

## The *Vita Sancte Alicie Bathoniensis*

### Transgressions of Hagiographic Rhetoric in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*

JOSEPHINE A. KOSTER

In a discussion of medieval genre, transgression, parody, and artistry, there is no better place to start than with the great modern theorist of parody, Alfred Matthew Yankovic, better known as Weird Al. For those who don't know his inspired work, Yankovic is the acknowledged master of contemporary music parodies, and his genre-bending send-ups, such as "Like a Surgeon," "It's All About the Pentiums," "(Living in an) Amish Paradise," and "The Saga Begins" have garnered numerous Grammys as well as MTV Video Award nominations. The genius of Yankovic's art is that it works on many levels: first of all, as better-than-average pop-song writing and musicianship, secondly as humorous send-ups of successful songs, but above all as transgressions of the genre expectations of contemporary music videos. And the more the audience knows about music and videos, the better Yankovic's parodies get, since it catches casual references to nuances in the originals being parodied. For instance, knowledgeable viewers quickly recognized that Yankovic's video for "Smells Like Nirvana" used the same high school gym, the same cheerleaders and rented costumes, and many of the same extras as in Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," while *Star Wars* addicts and Don MacLean fans alike saw many familiar references in Yankovic's *The Saga Begins*. Every camera shot modern video watchers expect in the contemporary folk rock ballad is included in Yankovic's work—it's just that the lyrics fit the tune of MacLean's classic rock anthem "American Pie," and the action takes place in one of the cantinas of George Lucas's *Tatooine* as Yankovic, costumed as Ewan MacGregor's young Obi Wan Kenobi, sings to a rhythmic guitar accompaniment, "My, my, this here Anakin guy, Maybe Vader someday later, now he's just a small fry."<sup>1</sup>

Why do I start a paper on Chaucer with this rehearsal of contemporary culture? Because I believe that in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* we see similar genre-transgression taking place, and that the more familiar we are with the genre being manipulated, the more we can appreciate Chaucer's artistry and achievement. Many scholars seeking the sources and analogues of Chaucer's

---

<sup>1</sup>Videos, lyrics, and details of many of Yankovic's works are available at <http://www.weirdal.com/>

most noteworthy female creation have pointed to La Vieille, estates satire, anti-feminist tracts in Latin and French, and astrological and physiognomical lore as the genres from which the Wife of Bath's richly-drawn portrait draws. But they usually neglect another, and closer genre: hagiography. Saints' lives were one of the most popular kinds of narrative in Middle English literature, if we judge from surviving manuscripts; Chaucer's audience, especially his female audience, would have known the genre and its standard twists and turns well. By using the conventions of the female saint's life in subtly perverted ways, Chaucer adds a richness and depth to Alice's story—what I would call the *Vita Sancte Alicie Bathoniensis*—that we as modern readers may miss if we aren't alerted to its presence.

It is no longer necessary to point out how many books of pious devotion were produced for or owned by female readers in the late middle ages. As Larissa Tracy points out, "Saints' lives served a twofold purpose: while elevating the subject they also provided a clearer picture of what role women were expected to play and how they played it, very often in their own terms with their own voice [sic]."<sup>2</sup> It's clear that tales of pious women held particular interest for the female readership of late medieval England. Collections as early as the three saints' legends in the *Katherine* group and as extensive as those in the *South English Legendary* or *Northern Homily Cycle* show how pervasive such stories were: by the fifteenth century, when Capgrave, Bokenham, and others were writing, the saint's life was an accepted female genre, much as the romance novel is for today's reader. It was considered culturally appropriate for women to "rede on holy seyntes lyves," as Chaucer's Criseyde wryly points out (2.118).

