The Kirby Canon

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“Words—so innocent and powerless as they are, as standing in a dictionary, how potent for good and evil they become in the hands of one who knows how to combine them.”

—Nathaniel Hawthorne
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About the Kirby Canon.........................................................................................
The Lenapè Indians, also known as Delaware Indians, have a strong sense of culture and dominant customs. It is important to learn and preserve Lenapè customs to prevent their extinction, as has happened to numerous other tribes in America. The Lenapè, or “original people”, inhabited the area known as the Delaware River region and began our history as Northeastern Pennsylvania residents. Other Delaware River regions include New Jersey, Eastern Pennsylvania, and Southeastern New York. Some important Lenapè customs are traditional ceremonies, strong beliefs in spiritual presence and the Great Creator, Earthly respect along with many others. Respecting the Earth is crucial to the world today because of environmental problems such as global warming and pollution. Along with connecting with the Earth, members of the Delaware River region can relate to experiencing a spiritual relationship as part of religious beliefs, just as the Lenapè do. It is important to learn and preserve Lenapè customs through both private and public means to prevent their extinction, show appreciation toward their contributions to the Delaware region, and strengthen our history as residents of this region. Through research I hope people can learn to understand and appreciate the generosity the Lenapè showed the settlers by helping them learn how to cultivate this land. By studying Delaware Indian customs, we can strengthen and restore our history as well as preserve a culture-rich group of tribes.

While at the Writing Center getting the second assignment for this essay reviewed, my reviser commented after reading the first sentence. She said, “Lenapè, I haven’t heard that since about third grade”. It is sad to realize that schools do not incorporate an important part of our history such as the former tribes that inhabited our region. The Delaware tribes are responsible for teaching the settlers how to cultivate and grow on the land in which we live today. I cannot remember learning about local native tribes in any grade throughout my school career. If school systems do not start teaching local
Native American history, the tribe, their customs and original land may dissolve.

An ideal solution to strengthen Lenapè culture in the Delaware River region is to incorporate their beliefs and practices into the school systems. Introducing Lenapè culture at a young age, children could learn about, and appreciate, the native people that lived in their area. A benefit could include local tribes to holding pow wows in which families and school classes could attend to experience a traditional ceremony of the Lenapè. By incorporating Lenapè culture into school children and teens could be exposed to Delaware customs in classes such as art, music, science, history, and others. Included are aspects of Lenapè culture that children could benefit from learning in school and families could encourage in the home.

The media today emphasizes a “green” lifestyle which includes simple everyday activities, products, and services that contain more environmental friendly practices such as fuel efficient light bulbs and hybrid vehicles. Therefore, it may be beneficial to encourage an appreciation and respect for the Earth in young children as well as teens and adults in the Delaware River region since the river shows great potential to provide through food and recreation. As residents of the Lenapè area, called Lenape’hokink, it is important to realize the harm that routine activities cause to the land and water. Factors such as car exhaust, litter on the land and in the water, building, and many others all cause damage to the places we live, work and play. The Lenapè found it crucial to give thanks to all Mother Earth, or Kukna, provides. Beaming respect is shown as Hitakonanu’laxk states, “Our concept of land is that it is not a thing to be possessed, but rather something sacred and alive” (2). Just as today’s generation must consider future generations, the Lenapè feel the same, “Each generation is here but for a little while, and while we are alive, it is our responsibility to see that the land remains pure and undefiled, so that our future generations may continue to live here in health and
happiness” (Hitakonan’laxk 3). Along with keeping available resources clean and healthy, there must also be a focus on the quantitative amount taken from these resources.

Taking from the Earth, in moderation, could aid in the preservation of natural resources. On Linda Mauser’s website, Delaware Indians of Pennsylvania, she describes that the healer of the tribe provided offerings such as tobacco or other plants to the Earth in appreciation for what they took. The healer dug a small hole at the east side of the medicine plant or root and placed the offering inside, then took the necessary amount as not to waste. The practice of preservation can relate to the natural resources we use today. Since there is a limited amount of resources, such as gasoline and oil, it is crucial to limit their use. By encouraging respectful and healthy Earth habits in young children in school and practicing those habits in the home the Delaware River region could be a safer, healthier, and cleaner place. As Hitakonanu’laxk states, “We cannot keep cutting down trees, polluting the water and Earth, and continue living for today without thinking of tomorrow” (4). The concepts Hitakonanu’laxk presents are applicable in any society during any time period. Honoring the Earth as a provider is an important habit to adopt and share with the Lenapè, yet many differences exist between early tribes and Northeastern Pennsylvania residents today that are just as important to learn.

