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Weasels and Angels: Rhetorical and Communicative Strength and Weakness in Selected Women of The Canterbury Tales

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WEASELS AND ANGELS:
RHETORICAL AND COMMUNICATIVE STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS
IN SELECTED WOMEN OF THE CANTERBURY TALES

by

Emily Glossner Greer

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WEASELS AND ANGELS:
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Introduction

In the final scene of the Miller's Tale, an eventful night in Oxford finds John the carpenter hanging from the roof of his house in a tub awaiting a great flood. He becomes a cuckold, endures a nasty fall in which he breaks his arm, rants and raves to the citizens of the town, and convinces everyone (perhaps correctly) that he is insane. Meanwhile, Nicholas, despite successfully tricking John and contributing to John's status as a cuckold, receives painfully burned buttocks--a dubious reward for his clever plans. Absolon, the agent behind the burning of Nicholas's buttocks, encounters the backsides of both Alison and Nicholas: with Alison he experiences an unpleasant kiss; from Nicholas he receives an equally unpleasant message.

So what about Alison, the woman at the center of this storm of broken arms, burned buttocks, and encounters with backsides? Alison emerges from the scuffle without a scratch. She tricks her husband, toys with Absolon, and enjoys the company of Nicholas in her marriage bed. She may not always communicate in an especially admirable manner, but she communicates effectively and consistently fulfills her own desires. She is not submissive to the wills of the men around her; rather, she asserts herself and her own will boldly and successfully.

Worlds away, Emily of the Knight's Tale longs to remain a virgin but ends up married. She is loved passionately, even violently, by two virtual strangers but never reacts to the intensity of the men's emotions. She is often silent, weeps at
other times, and, when she does communicate her feelings and desires in a private prayer, asks the goddess Diana to determine her fate. Emily's prayer reveals her resigned acceptance of her own perceived lack of control. She may be beautiful—a noble lady in a noble tale—but she is passive to the point of insubstantiality.

I am interested in the communicative methods and rhetorical strategies of two kinds of women: women like Alison whose communicative methods I perceive as strong and women like Emily whose communicative methods I see as weak. My group of strong women consists of Alison, the Wife of Bath, and May of the Merchant's Tale; in my group of weak women are Emily, Griselda of the Clerk's Tale, and Dorigen of the Franklin's Tale.

The strong women communicate actively and assertively while the weak women communicate passively and subserviently. The strong women are willing to argue, trick, and, if necessary, lie their ways toward control of their own destinies. The weak women patiently accept whatever fates they are handed and ultimately lose themselves in the depths of their own submissiveness.

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous urges women to "write themselves": "Woman must write her self . . . Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (875). She continues, "Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the
ultimate reserve-discourse" (886). She maintains, "It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing . . . [because] this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded"; however, she explains, "It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate" (883). She tells women to seize "the occasion to speak" (880). She says, "Women should break out of the snare of silence" (881). The function of a feminine text, she maintains, is "to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter" (888).

Cixous describes the results of the act of a woman writing:

it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty . . . tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvelous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak. (880)

She describes women who write themselves:

We're stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation. Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without
ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of lacking. (878)

For the purpose of my discussion, I am applying Cixous's description of written female language to spoken language—spoken, that is, as language is "spoken" by "voices" in a text. The powerful female language proposed and envisioned by Cixous is the language spoken by the voices we call Alison, the Wife of Bath, and May. These women are certainly stormy and, indeed, laughter exudes from their mouths. Each of these voices is a miniature text—a feminine text—within the larger text that is The Canterbury Tales. And each text "shatter[s] the framework of institutions" without fear of debilitation and "wreck[s] partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes" (888, 878, 886).

In Language and Woman's Place, Robin Lakoff identifies nine general linguistic forms that comprise what she calls "women's language." Because she concentrates primarily on contemporary American English and women in contemporary American society, I am less interested in her specific linguistic observations (the use of a large vocabulary of words related to women's specific interests, "empty" adjectives, tag questions and rising intonation in statement contexts, hedges [well, y'know], the intensive "so," and hypercorrect grammar) than I am in her more general observations (the use of superpolite forms, the absence of joke telling, and the practice of speaking in italics [a
careful "holding back" of how one truly feels]) (53-56) and the theory underlying her discussion. Lakoff explains the overall effect of women's language: "it submerges a woman's personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly, on the one hand, and encouraging expressions that suggest triviality in subject matter and uncertainty about it" (7). The ultimate effect of women's language is a denial of access to power due to women's apparent incapability in handling power (7). Lakoff does not provide a detailed description of exactly what she means by "power." Therefore, for the purpose of my discussion, I propose that "power" means political and economic power. Hence, the use of women's language ultimately denies women access to political positions or at least possession of a voice in political decision-making, employment, financial autonomy, and thus, inevitably, personal autonomy.

Lakoff argues, "women's speech is devised to prevent the expression of strong statements" (19). She believes a deep bias exists in virtually every culture against according women full societal status (8). She says:

My hope is that women will recognize that such a role is insufficient for a human being and will then realize that using [women's] language . . . . and thus being placed implicitly in this role, is degrading in that it is constraining. (52)

Lakoff's women's language is the language used by the voices we call Emily, Griselda, and Dorigen. Lakoff maintains, "If a
woman learns and uses women's language, she is necessarily considered less than a real, full person—she's a bit of fluff" (61). Of course, Emily, Griselda, and Dorigen are not real people and to speak of what they have learned in a time before their appearances in the text would be absurd. Yet, as textual voices, they are "bits of fluff." They do not feel full and real. They avoid strong statements and thus deny themselves access to anything but peripheral, insubstantial existences.

I have chosen to use a strong/weak bipolar scheme because of the underlying bipolar oppositions I believe exist in the theories of both Cixous and Lakoff. The opposition I detect in Cixous's discussion is powerful female language versus language threatened by "the snare of silence" (or, one could say, Lakoff's women's language). The opposition I observe in Lakoff's discussion is language beyond the constraints of women's language (or, perhaps, Cixous's powerful female language) versus women's language. I am therefore following the patterns I observe in my theoretical sources. The strong women write/speak themselves while the weak women flounder in their use of a constraining, debilitating language.

Strength or weakness is not only conveyed through a character's own words and behavior; the descriptive imagery that a narrator uses to describe a female character tends to reflect either the communicative and rhetorical strength or weakness of that character. Narrators tend to describe strong women with language involving substantial imagery, especially food and
animal imagery. On the other hand, narrators tend to describe weak women with flower and other-world imagery or brief, abstract descriptions of a character's great beauty and virtue. Hence, the language of a narrator is like the language and manner of communication of a character herself. Lively, bold language tends to appear with lively, bold characters whose presences feel truly bodily--or whose blood seems to flow, as Cixous might say. Abstract language tends to appear with reticent characters whose manners of communication make them feel not bodily but as insubstantial and intangible as puffs of air--or bits of fluff, as Lakoff might say. Thus, the narrators of the strong women employ the kind of language Cixous describes while the narrators of the weak women use a kind of women's language as they avoid strong statements about the characters they relate.

Of course, Alison is a character in the Miller's Tale and the Miller is a character in Chaucer's body of work that we call The Canterbury Tales. Likewise, Emily is a character in the Knight's Tale while the Knight is an invention of Chaucer the narrator and, ultimately, Chaucer the person. As Robert M. Jordan explains, "Rhetorical analysis regards the pilgrims primarily as voices that Chaucer inscribes into the language of his text and only secondarily as reified and, to varying extents, 'rounded' characters" (18). So what do these strong and weak "female" voices tell us? What is Chaucer the narrator (since Chaucer the person has been unavailable for comment for several centuries) doing with these voices?
Ann S. Haskell maintains:

by the late fourteenth century, English society was in a state of transition: emphasis was shifting from the upper to the middle classes, from the religious to the secular, and from life on the independent manor to the integrated life of the city. And with these changes elsewhere came the inevitable literary innovations. (1)

Priscilla Martin believes that Chaucer "exemplifies some of the changes in English culture" (xiii). She explains, "He came from the merchant class and from a highly 'upwardly mobile' family, he was a member of the expanding category of literate laity, and he chose to write in English" (xiii). Further, Chaucer "recognises the power of discourse and the implications of the traditional restriction of written discourse to a male clerical class" (xiv). The Canterbury Tales is a literary innovation; it represents a move away from that which was traditional and firmly established--a move whose goal is to turn authority on its ear and call established uses of language into question.

Jon Cook reads and discusses The Canterbury Tales in light of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival, "popular language . . . [that] exists independently of written forms: in the marketplace, in the feast, in the carnival procession":

Bakhtin repeatedly refers to carnival as an 'alternative' or a 'second' world to institutional
Christianity. It is nothing less than a rival metaphysic to Christianity, one grounded in popular institutions and experiences, working through devices of parody and inversion to counter and mitigate the various forces of authority in the medieval world. (172-73)

Cook calls *The Canterbury Tales* "fertile ground for the emergence of carnivalesque values with their emphasis on the relativity of different perspectives and styles and on the open-ended character of invention" (175). He explains:

Reading *The Canterbury Tales* as carnival enables us to see the interaction between stylistic and formal features of the text and social practice. We are given a sustained literary realisation of voices largely unheard in medieval literature before *The Canterbury Tales*. These voices come not from the Church or the Court but from the unofficial worlds of medieval culture, from the market-place, from the tavern, from domestic life. In the special world of the pilgrimage these voices interact freely with the established authorities of medieval culture. Those authorities are interrupted, defied and questioned by the forces of popular comedy. (189-90)

Cook points out the crucial role that women play in carnival, specifically in the carnivalesque humiliation of men (186). Alison, the Wife of Bath, and May each participate in
carnivalesque behavior; they represent "unofficial" voices that "interrupt" expected male authority. These characters are like the peripheral figures Cixous writes of; peripheral figures who, in carnival fashion, "will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language" (885). For, as John M. Ganim explains, "carnivalized texts contain a chorus of many voices in contradistinction to a single, authoritative voice" (114). These women are weasels—burrowing beneath foundations, disrupting expectations. They are not the angels that Emily, Griselda, and Dorigen are—insubstantial angels who hover above foundations and meet expectations.

On a different note, Jordan maintains that Chaucer is fascinated with verbal surfaces; he defines Chaucer as "rhetorical man": a writer who is ambivalent, "who cannot be univalent about anything" (8, 10). Jordan continues, "Chaucer's works display an uneasiness with univalent authority, be it historical authority, moral authority, or the authority of language. His unspoken poetics provides a framework for coming to terms with uncertainty" (10). Following the tradition of the medieval understanding of rhetoric, Jordan is "concerned with written composition rather than public oratory" (6). About the term "rhetorical," he explains:

**rhetorical** applies both in the narrower sense of poetry as blocks of language crafted and ordered by the poet and in the broader philosophical sense of a relationship between language and truth that is
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problematic and that questions the nature--and even the possibility--of meaning. (6-7)

Jordan believes that meaning in Chaucer's poetry is "contingent and ambiguous rather than confidently authoritative" (2). Thus, even an unofficial voice does not assume a position of authority once it interrupts and questions authority. (Weasels do not become king, queen, or president once they invade and tear down the palace or the White House.)

The strong women have a carnivalesque function, but the dishonest and manipulative nature of their communication suggests that strong women are corrupt and immoral and that a woman cannot communicate both successfully and honestly and should not attempt to assert her own self-interests. The underhanded nature of the strong women's methods suggests that, although these women challenge and sometimes destroy the oppressive status quo, they are incapable of success beyond what Cixous calls a shattering of institutions. In other words, they can shatter institutions, but they cannot rebuild them.