The similarities between romance and hagiographic narrative are many. Julia Boffey notes that "Like romances saints' lives usually involve a sequence of episodes which pit the central figure against some opposition, so generating action and response, and in both genres the contests can generate accumulations of graphic and sometimes lurid detail."<sup>3</sup> The conventional rhetorical structure of a female saint's life consists of a recognized succession of episodes. The saint's geographic and family backgrounds are established, as are her piety and general "passivity." She is exposed to a number of increasingly dangerous physical and spiritual perils, which she surmounts triumphantly, either exacting appropriate revenge on her persecutors and rejoicing at their deaths or converting them and mass numbers of their followers to her way, all while preserving control of her

<sup>2</sup>Larissa Tracy, *Women of the Gilte Legende: A Selection of Middle English Saints' Lives* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Julia Boffey, "Middle English Lives," in *The Cambridge History of Middle English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 620. For further examination of the genre, see Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "The Virgin's Tale," in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*, ed. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (London: Routledge, 1994), 165–94, and John Scabill, *Middle English Saints' Legends*, Annotated Bibliographies of Old and Middle English Literature 7 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 1–4. For the literary terms used to name the many varieties of hagiographic narratives in the Middle Ages, see Paul Strohm, "Passioun, Lyf, Miracle, Legende: Some Generic Terms in Middle English Hagiographical Narrative," *Chaucer Review* 10 (1975): 62–75 and 154–71.

virginity. In her final test, the saint is usually martyred, but only after offering a last oration or sermon on her own conduct and on her beliefs that inspires mass conversions and sets the stage for divine retribution against her persecutors. Quantity is an all-important feature: there must be a sequence of perils, each greater in duration and degree than the ones before; and massive numbers of unbelievers must be converted through the saint's agency. As Thomas Heffernan points out,

In this narrative frame, action becomes ritual, and specific action becomes specific ritual. For sacred biographers, there existed a veritable thesaurus of established approved actions which they could employ in their texts. . . . Within this cultural setting, the saint's life, with its emphasis on right action, served as a catechetical tool much like the stained glass which surrounded and instructed the faithful in their participation at the liturgy.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the male saints, in whose narratives physical action on the saint's part often figures largely, the female saints most often work their ends through verbal action—either orations or *orationes*, that is, prayers. Tracy identifies that female voice as a key element of the genre:

Male ecclesiastical authors, though they may have been concerned with the lasting obedience and silence of women, gave their female saints a vocal presence in their legends. While it may be the voice of Christian doctrine providing examples of sanctity for general edification, the women saints are allowed to speak for themselves. . . . The women are largely historical inventions constructed as representations of sanctity, but the fact that they speak clearly and loudly for themselves, instead of having their message conveyed by a male narrator, shows the female voice is an integral part of hagiography. (108)

Such voices, of course, are characteristic of Chaucer's artistry, and may indeed be one of the elements that drew him to work in the genre of the saint's life. Another attraction may have been the intrinsically transgressive nature of the woman saint's life as a genre: in showing women triumphing consistently over men, controlling their own sexuality and even using it as a weapon, in ridiculing father figures, suitors, husbands, prefects, and other patriarchal figures of authority, the woman saint's life allows its writer to challenge many of the accepted norms of the culture—a stance with which Chaucer apparently had considerable sympathy.

Among the numerous Chaucerian characters drawing from the hagiographic tradition, Virginia in the *Physician's Tale*, Constance in the *Man of Law's Tale*, Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale*, and Cecilia in the *Second Nun's Tale* are the most notable, but Chaucer frequently uses the rhetorical and structural details that characterize medieval female saints' lives in other works as well. In

<sup>4</sup>Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 6.

the *Physician's Tale*, Virginia, though described in a typical hagiographic blazon (VI 30–66), actually speaks only twice: to ask her father if there is “no grace . . . no remedye” for her death sentence, and then to praise God “that I shal dye a mayde” and to ask for a quick death “er that I have a shame” (236, 248–49). As a virgin martyr, she is present so briefly that she is actually a negligible character in her own *passio*. In the *Clerk's Tale* of Griselda, however, the female voice is heard more clearly.<sup>5</sup> The blazon of the saint's geography and genealogy is conducted rather quickly: the second fitt of the tale tells us that

Noght fer fro thilke paleys honorable,  
Wher as this markys shoop his marriage,  
There stood a throop, of site delitable,  
In which that povre folk of that village  
Hadden hir beestes and hir herbergage.

.....  
Amonges thise povre folk ther dwelte a man  
Which that was holden povrest of hem alle;  
But hye God somtyme senden kan  
His grace into a litel oxes stalle.  
Janicula men of that throop hym calle;  
A doghter hadde he, fair ynogh to sighte,  
And Grisildis this yonge mayden highte.