Lenapè religion differs from dominant religions today such as Baptist, Catholic, and Judaism. By learning about Lenapè customs, children can learn to appreciate and respect diverse cultures. An array of races, ethnicities, and cultures are present in schools today in which children come in contact with. By introducing various cultures at a young age, children may grow to understand the sundry world in which they live. Aspects of Lenapè culture are controversial such that some beliefs require drug use including a hallucinogenic called Peyote. The drug contained the dried top of a Peyote Cactus and showed importance to the tribes because it was the means of connecting with the spirits.
Since the Delaware River region inhabits a plethora of cultures and ethnicities some families may feel that their customs are the only or most important custom to practice in their homes. Retaining heritage becomes essential in such a diverse place, therefore it is important to keep Lenapè culture alive in an area where their customs continue to diminish. Although young children should not be taught about drug use in school accepting and understanding why the Lenapè used Peyote is an important part of learning about Lenapè culture as an adult in Lenape’hokink. While using Peyote Lenapè “sought spiritual contact by establishing the ideal circumstances for their occurrence through fast-vigils and isolated journeys” (Gavaler 219). In addition, when children reached an age around puberty they were responsible for experiencing their first journey and begin a life-long committed relationship with the spirits (Tantaquidgeon 8). Lenapè spirits are natural, not supernatural, so “the potential Lenapè space for contact between human and spiritual beings encompassed the entire wilderness, where spirits co-exist with plants and animals…” (Gavaler 219). With the crime and violence that exists today, walking off in the woods alone could be nerve racking experience, yet the Lenapè trusted their gods and saw these journeys as a great step towards growing in a spiritual relationship. Those residents of the Delaware River region who practice some form of religion, or have a set of beliefs, could relate to trusting in others or a higher being and wanting to grow stronger relationships in a religious aspect or any relationship within their lives.

Similar to local customs, the Lenapè congregated “after the harvest to express general thanksgiving and the reciprocity of men and women” (Miller 121). This ceremony occurred twice a year, one day and night in June and again in the winter for twelve days and nights (Harrington 128). The ceremonies were held in the Big House where many members of the tribe gathered except women who were menstruating. The Big House was situated with one large central post and a second smaller
post where a deerskin hung. Two poles lay inside dividing the Big House into a dancing place in the
center and a sitting place on the sides (Harrington 131). Before the ceremony began selected hunters
set out to get twelve deer and two fires were built inside the Big House. The smoke from Hemlock
boughs burning in the fires purified the House and turkey wing fans were used to sweep the floors of
dirt and evil influences (Harrington 133). Those who could, entered in the east door and received the
Chief’s speech. He instructed the members not to do any wrong and to “be honest and kind and
hospitable” then gave thanks for everything to the Great Creator (Harrington 134). During the
ceremony each member drank a spoonful of strawberry drink made from dried strawberries that were
previously collected at the June ceremony (Harrington 134). Those who wanted to dance paid
wampum, or shell beads, to the vision teller and a turtle rattle was given to the men who were blessed
with a vision (Harrington 135-36). At the central post singers sat and beat a folded square of deerskin
as a drum. During the last period of the twelve days members reached the Great Creator and all exited
through the west door. Ceremonies like the Big House relate to the holidays in which residents of the
same Lenapè area celebrate today where family and friends gather to celebrate and give thanks. By
finding similarities between cultures, members of our Pennsylvania area could appreciate how those
cultures, such as the Lenapè, support our ideals as well as gain a more diverse background by learning
the differences between the two groups.

Residents of the Delaware River region can utilize Lenapè beliefs and practices such as
showing the Earth respect, spiritual connections, ceremonial gatherings and many others in everyday
life. Learning about Delaware Tribes could strengthen both Lenapè history and those who live in the
area that the native tribes helped to establish and grow. When the settlers came to the Lenape’hokink
area their survival may have relied on the help of the Lenapè tribes who shared and taught them how
to live and cultivate this rich region. In appreciation, current members of the Delaware River region could help to preserve Lenapè culture by teaching the younger generations in school about their past and encouraging those practices in the home. Knowledge of the rich Lenapè culture could create a sense of unity, increase appreciation for other cultures and history, and keep the Delaware tribes alive for generations to come.
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Examining Ego and Self in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*
Sara Crolick

Few literary characters can compare to the complexities which Bharati Mukherjee’s creation, Jasmine, embody. From a most simplistic angle of plot, this teenager turned woman faces more hardship in her few young years than most would encounter in a lifetime. Coming from a culture which marries their children off at a very young age, Jasmine was married and subsequently widowed before she could make it out of her teenaged years. This is a novel full of betrayal, danger and survival on a scope that no American-born citizen could realistically comprehend.

Mukherjee crafts a character so multifaceted that, at times, it appears as though Jasmine herself cannot keep sight of who she truly is. *Jasmine* is pieced together in such a way so the audience can, as accurately as possible, follow the undoubtedly clouded self image that Jasmine has of herself. By continuously jumping to unrelated character descriptions, as well as shifting forward and backward rapidly in time, Mukherjee fashions a storyline mimicking that of internal thought patterns. This novel is constructed of briskly changing scenes and characters, sometimes with no forewarning whatsoever. Amidst this uncertainty the audience is able to understand that an important component of who Jasmine or Jyoti or Jase or Jazzy or Jane Ripplemeyer is, is to methodically shape shift “Self” in the face of crisis.