On a similar note, the weak women, despite their passivity and acquiescence, occupy pivotal positions in the works in which they appear and are active agents, even when passive characters, in moving forward a given narrative, sometimes with carnivalesque results. Thus, by affecting other characters and the outcomes of situations, the weak women are not completely submissive and ineffectual.
In addition to discussing the carnivalesque disruption of authority and tradition by Chaucer's "female" voices, I will argue that the rhetorical nature of both the strong and weak women is not always what it initially seems: The communicative methods of the weak women are ultimately not completely ineffectual while the methods of the strong women are not always entirely successful. The weak women, although they use a language similar to Lakoff's women's language, do not quite end up as Lakoff suggests users of this language will: in minor, powerless positions. Meanwhile, the strong women do not quite achieve the wondrous freedom Cixous believes users of a powerful female language should: Each strong woman does not entirely repossess "her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal" (880). This existence of weakness in strength and strength in weakness reveals Chaucer's larger view of language, its relationship to truth, and truth's ultimate inaccessibility.
Weasels, Colts, and Barley Bread: The Strong Women

Descriptions of Alison in the Miller's Tale reflect the strength she exhibits throughout the story. John the carpenter is old and "demed hymself been lik a cokewold" (3226).\(^1\) He is a jealous man who keeps the "wylke and yong" (3225) eighteen-year-old Alison "narwe in cage" (3224). This suggestion of Alison as a caged bird or animal is the first of the Miller's many animal similes in his introduction of her. The Miller continues: Alison's body is like a weasel's body; she is as soft as the wool of a ram; she sings like a swallow, cavorts like a kid or a calf, and is as spirited as a colt.

The Miller also describes Alison as a little doll ("a popelote" [3254]) and says she is shinier than a new gold coin. Although both dolls and coins are inanimate objects (or, at least in the case of dolls, one would hope so), both are tangible nonetheless. Dolls and coins can be held in a person's hands or at least envisioned in a person's mind. These images paint a more vivid picture of Alison than would a statement such as, "She was beautiful."

Despite the variety of the Miller's descriptive images, his favorite method of describing Alison involves the use of animal similes and he continues to associate her with animals throughout

\(^1\) All quotations are taken from Benson, Larry D., gen. ed., The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1987).
the Tale. When Nicholas first propositions her, "she sproong as a colt dooth in the trave, / And with hir heed she wryed faste away" (3282-83). During Absolon's attempted wooing of Alison, he tells her, "I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete" (3704).

The Miller's descriptions of Alison paint a vivid picture of an energetic, bold woman. His images are substantial: lively animals, a doll, a coin. These images make Alison substantial: She has a bodily presence; she is active like a young animal and, like a coin, worth something. She leaps off the page from the very start of the Tale and continues leaping until the end. Her actions demand that she be reckoned with. Patrick J. Gallacher maintains, "there is a pounceability about Alison" (40). He believes the comparison of her to a doll evokes "the urge to grasp and fondle" her (40). The ultimate effect of Alison's pounceability, he feels, "is perhaps summed up in Absolon's reaction: 'if she hadde been a mous, / And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon' (3346-47)" (40). Overall, the Miller's language about Alison reflects the nature of her strong rhetoric.

When Nicholas first propositions Alison, she appears to play hard to get. She says, "Lat be, Nicholas, / Or I wol crie 'out, harrow' and 'allas'!" (3285-86). Nicholas has "caughte hire by the queynte" (3276) and holds her "harde by the haunchebones" (3279). Alison plays the ravished victim, but a closer look proves that she merely wants Nicholas to beg. Derek Pearsall explains, "She does not thoroughly understand why she should be, even temporarily, under this nice restraint (any more than a colt
'in the trave': 3282), but she obliges with a decent if brief show of reluctance" (131). In any case, Nicholas does beg and, due to his fair speech, Alison grants him her love "atte laste" (3290). This scene is the first glimpse we get of Alison's dishonest yet effective use of words.

One must remember that Alison has "a likerous ye" (3244). She is not a victim of Nicholas's lust but a willing participant. A look at Absolon's wooing of Alison reveals her lustful desire for Nicholas.

When Absolon attempts to woo Alison, he uses language similar to that which Nicholas initially uses. Absolon expresses the urgency of his desire: "Wel litel thynken ye upon my wo, / That for youre love I swete ther I go" (3701-02). He mourns for her; he can "ete na moore than a mayde" (3707). He implores her to have pity on his lustful, sorry state. Likewise, Nicholas says, "Lemman, love me al atones, / Or I wol dyen, also God me save!" (3280-81). Alison briefly toys with Nicholas and then gives in to his (and her own) desire. If her initial words to Nicholas were true—if she were just a victim of male lust—she might have given Absolon the same response that she initially gives Nicholas ("I wol crie 'out, harrow' and 'allas'!" [3286]). But she does not threaten to call for help after listening to Absolon's requests. She calls him "Jakke fool" (3708), tells him she loves someone else, and says, "Go forth thy wey, or I wol caste a ston, / And lat me slepe, a twenty devel wey!" (3712-13). A woman who will throw a stone at an irritating and unwanted
suitor and who so easily invokes the name of twenty devils can certainly hold her own when held firmly by the "haunchebones" (3279). If Alison truly did not want Nicholas, she probably would have beaten him with a rock.

Alison again speaks dishonestly when John returns from his conversation with Nicholas and tells her about the impending flood. Her feigned reaction to this information is similar to her response to Nicholas's advances. She speaks passionately, "Alas! go forth thy wey anon, / Help us to scape, or we been dede echon!" (3607-08) and calls herself John's "trew, verray wedded wyf" (3609). Of course we know that this is an act. This act further reveals the falseness of her alarm when she is first seized by Nicholas. However, both John and Nicholas believe Alison when she acts; she knows how to speak passionately and convincingly albeit dishonestly.

Alison speaks dishonestly a final time at the end of the story. John attempts to tell the citizens of the town about the events of the evening, but "whan he spak, he was anon bore doun / With hende Nicholas and Alisoun. / They tolden every man that he was wood" (3831-33). We do not know Alison's exact words in this situation, but we do know that she is involved along with Nicholas in discrediting John to save her own reputation.

When Alison is honest, her language is direct and terse often to the point of rudeness. She neither wastes nor sugarcoats her words. We first observe an honest and succinct response from her when Absolon appears under her window for the
first time. Absolon asks for Alison's pity by singing to her in a "voys gentil and smal" (3360). When John asks his wife if she hears the disturbance, she simply replies, "Yis, God woot, John, I heere it every deel" (3369). Alison merely answers her husband's question; her lack of any comment about Absolon's actions (and, perhaps, his singing talents) reveals her utter indifference toward him. After Alison's reply, the Miller asks, "what wol ye bet than weel?" (3370). Indeed, what more could anyone want of Alison? Her lack of a fuller response speaks more about her attitude towards Absolon than any lengthy explanation could.

Alison's directness becomes rude when Absolon interrupts her lustful night with Nicholas. She tells Absolon in no uncertain terms to get lost. She says, "Go fro the wyndow" (3708), explains that she loves another person, and tells him that she will resort to violence if he does not leave. She ridicules his request: "As help me God, it wol not be 'com pa me'" (3709). She expresses herself clearly, bluntly, and boldly.

About Absolon, we are told, "he was somdeel squaymous / Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous" (3337-38). Alison, on the other hand, is not squeamish about anything and neither fastidious nor delicate in her ways of communicating. When Absolon does not leave, Alison offers him a kiss in return for his departure. Under cover of darkness, she offers him "hir naked ers" (3734) after telling him, "come of, and speed the faste, / Lest that our neighbores thee espie" (3728-29). Of
course, "he kiste hir naked ers / Ful savourly" (3734-35) and upon feeling "a thyng al rough and long yherd" (3738) thinks that "a womman hath no berd" (3737). He realizes what has occurred and "His hoote love was coold and al yqueynt" (3754). Alison is triumphant in her ultimate expression of disdain towards Absolon and successful in destroying the love he feels for her.

For Alison, laughter is a communication tool that expresses her comfort with and control over a situation. And laughter is also, of course, a spontaneous reaction to a situation—a reaction that reveals Alison's sense of humor. Before Alison presents herself to Absolon for their kiss, she says to Nicholas, "Now hust, and thou shalt laughen al thy fille" (3722). She knows that her trick will be successful and so prepares Nicholas for the fun. She realizes the mild perversity of her actions, but is able to laugh and wants to elicit laughter from her lover nonetheless. After Absolon kisses her "ers" (3734), her response is laughter, pure and simple: "Tehee!" (3740). Nicholas is delighted by the genius of her actions; he declares: "A berd! A berd! . . . By Goddes corpus, this goth faire and weel" (3742-43). Alison succeeds in both humiliating Absolon and entertaining Nicholas and is not at all squeamish about her method. Her laughter reveals her sheer delight over both her mastery of the situation and her ability to employ any means necessary to achieve her desires. Laughter, pure and direct, exudes from Alison (as Cixous explains that it should) as she
resists any holding back of her thoughts and transforms her thoughts into action.

Alison wants to enjoy the sexual company of Nicholas and is both bold and determined enough to do what she must to fulfill her craving. She acts on her own self-centered desires and relies not only on Nicholas's cleverness but also on her own wits and rhetorical talents to achieve self-gratification. Lakoff explains that often "a woman is identified in terms of the men she relates to. The opposite is not usually true of men: they act in the world as autonomous individuals" (31). Contrarily, Alison acts as an autonomous individual and does not rely solely on men for either her identity or her achievement of pleasure.

Alison's communicative and rhetorical methods consist of four basic elements: First, she is a good actress: She speaks dishonestly yet passionately and convincingly when she wants to control the actions of another person. She acts bothered by Nicholas's advances because she wants him to beg. She acts alarmed at John's news about the flood because she wants the trick to succeed--she wants to spend the night with Nicholas in her marriage bed. Second, when Alison is honest, her language is direct, terse, and often rude. She reveals her actual feelings and desires in stark, bold, clear language. Third, Alison uses crude behavior to communicate her feelings when she believes the situation warrants it. She communicates her complete lack of interest in Absolon with the kiss she offers him. And she succeeds in getting what she wants (getting rid of Absolon) with
her uncouth actions. Finally, laughter is a communication tool for Alison. Like her use of crude behavior, Alison laughs to reveal her attitude toward a situation. Her laughter is bold and simple: As the Miller asks, "what wol ye bet than weel?" (3370).

Of the strong women in my discussion, the Wife of Bath is perhaps the strongest. As does the Miller with Alison, Chaucer as narrator of the General Prologue describes the Wife of Bath vividly and distinctly. Her description in the General Prologue prepares us for the boldness of her language and opinions.

The Wife becomes enraged if anyone presents an offering at Mass before she does. She has had five husbands, is an experienced pilgrim, and knows how to laugh and enjoy herself with others. And, of course, she is an expert "of that art the olde daunce" (476). She is a strong and mighty presence; her massive headgear, scarlet stockings, and sharp spurs reflect her strength. Her bold ruddy face, wide-set teeth, and ample hips indicate the might of her presence as well. She is big and red and bright like the sun; her strong opinions and bold rhetoric radiate fearlessly through her Prologue and Tale (and into the Prologues and Tales of several other pilgrims, for that matter). She is like the "writing women" Cixous describes: "we inspire ourselves and we expire without running out of breath, we are everywhere!" (878).

In her Prologue, the Wife discusses the "wo that is in mariage" (3). She explains at great length what she wants in a
marriage and what occurred, in relation to her desires, in her five marriages. Her language is, like the woman herself, vibrant and forthright.