(IV 197–210)

Griselda, the daughter of the poorest of the poor, is yet at the same time of high heritage, for she is compared to the grace God sent into the stable at Bethlehem: she is a figure of Christ. Griselda is repeatedly described with adjectives common to hagiographic discourse that delineate her saintly status: *patient*, *stedefast*, and *benign*. She promises total obedience to the decrees of father and husband, thus marking her as a figure of the Church's obedience to Christ and the average Christian's obedience to the Church.

Now come her perils, each increasingly stressful. She is separated first from her daughter, then her son, and finally believes herself to be divorced by her husband—and called back to prepare her ex-husband's second wedding. To each new torment she responds with an approximation of “Thy will be done,” the saint's true response to any test of her faith. In so doing she achieves numerous conversions: more and more of the courtiers who rejected her for her low birth are won over by her pious *gentillesse*, until, when she is ordered to return to her father's home, she does so followed by hordes of weeping converts. Finally, even Walter relents: the chief torturer is won by her demonstration of patient temporal suffering, and he restores to Griselda at least some of what she has lost. Her patient piety, then, has not been passivity but non-violent resistance, and has given her the power to endure and finally change her situation.

<sup>5</sup>I would agree with many of the observations about this tale made by Kate McKinley in “The *Clerk's Tale*: Hagiography and the Problematics of Lay Sanctity,” *Chaucer Review* 33 (1998): 90–111, but not with her contention that Griselda is so perfect a figure that her actions as a saint are unconvincing (105–06).

Griselda's rhetoric is also strongly reminiscent of hagiography. Most of her direct speeches are, in fact, Chaucerian additions to Petrarch's story, and Griselda's speeches move strongly toward the pious oration so common in stories of saints. When she is ordered to leave Walter's house, she responds with a theme-and-variations take on “Thy will be done” that lasts 76 lines (IV 500 ff). Many of her added speeches are prayers—or, as in the case of her speech after reuniting with her children, prayers punctuated with culturally-appropriate swoons. As an exemplary female figure, Griselda is drawn in terms with which Chaucer's audience would have been not only familiar but comfortable; she offers them reification of their beliefs, not challenges to them.

Constance in the *Man of Law's Tale* is a more complex figure. Her tale again begins with her genealogy and history: she is the extraordinarily beautiful daughter of the Emperor of Rome, and her piety and beauty are so renowned that the Sultan of Syria comes from afar to marry her and convert his entire kingdom to Christianity. (This is powerful piety, even in a saint's life.) Her first oration, a Chaucerian addition to the story, is two rhyme royal stanzas (II 274–87) on the “Thy will be done” theme, stressing the speaker's strong beliefs that such is woman's fate. She becomes immediately popular with everyone in Syria except her mother-in-law's faction, and the Soudaness immediately arranges the massacre of her son and the newly-converted Christians. Only Constance survives, to face greater tortures in being put to sea in a rudderless ship. Her subsequent prayer, another Chaucerian addition, is short again, just under two stanzas (451–62); however, Chaucer also adds, in the narrator's voice, six more stanzas reminding readers that such things happen all the time in biblical stories, rebuking them for finding her long survival difficult to believe. (Petrarch, too, faced similar disbelief in his audience, who found the actions of female saints implausible, and reacted similarly to Chaucer; apparently such resistance in the audience was not unprecedented; see McKinley, 97.)

Constance, of course, is swept up on the beach in Britain, where she is befriended by the constable and converts his wife, is falsely accused of murder, is cleared by divine intervention, and marries King Alla and bears him a son, while in the process converting large numbers of heathens to Christianity. Once again this brings her into conflict with a jealous mother-in-law, in the pattern of repetition so common to hagiographic narrative. The mother-in-law so contrives that Constance is put to sea again, with her son, in the same ship in which she had arrived. She lands in heathen territory again, where she is menaced by a lustful steward but through divine intervention avoids rape, and is swept out once more through the straits of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean, to be rescued by a Roman senator who takes her and the baby home to his wife. For reasons never explored she does not reveal her identity to her father until her husband Alla comes to Rome on pilgrimage and she is reunited with him; then she is also reunited with her father; and all seems set for a pious happy ending. But such cannot be, for to live in marital congress is to engage in sin, and Constance, after all, is a saintly woman. So Alla conveniently dies a year later, allowing Constance to finish out her life in prayer, chastity, and good works among the poor—the true saintly ending when martyrdom is not required.

