

ALEXANDRA LOȘONȚI

Babeș-Bolyai University, Faculty of History and Philosophy
Email: alexa_los21@yahoo.com

DISCOURSE AND DOMINION IN CHAUCER'S *WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE*

Abstract: In the following paper we will investigate the power of discourse in medieval text, with a particular reference to a fragment of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. In the context of the New Historicist paradigm of approaching the medieval text, our research explores the dialectic of selfhood and its discourse within the cultural and social constructs of the Middle Ages at the end of the fourteenth century in England. The focus is on the concept of authority in the medieval texts and the textualization of history in the context of the tension between the speaking subject and the objectified historical identity.

Key words: Middle Ages, authority, discourse, selfhood, narrative

Introduction

Nowadays the critical analysis of the medieval texts is facing the challenge of postmodernism to re-examine the premises and presupposition of the traditional methods and concepts of research and to replace them with alternatives which can speak in a way that is consonant with modern epistemology. Today's intellectual universe is pluralistic.¹ In this context, the goal of New Historicist criticism is to demonstrate the power of discourse in shaping the ways in which the dominant ideology of a period creates both institutional and textual embodiments of the cultural constructs governing mental and social life.² It is this mutuality in the relationship of literary texts and history that David Wallace was trying to describe when he talked about the way social systems produced and were produced by texts. Under the influence of Foucault, New Historicists became possessed not just by the idea of the historicization of literature but also that of the textualization of history.³

These new concepts and instruments of analysis and the interdisciplinary methods of approaching a text found a proper territory in reevaluating the medieval texts, especially the literary ones. The relation between context and text became more important in recovering a proper image of the past. The discourse of the literary text becomes an image of the cultural constructs of medieval society. The text reflects the tension between the subject and the social system in which he or she is caught.

In our modern times the category of the social has begun to fade from view, and so too has the category of the historical. Instead of understanding themselves as products of determinative historical processes, modern individuals tend to see themselves as autonomous and self-made. The extreme to which modern society has taken individualism threatens to annul the power of human beings to create their own history, its insistence that the social world is within our control and subject to our power of reformation.⁴

In cultural history, we witness a split between two major periods in the configuration of the individual. Before the Renaissance, when, as Jacob Burckhardt argues: "Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation- only through some general category"⁵ as compared with the concepts of individualism conceived during the age of Renaissance, when people became aware of themselves as freestanding individuals, defined not by social relations but by an inner sense of self-presence. In this direction, many literary critics and sociologists accepted and developed Burckhardt's assumption. Among them, Terry Eagleton draws a distinction between "the old feudalism" of the Middle Ages, "constituted by social bonds and fidelities", and the modern "individualism conception of the self" which is being crushed by

a the “crippling burden” of subjectivity.⁶ Stephen Greenblatt asserts that “there is in the early modern period a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities”⁷.

In fact, this antagonism between the desires of the individual and the demands of society provided one of the greatest topic for literary exploration throughout the Middle Ages. The medieval conception of selfhood is typically understood as a dialectic between the Christian subject and this objectified historical identity. The topic of the late medieval writing is not the subject *per se* but “the confrontation of the subject with the determinants of the exterior, present world”⁸. Historians have allowed themselves an alarming degree of condescension in accepting too easily that people in the Middle Ages possessed no, or only a weak sense of self. This is based on the assumption that the individual was subsumed in and subordinated to the needs of the community and that the medieval society demanded conformity to stereotypes. In practice, the importance of community co-existed with personal responsibility. To take only one example, the teaching and rituals of the medieval Church emphasized selfhood as the locus for moral choice and responsibility, the unit of salvation. According to the fourth Lateran Council in 1215, confession required people to reflect on their individual actions and motivations. In this respect, identity was never a process of replacement, but of accumulation.

