, stating that “[the] modes of persuasion are the only true constituents of the art: everything else is merely accessory” (Book 1 Part 1). Alyson’s language returns to the basics of art, the persuasive nature of her argument that proves itself capable while void of decorative trappings and unnecessarily elevated language. She exemplifies what Aristotle refers to when stating “[naturalness] is persuasive”, that is the natural way she builds her argument on logical means, invites the reader with minimal force to accept and identify with her argument for feminine sovereignty (Book 3 Part 2). Alyson’s language has an easiness that flows naturally from example to explanation, undermining previous assumptions. She argues “God bad us for to wexe and multiplye” as a suitable explanation for why she has remarried, undermining the argument that “Crist ne wente nevere but onis / To weddyng, in the Cane of Galilee” (28, 10-11). The ways in which her arguments connect and move from one to the other is persuasive because it mimics a natural movement in thought and reasoning, further extending the argument that the Wife of Bath gains sovereignty and agency partially through her intelligent means.

Milton structures Eve’s sin of falling as a forgivable offense, due to her desire for true knowledge in a space where knowledge allows one to be drawn closer to God, a desire that the Bible often proclaims as the reason for the creation of Man. Isaiah writes

that “everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made” (*NIV*, Isa. 43.7), fully affirming that Man’s purpose is to glorify and praise God. Echoing Solomon, this purpose is achieved through a life of faithful service to God in which one aligns their actions and devotions to follow Jesus’s teachings. Reason allows one to know God more fully and serve Him better, yet this movement towards knowledge can unintentionally be a movement away from God, as will be touched upon later with Stanley Fish. The argument of Eve’s failing lies in the affirmation that knowledge, and its incidental authority, is the most prized attribute of Milton’s time, a trait that lends dignity to a woman who embodies the masculine mind. Eve’s authority is based in her knowledge of plants and earthy things, a knowledge that she must instruct and correct Adam in. The power of the inherent knowledge Eve brings into Paradise is matched only by her desire to know more in an effort to know God more. Eve’s failing is only the attempt to embody the teaching of God’s Word.

Milton continuously proves that Adam is inferior to Eve, placing Eve as the voice of both reason and memory. Adam instructs Eve to “go with speed / And what thy stores contain, bring forth and pour”, seemingly forgetting that in Paradise there is no need for stores of food because God is abundant and Adam and Eve will always be fed (5.313-314). Eve reminds him of this, gently reprimanding as she says “*Adam*, earth’s hallow’d mould, / Of God inspir’d, small store will serve, where store, / All seasons, ripe for use hangs on the stalk” (5.321-323). Eve reminds Adam two important things: that *he* is made of the earth by God and that they will be cared for in plenty, and that God will always provide more than enough for them. Eve is the one who is able to remember the importance of their creation and the generosity of their Creator. Her faith appears

stronger than his when her understanding of Paradise exceeds the knowledge of her helpmate.

Adam describes Eve to Raphael as his inferior helpmate, protesting that “[of] Nature her th’ inferior, in the mind / And inward Faculties, which most excel” (8.541-542). He critiques her mind, but offers up her physical worth as redemptive, placing at least an equal value in her beauty and with her intelligence. While he recognizes that Eve does not have the inherent intelligence that he has been blessed with upon creation, Adam fails to recognize the intrinsic value of curiosity and Eve’s desire to know. The value of Eve’s curiosity is magnificent—it is her redemptive quality and that which could redeem readers—but the strength of a redeeming feature also contributes to her Fall from Grace.

Joanna Picciotto argues the flaw of Eve’s intelligence is her inclination to idleness instead of innocent curiosity. Arguing that “[rather] than working to produce knowledge, she attempted, while “at leisure,” to eat it. Innocent knowledge could only be produced, not consumed; when innocent curiosity yielded to idle curiosity, therefore, the paradise of “exercise and experiment” ground to a halt” (28-29). She reasserts the blame for the Fall on Eve’s shoulders, arguing an unproductive curiosity collapses the space of paradise as Eve negates the movement of “exercise ad experiment” in human form. Eve’s innocent curiosity is transformed into the foundation of her sin as she becomes responsible for the deterioration of Paradise; Milton begins to restore her to a figure of perfect Reason, but concedes the damaging effects of an unbridled inquisitiveness. Picciotto implies a greater worth in “working to produce knowledge”, a value that is echoed by Milton as Eve and Adam remain productive stewards of the Garden.