The Wife uses food and animal imagery throughout her Prologue. For example, she does not envy virginity and refers to virgins as "breed of pured whete-seed" (143). She continues, "lat us wyves hoten barly-breed; / And yet with barly-breed, Mark telle kan, / Oure Lord Jhesu refresshed many a man" (144-46). The Pardoner interrupts the Wife and asks, "What sholde I bye it on my flessh so deere?" (167). In her answer to him, she compares her discussion of marriage to a barrel of bitter ale. She says, "thou shalt drynken of another tonne, / Er that I go, shal savoure wors than ale" (170-71). When discussing her age, she compares herself to bran: "The flour is goon; ther is namoore to telle; / The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle" (477-78). After giving an example of the misery she gave her three old husbands, she compares herself to a horse: "For as an hors I koude byte and whyne" (386). During her discussion of her fourth husband, she confesses to wild behavior in her youth. She says she was "joly as a pye" (456) and could sing "as any nyghtyngele" (458). When she discusses her marriage to Jankyn and their terrible fight, she says, "Stibourn I was as is a leonesse" (637).

In sum, the Wife is like barley bread and bran; the story of her experiences is like bitter brew; she is like a rambunctious horse, a magpie, a nightingale, and a stubborn lioness. These
similes offer a clear and powerful picture of her outlook. Her language reflects her robust nature.

The Wife is blunt and sometimes crude in her discussion. She is open about her feelings and desires and does not care if she is offensive or shocking. Lakoff explains that speakers of women's language tend to use mild expletives (Dear me!) while speakers of a stronger language tend to use strong expletives (Shit!) (10). The Wife is a user of both strong expletives and bold, graphic descriptions and therefore not a user of meek, polite women's language.

Despite the misery of marriage, the Wife looks forward to marrying a sixth husband and is honest about her reason:
"Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal. / For sothe, I wol nat kepe me chaast in al" (45-46). Quite simply, the Wife likes sex and sees no reason why she should refrain from it. Rather than lie by explaining that she wants another husband for security or stability or some such vague reason, she proclaims the truth: She will not and does not want to remain chaste.

After proclaiming her intent to refrain from chastity, the Wife discusses male and female sexual organs and asks, "to what conclusion / Were membres maad of generacion, / And of so parfit wys a [wright] ywroght?" (115-17). Her reply to her own question is rather graphic. She does not believe that sexual organs were made for just "purgacioun / Of uryne" (120-21) or "to knowe a femele from a male" (122); she believes "that they maked ben for bothe; / That is to seye, for office and for ese / Of engendrure"
(126-28). Further, sexual organs have a kind of economic function: A man makes his marital payment to his wife, she explains, with "his sely instrument" (132).

The Wife's discussion is again graphically honest when she recalls her relationships with her three old husbands. She says, "As help me God, I laughe whan I thynke / How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke!" (201-02). She continues: "I sette hem so a-werke, by my fey, / That many a nyght they songen 'Weilawey!'" (215-16). The Wife, like Alison, is amused by sex and by her own sexual antics. Sex is not a taboo subject but rather a way of making a point and eliciting laughter, her own laughter especially and the laughter of anyone who cares to join in.

The Wife does not find it difficult to admit to controversial events in her past and, when she does, she is far from demure. In fact, she boasts about her past controversies. She confesses to wild behavior in the days when she met her fourth husband. She explains: "I was yong and ful of ragerye, . . . How koude I daunce to an harpe smale, / And synge, . . . . When I had dronke a draughte of sweete wyn!" (455-59). She admits to lusting after Jankyn on the day that she buried her fourth husband:

As help me God, whan that I saugh hym go
After the beere, me thoughte he hadde a paire
Of legges and of feete so clene and faire
That al myn herte I yaf unto his hoold. (596-99)

Getting drunk, singing and dancing wantonly, and lusting after
one's clerk on the funeral day of one's spouse are not especially appropriate or exemplary modes of behavior, but the Wife does not mind confessing them. She seems to enjoy recalling the indecent events of her life. Of course, her Prologue is a literary confession; one therefore expects her to confess. But it is the way she confesses that is interesting. For example, she does not merely explain that she felt lust towards Jankyn--she revels in her lust as she describes the man's irresistible legs and feet.

After discussing her lust for Jankyn, she explains why she is such a lusty woman. She describes the various physical attributes that indicate lustfulness and the astrological circumstances of her existence that have determined her strong sexual appetite. To this discussion she includes, "trewely, as myne housbondes tolde me, / I hadde the beste *guoniam* myghte be" (607-08). She cannot resist adding this spicy detail, this strong expletive, to her otherwise technical explanation.

Because the Wife of Bath's Prologue is a literary confession, she is honest and frank throughout her discussion. However, she discusses the uses of dishonesty several times. Before she offers her example of the kind of speech she would deliver to one of her old husbands, she says to "wise wyves, that kan understonde" (225): "Thus shulde ye speke and bere hem wrong on honde, / For half so boldly kan ther no man / Swere and lyen, as a womman kan" (226-28). She continues to discuss the ways in which false accusations and guilt trips give a wife the upper hand in a marriage and protect that wife's own possibly
precarious reputation. At the end of her example speech, she says:

I koude pleyne, and yit was in the gilt,
Or elles often tyme hadde I been spilt.
Whoso that first to mille comth, first grynt;
I pleynd first, so was oure werre ystyn. (387-90)

Hence, a wife who lies before and better than her husband will assume a dominant position and protect herself from possible (and possibly true) counter-accusations.

The Wife further demonstrates the use of dishonesty when she explains her strategy for winning Jankyn. Her mother, probably another strong woman, taught her the strategic use of language she employs. The concept of one woman passing significant information to other women calls to mind Cixous's emphasis of the importance of women writing to other women: "It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence" (881). The Wife says: "I bar hym on honde he hadde enchanted me-- / My dame taughte me that soutilee-- / And eek I seyde I mette of hym al nyght" (575-77). She continues, "al was fals; I dremed of it right naught" (582). Her method is reminiscent of Alison's pretended alarm at the advances of Nicholas. The Wife pretends that Jankyn has the power to enter her very dreams; she dishonestly but convincingly flatters him in order to win him.
Chaucer states in the General Prologue, "In felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe" (474). Again, the Wife is anything but a speaker of Lakoff's women's language for "[w]omen's language avoids the markers of camaraderie: backslapping, joke telling, nicknaming, slang, and so forth" (79). (One could safely add to the list "laughing and carping in felaweshipe.") In her Prologue, the Wife admits to laughing about the way she made her three old husbands toil sexually. The Wife has maintained her keenly developed sense of humor throughout her life of marital misery. She has not crumbled but has risen to the top of her art, "the olde daunce" (476), to welcome her sixth husband with bold laughter. The Wife's laughter reflects her strength and communicates her awareness of the often absurd circumstances of her existence.

The Wife of Bath's general rhetorical strategy consists of four basic practices: First, she uses blunt and, if necessary, crude language to describe events and situations. Second, she believes in confessing with gusto: She does not exhibit shame when discussing the controversial events of her life; rather, she exhibits pride. Third, she believes in the use of outright lies or subtly dishonest language to protect one's own interests and reputation and to achieve personal gratification. Finally, she uses laughter as a communication tool. Her laughter conveys the bold, energetic way in which she views herself and the world and shows her awareness of the control she has over her own destiny.

* * *
Based on descriptive imagery alone, May of the Merchant's Tale appears to be like the weak women in my discussion. When first introduced to her, we are told that her beauty has "greet renoun" (1624). How beautiful is she at the celebration of her marriage? The Merchant merely states:

I may yow nat devyse al hir beautee.

But thus much of hire beautee telle I may,
That she was lyk the brighte morwe of May,
Fulfild of alle beautee and plesaunce. (1746-49)

In other words, May looks like, well, May; her beauty is brimming with, quite conveniently, beauty. She is frequently called fresh May—a depiction as vague as the others. With only these descriptions, May does not have much of a presence. She is beautiful but shadowy and intangible—like the reflection of a flower in a puddle.

From the moment of the wedding night onward, the ironic nature of the Merchant's early descriptions of May becomes apparent and the true character of May begins to emerge. As Martin explains, "May is very quiet but her silence proves to be stealth" (49). The Merchant describes January's sexual ardor in gruesome detail. About May, he says:

But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte,
Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte,
In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene;
She preyseth nat his pleyng worth a bene. (1851-54)
Thus, May considers January's "coltissh ragerye" (1847) worthless. The previous descriptions of her are illusions—shadowy, yes, but shadows of the way January sees her.

If January is repulsive to May, why does she endure him? Martin explains, "Her extreme quietness and passivity during the magnificent wedding and the gruesome wedding night indicate that January's only attractions for her are economic" (105). Of course, we know that May is, or had been before her marriage, "of smal degree" (1625). May's economic motives for marriage to January are apparent when she reads the initial letter from Damyan. When she takes pity on Damyan, she says, "I hym assure / To love hym best of any creature, / Though he namoore hadde than his sherte" (1983-85). Because January offers May far more than his shirt, she can tolerate marriage to him; she doesn't need feelings of love to be elevated to a higher social rank and better financial position. But she can take pity on and have feelings of love (or, more accurately, lust) for Damyan. He may have nothing more to offer her (materially) than the very shirt on his back, but what does this matter to May? She does not want or need anything material from Damyan. Her pity leads to sex—Damyan's shirt is irrelevant. The Merchant realizes this when he ironically states, "Heere may ye se how excellent franchise / In wommen is, whan they hem narwe avyse" (1987-88).

May operates according to her own self-interests. She purports to take pity on the lovesick Damyan and, to assuage his pain, she writes him a letter in which "she graunteth hym hire
verray grace" (1997): She specifies the day and place "Wher that she myghte unto his lust suffise" (1999). Meanwhile, she obviously derives no sexual pleasure from January with his "thikke brustles of his berd unsofte" (1824) and his "slakke skyn" (1849). May's pity, then, is a sham. By helping Damyan, she helps herself. And she is committed to helping herself: She copies a garden key for Damyan and choreographs their lustful meeting. Brian Stone calls May "a young acolyte of the Wife of Bath" (105). Indeed, May is concerned with self-preservation and self-gratification. She is not just a fresh morning in the month that is her name; she is a clever woman whose behavior and rhetorical strategies reflect the strength of her will.

May, like Alison and the Wife of Bath, is not above relatively unappealing, earthy behavior if and when a situation warrants it. When she returns home to January after receiving the initial letter from Damyan, she pretends that she needs to use the " pryvee" (1954): "She feyned hire as that she moste gon / Ther as ye woot that every wight moot neede" (1950-51). After reading the letter, she tears it up and "in the pryvee softly it caste" (1954).

Her moment with Damyan in the pear tree is ribald and somewhat unappealing as well. The Merchant recognizes the bizarre and uncomfortable situation at hand when he describes this moment:

Ladyes, I prey yow that ye be nat wrooth;
I kan nat glose, I am a rude man--
And sodeynly anon this Damyan
Gan pullen up the smok, an in he throng. (2350-53)

Interestingly, the Merchant begs for the forgiveness of ladies for describing in graphic terms the lusty actions of a woman. May's crude behavior reveals her attitude toward communication. She communicates not according to some vague code of decency but according to what she needs at the moment she needs it. The Merchant's language reflects the boldness of her actions: He has no better words to describe the sexual antics in the tree than "in he throng" (2353).

May often lies and acts dishonestly to protect her own interests and achieve her own desires. In the garden, January tells May what she will receive if she is true to him:

Thre thynges, certes, shal ye wynne therby:
First, love of Crist, and to youreself honour,
And al myn heritage, toun and tour;
I yeve it yow, maketh chartres as yow leste;
This shal be doon to-morwe er sonne reste,
So wisly God my soule brynge in blisse. (2170-75)

May responds to January's speech by expressing her concern about the preservation of her own soul and the "tendre flour" (2190) of her "wyfhod" (2190). She claims to believe that she will damage her name if she is untrue. She says:

if I do that lak,

Do strepe me and put me in a sak,
And in the nexte ryver do me drenche.
Of course, while she speaks these words, her plans to fulfill Damyan's lust have been set into motion. Damyan is in the garden waiting anxiously to couple with May while she lies to January. But she is dramatic and passionate and therefore convincing. January, already blind, is also somewhat deaf to his wife's slick, effective rhetoric. He hears only what he wants to hear; he believes her lies.