Jasmine is far from unique in the aspect of examining “Self.” Psychology has long studied the intertwined concepts of “Self” and “Ego.” Human ability to think and reason allows for the consideration of things like the make up of existence, of consciousness; this contemplation is muted within the young character of Jasmine, however. As Jasmine struggles in each new city to construct a new life, she works diligently to suppress those which are her “past lives”; the reader can assume this has developed as a defense mechanism. As described in *The psychology of Ego-Involvements* “an individual’s characteristic ego structure may become completely dissociated, may entirely collapse
under cases of extreme stress or pathological conditions” (Sheriff and Cantril 96). This young Hindi character would easily fall within the limits of experiencing extreme stresses. By taking on a new identity, Jasmine convinces, even herself at times, that the “old” lives are gone, easily swept under the rug. This, she recognizes as an almost natural occurrence for herself, a sudden, drastic, and necessary change.

The obsession with subconscious exploration, in fact, is presented in this text as an American hobby of sorts. Jasmine came into a city setting where her uniqueness and exoticness was something to be celebrated, even studied. Acquaintances assumed then, that Jasmine had the unconventional answers that an eccentric American might be seeking. At lunch with Mary Webb, Jasmine reflects, “I am astounded by all this, the American need to make intuition so tangible, to possess a vision so privately” (125). This desire to palpate an intuitive process is an incredibly foreign concept to Jasmine for the simple fact that she has been immersed in it since childhood. Reincarnation, being an important element of her religious beliefs, constructs one aspect of her ego, her identity. Jasmine’s religious beliefs are one of the few ideals she is willing to, and actively tries to, retain throughout her constant metamorphosis.

Jasmine’s continuous transformations are, in a way, counterintuitive to her Hindi beliefs of reincarnation, inadvertently amplifying her awareness of Ego throughout her lifetime. Described in Reincarnation and the Law of Karma by William Walter Atkinson, “the fundamental idea of an original emanation from, or manifestation of, One Divine Being, Power and Energy, into countless differentiated units, atoms, or egos, which units, embodying in matter are unconscious of the spiritual nature and take on a consciousness corresponding with the form in which they are embodied” (71). Following this initial embodiment, the soul is said to transcend through a succession of incarnations.
These embodiments follow a path of progressively “higher” levels until “finally after eons of time, it enters in Union with the Divine Nirvana and Para-Nirvana-the state of Eternal Bliss” (72).

From a metaphorical stance, Jasmine successfully manifests into one new form after another. Jasmine, however, truly identifies herself as each of these new people. Just before her fatal encounter with Half-Face, Jasmine slices her tongue; this is symbolic of the serpent like tongue of Kali, the Hindi god of destruction. She reflects numbly after the slaughter, “What monstrous thing, what infinitesimal thing, is the taking of a human life…I was walking death. Death incarnate” (119).

Egocentrism, as discussed by Louis Breger in *From Instinct to Identity*, “…refers to a state in which thought is “centered” on the self and, while it bears some relation to the common ideas of “selfishness” or being “self-centered” it more precisely refers to intellectual or cognitive limitations” (9-10). The reader is able to deduce then, that this troubled character possesses overwhelming egocentric qualities; qualities exhibited by Jasmine’s perpetually changing identification with new entities, notably here, with that of a deity.

Examining Jasmine’s perspective in viewing the world and her understanding of her relation to it, demonstrates her underlying focus on self/ego. In a psychological context, ego often revolves around using self as a constant reference point of “space” and “time.” The individual sees herself as a central/pivotal character in the universe’s intricate workings (Sheriff and Cantril93).

Throughout the novel, Jasmine often returns to the conception that she, Jasmine, has fallen victim to a glitch in the system as she considers, “…I do believe that extraordinary events can jar the needle arm, jump tracks, rip across incarnations, and deposit a like into a groove that was not prepared to receive it” (Mukherjee 127). Jasmine periodically revisits the death of her husband, Prakash. His tragic murder is the source of much of Jasmine’s identity inconsistencies as she believes he was
mistakenly sacrificed. She looks back on the incident with a heavy, guilty heart communicating: “I failed you. I didn’t get there soon enough. The bomb was meant for me, prostitute, whore” (93). The idea of the universe allowing for a tiny malfunction, as in her escaped death in Hanaspur, is fascinating. However, her seemingly continuous methodology of rebirth brings its “extraordinary” qualities into question.

In an interview with the author herself, Bharati Mukherjee said this of her character: “…Jasmine, while she is a very lovable character, has wants, however reckless, has hopes and that there are others who are critiquing her particular desire and persistence, her hope” (Gabriel). To seek out a dream is not something to be critiqued, but it seems as though Jasmine lacks coping skills. Her manipulation of religion to form fit whatever she must be in the moment is a sign of mere escapism. She is able to duplicate a physical form with every new phase of her life, but dramatically changes the contents.

