When her turn in the storytelling comes, Alisoun of Bathe is already an old hand at waging war against authority and authorities. As a young girl, she married old men, men who would ordinarily be expected to serve as authorities for her, but she easily learned to manage them, taking advantage, for example, even of their anti-feminist doctrines (or such doctrines imputed to them by her [114 248-378]) to establish her own dominance in her family. Her young clerky husbands proved harder for her to get the better of and also nearer to the center of her real quarrel with the dominant discourse of her time—feminism and knowledgeably represented for Alisoun auctoritate itself, that which had set her experience at nought in the great contest every generation wages to be heard and marked.

Alisoun charges auctoritate with controlling the discourse through which her life is seen and indeed shaped: “Who peyned the leon, tel me who?” (692). She struggles for control by attempting to seize two important genres in the contemporary system of discourse, the anti-feminist tradition in her Prologue and the courtly romance in her Tale, both of them genres which define women’s lives in terms of male desires. This essay sets out to describe those two attempts at appropriation, note the similar structural pattern employed in the Prologue and Tale, and discuss the problems raised by the two endings.

The Wife’s notable success at the reappropriation of existing discourse (in her own eyes and in the eyes of some readers, though far from all) makes an interesting point about the possible relationships between the traditional materials which inform a text and the rhetorical purposes which shape its effects. Some critics have written about Alisoun’s masterful account of herself as if the Jerome’s Adversus Jovinianum were merely being readdressed while remaining untouched in force and import. In A Preface to Chaucer, for example, D. W. Robertson, Jr. asserts that “the wife takes up a position somewhat like that of Jovinian” and takes for granted that Jerome had won this argument with him once and for all in the Middle Ages. A different stance

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31. 1, 206. Langland is referring of course to biblical and theological auctoritate rather than to inherited story.
ward intertextuality, however, allows the possibility of Chaucer's much more fundamental reframing and repositioning of Jerome's argument. John of Salisbury, for example, argues for the thoroughgoing reconsideration of pagan writing by Christian readers. Part of his argument quotes Seneca: "Bees roam about and sip flowers, then arrange what they bring in, distribute it in combs, and by a mixing process by their own peculiar scent change the taste of the various ingredients into one flavor" (Policriticus, Bk. VII, ch. X). We must consider the possibility that Alisoun's "peculiar scent" can transform the flavor of the various ingredients in her Prologue.

Richly as the rhetorical tradition and scriptural and social typology are drawn upon in creating Alisoun, they ought not to be regarded as conclusive for interpretation. Ultimately we must refer instead to the dramatic frame of the Canterbury Tales as, in Marshall Leicester's words, "the end point of the speaker's activity." This move presents us with a text in which "each of the tales is primarily an expression of its teller's outlook as embodied in the unfolding 'now' of the telling." To adopt this perspective will be to ask what the fictional Alisoun is doing with the adverse forms she manipulates and how her manipulations are to be read. It is my contention that both her Prologue and her Tale take her plea for her listener's understanding to the heart of the enemy's stronghold—control of discourse, auctioriee.

Genre itself carries a message, as Fredric Jameson argues, a message which persists when that genre is refashioned under different circumstances, producing a tension between the assimilated mode and the new text. In interpreting the Wife's Prologue, we would acknowledge the force of the Adversus and the generic mode of the antifeminist writing and preaching in which it was seen to function, while at the same time framing it within the dramatic situation created for it in the Canterbury Tales. Especially important is the fact that a woman presents it, to the end of painting a different lion from that of the clerks who had been the guardians of the genre.