Eve's unproductiveness however, is not enough to place the blame of the Fall on her shoulders. Picciotto completes a circle, coming back to the argument that Eve's innocence outweighs her unintentionally sinful behavior and is adequate for her redemption. "Redescribing Eden as a place of "trial" to prepare Adam and Eve for heaven links the state of innocence to the state of regenerate believers; both are dynamic, processual, geared towards a higher goal and inextricable from the painful trials of labor" (44). Milton's Paradise functions as a place of trial and purposeful failing—how else can God's creation know of His love if they never have to suffer and how can they know of their love for Him, unless they are tried and still offer praise? Adam and Eve had to fall so that believers could be reborn into salvation; Picciotto identifies Eve's innocence as the method and opportunity by which sinful creatures can regenerate into faith, and this ability to redeem others is what redeems Eve. While Adam falls with his Reason and sins by choosing Eve over God, Eve works "towards a higher goal" through her "painful trials of labor" that they will both endure after the Fall. Eve's path is more spiritual than Adam's, her innocence carries more value than his Reason and she redefines Paradise as a place of regeneration into faith instead of a space that humanity can never return to.

The Wife of Bath and Eve represent two stark contrasts to the image of women that pervaded through the centuries, with Alyson as the more social, sexualized woman and Eve as the more religious, innocent woman. The Wife of Bath has carnal knowledge that Eve can not experience while in pre-Fallen state and Alyson's authority grounded in this experience allows her to speak to women who would otherwise feel isolated by sexual experiences, while Eve gives reassurance to women who have been degraded for their attempts to reason like men. These women unite together to present a complete

redemption of past injuries—Alyson’s sovereignty is made whole by Eve’s absolution; authority and reason function as the two essential elements of reconstructing an affirmative view of women.

## CHAPTER 6

### SOVEREIGNTY

The Wife of Bath reclaims her agency as a woman by claiming control over the most essential aspect of herself that makes her a commodity, an objectifiable agent in the cultural consciousness of Chaucer's time. Henderson and McManus point out that in "the English Renaissance the assumption that a woman would marry was so universal that it was seldom explicitly articulated" (72). Alyson was twelve when she was married off by her parents, a common phenomenon that dictated the assumption she would continue to marry after succeeding her much older husband and a pattern that would continue to relegate agency to someone else. She demands control of her body, switching the reader from reading the poem as a text to reading her body as a text—directing the gaze of the reader onto herself, and by controlling the text and the gaze, she controls the conversation. She proudly claims that

In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument

As frely as my Makere hath it sent.

If I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwe!

Myn housbonde shal it have bothe eve and morwe,

Whan that hym list come forth and paye his dette. (149-153)

She uses her body as the measurement of her worth in a cultural and minimizes her worth and gain by what she can physically provide. She wields her body, her "instrument", but

only “In wyfhod” does her body become an “instrument” that she can use “frely”. By wielding her body as she chooses, she takes control of the parameters of her subjection and thus turns the cultural limitation of women on its head, subverting it to make it affirm her agency instead. Alyson even shifts her body, removing it from the position of a man’s possession to being the virtue a man must pay for. Alyson says that her “housbonde shal it have bothe eve and morwe”, but only after “hym list come forth and pay his dette” to her. In subverting the role women’s bodies usually play in the socio-sexual exchange, Chaucer’s Alyson forces the man to be subservient to her, to “paye his dette” or else she will “be daungerous” with her “instrument”. She places conditions on the accessibility to her value; in this unsettled placement, a man must first “paye” her before he is granted access to her “instrument”, situating her as the active, authoritative agent.

Chaucer’s move to reassign the authority of sovereignty to women illustrates his progressive view of women and his support of their agency. An essential perspective on the redemptive nature of Alyson is that while the narration is hers, her agency is mitigated because her narration is a mask for Chaucer’s voice. Anne McTaggart asserts that the Wife of Bath is a paradox for women’s rights, stating that “Chaucer’s Wife of Bath centers on a wonderfully fruitful paradox: she claims for women and for herself the right to “maistrie” and “sovereynetee” in marriage, but she does so by articulating the discourse imparted to her by the “auctoritee” of anti-feminism” (41). It is Alyson’s inverse method of establishing her “right to ‘maistrie’ and ‘sovereynetee’” that McTaggart believes turns her into a paradox; the vehicle for women’s rights cannot secure them because in order to obtain them, she must constantly surrender and revoke them. This reveals the complexity of feminine sovereignty, securing Chaucer’s work as

beyond the constraints of linear time. McTaggart identifies a crux of Chaucer's talent, succinctly naming the problem of Alyson as a vehicle for feminine sovereignty and redemption as it conflicts with notions of authority and authorial voice.