Interestingly enough, this appears to contradict the pitcher metaphor revealed in the novel. The pitcher breaks, only to reveal “it is the same air this side as that” (43). Jasmine’s figurative pitcher has been broken, crushed, and desecrated. Her distinctive disposition however, moves Jasmine to produce a new pitcher, filling it quickly and convincingly with whatever is appropriate for the circumstance. “My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for” (121). This rebirth becomes less about transcending to a higher being as her Hindi beliefs would ordain, but acts to shield her from the painful history she was forced to endure.

Frequent “breaking points” for Jasmine were the recurrent separations she was forced to undergo. She separates from family, from her husband, from her country, and again and again, Jasmine separates from self.
The self, once structured even to a limited degree, tends to perpetuate itself. Departure from a known or secure self at any particular point in time has the potential to arouse anxiety. In the early years, this anxiety arises directly from separation; separation anxiety is the prototype for many later threats to the security of a known or established self. (Breger 331)

Highly formidable times in her life left scars she was left too weak to cope with. Jasmine dealt with these scars by ignoring them altogether, allowing them to creep back into her consciousness only when her guard was down.

When faced with a conflict, Jasmine effectively breaks all visible ties with a routine of dissociation. “Dissociation involves a splitting off of conflict-producing or anxiety-arousing thoughts, impulses, feelings or actions from one’s self-conception. It encompasses the phenomena of repression, defense, and the unconscious” (Breger 194-5). Highlighting this tendency, Jasmine is compelled to leave a life of happiness with Duff and Taylor after an unexpected sighting of her late husband’s killer. In a matter of moments she makes the decision, “I’m going to Iowa” (189). While this troubled character can break away from physical situations, thereby removing herself from anxiety-triggering environments, the reader is left painfully aware of an internal dialogue often colored with sadness and regret.

While considering her relationship with her adopted son Du, Jasmine divulges the roles she most identifies with. By using Du’s vantage point, the reader is able to see how Jasmine actually views herself: “In the America Du knows, mothers are younger than sisters, mothers are illegal aliens, murderers, rape victims…” (224). Her harrowing past leaks into present consciousness and translates into what she believes to be her son’s translation. In this atypical admittance, Jasmine invites her
former lives to reside, even momentarily, in her humble quarters in Iowa.

Arguably, Jasmine’s constant transformations are what give her character any sense of identity regularity. Jasmine’s inconsistency remains consistent. Similar to the being that embodies it, “the ego is not a fixed and immutable entity” (Sherif and Cantril92). To say that Jasmine’s character is unfixed would be a blatant falsehood. This character clearly uses metamorphosis as a tool of survival as well as a means of self-preservation. In fact, Jasmine admits to owning this capability from birth.

When the midwife carried me out, my sisters tell me, I had a ruby-red choker of bruise around my throat and sapphire fingerprints on my collarbone… My mother was a sniper… I survived the sniping. My grandmother may have named me Jyoti, Light, but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter (40).

The situational influence or, perhaps necessity, of this character’s modifications becomes an unconditional characteristic from her severe beginning.

Jasmine’s development as a character and as a person certainly takes on a jaded tone at times. Her unwillingness to incorporate her past consciously makes any sort of spiritual progression or enlightenment unlikely. However, even without her difficult past in perceptible awareness, the nature of development dictates what will actually affect her “self”.

The very process of self-development is itself a source of conflict. … imitation, modeling, and identification are the major ways in which the person develops. One incorporates new roles by identifying with those one loves or needs, envies or admires, or whose control one chafes under. The growth of self by identification implies that the external conflicts become internal conflicts (Breger 193).
This jumping of, rather than incorporation of, new roles is evident in every new situation Jasmine is placed. She hurriedly and seamlessly adapts to her new surroundings, knowing it may be her only real chance at survival. This adaptation is not uncommon in a healthy individual. A “person has a need to make sense of himself, his relations with others, and his place in society and the world. As his intellect grows he becomes dissatisfied with earlier roles and stereotypes” (Breger 333). Jasmine’s dissatisfaction and subsequent disposal of former identities is what separates her from a “healthy individual.”

In fact, this distinction of roles is childlike in many ways. Breger explains, “…the child has different selves and is not bothered by inconsistencies between them, by his lack of unity or wholeness. He may be one person with his parents, another with his friends, and still another in his dreams. The limitations of intuitive and concrete operational thought permit such shifting about and contradictions” (330). Jasmine limits herself to being one “person” at a time, rather than enduringly integrating a lifetime of lessons into a complete and whole single person.

Jasmine’s decision to relocate to America is an incredibly influential factor in her shape shifting. America is characteristically diverse, from every standpoint. Geography, temperature, and most visibly its people make America an eclectic place to reside. This assortedness is what allowed for much of her rebirth. David Cowart touches upon the commonality of this experience in Trailing Clouds: “Any American who has long resided in another country knows that, however cordial its people, actual transformation of an outsider into one of them remains highly problematic. Yet in a land of immigrants such transformations are routine” (71).