Reading and writing in the Middle Ages came to be the vehicle for self-realization and self-emancipation as well, but always in relation to an audience, to a social group. At the same time, the notion of text, textuality and textual culture in the Middle Ages raised the issue of power in society. The historical is not isolated from the literary as fact and representation. The “I” of public poetry presents himself as his audience: a layman of good will, a worker among others, with a talent to be used for the common good.⁹ In this regard, medieval poetry reveals the interconnection of individual and society, of self and social character, of private reflected in public life. This connection between personal character and social character is well defined in the work of Geoffrey Chaucer, namely in his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*. *The General Prologue* is a conspectus of Medieval English society. One of the features revealed by this text is the tension between the subject that speaks and the limitations imposed by the historical and social environment. For Chaucer, poetry is a mediating activity. The notion of the poetic enterprise reinforces the social ideas. The personal experiences presented by each character in *The Canterbury Tales* are validated not by particular intensity but by its commonness. Each character is the product of a dialectical movement between a socially undefined subjectivity and a historically determined

role. The character is what emerges from the transactions between the given world outside (history) and the unspecified world within (the subject).¹⁰

Narrative and discourse becomes a way of making yourself visible, a way of figuring oneself within a social order. In Chaucer, characters are understood as texts, essentially, yet verge on the corporal real. The self came to be composed by the language it engaged, a language whose power was coming from its increasing status as distinct in and of itself, as substantial for itself.¹¹

Chaucer's instinct as a poet was to explore the horizontal, ethical dimension of language, understood as the living expression of the social order. He did not try to apprehend the inner life of the soul separately from the medium of conventional language and from the multiple discourses that determine the social life of the individual man. In this respect, the order of discourse is the living expression of the social order. As Cicero argues in *De oratore*, it is the speech that has the power to unite men in a single place, to extract them from their bestial and savage condition and bring them to civility. Chaucer has a "performative" linguistic consciousness, an acute sense that speech is a kind of behavior by which many different types of social acts are achieved.¹² Judson Boyce Allen defines the medieval understanding of the relationship between the inner life of the poem and that of the external, social world in terms of assimilation. This term includes the notion of mimesis of the external world, the notion of metaphor or simile and the notion of universals outside the time which the poem as an instance of discourse evokes. The key definition of the words, stories, figures and statements of which the poem is composed is a definition, not of a thing, but of an act, an act whose actors and objects inhabit a larger world than the poem itself.¹³

It is within this historical context that Chaucer's explorations of the dialectic between sense of selfhood and the claims of the historical world should be placed.

The Middle Ages is a time in which all forms of human activity were understood in relation to an original perfection. In almost all of the areas of life – whether it be political, institutional, intellectual, spiritual, or artistic – people legitimize their activity by reference to transcendent values and first principles. From their point of view history and the present were imperfect so all their actions had to be orientated toward a divinely authored originality. In this order, Chaucer's poetry, by representing people as they truly are, escapes from the limitation of its own historicity into the timeless present of great art. There is always present in the text a tension which equilibrates the movement of present with the values of the past, an interaction between personal story and what critics called *auctoritates*. The Chaucerian imagination is at once

caught within the middling world of history and haunted by the dream of origins.¹⁴ In this regard, it would be possible to understand this Chaucerian dynamic as endemic to the act of writing itself. According to Derrida, “to write is to have the passion of origin”¹⁵. In this context, literacy becomes a “context dependant” since it is responsible for the development of social patterns.¹⁶ When understood as the formation of such patterns, writing becomes the “ideology” of culture.

In the next lines I would like to examine the function of discourse in relation to the ideological world in which it is conceived. *The Canterbury Tales* are structured on a binary diagram: mainly every character has a Prologue and a Tale. Within the Prologue, the narrator retreats from the narrative stage and each character speaks for her/himself. It is in the realm of the Prologue that every character becomes a subject. As a predominant feature, reflecting the medieval structure of society, the majority of the characters are males. A distinct figure is the Wife of Bath, the only female character that does not belong to a religious order. Her Prologue is the longest one in the whole narrative of the Tales and the most intriguing. Her portrait in the General Prologue emphasizes the expansive quality of her experience: her penchant for pilgrimages, her numerous marriages and her ability to entertain and get along with the others. The colorful and martial aspects of her appearance express her love for self-fashioning and for self-projection.

Her entire discourse is an exploration of her relation to authority, and especially to patriarchal texts. The very process of speaking reproduces the central concern of her Prologue: the problem of the validity and validation of her story or personal experience in the public realm of audience and authority.