In her Prologue, Alisoun does not refute the antifeminist texts she cites in such detail. What she does is to transform them into theater. The lessons she "preaches" in lines 248–378 are framed by two fiction: Alisoun introducing the other pilgrims to her techniques for taming old husbands and, within that story, Alisoun rectifying to her old husbands what she accused them of saying when drunk—but "al was fals." She claims to have used these tirades to shame her husbands into letting her have her way. Obviously, this ploy would not work if the husbands accepted these "traditional" charges against women as truth and piety. (And I know of no critic who has contended that the old husbands were not successfully tamed.) The obvious no-win situation of women, and of men attempting to deal with women (a poor woman will cost too much to keep, a rich one will be too proud, and the like) turns the rhetorical force of the accusation against the accuser. Apparently none of the husbands want to take credit for such views, even though their experiences with Alisoun have not readily disproved them. Merely resituating the genre from the shadowy domain of ancient wisdom to the immediacy of the family hearth (and the bench from which the husband had supposedly made his speech) subjects it to scrutiny and perhaps humor, and creates sympathy for its intended victim. But, of course, Alisoun is staging this encounter; she has taken control, not only of the material in the tirade, but of the circumstances of its presentation. She did not create it, but she did put it to work.

The Prologue does not end, however, with this bit of theatricality, effective though it seems to have been. Alisoun gets still nearer to the source of her contention with her society's definitions of women by marrying clerks, as a class the authors and continuers of antifeminism itself (688–89). Although the gap between their outlooks seems unbridgeable, the Wife does not end her prologue with an account of a stalemate between their disparate assumptions and methods. Instead she, the Arch-wife, and Jankin, the Arch-clerk (who really did give his evenings to the study of antifeminist materials which the old husbands were tasked with believing), slug it out.

Injured and permanently deafened by the blow she received from him, Alisoun none the less exchanges a kiss with her husband, a kiss which begins the negotiation in which she becomes his treue and kynde wyf. At this point many critics make the assumption that what Alisoun wanted all along was not the maistrie she argued as her right, but the abuse and physical domination which seemed to resolve the argument. In fact, it is not the fight which produced the accord, it is Jankyn's willingness to give his wife governance of his "tonge, and of his hond also" (815) and to burn his book. What he does is to renounce his own discourse and interest himself in the claims of hers. What she wins is justification, and it frees her from her various marital "sins." If Alisoun is, as Lee Patterson puts it, "everyman's nightmare" (678), she is also our guide into what that nightmare expresses, what would happen if women had mastery. The final third of her Prologue describes the way she wakened her fifth husband from that centuries-old dream. We will return to this scene later.

In the mellow glow of the accord she has just described, Alisoun tells an elegant old story set in the days of King Arthur. The "unfolding now" of the telling warmed Alisoun as some people argue the Pardoner's sermon warmed him. She has, as she sees it, made her peace with wisdom and finds something to contribute to the story-
lling contest that proves all her own points and yet retains the charm, time-honored and courtly delicacy. Only after the Tale is complete, the curse on stubborn old husbands, does she recover her sense of casion and return from the fiction in which she has won her point to the world of the present in which she is still fighting. In the Tale, her appropriation of tradition is gentler, less openly combative, but it just surely as the Prologue subverts the form in which a male-serving age of women (in this case a courtly, superficially more positive age) is developed. Alisoun’s persona, the loathly lady—the seemly loathly lady, a tribute to the Wife’s self-acceptance—has recourse white magic, and needs display none of the cynical shrewdness of the character herself had been forced to use, and to disclose her use of, in the Prologue. The Wife’s whole history is suggested, passim, in this lovely e. Different in tone as it is (and I am arguing that the change in tone he result of the dramatic situation of the frame), the Tale makes the ne points and follows the same structure as the Prologue.

For example, her phrase “as I rode” (862), where we might have pected “as I have heard,” reminds us of the literateness, the desire for discursive knowledge and control, the Wife has shown all along. An introductory digression on friars displacing elves as threats to men reminds us of her fear of threat from intellectual sources, her mere feeling. Her candor in admitting that women like to praised for wisdom and virtue even when they are vicious (943–44) sounds like the familiar Alisoun. Her tale of Midas reminds us of own indiscreet tongue when she told her neighbor that her husb came pissing on a wall or other “thyng that shold ha cost his lyf” (4–35). The loathly lady, her persona in the Tale, articulates the oral wisdom which solves the problems of the Tale, just as Alisoun attempted to do for the problems of the Prologue, and she receives rewards of respect and physical love which are Alisoun’s own.