Although Jasmine believes she was able to reincarnate as a new entity, she brings an incredible amount of emotional baggage through to present day. She brings with her the emotional scars of lives
past. She, in actuality brings anguished scars of her history of “self”. Consciousness and awareness of her “former lives” indicates then, that this would be a gradual development of self.

Try as she might, Jasmine cannot completely control what aspects of her past will influence the woman she is to become. The egocentric tendency to claim a new identity every time a conflict arises inescapably sets the stage for more conflict in the end. Breger notes that when placed into a new environment, a person with similar propensities has “… a tendency to overdo things at the onset of a new stage, to over assimilate…” (193).

This “over assimilation” is evidently demonstrated later in the novel, during the highly anticipated back-story of Bud’s shooting. Jasmine’s eagerness to be content and happy with her shiny new life made her ignorant to the warning signs she should have been able to pick up on. “That first fall I was so busy loving Bud and settling Du in school and fighting off Karen that I missed what was happening between Bud and Harlan” (196). Even with her ample experience with violence, Jasmine overlooked the body language and verbal cues Harlan emitted, unambiguously foreshadowing his intentions to harm Bud.

To expand on this separation with reality, Cowart relates, “the price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation” (70). This associated disturbance can be taken to many different levels; the usage of transformation in Jasmine’s life has been unsafe to her wellbeing and, in this particular incident, equally hazardous to those around her. Even as Bud whispered in her ear, “he’s going to shoot me” (193), she mindlessly went back to rearranging Christmas gifts.

Jasmine’s life (or lives) has been in many ways antagonistic to itself. Her ability to conform to a new identity is what inevitably prohibits her from maintaining any true sense of identity. The
Greek maxim, “know thyself” has an eerie significance to this troubled immigrant, who perhaps, will never truly get to this place of self discovery. Jasmine used the psychological tools she had available to her to survive, but in many ways disregarded the import of historical influence on who she is as an individual. In his book *The Self in Pilgrimage* Earl A. Loomis wrote, “…we are individual. Each of us is a separate and distinct self. Each of us is unique, quantitatively and qualitatively different from each other. None of us can replace another…” (35) Jasmine’s persistent quest for identity leaves the reader to consider if she ever succeeds at her apparent desire to ultimately and harmoniously replace herself.
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Despite being published over one hundred years ago, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* retains immortality upon the shelves of classic literature. Contemporary society is still interested in the origin of the vampire who continues to spawn generations of books, films and other media about bloodsuckers of the night. However, such consistent fascination should not be solely attributed to *Dracula’s* cringe factor. In fact, the novel has a low fear factor and an even lower suspense level. The question arises: What about *Dracula* continues to enchant readers? The most frightening thing about *Dracula* is not a propensity for gore and torture, but rather a manifested portrait of our own corruption and evil. The manifested image of corruption implies a form of self-reflection that is generally absent from the characters’ external musings. In this essay, I will examine the significance of the characters’ lack of self-reflection, the reversal of gender roles, and how each type of significance is respectively accounted for by psychoanalytic and gender criticisms.

One of the most famous legends in vampire lore holds that vampires cast no reflection. There is evidence of this suspicion in the very beginning of the novel, when Harker notes, “but still in none of the rooms is there a mirror” (Stoker 28). Distressed about keeping his face shaved, Harker uses his, “little shaving glass” instead (Stoker 29). When Dracula later enters the room while Harker is shaving, Harker is caught unaware and glances to his mirror, remarking that, “[t]his time there could be no error, for the man was close to me, and I could see him over my shoulder. But there was no reflection of him in the mirror (Stoker 34). Here, Harker refers to Dracula as a “man.” This suggests that Harker consciously relates to Dracula as a man. Also, the “over my shoulder” reference connotes images of a conscience entity which advises one over one’s shoulder. Harker stares in shock, accidentally cutting
himself with his razor, while Dracula rips the mirror from his hands, warning, “take care how you cut yourself,” and “this is the wretched thing that has done the mischief. It is a foul bauble of man’s vanity” (Stoker 35). To note that Dracula considers the mirror a “foul bauble of man’s vanity” may suggest that Harker is vain because he denies his own vices and intentionally ignores that aspect of his own reflection. When Stoker uses the word “man’s,” the word may refer to either mankind or humankind, thus possibly excusing the common association of “vanity” with the feminine. Then again, this might call attention to the connotation of femininity since in the novel appear to assume more commonly-perceived feminine roles such as subservience to Dracula, a lead male figure. Furthermore, this commentary on “foul bauble[s] of man’s vanity” may imply that Dracula, as a manifestation of Harker’s repressed vices, actually encourages him to repress these images by disposing of the mirror.