***The Wife of Bath* and the triumph of the discourse: sovereignty and survival**

In the Middle Ages women were identified by their roles in life and society as wives, widows, mothers or maidens and were portrayed in relation to a man or group of men. Men were considered the ones who produced and read the written word; they were also the ones schooled and qualified as *litterati* (men of letters); they became teachers and instructors. Women, on the other hand, were not traditionally schooled in literate matters, nor were they ever considered to be *litteratae*. Misogyny was another attitude that the women of Chaucer’s time had to fight. The Church preached that women were like Eve, still causing a fall from grace for men through their sensuality and disobedience. Following a long Western tradition dating back to the early Greek and Hebrew cultures, the Church was particularly virulent against women in the second half of the Middle Ages.¹⁷ Jill Mann also argues about the polarized nature of

medieval attitudes to women: Eve is set against Mary, the sensual deceiver against maternal purity, rebelliousness against meekness.¹⁸ There are two authors who contributed to the formation of these stereotyped images, namely Ovid, whose amorous poetry represents women as cunning strategists in the battle of sexes, and Jerome, whose treatise *Against Jovinian* is a major weapon in the arsenal of antifeminist texts. Both of these texts find a reflection in Chaucer's construction of characters and narratives. The very concept of patriarchy, the institutionalized, self-sustained power of men over women has been the usual means of thinking about the relation of maleness to dominance.¹⁹

Throughout the Middle Ages women were denied social conceptualization. Not only were they almost entirely excluded from public life, but their existence as part of the social totality was often ignored.²⁰ In the estates lists by which medieval society imagined itself, lay women are categorized not by economic, social, or political function but either by social status as determined by their male relatives or by their marital status. But perhaps this exclusion generated or carried with it a sense of freedom.²¹ Men, as befitted historical beings, had social responsibilities; women, as befitted the socially invisible, had private lives. From another perspective, Larry Scanlon evokes authority, whether in social differences or gender differences as being triangulated, empowering the constraint to recreate the authority and reshape it.²²

The energy which animates the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* derives not so much from her perception of herself as a speaking subject, as from her awareness of the tension between her centrality as a speaker, and her experiential understanding as a female. Through her discourse, and through the act of speaking in front of a preponderantly male audience, she gives voice to a distinctive female experience in relation to men, and by extension, in relation to the patriarchal society in which she lives.

Her attitudes toward her status as a married woman, toward marriage as an institution and the relationship between men and women are characterized by a central ambivalence, through which she never stands autonomous, but always in a relationship of opposition to her society, and yet of complicity with it. Even if she attempts a deconstruction of patriarchal literature in an experiential revision of it, the Wife can only define herself in relation to that authority. In this context, she does not speak simply about herself, but recreates herself through her relationships to the various manifestation of patriarchy. Patriarchal authority determines the fundamental bases for her self-definition. Her assumptions, concerns, and attitudes make visible the dialectical interplay of experience and authority, rebellion and submission.

Verbalizing her experience makes it real; it is a validation of her experience through the act of telling itself. The Prologue reveals her

engaged in a double-edged process of creating a persona for herself in the performative here and now of speaking, and re-living, re-working, and re-creating her experience through the selective and modifying movement of remembering as she speaks.²³

At the same time, not only the content of her discourse marks an important step in affirming her own authority and subjectivity, but also the shape of her discourse, mainly the performative act of speaking. Her speaking performance reveals the psychic cost and benefits, of her survival in which her own experience runs counter to the authority of the prevailing ideology.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue may be divided in three main sections. In the first part of her Prologue, although she promises her audience a lesson in the "wo that is in marriage", she digresses on the more abstract topics of the biblical precedents for remarriage, sexual gratification, celibacy, and adherence to the perfect state of virginity. In this section, the *auctoritee* is represented by biblical and patriarchal texts. She confronts these texts with her own experience and reinforces them with a twisted semantic value:

Experience, though no authority
Were in this world, were good enough for me,
To speak of woe that is in all marriage.²⁴

In this way, she intends to valorize the authority of her experience of the vicissitudes of day-to-day married life. Experience is con-textual; authority, epitomized in the texts of patriarchal society, infuses and is diffused in experience, establishing a referential framework for the evaluation of experience.²⁵

Through this reinvestment of semantic and symbolic value of the authorial texts, the Wife of Bath is creating a brief version of *sermon joyeux*²⁶. The Wife's text is from Corinthians 7:28: "If however you take a wife, you do not sin. And if a maiden marries, she does not sin: but they will have trouble in the flesh because of this." She frames her sermon with two citations of this text, invoking it at the beginning as the "wo that is marriage" and at the end in a direct quotation:

I'll not delay, a husband I will get
Who shall be both my debtor and my thrall
And have his tribulations therewithal
Upon his flesh, the while I am his wife.
I have the power during all my life
Over his own good body, and not he.
For thus the apostle told it unto me;
And bade our husbands that they love us well.