May behaves and speaks dishonestly again when January suddenly sees the lovers entwined in the tree. Before her climb, her words to January suggest that she is pregnant. She tells him:

I moste han of the peres that I see,
Or I moot dye, so soore longeth me
To eten of the smale peres grene.
Help, for hir love that is of hevene queene!
I telle yow wel, a womman in my plit
May han to fruyt so greet an appetit
That she may dyen but she of it have. (2331-37)

Her condition may simply be lust rather than pregnancy and the pears she so fervently desires may simply be--at risk of sounding like the Wife of Bath--the pears of Damyan. In any case, May convinces January to help her into the tree. When January regains his sight and sees the lovers, May (thanks to Proserpina) says, "As me was taught, to heele with youre eyen, / Was no thyng
bet, to make yow to see, / Than strugle with a man upon a tree" (2372-74).

May's keen power of persuasion is an important aspect of her rhetorical strategy. January does not believe her when she lies from the tree. He says, "He swyved thee; I saugh it with myne yen, / And elles be I hanged by the hals!" (2378-79). May calmly and logically tells January that he is bewildered and has not seen accurately. When he still doubts her, she tries to make him feel guilty to persuade him to believe her. She says, "This thank have I for I have maad yow see. / Allas, . . . that evere I was so kynde!" (2388-89). When January finally believes her, she boldly and ironically warns him, "He that mysconceyveth, he mysdemeth" (2410).

May speaks and communicates in ways that will protect and ensure her own self-interests. Her communicative and rhetorical methods consist of three basic practices: First, if she must behave crudely, she behaves crudely. Unlike Absolon, she is not a squeamish person. Second, she speaks and acts dishonestly when necessary to achieve her desires; indeed, she is a good liar. Third, she is extremely persuasive, whether lying or speaking somewhat honestly (as when she tells January that she wants some pears). She often peppers clear and logical explanations with statements intended to induce guilt to convince January to believe whatever she says.

* * *
Lakoff believes that women's language tends to "relegate women to certain subservient functions: that of sex object, or servant" (4). However, Alison, the Wife of Bath, and May tend to relegate men to these functions. As Cixous envisions for users of powerful female methods of communication, these strong women defy "partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes" (886).

Ganim maintains:

the marks of carnivalized language contribute to at least one distinctive form of discourse throughout Chaucer's texts, a discourse marked by its lively and often grotesque fascination with bodily, earthy, natural, and animal images, by its parody of and satiric response to official positions, and by its tendency to turn upside down established hierarchies. (114)

Ganim believes this discourse "is especially well-defined in the Wife of Bath's performance" (114). This discourse is also well-defined in the performances of Alison and May and is like the discourse Cixous proposes. With their strong rhetorical and communicative methods, Alison, the Wife of Bath, and May attempt to take back their goods and pleasures (Cixous 880). In chapter four, I will discuss the extent of the success of their ventures.
Fairest Under the Sun: The Weak Women

As I have previously discussed, narrators tend to describe weak women with flower or other-world imagery or abstract images of a character's great beauty. The language of the Knight when describing Emily follows this pattern. We are introduced to Emily when Palamon and Arcite first see her outside their dungeon window. Emily "fairer was to sene / Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene, / And fressher than the May with floures newe" (1035-37). Her hue competes with that of the rose. She is often called Emily the bright. She is like a being from another world; she sings like an angel and Palamon is not certain whether she is a woman or a goddess--perhaps the goddess Venus. In all, Emily is associated with flowers, brightness, angels, and goddesses. Martin states that Emily sounds "celestial, other-worldly, perhaps even asexual" (44). She may be beautiful but she is also vague and intangible. She lacks a bodily, sensual presence. She is certainly unlike a weasel or a colt. Her brightness is not compared to something substantial such as a gold coin; rather, she is like light--present but not active. The images that the Knight uses reflect her passive, peripheral presence and subdued methods of communication. She is often silent, allowing men to speak for her; when she does communicate, she often weeps and leaves her destiny in the hands of others.

Palamon and Arcite both fall in love with Emily. When arguing over who has a right to her, Palamon refers to her as "my lady" (1143): He says to Arcite:
Thus artow of my conseil, out of doute,  
And now thou woldest falsly been aboute  
To love my lady, whom I love and serve,  
And evere shal til that myn herte sterve. (1141-44)

Palamon has merely seen Emily from afar, yet he calls her his lady and assumes that he has a right to declare possession of her. Palamon again calls Emily his own when arguing with Arcite in the grove of trees: "Arcite, false traytour wikke, / Now artow bent, that lovest my lady so, . . . Thou shalt nat love my lady Emelye, / But I wol love hire onply and namo" (1580-89).

Emily has done nothing at the point of either argument to promote the possessiveness of either man. In fact, she is not even aware of their love. Yet, even when she has the opportunity to react, she remains silent and passive. She allows herself to be controlled and defined by the men around her as Lakoff maintains that speakers of women's language will (31). The possessiveness of the two men, especially Palamon's possessiveness, draws attention to Emily's submissiveness. While the men around her are bold, she is reticent.

Emily finally meets Palamon and Arcite when Theseus's hunting party happens upon the two men in the grove of trees. The men confess both their love for Emily and their identities to Theseus. Emily does not respond to the confessions of love; rather, she weeps along with her sister and the other women in the hunting party when Theseus plans to kill the men for their transgressions. Upon forgiving the men, Theseus speaks for Emily
and designs a plan to solve the problem at hand: "I speke as for
my suster Emelye, . . . that wheither he or thou / May with his
hundred, . . . Sleen his contrarie, or out of lystes dryve, /
Thanne shale I yeve Emelya to wyve" (1833, 1857-60). Again,
Emily is silent. Her silence suggests her acquiescence to the
wills of Theseus, Palamon, and Arcite.

Theseus again speaks for Emily when Arcite wins the battle
Theseus has arranged. He says, "Arcite of Thebes shal have
Emelie, / That by his fortune hath hire faire ywonne" (2658-59).
Emily's only response to the situation is a friendly glance at
Arcite: "she agayn hym caste a frendlich ye" (2680). Beyond
this, she is truly like a flower or a beam of light--present but
silent and seemingly without an opinion.

At the end of the Tale, Theseus tells Emily his "fulle
assent" (3075):

That gentil Palamon, youre owene knyght,
That serveth yow with wille, herte, and myght,
And ever hath doon syn ye first hym knewe,
That ye shul of youre grace upon hym rewe,
And taken hym for housbounde and for lord. (3077-81)

Although Theseus has already decided upon the course of Emily's
future, he includes her (or at least makes a pretense of
including her) in the determination of her fate: He reminds her
of Palamon's excellent attributes and unfailing dedication and
appeals to her "wommanly pitee" (3083). Yet, again, Emily does
not speak. The Knight tells us: "And thus with alle blisse and
melodye / Hath Palamon ywedded Emelye" (3097-98). Further, the Knight assures us that the marriage is a happy one. With this information, we realize that Emily has silently obeyed Theseus once again.

While the strong women in my discussion tend to laugh, the weak women tend to weep. Laughter and weeping both represent an overflow of emotion; but while laughter is an exuberant communicative act, weeping is a desperate communicative act. When Theseus is about to kill Palamon and Arcite in the grove of trees, Emily, along with the other women, begins to weep: "The queene anon, for verray wommanhede, / Gan for to wepe, and so dide Emelye, / And alle the ladyes in the compaignye" (1748-50). Emily again weeps when Arcite dies:

Shrighte Emelye, and howleth Palamon,
And Theseus his suster took anon
Swownynge, and baar hire fro the corps away.
What helpeth it to tarien forth the day
To tellen how she weep bothe eve and morwe? (2817-21)

Of course, Emily's response to Arcite's grisly death is not unusual or inappropriate; in fact, Palamon weeps as well. I am interested, however, in the fact that often when Emily does respond to a given situation, she weeps. Her typical response is either silence or weeping. She does not get angry; she does not disagree; she does not attempt to assert her own will, whatever that will might be. Instead, she weeps in seeming desperation
and frustration—as though she has no other way of expressing herself and no will to attempt to find a way.

Emily finally speaks (although only this one time) when she prays to Diana in Diana's temple. She says, "Chaste goddesse, wel wostow that I / Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf, / Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf" (2304-06). She asks Diana to "sende love and pees" (2317) to Palamon and Arcite and to "turne awey" (2318) the hearts of the two men from her. Emily's prayer reveals her true desire in life: to remain a virgin. However, to this expression of her true desire she adds, "if my destynee be shapen so / That I shal nedes have oon of hem two, / As sende me hym that moost desireth me" (2323-25). Emily speaks in the superpolite form Lakoff identifies as a characteristic of women's language: She does not want to offend or disrupt anyone or anything.

Emily never reveals her true desire to Theseus but rather lives silently and obediently with the second, less desirable option of her own prayer. Of course, both Emily and her sister are technically Theseus’s prisoners of war. Emily obviously considers it prudent to abide by Theseus’s wishes. After all, this is the man who imprisoned Palamon and Arcite "Perpetuelle—he nolde no raunsoun" (1024). Emily's public silence is, to a degree, politically wise—an act of self-preservation, really. But her prayer in the temple of Diana is private and yet she still mentions the politically safe act of marrying either Palamon or Arcite and obviously intends to marry either man if
she must. She claims to fervently wish to remain a virgin for life, yet the "alternate plan" nature of her prayer undermines her claim and reveals the weakness of her will.

To further illustrate my reasons for categorizing Emily as a weak woman, I must turn my discussion to Emily's sister, Ypolita. Ypolita may be the one and only strong woman in the Knight's Tale, but we do not receive enough information about her to adequately determine her character. However, she may be like the other strong women in my discussion because of the Knight's description of the battle waged by her and her country. The Knight claims that this story is "to long to heere" (875), but, in keeping with his rhetorical style, he provides a hefty glimpse of it:

I wolde have toold yow fully the manere
How wonnen was the regne of Femenye
By Theseus and by his chivalrye;
And of the grete bataille for the nones
Bitwixen Atthenes and Amazones;
And how asseged was Ypolita,
The faire, hardy queene of Scithia;
And of the feste that was at hir weddynge,
And of the tempest at hir hoom-comyng;
But al that thyng I moot as now forbere. (876-85)

The Knight says that there was a battle, a "grete bataille" (879) to be specific. If Theseus had merely conquered Ypolita's country without a significant struggle, the Knight would most
likely not describe the event as a battle. Further, if Scithia is "the regne of Femenye" (877) and Theseus battled "Amazones" (880), then one can assume that Ypolita was part of the battle and not merely a bystander. Hence, Ypolita put up a fight, even if an unsuccessful one, against Theseus. The mention of "the tempest at hir hoom-comynge" (884), if the tempest is metaphorical, suggests that the fight did not end when the battle ended and the marriage started. Ypolita's implied actions show that a woman is capable of at least attempting to retaliate when her interests are threatened or violated. Emily, however, never attempts to assert her will to protect her own interests. Martin points out that Emily is "often, as at her first appearance, a syntactical adjunct to her sister the queen" (42). Her syntactical position in the text reflects the difference between her sister's assertive behavior and her own passive behavior.