While it is typically rationalized that a vampire casts no reflection because it lacks a soul, perhaps there is a different explanation, one which can be derived from a psychoanalytic perspective. Following Harker’s claim about there being “no reflection of [Dracula] in the mirror,” he goes on to say that “[t]he whole room behind me was displayed; but there was no sign of a man in it, except myself” (Stoker 34). This statement may be evidence of Harker’s psychological repression. Anthony Elliot writes, “[p]sychoanalysis posits a basic split at the centre of psychical life between consciousness of self and that which is unconscious. Lurking behind all forms of self-organization—that is, our day to day fashionings of self-identity—there lies a ‘hidden-self,’ a dimension of subjectivity which produces itself through fantasy, drives, and passions” (Elliot 6). Thus, Harker may be repressing the image of Dracula because he represses his own “hidden-self.” Dracula, the manifestation of Harker’s hidden-self, frightens, or even disgusts, Harker too much to acknowledge
the hidden-self’s existence.

Therefore, I argue that Harker’s physical fear of Dracula does not induce such psychological repression. Rather, Harker’s unconscious recognition of Dracula as the manifestation of his own vices inspires Harker’s fear and repression. I also suggest that perhaps Dracula is incapable of casting a reflection because he is, in fact, already a reflection himself. Rebecca Stern notes in her article on “Vision and Visibility in the Victorian Novel” that, “[t]hrough the illusion of seeing oneself seeing,” as in a mirror, “the subject—especially the male subject—aligns himself with the gaze and borrows its power” (Stern 28-29). Stern’s concept suggests that Harker bases his self-perception on what he sees in the mirror; this is faulty, since Harker might be seeing an illusion formed from the repression of vice or even reality. Harker denies the possibility that he may or does have vices attributed to Dracula. Another examination of the reflective experience can be seen in Lacanian theory. Anthony Elliot writes of Lacanian theory:

[f]or Lacan, the narcissistic illusions of modern selfhood can be traced back to a very early stage in life, to a structuring event which Lacan calls the ‘mirror stage.’ This stage of human development comes about when the small infant, previously unintegrated and uncoordinated, finds its bodily image reflected in a mirror. Whether the mirror stage is understood literally or metaphorically, the crucial point, for Lacan, is that the small infant is led to misrecognize and misperceive itself. According to Lacan, this is so since the mirror provides an illusory apprehension of self-unity that has not been objectively achieved. That is, the creation of an ‘ideal self’ — the self as it would like to be, self-sufficient and unified — is an imaginary construct which covers the fragmentation of the physical economy. (Elliot 29)

Lacanian theory suggests that what the characters see in the mirror are imaginary images of what they
would like to see. This makes sense if Harker represses the image of Dracula because it is an unpleasant reflection of his own repressed vices. In further support of Harker’s misperceived reflections, Elliot writes, “The mirror stage is profoundly ‘imaginary’ for Lacan, because the consolingly unified image of selfhood which it generates is diametrically opposed to the bodily fragmentation that the child experiences. In a word, the mirror lies” (Elliot 94). Thus, Harker asserts himself as the only reality because he recognizes Dracula’s presence as his own reflection of vices.

Robert Rogers discusses the reversed type of reflection, or double, in literature. He describes the double as a reflection of one or several characters. Rogers also writes in his book, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature,* “The conventional double is of course some sort of antithetical self, usually a guardian angel or tempting devil. Critics oriented toward psychology view the diabolic double, which predominates, as a character representing unconscious, instinctual drives” (Rogers 2). Rogers’s statement supports Dracula’s representation as the repressed unconscious, particularly in the way that the other characters discern him as a devil-like being. Furthermore, Rogers writes:

In Christian demonology the devil appears as the evil opposite, or double, of God. G. Rattray Taylor comments on the psychological process of decomposition by way of accounting for the nature of the devil: ‘The way in which the devil is made to provide a mirror image of the Deity is quite striking. He has his Mass, his churches, his disciples […] he has great power and knowledge; he descends into hell. (Rogers 6)

Rogers then introduces Taylor’s argument, which states, “men make gods in their own image, and if the Deity was an image of their better selves, the Devil was an image of their worse selves” (Rogers 6). In the same way that a devil figure can be interpreted as the double of God, Dracula doubles as the
reflection of men.

Although reflection may occur in the double of Dracula, self-reflection is an experience almost unknown to the characters. In relation to self-reflection, Van Helsing later says in the story, “[f]or in this enlightened age, when men do not believe even what they see, the doubting of the wise men would be [Dracula’s] greatest strength” (Stoker 326). Therefore, the lack of self-awareness and admittance of personal vices may prove to be weaknesses for Harker, but these faults are apparent weaknesses for the other male characters. Because Seward does not believe Van Helsing’s theory about Lucy’s death, his own life is risked when he and the others attend Lucy’s grave. The men’s hesitance to recognize Dracula as a threat to Lucy catalyzes and ensures her death. Stern also mentions in her article that “[t]he Gothic, and especially female horror […] articulates the fear of losing one’s image of self-as-subject by seeing all-too-clearly the objectifying socio-psychological structure in which one is caught” (Stern 29). Stern’s observation relates the forfeiture of female characters’ subjective self-images and desires through the objective reformations of their deaths; objectification particularly happens to Lucy, whose character will be further examined later.