And all this pleases me whereof I tell.

Her *sermon joyeux* explicates the scriptural authority by a conversion, pleading for the listeners to enjoy the limitation imposed by the biblical authority. Her alternative reading of verse 28 can thus be supported even by the exegetical principle of intertextuality, taking one passage from a text to gloss another. Her exegetical method is not, as it is usually argued, a sign of her moral limitation but a strategy appropriate to her chosen genre.²⁷ The Wife acknowledges the power of authority, especially that of written texts, both to influence and to affect the experiential perceptions of ourselves. The complexity of her double-vision, born of experience and in conflict with authority, exposes the shakiness of the very foundations of authority:

Thanks to be God who is forever alive,
Of husbands at church door have I had five;
For men so many times have married me.

In order to compensate for her sense of disenfranchisement within the realm of male power, she has no real choice at this point other than to attempt an appropriation of male prerogatives:

I'll not delay, a husband I will get
Who shall be both my debtor and my thrall
And have his tribulations therewithal
Upon his flesh, the while I am his wife.
I have the power during all my life
Over his own good body, and not he.

The Wife of Bath projects an inversion of the property rights and emotional obligations of marriage.

In the second part, she dramatizes Theophrastus's account of female vices by telling her story about how she scolded her husbands. She also points out the power of the speaker to manipulate the raw materials of experience for her own ends in much the same way textual exegetes manipulate texts for their own purpose. She is able to see that the route to power and sovereignty in marriage is through gaining control of her husband's property by ransoming her sexual favors. Thus, as the Wife of Bath simultaneously embodies and parodies patriarchal attitudes towards wives and marriage she yet works within the limits and limitations of the dominant ideology. Although she tries to overcome the patriarchal ideology, she is trapped between its limits.

The third part reproduces the sample miscellany of antifeminist proverbs and anecdotes contained in Jankin's (her fifth husband) "book of wikked wyves". Both husband and clerk, Janekin is literally an embodiment of authority, but he is also a man who uses textual authority

in order to achieve particular results. His book, which he constantly reads to his wife is an emblem of misogyny and of vulnerability of women in a patriarchal society:

He had a book that gladly, night and day,
For his amusement he would read always.
He called it 'Theophrastus' and 'Valerius',
At which book would he laugh, uproarious.
And, too, there sometime was a clerk at Rome,
A cardinal, that men called Saint Jerome,
Who made a book against Jovinian;
In which book, too, there was Tertullian,
Chrysippus, Trotula, and Heloise
Who was abbess near Paris' diocese;
And too, the Proverbs of King Solomon,
And Ovid's Art, and books full many a one.
And all of these were bound in one volume.
And every night and day 'twas his custom,
When he had leisure and took some vacation
From all his other worldly occupation,
To read, within this book, of wicked wives.
He knew of them more legends and more lives
Than are of good wives written in the Bible.
For trust me, it's impossible, no libel,
That any cleric shall speak well of wives,
Unless it be of saints and holy lives,
But naught for other women will they do.
Who painted first the lion, tell me who?
By God, if women had but written stories,
As have these clerks within their oratories,
They would have written of men more wickedness
Than all the race of Adam could redress.

Jerome has the starring role as arch-representative of antifeminist writing, but the *Epistola Valerii*, the *Romance of the Rose*, Deschamps's *Miroir de Mariage*, Matheoulus's *Lamentation* and the Solomonic proverbs provide a strong supporting cast.

If the Wife asserts her "experience" against written "auctoritee", she does not therefore abandon the verbal world, but rather adapts its techniques to her own ends. Jerome's triple comparison of virginity, marriage and lechery to wheat bread, barley-bread and dung opens up alarmingly to new meaning as the Wife subjects it to the same sort of close reading as the exegetes apply to biblical texts.²⁸

And many a saint, since this old world began

Yet has lived ever in perfect chastity.
I bear no malice to virginity;
Let such be bread of purest white wheat-seed,
And let us wives be called but barley bread;
And yet with barley bread, if Mark you scan
Jesus Our Lord refreshed full many a man.

The Wife sets herself up as a new “authority”; male discourse passes into female control.