Emily's communicative and rhetorical behavior consists of three general practices: First, she allows men to speak for her and her silence communicates her acquiescence to the wills of others. Second, when she does respond to a situation, her response is frequently weeping. Finally, her speech, when she does speak, merely explains and supports her submissive actions. When she prays to Diana, we learn about her desire to preserve her virginity for life. However, her prayer reveals her belief that she has no control over her own destiny. She has a fatalistic attitude and so leaves her future in the hands of others. Although she wants, she does not seek: She wants to be
a virgin for life but she does not attempt to achieve her wish because she does not believe she is capable of achieving it. Rather than brashly seizing control of her own life, she demurely and politely allows life to control her.

* * *

Of the weak women in my discussion, Griselda of the Clerk's Tale is perhaps the most frustrating and infuriating. She is meek, accepting, and submissive to the point of absurdity. The Clerk describes her in vague language: she is one of "the faireste under sonne" (212). What exactly does this mean? Just how fair must one be to be one of the fairest under the sun? She is full of "vertuous beautee" (211): "For poverliche yfostred up was she, / No likerous lust was thurgh hire hente yronne" (213-14). She takes care of her father "in greet reverence and charitee" (221) and diligently tends a meager assortment of animals. She simply seems too good to be true and therefore intangible. Some detail, even a brief description of a wart on her chin, would make her a more substantial, tangible presence. Instead, she is a passive picture of virtue and humility. These early descriptions of Griselda, as frustrating as they may be, accurately reflect her behavior and rhetoric throughout the story.

When Walter presents his proposal to Griselda, he says to her:

"I seye this, by ye redy with good herte
To al my lust, and that I frely may,
As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,  
And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?  
And eek whan I sey 'ye,' ne sey 'nat 'nay,'  
Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?  
Swere this, and heere I swere oure alliance." (351-57)  

Griselda "quakynge for drede" (358) answers, "Lord, undigne and unworthy / Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede, / But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I" (359-61). Griselda fearfully promises to obey because she considers herself unworthy of Walter's attentions. At this moment, she establishes a pattern of complete submission to Walter's will.

Griselda maintains this pattern throughout Walter's testing of her loyalty and constancy. When Walter's sergeant comes to take her daughter, Griselda "as a lamb . . . sitteth meke and stille, / And leet this cruell sergeant doon his will" (538-39). She "neither weep ne syked, / Conformynge hire to that the markys lyked" (545-46). She bids her child farewell and tells the sergeant, "dooth my lordes heeste" (568). About her behavior, the Clerk remarks, "Wel myghte a mooder thanne han cryd 'allas!' / But nathelees so sad stidfast was she / That she endured al adversitee" (563-65). Her submissiveness is similar to Emily's silent acquiescence. Griselda speaks merely to reiterate her obedience--her words might as well be silence as she passively and patiently accepts the atrocities dealt her.

When Walter tells Griselda that he must have her son killed as well, she says, "I have . . . seyd thus, and evere shal: / I
wol no thyng, ne nyl no thyng, certayn, / But as yow list" (645-47). She tells Walter that she left her."wyl" (656) and "libertee" (656) at home with her old clothing. As when the sergeant takes her daughter, her words work merely to support her commitment to Walter's desires. She adds, "For wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese, / Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plese" (664-65). In other words, Griselda would rather die than disobey Walter, even if obedience means the death of her children.

In Walter's final test of Griselda's loyalty, he tells her that he intends to marry a new wife and that she must leave him. She neither questions Walter's motives nor expresses sadness or anger, she merely obeys Walter's commands. She thanks God and Walter for the marriage and says, "Unto my fader gladly wol I wende, / And with hym dwelle unto my lyves ende" (832-33). As Lakoff predicts a user of women's language might be, Griselda is absurdly, inappropriately polite. She submits completely to Walter and asks only for a smock to wear as she walks home. She appeals to Walter's sense of decency when she asks for the smock: "Ye koude nat doon so dishonest a thyng, / That thilke wombe in which youre children leye / Sholde biforn the peple, . . . Be seyn al bare" (876-79).

Walter is a marquis and Griselda comes from among the "povre folk" (204). Being of the ruling class, Walter has vast power over Griselda's fate. Griselda displays her awareness of her political situation when she says to Walter, "bitwixen youre
magnificence / And my poverte no wight kan ne may / Maken comparison; it is no nay" (815-17). Her submission to his will, therefore, is a act of self-preservation. But Griselda's words and behavior go beyond self-preserving acquiescence. Her language frequently contains self-deprecating remarks. She demonstrates not just a respect for Walter's position and political power, but a low opinion of herself. Lakoff explains that women's language frequently reveals a woman's lack of confidence in herself and need for confirmation of her opinions from others, especially men (16-17). Indeed, this is the case with Griselda. For example, when Walter tells Griselda that she must leave, she tells him that she does not even deserve to be his "chamberere" (819). She refers to her old clothes as her "wrecched clothes" (850). When Walter asks her to return to his house as his servant, Griselda does not simply agree to the idea, she emphatically supports it:

"Nat oonly, lord, that I am glad," quod she,
"To doon youre lust, but I desire also
Yow for to serve and plese in my degree
Withouten feyntyng, and shal evermo;
Ne nevere, for no wele ne no wo,
Ne shal the goost withinne myn herte stente
To love yow best with al my trewe entente." (967-73)
When Walter asks for her opinion of his supposed new wife, she says, "A fairer saugh I nevere noon than she" (1033).
Griselda's remarks are not necessary. She could obey Walter without belittling herself, but she does not. She could preserve herself without criticism of her own position and excessive praise of Walter's circumstances and decisions, but she does not. She obeys Walter's every wish while continually criticizing herself.

On several occasions, Griselda expresses her own desires. Her requests, however, merely communicate her fears and reinforce her submissive stance. When the sergeant comes for her daughter, she says:

But o thyng wol I prey yow of youre grace,
That, but my lord forbad yow, atte leeste
Burieth this litel body in som place
That beestes ne no briddes it torace." (569-72)

She is afraid that creatures will eat the corpse of her baby, but she is not afraid enough to ask the sergeant to bury the corpse safely even if Walter has forbidden it.

When the sergeant comes for her son, Griselda makes the same request:

Save this, she preyede hym that, if he myghte,
Hir litel sone he wolde in erthe grave
His tendre lymes, delicaat to sighte,
Fro foweles and fro beestes for to save.
But she noon answere of hym myghte have. (680-84)

Obviously, Griselda does not demand an answer from the sergeant. He leaves without giving her one and she accepts his silence.
Again, she does not assert her wishes with much zeal. She exhibits fear of hungry birds and beasts, but her fear is not as intense as her desire to obey Walter.

As I discussed earlier, Griselda requests a smock from Walter when he tells her that she must leave him. She wants the smock, however, so that Walter will not be dishonored by his people seeing the bare womb that held his children. She says, "Lat me nat lyk a worm go by the weye. / Remember yow, myn owene lord so deere, / I was youre wyf, though I unworthy weere" (880-82). Griselda does not ask for the smock in order to preserve any last shred of her own dignity; rather, she requests it to preserve Walter's dignity. Thus, although Griselda asks for something for herself, she has lost any sense of self. She continues her total compliance to Walter's will as she exhibits concern for Walter's reputation.

Griselda makes a final request of Walter when she meets his supposed new wife. She says, "O thyng biseke I yow, and warne also, / That ye ne prikke with no tormentynge / This tendre mayden, as ye han doon mo" (1037-39). Griselda, observing the "tendre mayden" (1039), believes "She koude nat adversitee endure / As koude a povre fostred creature" (1042-43). Griselda is more assertive here than in her previous requests; her words are not just a request, they are a warning. Griselda subtly acknowledges the torment she has endured. Her calm, patient front seems to be crumbling. Might it collapse entirely? It is not given the chance. Walter finally tells her the truth and she returns
completely to her subservient position. She thanks God that Walter has saved her children; she has apparently forgotten that he took them and kept them away for many years. She expresses joy at being restored to her previous position; she says, "Now rekke I nevere to been deed right heere; / Sith I stonde in youre love and in youre grace, / No fors of deeth, ne whan my spirit pace!" (1090-92). To her children, she reiterates her earlier fears: "Youre woful mooder wende stedfastly / That cruuel houndes or som foul vermyne / Hadde eten yow" (1094-96). She thinks only of the cruel beasts, not of the cruelty she has endured because of Walter's beastly will.

Throughout the Tale, the Clerk offers his opinion on Walter's cruelty. He says, "as for me, I seye that yvelle it sit / To assaye a wyf whan that it is no nede, / And putten hire in angwyssh and in drede" (460-62). About Walter's relentlessness, he says, "What koude a sturdy housbonde moore devyse / To preeve hir wyfhod and hir stedefastnesse, / And he continuynge evere in sturdinesse?" (698-700). Indeed, Walter is an unjustly cruel man. However, Griselda's complete subservience to the will of Walter helps perpetuate the cruelty.

Griselda's strict obedience, as far as she is aware, allows the murder of her children. Of course, her children are not actually murdered, but she believes they are and allows it to happen. She will not even stand by her desire to preserve her children's corpses from scavenging animals if Walter forbids it. She is motivated by a desire to preserve herself by obeying
Walter. She says, "I nyl yow disobe ye, / For to be deed, though me were looth to deye" (363-64). She chooses obedience over death even at the expense of her children. Her self-preservation through obedience is not a strong and mighty survival tactic. Rather, it is a pathetic helplessness; the "self" that Griselda attempts to preserve is already lifeless. I realize that this description might not be entirely fair to Griselda for she is strong in one sense: She is fiercely determined to remain passive and subservient and to hide from Walter any anguish she might feel. Yet her determination merely leads to submission and outward denial of her true emotions. Thus, any strength she has is, perhaps, terribly misguided.

Griselda's communicative and rhetorical behavior is marked by utter submissiveness. Her acquiescence transcends mere self-preservation as she continually criticizes and belittles herself. She obeys Walter even at what she believes to be the cost of her children's lives. And she is forgetful: At the Tale's end, she expresses gratitude and happiness—not anger, not remorse, not disgust. She forgets and thus silently forgives Walter's cruelty.

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Like Griselda, Dorigen of the Franklin's Tale is "oon the faireste under sonne" (734). Dorigen is "of so heigh kynrede" (735) that Arveragus is hesitant to tell her about "his wo, his peyne, and his distresse" (737) over loving her. But Dorigen is a compassionate woman; she takes pity on Arveragus's suffering,
admires his "worthynesse" (738) and "meke obeysaunce" (739), and agrees to marry him.

The marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus is quite different from the marriage of Griselda and Walter. Arveragus promises to give Dorigen freedom and respect:

Of his free wyl he swoor hire as a knyght  
That nevere in al his lyf he, day ne nyght,  
Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie  
Agayn hir wyl, ne kithe hire jalousie,  
But hire obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al,  
As any lovere to his lady shal,  
Save that the name of soveraynetee,  
That wolde he have for shame of his degree. (745-52)

Dorigen replies, "Ye profre me to have so large a reyne . . . I wol be youre humble trewe wyf" (755, 758). Throughout the narration, the Franklin offers several of his opinions on successful marriage: "Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye. . . . Love is a thyng as any spirit free" (764, 767). He explains: "Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee, / And nat to been constreyned as a thral; / And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal" (768-70). He refers to Arveragus as Dorigen's servant and lord, "Servant in love, and lord in marriage. / Thanne was he bothe in lordshipe and servage" (793-94).

Walter's doubts about Griselda's loyalty drive him to cruelly and relentlessly test her; Arveragus and Dorigen, on the other hand, trust and respect each other from the beginning and
live "in blisse and in solas" (802). The information offered about the marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen offers more insight into Dorigen's character than does the vague description "she was oon the faireste under sonne" (734). She may be fair, but she is also compassionate and prudent. Her compassion leads to her agreement to marry Arveragus. She agrees to be a humble, true wife because he promises to give her liberty and respect. In other words, she both kindly and wisely helps to arrange the conditions of her own marriage.