At a quick glance, Dracula may be interpreted as a tribute to chivalrous romances in which maidens were rescued by knights from monstrous dragons. Indeed, Dracula has its share of attempted rescues and surrogate dragons; however, a closer reading of Dracula from a gender criticism perspective calls attention to the male characters’ subjugation of the female characters. “Dracula,” a name which is literally associated with dragons, is usually seen as the villain while the men are seen as the heroes. Despite the potential heroism associated with the male characters, their subjugation of women can be seen in the way that females are introduced. Harker comments upon the eastern women, “[t]he women looked pretty, except when you got near them” (Stoker 12). Female subjugation
is also evident in Harker’s first mention of his fiancée, Mina, when he writes, “I had for dinner, or rather supper, a chicken done up some way with red pepper, which was very good but thirsty. (Mem., get recipe for Mina)” (Stoker 11). Harker’s first mention of his wife is crucial, as it lays the foundation by which readers can imagine her character. Harker’s assumption that Mina will cook this meal for him encourages Dracula’s audience to believe that Mina is a domestic, dependent woman.

The example of Mina’s domesticity conflicts with her role as the independent, or at least intelligent, female in the story. She is interested in technology, such as her new typewriter, and maintains her own job as an assistant schoolmistress; however, it is significant that even this job as an assistant is still considered secondary to a superior position. Despite some level of independence, Mina expresses her own perceived subservience to males, such as when she claims to be “unclean” after Dracula makes his mark upon her (Stoker 290). Perhaps, though, Mina’s subservience is most noticeable when Van Helsing makes a second mark upon her. After Dracula bites Mina, Van Helsing places a Christian wafer upon her forehead. Mina then suffers scarring from the Christian artifact. The wafer is from a religion ruled by a male deity, and the wafer is also placed upon Mina by a male. In this passage of the story, Mina also refers to herself as “unclean” several times.

Because Van Helsing made the mark on Mina’s forehead, she will be unable to see it without looking in a mirror, a mirror which may or may not reveal her true self. In other words, Mina sees a doubled form of herself, much in the same way that Dracula acts as a double. Mina’s diabolic double manifests itself in the physical form of her marked forehead, while Harker’s vices manifest as Dracula. If self-reflection relates to a person’s sense of self-understanding, Mina’s self-awareness is compromised because of a mark that Van Helsing makes upon her, a mark which she perceives as indicating her impurity. Thus, the mirror may show Mina an image of impurity because the reflection
distorts her true self, which is not necessarily impure. In contrast to the male characters, Mina may repress images of her own independence or even attribute unnecessary blame to herself for her misfortunes. Since both marks were made by males, this emphasizes the influence of male dominance among the female characters, especially as Mina’s self-opinion is now based on a manmade scar.

Yet there is no more fitting example of the subjugation and objectification of female characters than Lucy. Van Helsing, the same inducer of Mina’s scar, refers to and treats Lucy as a child. He believes this appeasing approach will work because of his assumption that Lucy, a female, will not detect his deception. Van Helsing’s subtle subjugation is particularly evident when he first meets Lucy and tries to convince her to tell him what she suspects of her condition. By lulling Lucy into a false sense of security, he manipulates her to fulfill the roles of test subject and victim so he and the other males can assume the roles of heroes.

Dracula, Van Helsing’s nemesis, also manipulates Lucy. Dracula’s manipulation seems to empower, as opposed to threaten, the males. The males’ desire for Lucy is never so evident as it is in the tomb after she dies. Seward remarks in his diary, “God! how beautiful she was. Every hour seemed to be enhancing her loveliness” (Stoker 176). Holmwood stresses the admiration of her deathly beauty by whispering, “Jack, is she really dead?” (Stoker 176). Seward even questions while thinking of Lucy as Un-Dead, “[i]s it possible that all love is subjective, or all objective?” (Stoker 207). Thus, Dracula’s mark makes Lucy more desirable in an objective way since she cannot express subjective desire in death; however, when Lucy awakes, she tempts the men, particularly Holmwood, and expresses even more subjective desire than she did while living. Seward notes in his diary, “[s]he still advanced, however, and with a languorous, voluptuous grace, said:—‘Come to me, Arthur. Leave these others and come to me. My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest
together. Come, my husband, come’” (Stoker 218). The men perceive Lucy’s “voluptuousness,” and conceive of any female “voluptuousness” (such as that of the three female vampires) as threatening, impure, and sinister. The shift from the males’ affection and desire to fear and hatred for Lucy is emphasized by Seward’s quote, “[a]t that moment, the remnant of my love passed into hate and loathing; had she then to be killed, I could have done it with savage delight” (Stoker 217). In this passage, Lucy expresses subjective desire. She expresses this desire after she is bitten by Dracula. Therefore, Dracula influences Lucy’s experience of both objective and subjective desire. Although Lucy experienced both subjective and objective desire in life, the after-death forms are much more potent, especially relative to the desire and hatred of the men. Thus, it is more significant that Dracula creates this intense level of reactions, particularly making the men vehemently object, deny, fear, and thwart her subjective desire. Therefore, Dracula’s actions ultimately cause the men to reveal how they feel about feminine subjective desire.