Her long speech is almost entirely made up of the commonplaces of antifeminist tradition, presented as what her husbands allegedly said to her. This is emphasized by the obsessive repetition in varied forms of the phrase “thou seyst” (“seistow”, “thou seydest”); it recurs twenty five times in all in nearly a hundred and fifty lines. Almost all of the Wife's tirade against her husbands, apart from the first twelve lines, is reported speech – nothing other than what *they* are supposed to have said to *her*. Male attacks on women become the very substance of a female attack on men. The Wife uses antifeminist satire as a blunt instrument with which to beat her husbands into submission.²⁹

The Wife's constant use of the plural – “we wyves”, “us”, “oure” – dissolves her individual situation into a general female experience, and acts as a constant reminder of the antifeminist commonplaces on which she draws. No matter that these particular husbands never made these accusations, their hackneyed character is evidence in itself that plenty of other men did. Within the speech of the Wife bullying her husbands, we can hear the speeches of countless husbands bullying their wives. Her tirade thus functions simultaneously as a demonstration of female bullying and a witness to masculine oppression. What is more, it suggests that female bullying and masculine oppression have a strangely symbiotic relationship: each feeds off the other. The Wife uses the traditional masculine attacks on her sex as a way of legitimizing her own tirade; her husbands (or male readers) could equally well appeal to her scolding as evidence of the contumaciousness of women.³⁰

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

precisely to make the reader conscious of the confining nature of “the prison house of masculine language”.

In the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, writing the truth of women's existence means not turning one's back on stereotypes, but accepting that their existence is the centrally important and interesting fact to be confronted. It means acknowledging the power they exert even as they are resisted, because they will define the form of the resistance. Chaucer could not plumb the unrecorded secrets of women's existence, but he *could* anatomize the literary stereotypes which set the terms in which male-female relationships were played out, and he could question the male writer's role as the “auctoritee” that supports them. And he could, in the *Wife of Bath*, give us the imagined representation of an individual engagement with these stereotypes and their absorption into an individual life.

¹ Suzanne Fleischman, “Philology, Linguistics and the Discourse of the Medieval Text”, in *Speculum* 65, no. 1 (1990): 245.

² Derek Pearsall, “Medieval Literature and Historical Enquiry” in *The Modern Language Review* 99, no. 4 (2004): 36.

³ Pearsall, “Medieval Literature” 40.

⁴ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 4.

⁵ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Phaidon Books, 1965), 81.

⁶ Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 75.

⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self -Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 1.

⁸ Michel Zink, *La subjectivité littéraire au tour de siècle de saint Louis* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985), 107.

⁹ Anne Middleton, “The idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II”, in *Speculum* 53, no. 1 (1978): 65.

¹⁰ Patterson, *Chaucer*, 29.

¹¹ Ian Frederick Moulton, *Reading and Literacy in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (London: Brepolis Publishers, 2004), 123.

¹² Eugene Vance, *Marvelous Signs. Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 209.

¹³ Vance, *Marvelous Signs*, 220.

¹⁴ Patterson, *Chaucer*, 287.

¹⁵ Jaques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 295.

¹⁶ Jesse M. Gellrich, *Discourse and Dominion in the Fourteenth Century: Oral Context of Writing in Philosophy, Politics and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 8.

¹⁷ Laura C. Lambdin and Robert T. Lambdin, eds., *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales* (Westport: Praeger, 1999), 67.

¹⁸ Jill Mann, *Feminising Chaucer* (Rochester: D.S Brewer, 2002), 59.

¹⁹ Derek G. Neal, *The Masculine Self in the Late Medieval England* (Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 2008), 13.

²⁰ For further reading see *Women in Medieval History and Historiography*, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1987)

²¹ Patterson, *Chaucer*, 26.

²² Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 7.

²³ Barbara Gottfried, "Conflict and Relationship: Sovereignty and Survival: Parables of Power in The Wife of Bath's Prologue" in *The Chaucer Review* 19, no. 3 (1985): 202-224.

²⁴ All the references to the text of Canterbury Tales, respectively the *Prologue* of The Wife of Bath are extracted from the Penguin Edition: Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales: A Selection* (London: Penguin books, 1996).

²⁵ Gottfried, "Conflict and Relationship" 209.

²⁶ *Sermon joyeux* is a genre that inverts the spirit of medieval orthodoxy but neither its structure nor its content.

²⁷ Patterson, *Chaucer*, 36.

²⁸ Patterson, *Chaucer*, 89.

²⁹ Mann, *Feminising Chaucer*, 67.

³⁰ Mann, *Feminising Chaucer*, 78.

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