At the point of the marriage arrangement in the Tale, Dorigen is a stronger character than either Emily or Griseld. She neither silently allows Arveragus to take her as his wife nor, trembling with fear and awe, promises death before disobedience. Rather, the two mutually determine the nature of their marriage. Arveragus may be Dorigen's lord, but "she fil of his accord / To take hym for hir housbonde and hir lord" (741-42).

Dorigen is simply a fuller character than Emily or Griseld and, in some ways, like the strong women in my discussion. Although the Franklin does not describe her with the kind of substantial images that the Miller uses with Alison and the Wife of Bath uses with herself, he does give her a voice and a mind. For example, Dorigen philosophically ponders the existence of "the grisly rokkes blake" (859) at the base of "the bank on heigh" (849) near her "castel faste by the see" (847). She calls the rocks "a foul confusion / Of werk than any fair creacion / Of
swich a parfit wys God and a stable" (869-71). She asks God, "Why han ye wroght this werk unresonalbe?" (872). She believes the rocks do no good for anything or anyone and asks God, "how thanne may it bee / That ye swiche meenes make it to destroyen, / Whiche meenes do no good, but evere anoyen?" (882-84). She understands the teachings of clerks who say "that al is for the beste" (886), but she exhibits her realization of the limits of human understanding when she says, "I ne kan the causes nat yknowe" (887). She finally leaves "al disputison" (890) to clerks; as Martin states, "Unlike the pugnacious Wife of Bath, Dorigen has no wish to usurp their [the clerks'] prerogative" (127). Still, her attitude is perhaps wiser than that at which any clerk might arrive. She realizes human intellectual limits but nonetheless understands her own fear and longs for answers. Anne Thompson Lee maintains:

The fact that she has enough spirit to complain, to question the universe, shows an energy of character to which we respond with intuitive sympathy. Dorigen is an ordinary and rather conventional woman who recognizes that she is living in a man's world, one which is controlled by God and the clerks, and to her as a woman it does not altogether make sense. (172) Dorigen again philosophizes when Aurelius informs her of the supposed disappearance of the rocks and reminds her of her promise. She complains to Fortune and realizes that her only
possible options are "deeth or elles dishonour; / Oon of thise
two bihoveth me to chese" (1358-59). She considers her options:

But nathelees, yet have I lever to lese
My lif than of my body to have a shame,
Or knowe myselven fals, or lese my name;
And with my deth I may be quytt, ywis. (1360-63)

She recalls the stories of a great number of women who chose
suicide over dishonor. Her "death or else dishonor" debate
brings to mind Griselda's "death before disobedience" position.
However, Griselda does not cite numerous examples of women who
chose to die rather than disobey. Further, Griselda refuses to
disobey her husband. Dorigen, on the other hand, does not want
her body "to have a shame" (1361), she does not want to lose her
name or be false to herself. In addition, she says, "I wol be
trewen unto Arveragus, / Or rather sleen myself in som manere"
(1424-25). She wants to be true to Arveragus not because it is
her role but because it is her desire. Thus, while Griselda's
care is centered entirely on her husband, Dorigen's care
involves both her husband and herself.

Dorigen's trouble starts with something she says "in pley"
(988). Her method of discouraging Aurelius through play is
reminiscent of Alison's kiss for Absolon. Like Alison, Dorigen
attempts to control a situation by way of a trick. She assigns
Aurelius an impossible task--moving the rocks from the coast--and
believes that the task's impossibility guarantees her own
security. About the task she says, "wel I woot that it shal
never bityde" (1001). She believes it is safe to promise Aurelius her love if he can move the rocks. Likewise, Alison believes that giving Absolon a special kiss will enable her to control his actions. Of course, Alison's plan succeeds. After all, what are the chances that the squeamish Absolon will enjoy the kiss and cause the failure of Alison's plan? However, thanks to magic, Aurelius is able to make it look as though the rocks have disappeared. Consequently, Dorigen's plan fails. Yet, before the crisis occurs, Dorigen uses a playful method—a method like that of a strong woman—to attempt to rid herself of Aurelius's attentions.

As much like a strong woman as Dorigen initially seems, her behavior becomes like that of the other weak woman in this chapter as the crisis unfolds. She becomes submissive to both the circumstances and her husband.

When Aurelius tells Dorigen about the disappearance of the rocks, he says, "I have do so as ye comanded me; / And if ye vouche sauf, ye may go see" (1333-34). But Dorigen does not go and see. She exclaims, "For wende I nevere by possibilitee / That swich a monstre or merveille myghte be!" (1343-44) and goes home and "wepeth, wailleth, al a day or two, / And swowneth, that it routhe was to see" (1348-49). In other words, she blindly accepts what has occurred. Further, she considers suicide before at least confirming with her own senses what Aurelius claims. She does not get angry at Aurelius; she does not tell him to get lost; she does not even attempt to explain that she made a
promise to him only "in pley" (988). Thus, what starts in play becomes serious. The serious manner in which Dorigen takes Aurelius' news leads her to submission and acceptance of both the supernatural events and the words of her own promise.

Dorigen submits to the will of Arveragus when he returns home. Like the women in the Knight's Tale, Dorigen weeps as a means of communicating her feelings of helplessness and despair. When Arveragus asks her why she is weeping, "she gan wepen ever lenger the moore" (1462). He tells her, "Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay!" (1474). And without argument, Dorigen goes to Aurelius. Martin calls this the "culminating irony" of the supposedly ideal marriage arrangement of Dorigen and Arveragus: "Arveragus does finally assert his authority over Dorigen in, of all things, telling her to sleep with another man" (123).

When Aurelius asks Dorigen where she is going, she answers, "Unto the gardyn, as myn housbonde bad, / My trouthe for to holde--allas, allas!" (1512-13). She speaks "half as she were mad" (1511). Once Arveragus enters the scene, she behaves as though she has no mind of her own. She no longer wonders whether she should choose death or dishonor; she allows Arveragus to make her decision for her and meekly abides by his wishes.

When Aurelius releases her from her promise, she neither runs laughing home nor reprimands him for his earlier behavior. Instead, she continues her subservient behavior. She assumes a position of submission before Aurelius: "She thonketh hym upon hir knees al bare" (1545). Perhaps she should thank him for his
generosity and compassion at the particular moment; but should she not also express anger at him? After all, his earnest response to her playful comment began the entire crisis.

By the Tale's end, Dorigen no longer seems like the woman who philosophized about the rocks. Instead, she is like a puppet flopping about between Arveragus and Aurelius passively awaiting instructions about what to do next. Dorigen's communicative and rhetorical behavior starts out strong but ends up weak. She becomes submissive, expresses her frustrations and anguish through excessive weeping, and allows the men in the Tale to determine her fate.

* * *

Congruent with Lakoff's theory, Emily, Griselda, and Dorigen deny themselves means of strong expression by using superpolite language and communicative behavior; avoiding any comments that might reveal a sense of humor and, subsequently, comfort with their emotions and confidence in the situation; and dutifully withholding their true feelings. Thus, each of these women denies herself access to a voice in any decision-making and a chance to determine her own fate. These women do not operate as autonomous individuals; rather, they allow others, notably men, to control their lives. However, in chapter four, I will discuss the presence of a certain strength in weakness and the possibility of "powerless power."
Weakness in Strength, Strength in Weakness

Following the example of Cook's reading, one sees that Alison's behavior is carnivalesque. She is not a picture of Christian virtue and she certainly "interrupts" the authority of her husband with her "unofficial" female language and communication. Alison's words and communicative actions help to bring about the ruin of John--he is finally both a cuckold and a fool. The "riche gnof" (3188) of the Tale's beginning becomes he who "was holde wood in al the toun" (3846) by the Tale's end. Alison also humiliates the other men in the Tale, even if indirectly, in true carnival fashion. Appropriately, Alison laughs as she defies John's authority and humiliates the men. And, in the end, she succeeds in drawing everyone into her laughter: "every wight gan laughen at this stryf" (3849). The laughter occurs beyond the boundaries of the Tale as well as the pilgrims laugh at the fun in the Reeve's Prologue: "for the moore part they loughe and pleyde" (3858). Alison takes the lead as everyone "break[s] up the 'truth' with laughter" (Cixous 888). The Tale's humor disrupts the established tradition of noble (and usually humorless) romance.

Of course, the Miller's purpose in telling his Tale is to "quite" (3119) the Knight's Tale. Martin maintains that in the Knight's Tale, "Love gives structure to the lives of the characters, . . . Love, civilisation, poetry and theology give form and meaning to sex" (78). She continues, "The comic thrust of the Miller's Tale is to expose this as a sham. Courtliness
and culture are a façade masking the real purpose of mating with Alison. The animal imagery describing her suggests which is the more powerful force" (78).

Both the Miller and Alison are two of the many voices belonging to Chaucer the narrator. Thus, it is Chaucer the narrator who "quites" what he himself says in the Knight's Tale and reveals the "sham." Alison is an important agent, an important voice, in this procedure.

Jordan believes that meaning in Chaucer's work is "contingent and ambiguous rather than confidently authoritative" (2). Along these lines, none of the Tales is "confidently authoritative" about any issue, including the carnivalesque uprooting of authority itself. Thus, Alison's language cannot be any more authoritative than the male authority of John that she disrupts. For this reason, incongruities exist in an analysis of Alison's communicative and rhetorical strategies.

Alison wants to enjoy the sexual company of Nicholas--and she does. At the end of the Tale, she wants to preserve her own reputation--and she does. Alison succeeds in fulfilling her own desires while John, Absolon, and Nicholas pay the price for her success. But how truly successful is she?

Alison is most successful when she speaks dishonestly. Through dishonest language, she works Nicholas into a lustful frenzy, moves the trick along its course and toward its triumphant (for her) finish, and discredits her husband to save
her own name. When she is honest, she is a rude, hard, cold woman who is not above crude behavior if it suits her purposes.

Raymond P. Tripp believes that love has rules and, in the Miller's Tale, love's rules get broken as characters attempt to control love (208, 210). John is jealously possessive of Alison, Nicholas attempts to trap Alison in his plan, and Absolon's vanity leads him to disenchantment and finally violence (210-11). Tripp states:

Few students of the tale, caught up in the rough and ready comedy of its conclusion, have paid sufficient attention to the ugliness of Absolon's intentions. The hot coulter, for all its appropriate sexual symbolism, is a murderous weapon intended for the woman Alison, not for the rival male Nicholas, since Absolon had no way of telling that the latter would get into the act.

(211)

However, Tripp continues, "In the end Alison, like love, remains free and we surmise in control of herself--and the situation" (211). Thus, Alison is the character at whom punishment is directed even if not administered--Nicholas is merely in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yet, if Alison is the intended victim of Absolon's "violent and hateful act" (Tripp 211), then she does not emerge from the events completely unscathed. The possibility of punishment is a punishment of its own. If she were considered completely free of fault by Absolon (and thus
ultimately Chaucer the narrator), then Absolon would not have returned to seek revenge.

But Absolon's revenge is not successful. He succeeds in burning the buttocks of Nicholas; but he does not accomplish his true mission—the burning of Alison. Hence, despite Absolon's angry intentions, Alison does go free, although perhaps not as free as initially perceived. The darkness of Absolon's emotions casts a shadow on Alison's success and suggests Chaucer's subtle disapproval of her communicative and rhetorical tactics.