The Wife of Bath gains sovereignty by controlling the text of her story, the text of her relationships; her independence is produced by the results of her former subjugation. This becomes problematic because it suggests that women can only become sovereign after they have been dominated, that through this domination lies freedom. And yet, the Wife suggests that being dominated can preserve the dignity of women, as long as they eventually come to power.

Experience, though noon auctoritee

Were in this world, is right ynogh for me

To speke of wo that is in mariage;

For, lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age (1-4)

The Wife of Bath found her authority in the years of "experience", knowledge that began when she was "twelve yeer was of age". Her young introduction into "mariage" and her treatment and worth through five marriages allows Alyson to learn by experience and speak from a place of "auctoritee". Her power comes from her recognition of her experience's merit and the control she takes over such experience; her sovereignty over men is grounded in her knowledgeable control over marriage and its sexual natures. Chaucer brings his figure through typical social practices to a place of empowerment in which the gender roles are switched and the new feminine position is one of power. Domination over the feminine body gives way to sovereignty of the feminine body; in

this way Chaucer demonstrates that repeated pejorative practices must give way to self-determining agents.

The Wife of Bath verbally parries with the masculine space to establish the validity and power of feminine agency along side such space. Alyson undermines the power held by men based on the objectification of a woman's sexuality by purposefully describing herself as "faire, and riche, and yong, and wel bigon" (606). By self-asserting herself as "faire...and wel bigon", Alyson takes control of her physical prowess as she names it and thus, relegates the agency and power of naming to herself. Chaucer argues through the Wife of Bath that a woman can claim and control her independence by her accepting her past as a text that can be read and by changing her body as the text she wants to be; she rewrites herself and in doing so, takes the words from the masculine dominator and gives them to the feminine independent. Alyson switches the power dynamic. She is able to supersede the implications of "fair...and yong, and wel bigon" by reversing the imbedded positions, so that she becomes the subject and objection, forcing the text and conversation to revolve around her. The masculine voice is no longer involved and has only an absent presence, even though the language is inherently masculine; because the language is wielded by a feminine narrator, the masculine language is present only its absence, by the void it leaves behind.

Eve's sovereignty can be considered as a turn away from Alyson, as her agency is imbedded in her ability to turn Adam's heart; a Christian wife's responsibility and power is rooted, in part, in her ability to ensure her husband's salvation. In the First Epistle of Peter, he advises that "wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by

the behavior of their wives” (3:1). Eve exemplifies the image of the ideal Christian wife as she turned Adam’s heart and makes it possible for mankind to seek forgiveness, and thus salvation. After Adam and Eve have fallen, Eve continues to fulfill God’s plan and through her example, makes possible Adam’s return to Grace.

After Adam laments their mistake and runs from God, Eve goes to him and begs “[forsake] me not thus, *Adam*” and remained “[immovable] till peace obtain’d from fault...soon his heart relented / Towards her...Creature so fair his reconciliation seeking” (10.914, 938-943). Her resistance at being moved aside reinforces her determination for absolution from her actions, but not her act of sinfulness, rather the effects it had in upsetting Adam. Her agency is revealed in the softening of Adam’s heart in what is referred to as “patient heroism” (Shifflett). Eve is the hero of this epic poem, the battle between good and bad and it is her patient heroism, this passive resistance, that embodies her sovereignty in her power over Adam.

Eve’s plea for forgiveness softens Adam’s heart and by her actions, he is able to return to a path that leads to God by encouraging him to follow her in supplication. They “prostrate fell / Before him reverent, and both confess’d / Humbly thir faults, and pardon begg’d...sent from hearts contrite” (10.1099-1103). Adam did not ask for God’s forgiveness initially, instead fleeing from Him in embarrassment and shame, Eve’s submission to Adam led him to salvation. Eve’s sovereignty is embodied in her continuous return to God’s will and her influence over Adam, an influence that does not need to be explicitly stated, but is strong enough to be understood when implicit.