More centrally, the Tale represents in a displaced narrative, generally and delicately framed (in contrast to the strident bluntness of e in most of the Prologue), a movement from the severe law of thur’s court to the milder, educative law of Guinevere’s, to the freeord reached between the knight and the loathly lady. This progress structurally similar to that of Alisoun’s Prologue. The Tale begins ith the cruelty of authority’s just but strict law in dealing with the knight’s offense, as the Prologue with harsh, ecclesiastical law; it passes though the softer, more whimsical, but still potentially dangerous le of the court of women, as the Prologue had moved through isoun’s moral precepts; and it ends with consent freely given on th sides. The lesson the knight learns is learned from both author-

ity, as he is taught it by his wife in her pillow lecture—in this case traditional lore is subtly reframed in, but not at crosspurposes with, its new setting—and from experience, as he finds it himself when baffled by the choice he is finally offered.

Yet for all its traditional wisdom, embedded deep in this story is the idea that men must learn from women, that they must reconstitute their lore and their affections to include women as subjects (as we say now) and partners. The loathly lady contrives to have a husband with whom she can share both authority and experience. She wants her husband to love her and upbraid him when he wallows to avoid touching her, “Ye faren lyk a man ha lost his wit” (1095). This refers, of course, to an ancient test for mental competence (sexual betokens mental competence), but it implies more too. Although he is a knight and has probably heard the conventional wisdom of the pillow lecture before, he has not behaved as if he knows it, either toward his original victor or toward his new wife. And of course he has no idea that she can change herself into a beautiful young girl, or, if the ending is read another way, that he can develop the insight to see his loathly lady as beautiful.

The male tradition Alisoun appraises in the Prologue has also ignored or refused the lesson of caritas it seems to hold as fundamental—that tradition has lost its most precious “wit.” Like the knight, it holds that females “wol nat been amended nerver mo” (1099). The story asserts that the seemingly ugly, old, and lowborn feminine nature might be restored through the respect and deference the knight finally pays his wife. This is Alisoun’s high moment as an exegete. Her exemplum about the condemned knight admirably proves her case for learning from women and experience, and coherently exemplifies her objections to the clerical antifeminist tradition. And again it is a kiss—which a wife asks from a man who has insulted her and which it takes the husband some relinquishment of maistrie to deliver—which signals the happy resolution of the fiction.

But now we must reconsider both conclusive kisses: does the Alisoun of our unfolding roadside story pay too high a price for her happy endings? Does she lose, at the end of both Prologue and Tale, the struggle to break free of the confining antifeminism of her society only to make the masculine image of women her wish for herself? Hope Phyllis Weissman argues that “the Wife, in struggling to free herself from imprisoning images, has merely transferred her cell.” Patterson uses the same metaphor: the Wife “remains confined within the prisonhouse of masculine language.” In a certain sense, this is true and inevitable—Alisoun’s imagination has been formed within a language which codes the possibilities for goodness and happiness in
certain ways. She could no more represent a twentieth-century
version of female freedom than we can come up with a version which will
seem right in the twenty-sixth. There is in all our languages a coher-
ence which, precisely because it enables us to speak, prohibits our
speaking otherwise.

But not entirely. I cannot find, with Patterson, that the way the Wife
"brilliantly rearranges and deforms her authorities in order to enable
them to disclose new areas of experience" makes her gesture in the
end a mere act of "transvestism," leaving her dependent on men "for
her voice" (682). Nor can I find, with Weissman, the conclusion to the
Tale "one of the most deeply pathetic moments in Chaucer’s poetry"
(110). These views seem to me to neglect the new terms upon which
marital concord has been erected, the nature of anyone’s freedom from
discursive systems, and the strong sense of comic victory with which
both Prologue and Tale conclude.