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Haskell calls the Wife of Bath Alison's "senior counterpart" (9). And, like Alison, the Wife engages in carnivalesque behavior as she humiliates and controls her many husbands and openly defies male authority. The Wife defies the authority of the Church as well. Stone explains, "the Church taught that attention to its doctrine enabled virtuous people to resist errant astrological predeterminings" (89). Meanwhile, Stone calls the Wife an "astrological determinist": "she lays responsibility for her instincts and morals on Venus and Mars" (89). The Wife, being neither especially virtuous nor a strict adherent to Church doctrine, does not resist her astrologically determined condition in life. In fact, she boasts about it.

Beryl Rowland's position undermines the possible triumph of the Wife's carnivalesque disruption of authority. Rowland maintains, "Although Alys's provocative behavior, flamboyancy of attire, determined attempts at 'purveyance' suggest that she
still retains the 'ragery' and exuberance of her youth, she is not a satisfied woman" (143). Rowland believes that the Wife is "loaded with neurotic symptoms" (143) and maintains that, although admittedly promiscuous, the Wife does not enjoy sex (144-45). In this view, the Wife's promiscuity is a frustrated search for fulfillment rather than a defiant assertion of female strength. The Wife has not succeeded in taking back her pleasures as Cixous believes a strong woman like her should.

Rowland does not believe that the Wife and Jankyn live happily ever after once the Wife seizes control of the marriage (145). About the Wife's final lines of her Prologue, "God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde / As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde, / And also trewe, and so was he to me" (823-25), Rowland says:

Unless we are to believe in the total fidelity of every woman from the northern to the southern hemisphere since the world began, Alys's preposterous claims are appropriate to the style of living which she has never renounced and which, with her final victory over Jankyn, she can resume with impunity. (146)

Rowland notes the "cheerful irony" of the Wife's conclusion: "[the Wife] never gives up her pilgrimage in search of more life and love" (146). Consequently, through this use of irony, the Wife toys with words--when purporting to be honest, she hides her actual motives behind sarcasm. The Wife herself says, "For half so boldely kan ther no man / Swere and lyen, as a womman kan"
Thus, like Alison, her junior counterpart, the Wife is often most persuasive when dishonest.

Martin takes issue with the Wife's criticisms of her husbands. She explains that the criticisms "largely consist of a rehearsal of their [the husbands'] imagined criticisms of her" (8). Martin asks, "Why not attack them for their own faults?" and wonders, "Is Chaucer condemning her out of her own mouth, using his most articulate woman character to voice the case against women?" (8).

On a different note, Haskell sees the Wife as Chaucer's "most positive creation of a strong woman" and believes that Chaucer uses the Wife to voice some of his own social beliefs, "including forceful ideas about women" (10). Similarly, Stone believes the Wife is "a kind of special representative of Chaucer" in the debate about relations between the sexes who "believes in harmony between partners, however it is arrived at" (85).

In a sense, Martin dispels the discrepancies between her own concerns and the beliefs of Haskell and Stone when she says, "The Wife of Bath presents a series of conflicting views, as if the character is a focus for contradictory attitudes and aspirations" (93). The Wife is also, it seems, a source of contradictory responses and interpretations. She is strong and yet her strength is questionable and debatable. She triumphs over men and gains the sovereignty she so desires, but she is restless and perhaps dissatisfied. She often achieves her desires through
dishonesty. She seems reluctant, as Martin points out, to attack her husbands' faults. If she is a direct mouthpiece for Chaucer, she reveals the ambiguity and uncertainty of Chaucer's own views. Discrepancies in the Wife's communication call into question Chaucer's confidence in the authority of language.

* * *

May of the Merchant's Tale is the agent of the unhappily married Merchant's carnivalesque attack of Christian marriage. As Martin maintains, the Merchant shows married love to be a mere delusion (117); his goal is "to savage the sacramental view of marriage and the romantic view of love" (121). Martin explains: "The generic complexity and generic conflicts of the Tale culminate in a fabliau sexual exploit set in the garden of romance. Like the disposal of the love letter in the privy, it condemns romance as filth adorned with rhetoric" (117). Pearsall believes that the "gratuitous bit of information about the fate of Damian's love-letter (1954), suggest[s] not a healthy animal vitality [in May] but a perverted cold sexuality" (138). May's slick rhetoric and bold behavior are a carnivalization of the rhetoric and behavior expected in Christian marriage. The language of the narrator reflects this uprooting of the good and noble; Martin states:

The narrator's 'rude' (2351) speech at the crucial moment, 'in he throng' (2353), January's 'Ye, algate in it went!' (2376) compromise the elevated and allusive
style of the rest of the Tale, as if the noble diction were merely a gloss on the vile reality. (118)

Thus, is May, one of my strong woman and an important agent in the Merchant's scheme, truly successful? Margaret Hallissy believes that in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale Chaucer illustrates "his awareness of the desirability of widowhood in the Middle Ages":

The Wife of Bath's privileged situation—heir to the worldly goods of three rich old husbands, so affluent that she . . . can indulge in her lecherousness with two poor young husbands—illustrates the advantages of being a widow in the Middle Ages. (295)

Further, "in general the audience of a work of medieval literature would have assumed that widows were in a favorable situation, both economically and socially, . . . in all economic groups except the very poor" (Hallissy 299). Turning to the Merchant's Tale, Hallissy explains:

May would best serve her own economic interest by securing Januarie's heritage to herself, by excluding the chance of an heir if possible, and by wearing Januarie out in the sexual excess he so enjoys. Then she could, like the Wife of Bath, live happily ever after, with or without a Damyan. (295)

January intends to leave everything to May, heir or no heir. Hallissy maintains, "if she can remain faithful and outlast Januarie, she will be a wealthy and independent woman, her own
woman, well at ease" (300). Hallissy explains that May will be financially and legally more successful if she does not have a child (301). Concerning pregnancy, Hallissy says, "The ineptness of Januarie's lovemaking, described in such graphic detail, would have sent a signal to the medieval reader that the marriage is likely to be barren" (303). Thus, if May can remain faithful, pregnancy is not a concern. But May is a "lecherous creature" who "foolishly and impetuously risks all for the interlude in the tree" (Hallissy 295).

Although I have categorized May as strong, Hallissy's argument reveals May's deeper weakness: "She is too much the sensual animal to operate systematically and pragmatically in her own self-interest" (295). May achieves what she wants at the moment she wants it, but does not plan beyond the moment. She succeeds in tricking her husband and achieving gratification, but risks possible future success in her arboreal antics with Damyan. Stone maintains that May wins a round of the war between the sexes (105). Indeed, she may win a round, but she might not win the war. Hallissy states May's major flaw well: "in this situation an intelligent woman should not risk pregnancy; ergo May is not intelligent" (304).

May's antics compromise both the image of romance and marriage and her own strength. Her strong-willed attempts to achieve self-gratification jeopardize the future possibility of her continued self-fulfillment. Martin asserts, "The pluralism of the Tale invites the audience to construct better meanings
than January's, May's or the Merchant's" (121). Chaucer issues this invitation within the Tale:

One of the ambiguities which Chaucer has planted in the story is whether May is pregnant when she climbs into the tree (she uses food-cravings as an excuse for a boost from Januarie), or whether she might be pregnant when she climbs down. (Hallissy 301)

In addition to wondering about May's condition, we wonder about her future and discover that it, too, is indeterminate. May's, the Merchant's, and finally Chaucer's words do not lead us to the truth.

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Turning to the weak women, Emily, as passive as she is, moves the narrative of the Knight's Tale in its most significant directions. The mourning Theban women at the beginning of the Tale foreshadow Emily's later actions. The Theban women weep, beg for Theseus's mercy, and successfully persuade Theseus to avenge their husbands' deaths. Likewise, Emily and the women in the hunting party weep, move Theseus to pity, and succeed in saving the lives of Palamon and Arcite. And the rest, as they say, is history.

William F. Woods maintains:

it is crucial to recognize that Theseus's authority is balanced and conditioned by natural forces of love and change that are far more subtle and deeply derived than even his prudent statesmanship. It is this 'natural
justice' that we see reflected in the tantalizingly empty, mirror-like role of Emelye, who must be weak to manifest the powerful hand of nature in human affairs, . . . . (277)

Woods points out Emily's role as "the focus of every important episode" (277). He explains, "Her timid, private prayer, an apparently minor investment of self, appears nevertheless to decide the public conflict that creates the outcome of the tale" (277).

Woods sees Emily as possessing a significant degree of control over both Palamon and Arcite. Palamon longs to possess Emily and, in so wishing, "he himself is 'contained' by desire" (290). Likewise, Emily signals the fate of Arcite:

In the moment before the fury appears, Arcite looks up into the stands and [Emily] casts down at him a 'freendlich ye,' yet her glance recalls the painting in Diana's temple, where the goddess, seated high on the back of a great stag, looks down toward Pluto's 'derke regioun' (2801). (297-98)

Hence, Emily is both Palamon's keeper and, as Arcite himself asserts, the ender of Arcite's life. These two roles are unintentional yet important enough to give Emily a degree of strength beyond her outward weakness.

At the end of the Tale, Theseus appears to decide the future of Emily. However, Woods explains, "Emelye has already chosen Palamon over Arcite, an outcome that Diana described as being the
will of the gods and that Saturn reaffirmed by arranging Arcite's death" (305). In other words, Emily decides her own fate in her prayer; Theseus is merely the agent through whom her fate is realized. Thus, the illusion in the scene is not the choice that Theseus presents to Emily; rather, the illusion is Theseus's own assertion of will.

Like Woods, Martin observes the subtle strength beneath the weakness of Emily. She calls Emily's single speech "the more vibrant for being unexpected and for saying something unexpected" (48). Martin states, "As far as I know, Emily is the only woman in English literature until the twentieth century to express the desire not to have children" (50). Emily would rather hunt than bear and raise children because she loves to hunt; her reasons reflect an awareness of and concern for her own self-interests. She does not wish to remain a virgin because she feels she would be an inadequate lover or mother; rather, she longs for the freedom available to her through lifelong virginity—freedom to partake of activities she enjoys.

Martin believes that Emily is not merely a shy, quietly dignified virgin; she points out that Emily is an Amazon and "a votary of the goddess who presides over the natural and wild" (51). She continues, "Diana's chastity has its savage aspect" (Martin 51). Indeed, there is something savage and wild in Emily's desire to emulate Diana. She does not want to give in to the order and balance of marriage and motherhood. However, her reluctance to fight for what she wants overshadows the force and
strength inherent in her desires. Nonetheless, she at least longs for control of her own life over the expectations of authority and tradition.

Martin observes the control Emily has over Palamon and Arcite: "Palamon and Arcite imprison themselves a second time, and perhaps more seriously, when they are captivated by Emily" (45-46). Turning Martin's statement around, Emily captivates Palamon and Arcite and aids them in imprisoning themselves. Emily, then, is a jailer. Again, she does not captivate and imprison the men intentionally. But without her existence, there would be no story. In this way, Emily's unintentional effects take on a strength of their own and lend a degree of strength to Emily.

* * *

About his Tale, the Clerk explains:

This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde
Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
For it were inportable, though they wolde,
But for that every wight, in his degree,
Sholde be constant in adversitee
As was Grisilde; thercfor Pettrak writeth
This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth.
(1142-48)

The Clerk advises, "Lat us thanne lyve in vertuous suffraunce" (1162). Reviewing Griselda's trials and unfailing patience, we realize and understand the allegorical nature of the Tale. Yet
Chaucer appoints a woman to be the voice of "vertuous suffraunce" (1162), a fact that is difficult to ignore despite the Tale's larger message. Thomas A. Van remarks:

The story's allegory has nourished us intellectually, but we cannot easily forget how we have been vexed and tried watching what human beings, who admittedly have been placed in the story to suggest ideas and ideals, do to other human beings. . . . we often wish we could say more about why this Walter does it to this Griselda. (214)

I have stated that Griselda is infuriatingly submissive and weak. However, as Martin maintains, "The powerless have their own bitter sources of power. Griseldas produce Walters" (147). Similarly, Ganim explains:

There was a time when critics agreed that the problem of the Clerk's Tale was the monstrous Walter, but there is now some disagreement as to who the real monster of the tale might be. After all, there are ways in which Griselda herself seems monstrously passive, or, to be more accurate, passive/aggressive.