In the *Second Nun's Tale* of St. Cecilia, we see Chaucer more explicitly begin to highlight the heroine's voice for his readers. As Priscilla Martin so succinctly puts it, "Like Constance, Cecilia is a paradigm of the Christian witness and missionary activity of the early Church, but while Constance is swept away and sent passively on her epoch-making journeys, Cecilia is a militantly active heroine."<sup>6</sup> She inspires action through her rhetoric: her impulsive power is verbal, not physical. To mirror this difference, Chaucer tells us less about her temporal and more about her spiritual genealogy. We are told that she comes "of Romayns, and of noble kynde," but more importantly that she is determined on Christian virginity. When she is married to Valerian, a fairly innocuous fellow, Chaucer sets the readers up for her entry into wifehood conventionally:

The nyght cam, and to bedde moste she gon  
With hire housbonde, as ofte is the manere. (VIII 141-42)

But Cecilia is not about to leave any of her holiness aside, and skillfully uses her rhetorical talents to achieve her ends. First she convinces Valerian that she is loved by an angel who will kill Valerian if he touches his wife. Valerian, of course, wants to see the angel, and Cecilia sends him away from her bed to Pope Urban at the catacombs for baptism, for only the baptised can see the angel. Valerian is confronted with a vision of a man holding a book of gold, which immediately convinces him to convert. He is baptized, returns home to find Cecilia and the angel, and requests that his brother Tiburce be converted, which the angel promptly achieves, with Cecilia preaching the catechism. The three take up proselytizing, are captured, and tortured. They convert one of their torturers, Maximus, who begins to witness his Christianity to great effect and is arrested and beaten to death. Finally, the prefect Almachias decides to put a stop to all this conversion and orders Cecilia arrested. She whips him handily at debate; he has her tortured, and even orders her beheading. But the torturer is unable to complete the job; the sword won't cut her neck, and for three days and nights (a significant number, of course) she addresses the crowd, inspiring mass conversions and the building of a church by the pope, before finally dying.

Nowhere in this tale does Chaucer give Cecilia freedom to act: he constructs her as a collection of provocative speeches rather than a physically realized character. She is, truly, a saint: a collection of idealized virtues. Unlike Constance, Cecilia never rails against her fate or accepts it as divine will, but instead embraces it enthusiastically, even using it as the opportunity for some judicious fund-raising. Unlike most of the female saints in tales Chaucer's audience knew, here is one who is pious without being passive. Like Griselda she strikes modern readers as rather inhuman in her eager dismissal of Valerian and Tiburce and her rather callous approach to her own martyrdom. (One senses that a modern Cecilia would have had her execution televised on *Oprah*, if she'd had the chance.)

<sup>6</sup>Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), 150.

In such conventional adaptations of hagiography, Chaucer manipulates the voices of his female protagonists to address disbelief and thoughtless imitation, reality and divine unreality, and the whole concept of modeling behavior, as he confronts his audience with the question of right conduct for Christians facing challenges to their faith. Strohm notes that

The reader's expectations about the movement of the narrative help to highlight and to explain any deviations from the pattern common to narratives of other martyred saints. . . . The audience still finds its satisfaction in anticipation and fulfillment of a design, rather than in suspense and surprise and other responses less well suited to a devotional work written for the purpose of confirming belief. (167)

It's noteworthy that these are some of Chaucer's longest tales, for the necessary cycles of repetition needed to create the picture of pious resignation demand space for the *amplificatio* and *elaboration* his readers anticipated in an exemplary life. Chaucer's Virginia, Griselda, Constance and even Cecilia raise and meet his audience's expectations of what becomes a *legende* most.