Alisoun did not simply give up her desire for autonomy; she won it,
and Jankyn offered it, with a contract-like clarity. Then they both
became kynde and trewe to each other. The loathly lady too won the
right to choose whether to obey her husband “in every thynge / That
myghte doon hym plesance or likynge” (1255–56), or not. Enforced
obedience might be a prison, but the element of willful choice trans-
forms it, just as the ennobling poverty the loathly lady praises is
“willful povertie” (1179). Alisoun is, or at least imagines herself in these
climactic moments, capable of service, perhaps even sacrifice, once it
is within her power to choose it.

Of course, in these matters, Alisoun’s imaginative possibilities do
not float free of history; they are limited by the discursive space avail-
able to her as a medieval woman. She thought of a happy woman as a
happily married woman and did not coin the slogan, “Women need
men like fish need bicycles.” But discursive systems are always left-
overs, borrowed or inherited, never made ex nihilo in accord with
people’s conscious purposes. There may be a very general pathos in
our response to the Wife’s conclusions, a response which admits the
stem limits on all human freedoms, but such pathos is not best inter-
preted as either Alisoun’s personal failure of nerve (Patterson: her
wish to come in from the cold [682]) or Chaucer’s failure of imagination
because he is biologically male.12 The powerful reorientation of
tradition presented in Alisoun’s story is the most familiar way to de-
feat the confining features of a dominant discourse. It may be the
most radical gesture available.

From a social angle, these two endings mediate between the night-
mare of female independence represented by Alisoun and the tradi-
tion she opposes. The deep impulse of comic fiction is not only to
reveal absurdity but also to reconcile personal desire with society’s
needs. Chaucer knew the mercantile world was changing; perhaps he
even knew someone like Alisoun, though that is not part of my argu-
ment. Her presentation in the Canterbury Tales is of a new female
type,13 as well as a traditional one, a type very likely to be seen as
threatening. Had Chaucer imagined (and this is unlikely, if not impos-
sible) a totally new role for his Wife to achieve through her struggle, a
new social space, not available in fourteenth-century England, he
might have defeated the “feminist” reception of his portrait. He
would have affirmed, as the social truth, the nightmare antifeminism
had portrayed female maistref to be. As it stands, what Alisoun does in
her endings is to image a reconciliation which awards women justifi-
ation and a degree of self-definition, without injuring men. The comic
gene of the Canterbury Tales does not insist that we see the Wife of
Bath as capable of living out this high destiny consistently, merely as
able of creating it as an appropriate ideal and an appropriate
conclusion from the logic she is using.

In the comic scheme, the two kisses provide a felt resolution for the
narrative of Jankyn and Alisoun and the knight and his lady, as well as
for the underlying split between authority and experience. The con-
clusive kisses may be thought of as signaling the romantic accord of
courtly discourse or the political “kiss of peace” between potentially
warring factions. They do not supply a philosophical judgment on
one side of the question or the other; they rather demonstrate the
human need for concord between two opposed perspectives on lives
and offer a festive hopefulness about their peaceful coexistence. Fur-
ther, since the Wife’s themes throughout have circled around sexual
encounters (and have sexualized even a potentially arid discussion of
method like glossing), the kiss seems an appropriate emblem of con-
cord in her text, a weaving together and knotting up for the life she
had lived and the story she has told. It is an appropriation of tradition on
her own terms and may be read as a new painting much kindlier
toward the lion.

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1. All quotations of Chaucer are from The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey

2. Hope Phyllis Weissman includes both in her category “antifeminist.” See
“Antifeminism and Chaucer’s Characterizations of Women” in Geoffrey Chaucer, ed.
George Economou (New York, 1975), 94.