While Alyson’s sovereignty is founded on a repurposing of misogynistic tendencies, Eve’s is founded in her correcting of misogynistic beliefs. Both women work

against the established patterns of subjugation to offer two opposing images of sovereignty, reflecting the duality of feminine redemption.

## CHAPTER 7

### LASTING EFFECTS

Eve and Alyson belong in the same conversation that students must be mindful of when beginning to read into the British literary tradition. They intertwine with each other, one's deficiency is fulfilled by the other's strengths; Chaucer's Alyson builds upon the Eve of the Bible to demonstrate to medieval audiences the proper image of a woman while Milton's Eve reflects back upon past portrayals of women considered too sexual or too controlling. Jankyn may blame Eve for "al mankynde broght to wrecchednesse", but when the reader studies Eve's "freedom to fall" in conjunction with humanity's wickedness, the blame slips off Eve's shoulders and on to Adam's. Eve is absolved by innocence and Alyson improves on such innocence to reaffirm her agency among men, complicating the ideal of innocence as a reflection of the true complicated nature of a wholly realized person.

In fractured cultures that often portrayed women as inferior, subservient and the object of blame, Chaucer and Milton offer up affirming constructions of women that broke down such previous images. In both poems, masculine authors strive to give women an active, authoritative voice in a masculine culture by subverting the underlining message that had become the anti-feminine refrain. Chaucer proves women can be capable and intelligent, endowing Alyson with wisdom gained through a life that began

as a dowery to be traded, but grew into a life of choice as she became the determiner of her own agency. Milton forgave Eve, proving that her sin was one of innocence and good intentions, that her desire to know God and Reason saved her and Jesus' sacrifice vindicated her mistake. Apart, each woman partially validates their ability and authority in positions of virtue; together, they stand as a singular timeless force that effectively subverts negative stereotypes of the sinful and unintelligent woman who belongs in society as the recipient of blame and degradation.

Alyson and Eve should be considered as the embodiment of a forward movement that forces the student reader to renegotiate these cultures while reflecting on Fish's closing remarks. "By retarding the forward movement of plot and forcing us to stand in place... the next step we take will always be the right one, even if it is the step of doing nothing at all" (531). Literature is never isolated from the context that produces it and contemporary students may find elements of these narratives as relevant to their lives as Milton intended. Chaucer's work was intended as a social voice while Milton's carried a religious and political intention, and while Fish may have been focusing solely on Milton's epic poem, his words incorrectly apply to both authors. The urge to move forward is present in both texts—in Chaucer's work, the Wife of Bath's Prologue ends with a beginning, closing as the Wife says "[now] wol I seye my tale, if ye wol heere." (828) The movement is always forward, always progressing and Alyson pushes the student reader to extend themselves beyond the Prologue, beyond the context it was written from and beyond the culture it was written into. Milton writes in movements, his books of *Paradise Lost* building on each other as they move towards a fallen humanity; this

movement practically pushes Adam and Eve out of Paradise as Eve's desire for Reason and Adam's desire to act becomes sinful movements away from Grace.

Socially and religiously traditional environments would not have permitted such images of the female sex to prosper and take hold, an additional reason why these pieces are timeless and must be studied. The texts were born in spaces that were splintering, in environments that were coming undone and was thus able to foster novel ideas that pushed against the weakening structure. While today's students may not scoff at the premise of a feminine voice with agency, the original audiences would not have been so initially welcoming to the poems' critiques. The lasting effects of these works is their ability to continue to speak to audience, to teach readers and to inspire novice and professional scholars with their power and transience. Brown eloquently states the lasting touch of *Paradise Lost* is that the "poem leaves the reader, as it leaves Adam and Eve, with a world of choice, solitary, self-responsible, yet with Providence their guide" (60). The works should function as tools for students to practice critical thinking, creating spaces for students to explore the arguments of these texts and begin to think for themselves. The grace in these poems is their ability to speak across centuries and remain relevant; their effective movement against the pervading misogynistic views is a shift that still influences modern readers. Chaucer and Milton's works extend beyond the culture that produced them, coming together to create the perfect image of feminine redemption born out of two imperfect characters. Chaucer and Milton preserve the dignity and sovereignty of women by presenting women in an authoritative and knowledgeable position.

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