So, when Chaucer comes to write his most famous *Lyf*, that of the heterodox Wife of Bath, he has command of a wide range of conventions for female exemplary biography at his command—and ready for exploitation in the *Wife's Prologue* and *Tale*. We know from the promises of the drunken Miller to tell "a legende and a lyf" (I 3141) and of the merchant's wife in the *Shipman's Tale* to "telle a legende of my lyf" (VII 145), and indeed from the entire project of the *Legend of Good Women*, that Chaucer understood the potential uses of hagiographic elements in parodic circumstances. Here, in his creation of Alys of Bath and her life story, he takes the elements of occasional parody to a higher, more sustained level. If one accepts that the belief structure he inverts is that of conventional Christianity, where female submissiveness and passivity are valued, we can see that Alice is, in a funhouse-mirror way, a saint and martyr—that she wears the costumes and occupies the settings of the saint's life genre, but in unexpected ways. Indeed Alice is the exact opposite of the physical 'type' of the saintly heroine—unlike the beautiful, barely pubescent heroines of most saints' lives, she is older, wiser, and no longer virginally lovely. Where the typical heroine of a saint's life is from a noble family, the Wife is "barly-breed" and proud of it (III 144). And where the saint espouses, usually at great length, the virtues of virginity, the Wife spends even more time celebrating the necessity for active sexuality when virginity is no longer an option. Unlike the squeamish but well-mannered Virginia, who feigns sickness to avoid the kind of people found at "feestes, revels, and at daunces, / That been occasions of daliaunces" (VI 65-66), the Goodwife of Bath seeks out such occasions, where she can put her convictions to the test. Unlike the saintly Cecilia, who wears a hair shirt under her wedding garments and retreats in maidenly modesty from public gaze at church, the Wife insists on first place in the offertory procession, wearing her ten pounds' weight of coverchiefs and her scarlet hose (I 449-56). Brigitte Cazelles states that, "Indifferent to her own appearance, eager not to provoke unchaste

gazing, the female [saint] seeks to become invisible."<sup>7</sup> Chaucer's transgressing Saint Alys seeks just the opposite.

The Wife's *vita* begins with her biography and genealogy: she was married first at age twelve, and was widowed twice at a young age. She follows a consistent pattern (in her first three marriages) of marrying men who are old, jealous, and miserly, but she triumphs over them by manifesting her "virtues" of sexuality, quarreling skill, and counter-argument. Where the traditional female saint is silent and lacks initiative, the Wife, like St. Cecilia, claims that she "baar [her] proprely" (III 224), as does a wise woman, by turning men's traditional weapons of sexual desire and speech against them. Whereas in typical saints' lives, a disregard for property, material goods, and inheritances is the hallmark of the virgin martyr, Chaucer's Saint Alys positively glories in the wealth she accumulates through her successive marriages—a wealth that empowers her to face more effective temptation.

Her tests against masculine persecution grow more serious when she is matched against her fourth husband, the "revelour" who provides her belief system with a stronger challenge by being "daungerous" to her (514).<sup>8</sup> This is temptation to fall, indeed, for the fourth husband matches her in sexual desire and licentiousness, and the Wife must call on all her acquired knowledge and faith in her beliefs to overcome him and "in his owene grece . . . ma[k]e hym frye" (487). Whereas in the typical hagiographic narrative the heroine figures as a new Eve, resisting the sexual temptations of a Satanic prefect or other suitor, the Wife defends herself not with the excellence of her virginity but with the achievements of her mature carnality. Using the language of pious discourse, she boasts that "in erthe I was his purgatorie, / For which I hope his soule be in glorie" (489–90)—wishing on the fourth husband the salvific result of a very unsaintly conversion.

The arch-torturer of Saint Alys, of course, is fifth husband Jankyn, the wily clerk of Oxford. Like Almachius and the other noteworthy torturers of the saint's life tradition, he starts with verbal assaults on her beliefs, reading to her from his book "of olde Romayn geestes" (642) and turning to physical assault when she counter-attacks by tearing a page from his book. His blow leaves her deaf in one ear, literally unable to take in his point of view. As is typical of the female saint, she is undaunted by the physical abuse heaped on her, and gives back as good as she gets. Jankyn extends and increases Alys's torture by reading to her every day out of his "book of wikked wyves" (685), attempting to shake her faith by reading from Theophrastus and Jerome. The Wife must draw on all her strength to remain "stubborn as a lioness" and to ask "who painted the lion?" (and one of the great Chaucerian parodic notes is, of course, that St. Jerome was frequently depicted in medieval portraiture as having a lion nestled tamely at his feet).

<sup>7</sup> *The Lady as Saint: A Collection of French Hagiographic Romances of the Thirteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 50.