(121)

Van maintains, "The total control [Walter] insists upon, although it would befit any medieval ruler, also reflects personal uncertainty" (217). Van continues, "Walter seems glad but also mystified and troubled about [Griselda's] unchanging willingness to obey him in all things. The only tension evident
here is his, for throughout it all Griselda shows only calm" (217). Thus, while tormenting Griselda, Walter torments himself. And he is a man already tormented by fear. Van explains:

[Griselda's] lot embodies what he is most afraid of having happen to himself. She lives a life over which she exercises no control or foreordination. She is dependent on someone else not only for whatever happens to her, but also for the explanation of it. (219)

Walter's relentless testing reveals the magnitude of his fear and uncertainty: In Griselda, he sees what he knows he is not capable of--patience in adversity and acceptance of one's condition in life, whatever that condition might be. So he tests and tests her, tormenting himself in the process.

Griselda controls Walter in another way as well. Van explains:

Walter's plan of testing continues to be subject to the personal uncertainties which made it necessary. Walter alters appearances to test his wife, covers his own emotions with glowering and menace, ... how can he be certain that Griselda is not also feigning? (221)

Walter cannot be sure that Griselda is not feigning; there simply is no way for him to be sure. Griselda's silence and stoicism, then, aggravate and intensify Walter's fear and insecurity.

The "powerless power" of Griselda acts not only on Walter but also on the Clerk. After all, Griselda's relentless submission makes Walter's actions all the more horrible: Her
patience intensifies his aggression. And the Clerk is greatly bothered by Walter's aggression. Van maintains, "one voice in the story troubles continually about Walter's actions before every test and ultimately resorts to a feminist manifesto on the traditional bias of all clerks against women" (215). The Clerk's uneasy voice, Van says, "adds considerable rhetorical intensity to the narration [and] indicates a struggle between the teller and the severity of his material" (215). And at the root of the material's severity is, of course, Griselda.

Cook refers to the Clerk, with his books and learning and religious authority, as a "Lenten figure in the carnival procession" (184). He explains, "The opposition between carnival and Lent was a structural principle of the carnival world, indicating, as it did, the struggle between the popular and official cultures of medieval Europe" (184). Cook maintains that, whether we read the Tale "as a covert form of preaching about the relationship between Christians and their God or about the proper role of women in marriage," the Tale "carries messages about the importance of submission and suffering which were characteristic of the official teaching of the medieval Church" (185). The Clerk represents, then, an opposition to carnival. Yet, the aforementioned struggle present in the Clerk's voice finally causes him to join the carnival world to which he is initially opposed: "[the] sudden transition from the misogynistic implication of his story to the praise of women in
his song" represents the Clerk's shift to the carnivalesque (Cook 188-89).

Van maintains:

[Walter's] high-minded marriage to Griselda and then his abuse and replacement of her indicate the gap he feels between the public and private definitions of himself. The tests by which Griselda's virtue is judged bring out an awareness of a dark world historically prior to or perhaps continuously underneath this ordered and ceremonious utopia. Each test suggests a cancellation of one of the most fundamental values necessary to any human society.

(220)

The carnival world exposed by the Clerk at the end of the Tale is Van's "dark world" revealed in a brighter light: Carnival unravels the order and ceremony of Walter's utopia. Cook states, "The Clerk is carnivalised by the pilgrimage and, in the process, he moves from one discursive world to another" (189). Griselda's reactions (or lack thereof) to Walter's actions ultimately cause the Clerk to move into the carnival world. Griselda is the agent, then, of the Clerk's carnivalization.

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As the Franklin's Tale progresses, Dorigen descends more and more deeply into weak communication and behavior. By the end of the Tale, she submits completely to the wills and instructions of both Arveragus and Aurelius. Despite her passivity, however, the
entire narrative revolves around her. Lee explains, "Dorigen is at the heart of Franklin's Tale. She is the most important, sympathetic, and convincing character in the tale, and she provides the focus for all of the serious issues which it raises" (169). At the Tale's climax, she is the agent who sets off the chain reaction of good will: She obeys Arveragus and goes to Aurelius. Impressed by Arveragus's integrity, Aurelius releases her from her promise. Hearing Aurelius's account of the story, the magician releases Aurelius from his debt. Dorigen is, then, the central mover of the narrative.

Through this central mover Chaucer reveals his uneasiness with the authority of language and his doubts about the possibility of absolutes. Dorigen refuses Aurelius's offer but then cannot leave well enough alone: She offers Aurelius an opportunity, impossible though it seems, to win her love. As Martin explains, "[Dorigen's] absolute 'No' modulates into a playful, conditional, unintended 'Yes'" (125). By the end of the Tale, we realize that Dorigen's absolute language is slippery and uncertain while her language spoken in play is substantial and meaningful.

Dorigen's playful language represents Chaucer's "pluralistic poetics": a poetics whose "primary and always manifest presupposition [is] that language is conventional and inevitably ambiguous" (Jordan 10). Jordan maintains, "human choice inevitably introduces a dimension of arbitrariness, the question or correctness--or truth--is always open. The rhetor is an
ambiguous authority" (13). In the Franklin's Tale, Dorigen is
the rhetor--she is a creation of the Franklin who is a creation
of Chaucer the narrator who is finally a creation of Chaucer the
rhetor. The narrative revolves around her playful, flexible
statement just as truth revolves around ambiguous, malleable
authority.

Martin maintains:

Dorigen inhabits a romance rather than a classical
genre--the Franklin's expression of modesty in his
Prologue includes the disclaimer that he never slept on
Mount Parnassus or studied Cicero--a romance in which
the logic may be gentler and more forgiving than in
tragedy, whose compromises have an element of common
sense. It is characteristic of Chaucer to eschew the
absolutes of tragedy in favour of the fluidities of
romance or the deflations of comedy. (129)

Martin believes the romance of the Franklin's Tale "proves broad
enough to accommodate an attack on romance" (129). She explains,
"It moves on from the love problem to the money problem, from the
knight's surrender of his wife, from the squire's renunciation of
her, to the clerk's refusal of payment" (Martin 129).

Martin's assessment of the Tale supports Jordan's assessment
of Chaucer's poetics. The absolutes of tragedy are left
elsewhere while absolutes in language are proven to be unreliable
and ultimately indeterminate. Further, the movement in the Tale
from love to the more practical, tangible issue of money
carnivalizes the romance present in the Tale. The once lovesick Aurelius ends up worrying about his finances. But, lo and behold, the story of Dorigen moves the magician to release Aurelius from his debt. Dorigen, once an object of infatuation and devotion, becomes collateral.
Conclusion

The communicative and rhetorical methods of the strong women in my discussion are not always successful while the methods of the weak women are ultimately not completely ineffectual. The existence of weakness in strength and strength in weakness reveals Chaucer's larger view of language and its ultimate uncertainty.

Clever Alison is a good actress; she speaks dishonestly yet convincingly to great advantage. When she is honest, she is direct and often rude. She is not at all squeamish and willingly engages in crude behavior, laughing all the while. The Wife of Bath laughs as well as she uses blunt and often crude language to express her bold opinions. She proudly confesses to controversial behavior and, like Alison, believes in the strategic use of dishonest language. Like Alison and the Wife, May is an extremely persuasive liar who also engages in crude behavior without shame. These women speak with a distinct freedom believed by Cixous to be the benefit of using a powerful female language.

Alison achieves her desires and succeeds in humiliating the men around her. However, as the intended target of Absolon's revenge, Alison is not entirely free from blame or harm. The strength of the Wife of Bath is similarly debatable. Although forceful and opinionated, she also seems dissatisfied and restless—emotions that would render her unsuccessful in the achievement of the happiness she so desires. May achieves
immediate personal fulfillment but is shortsighted: Her recklessness could lead to future insecurity and unhappiness. In addition to their individual shortcomings, Alison, the Wife, and May all achieve success through dishonest and frequently discourteous and crude speech and behavior. This implies that women must be hard, cold, and deceitful to obtain satisfaction and control. This also calls into question the extent of the freedom with which they seem to speak.

Emily silently allows men to make decisions for her. She frequently weeps and infrequently speaks. When she does speak, her words merely reiterate her passive acquiescence. Griselda is completely submissive to the will of her husband and supports her subservient communication with self-depreciating remarks. Although she begins strong, Dorigen ends up weak: She dutifully submits to the wills of the men in the Tale and, like Emily, expresses anguish through weeping.

Despite her passivity, Emily turns the narrative of the Knight's Tale in all its most significant directions. Further, she powerfully, albeit unintentionally, controls Palamon and Arcite. Finally, although Emily's prayer is meek, it reveals a desire within her to control her own life. Griselda's passivity exacerbates Walter's fear and insecurity and ultimately leads to the Clerk's move to the carnival world. Dorigen, although ultimately submissive, is the central mover of the Franklin's Tale and one voice through which Chaucer reveals his uneasiness
with the authority of language and his doubts about the possibility of absolutes.

Emily, Griselda, and Dorigen occupy pivotal positions in the Tales in which they appear. The importance and subtle success of their roles imply that women should behave passively and submissively, that significant and lasting control can only be obtained by women who stay in line.

However, although there is weakness in strength and strength in weakness, there is still strength in strength and weakness in weakness. Alison, the Wife of Bath, and May control situations and obtain self-fulfillment while Emily, Griselda, and Dorigen settle for mediocre results as they allow others to control situations. So what do these various "female" voices finally tell us?

Martin maintains, "Chaucer's delight in human diversity is manifested in the scheme of the Canterbury Tales. . . . We hear from all the various estates, the voices of rich and poor, good and bad, leressed and lewed, men and women" (229-30). And we hear from a variety of women--women both strong and weak. Jordan states:

Chaucer's poetics . . . accommodates all the uncertainties and indeterminacies of worldly experience, . . . It is a wonderfully flexible and expansive poetics, fundamentally heterodox, open to all modes of discourse, and indifferent to strictures of
orthodoxy, whether moral, philosophical, aesthetic, or
generic. (172)

He continues, "the Canterbury Tales finds a place for didactic
prose among prose fictions, for pious tales as well as ribald
ones, for both realism and stylization, for truth and
countertruth" (Jordan 172).

The assessments of both Martin and Jordan suggest that
Chaucer does not intend to imply anything specific through his
many voices but rather delights in the mere presence of many
voices. Ganim explains:

As opposed to the unified, "monologic" voice of
official truth, "carnivalized" literature reveals
its origins in the anarchic spirit of popular
celebration, during which laughter, parody, and the
celebration of the body unmask the pretensions of
power and authority. (114)

The voices that we call Alison, the Wife of Bath, May, Emily,
Griselda, and Dorigen sometimes disrupt tradition, sometimes
submit to tradition, sometimes laugh at the world, and sometimes
weep. And all contribute to an atmosphere of celebration--a
celebration of diversity. Most of all, they reflect Chaucer's
view of language: "[Chaucer's] unspoken poetics provides a
framework for coming to terms with uncertainty" (Jordan 10).

And, because rhetoric's primary presupposition is "that language
is conventional and inevitably ambiguous," "rhetoric provides the
basis for [Chaucer's] poetics of uncertainty" (Jordan 10).
Therefore, like language itself, the communicative and rhetorical methods of the strong and weak women have varied results and convey ambiguous messages. The perception of strength or weakness ultimately resides in the perceiver rather than the perceived.
Works Cited


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