<sup>8</sup> On the possible meanings of the word *daungerous* in this passage see T. L. Burton, "The Wife of Bath's Fourth and Fifth Husbands and Her Ideal Sixth: The Growth of a Marital Philosophy," *Chaucer Review* 13 (1978): 34–50, p. 42.

Finally, in a physical confrontation, Jankyn strikes the Wife down so that she lies as one dead—but when he goes to raise up her corpse, she finds the strength to proclaim him a murderer, kiss him one last time, strike him in the face, and begin preaching her 'last sermon.' That, of course, is the heretical *Wife of Bath's Tale*, in which the triumphant heroine demonstrates to her own satisfaction that men can successfully deal with women only by converting to women's belief system, accepting that *gentillesse* depends on conduct rather than rank, and granting women *maistrye* in intersex dealings. As both Heffernan and McKinley point out, a major feature of female saints' lives was an argument that virtue was not dependent on the saint's political, economic, or social class (Heffernan, 270 ff.; McKinley, 94 ff.). But here, Chaucer totally inverts his audience's expectations, by using an argument usually proffered to support a saint's right to preserve her virginity to campaign, instead, for a woman's right to be free of patriarchal domination.

Saint Alys's torturer, Jankyn, converts in the face of his wife's strong beliefs, burns his book of wicked wives, and grants her the 'soverayntee' she so desires. He dies, she tells us, in the state of grace appropriate to such a convert, and she prays for God's blessing on her one-time torturer's soul, as well as for God's vengeance against all men who do not convert when faced with such incontrovertible evidence of female moral superiority. Thus, like the female saints who lives Chaucer's audience knew, the final note of the *vita* of this very unorthodox saint is that of salvation, conversion, and redemption—but totally different salvations, ones which would both amuse and confound Chaucer's audience as contrary to their doctrinal and narrative expectations.

Generically, all the conventions of the saint's life are present in the Wife of Bath's *Prologue* and *Tale*, just as the expected conventions are present in one of Yankovic's videos. Similarly, it is the superb reversal and exploitation of expected elements that enriches the joke for an audience familiar with the conventions being transgressed, as Chaucer's audience was with those of hagiographic narrative. And with the linguistic artistry that is his hallmark, Chaucer even plays with the language the Wife uses to reinforce the identification of the parody in his listeners' minds. As one instance, consider the last four lines of the Wife's *Tale*, where the narrator prays,

And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves  
That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;  
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,  
God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (1261–64)

If readers substitute "save" for "shorte" and "penitence" for "pestilence," they will see how close the parody is; just inserting those two traditional words from Middle English prayer would change Alys's speech to a totally orthodox statement. But Chaucer, by changing just two words, makes it a closing oration that challenges the entire basis of that orthodoxy, that women should be submissive to their husbands. The close verbal parallels to what his audience would have expected to hear at the close of a "standard" hagiographic narrative heighten the disruptive effect of the comic close to Alys's *lyf*.

What effects does Chaucer achieve by incorporating the most common elements of exemplary biography into this *vita* of a very unsaintly teller? This question applies in fact to the entire genre of female saints' lives: As Heffernan argues,

What would women, married or single or widowed, make of tales which subjected women who defended principle to an encyclopedia of violent sexual abuse, ending in death? . . . The positive reception which greeted these vernacular narratives of the saints suggests some degree of sophistication on the part of its audience, an audience whose attitudes are not easily categorized despite the hegemony of orthodoxy, an audience in which men and women were aware of gender problems, and [sic] audience familiar with sexually explicit and deviant behavior, an audience who enjoyed stories which exploited class conflict, and an audience who believed that authority figures, whether clerical or political, often had feet of clay. (264–65)

Familiarity with the genre of the female saint's life shows us that some of the elements we see today as most revolutionary and "proto-feminist" in Chaucer would have been recognized by his own audience as variations on the given conventions of a common genre. Thus, the audiences whose expectations are disrupted by the Wife of Bath's *Prologue* and *Tale* are as likely to be modern as medieval.

Modern critics, not attuned to these echoes, often find the Wife a very confusing character. As the *Riverside Chaucer's* notes point out, the Wife is either a vehicle for critiquing marriage, or "a sympathetic figure, one of the great comic characters in our literature," who is "all the more human for her frailties and inconsistencies," or a character who "has no personality of her own, but is a universalized representation of some aspect of womankind," and who even seems to some "a monster—androgynous, spiritually corrupt in both sexes"—and all those comments come within the course of two paragraphs summarizing critical reaction to her portrait (865, column 1). When modern readers familiarize themselves with the rhetorical and generic conventions of medieval hagiography, her contradictions become less threatening. While the Wife is joyous and stalwart in her beliefs that patriarchal dominance and female continence are out-comes to be challenged and that sexual temptation and abuse are best trumped by female wiles and the rampant exercise of carnality, those beliefs are founded on her ignorance and misreading of the conventional pious texts and tenets of her times—just the kinds of ignorance that were supposed to be rectified by subjecting women to a literary diet of hagiography and that an audience should recognize when they hear her expound on them. Indeed, one of the greatest achievements Chaucer reaches in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* is that it is a saint's life told by a female character who has obviously not absorbed any of the lessons of the saints' lives she *has* read. Thus, she is governed by morally fallible *experience* rather than the morally defensible *auctoritee* that a sequence of men have labored to expose her to. Unlike the Pardoner, she's unaware of her own shortcomings—and therein lies her failure as a "saint." The message that

Chaucer's transgressive *vita* relays, then, is a critique of those in his audience who agree with her beliefs as well as of the genre itself.

The comic possibilities of Chaucer's transgressions of genre are likewise tremendous: Alys's *vita* is a parody of the exemplary lives held up to late fourteenth-century women, the kind of exemplary lives that underlie the tale of Saints Cecilia and Virginia and to a lesser extent the tales of Griselda and Constance. In creating a woman who acts in *precisely* the opposite way to an orthodox saint and in making her live out the adventures—the increasingly difficult tests and torments, the steadfast opposition to "heathen" beliefs, the ability to convert the most hardened tyrant, the "miraculous" revival of the dead "saint"—Chaucer effectively lampoons an entire genre of approved textual consumption in his time, much as he skewers romance on the lance of Sir Thopas or as the modern Yankovic deconstructs music videos through parodic imitation. But more significantly, by having Alys espouse her anti-misogynist sentiments in the context of a genre aimed chiefly at female readers, Chaucer forces his readers to confront a real issue, for his time and for ours: what sort of examples ought the female reader to follow? Should she be a patient pushover, like Griselda and Constance? What kind of life did that earn her? The out-and-out attack Alice mounts on misogynist teaching, while first and foremost humorous, also requires readers to ask not only "What do women most desire?" but "What should women be allowed to desire?" At the same time, if Boffey is correct that the aim of narratives of holy lives is "less to warn, more to hearten and encourage" (618), we also see the inherent dangers in Chaucer's transgressive creation, for the appeal of this lively and engaging character's arguments could indeed cause the unaware to "sownen into synne" (X 1085), in Chaucer's time or our own.

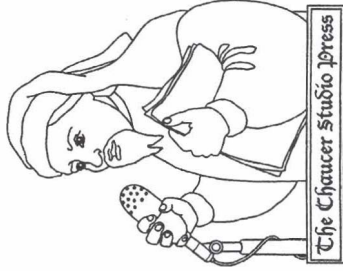
Recognizing the elements of the saint's life in the Wife of Bath's *Prologue* and *Tale* does not, of course, "solve" the problem that Alys and her beliefs presents for the modern reader, but complicates it even further, reminding us that Chaucer may possibly have envisioned this creation, in part, as a critique of the impossibility of the exemplary life his world demanded that women live. By incorporating the structural and rhetorical features of the saint's life with the other sources and elements that make up the Wife of Bath's portrait, Chaucer turns the genre and the expectations of his audience inside out with her performance. The humor comes in hearing the echoes of the saint's life in such an unsaintly setting, the *sentence* in reflecting on the implications such juxtapositions raise. Like those who watch a Yankovic video, Chaucer's readers, knowing what a saint's life should and should not contain, and how a saint should and should not face her tests and tortures, can find in the *Vita Sancte Alicie Bathoniensis* a richness and depth hitherto unnoticed.

# “Seyd in forme and reverence”

*Essays on Chaucer and Chaucerians*  
*in Memory of*  
*Emerson Brown, Jr.*

EDITED BY

T. L. BURTON AND JOHN F. PLUMMER



2005