Because of the revealing nature of Dracula’s actions, his status as the novel’s antagonist is debatable. Rogers writes:

The novel presents us with the paradox of a study which dwells on the subject of evil, largely in psychological terms, yet fails to involve our emotions deeply because of the way in which evil is accentuated and isolated in a diabolical other self. Just as the principal character projects his malevolent impulses onto his double, thereby disclaiming any responsibility for such impulses, so is the reader easily able to shunt off the guilt he unconsciously shares with the evil protagonist. (Rogers 33)

In relation to Dracula’s role as protagonist or antagonist, I believe the biggest question is, does Dracula support male dominance or female empowerment? As a character, I argue that he is
interested in neither. Dracula is concerned only for himself. He carefully calculates his next steps toward the top of the food chain—both literally and figuratively. As a character with motives, Dracula enlists the women in his dark ranks because he wants more power. Yet as a psychoanalyzed entity and literary mechanism, Dracula serves as a revealing agent. If Dracula were a Freudian psyche, he would be the id, the most basic and primitive source of human desires. In support of this, Rogers’ diagram of the Freudian psyche parallels the “monster” image of the soul to the id (Rogers 9).

In Dracula’s days of assumed chivalry, the male characters labor under the delusion and pretense that they respect women, yet continue to subtly manipulate them for their own purposes. Since Dracula exposes these circumstances, he may, in some light, be considered a dark protagonist. Although Dracula encourages corruption in others, he reveals their repressed natures for what they always were, whether it is men assuming bravery or women assuming domesticity and complacence below the superiority of male humankind.
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“Though it gets more difficult the more you ask it, though it gets more inexplicable, more painful, and the answer never seems to come any nearer, don’t try to escape this question Why” (my emphasis, Swift 130). Such is the traumatized utterance of Swift’s protagonist, Tom Crick, a history teacher, toward his class of students; they are a group of children who, like Tom Crick before them, are embedded in a culture of fear. The pursuit of one’s curiosity, itself a central theme of Waterland, is the driving force for much of the plot; as a scholar of history, Tom Crick encourages his students, and especially himself, to “demand of history an Explanation” for the current conditions of their selves and their world (62). At the same time, Tom Crick rejects the idea of studying history “to learn from our mistakes,” but rather as the equilibrium between progress and regression; in this sense Tom often ponders whether Man moves in “a great circle” (135). Historical curiosity, such as that of Tom Crick toward his past, thus functions to reveal his reality in the “here and now,” which is juxtaposed with fear. By curiously indulging in history, despite that it “gets more painful,” Tom Crick’s storytelling attempts to mitigate his current feelings of guilt and fear toward the outcome of his childhood curiosity; Tom is fearful that his past complicity in the sterilization of Mary Metcalf, his future wife, by means of a violent abortion procedure, has lead her to abduct another woman’s baby later in life. From a broader perspective, the relationship between curiosity and fear in Waterland thus reflects a common element in human civilization. Within the events of the novel, it is important to note that curiosity has been continuously coupled with fear; historical events such as the invention of the guillotine during the French Revolution, discussed in Tom Crick’s class, and the production of the atomic bomb, both products of Man’s desire for progress, have led to the subsequent fear of beheading during the Reign of Terror and from nuclear obliteration in the Cold
War, respectively. This focus on the duality of curiosity and fear as means of progression leading to self-destruction in human history is prevalent in Swift’s *Waterland* as a literary response to both the historical and potential future costs of Man’s curiosity.

During his latest lectures, Tom Crick emphasizes to his students that curiosity is innately embedded within Man. When asked *why* the study of history is important, most notably by Price, who is himself concerned with the “here and now,” Tom Crick responds that the “demand for explanation provides an explanation” (106). The human species, being the “animal which asks why,” is instinctively desperate for explanations. In dealing with *historia,* or inquiry, into past events, Tom Crick focuses his class’ discussion to utilize history to “uncover the mysteries of cause and effect” (107). Tom achieves this by abandoning the syllabus and engaging in storytelling; through his childhood stories, Tom is essentially probing for an explanation, a *cause,* for his wife’s kidnapping of a baby. The idea of interrogating the past to explain the “here and now” is important for both Tom Crick as well as his current students, namely Price.

Set during the apprehensive year 1979, the characters in Graham Swift’s *Waterland* are embedded in a culture of fear. Price, for example, often alludes in class to “certain topics of the day (the Afghan crisis, the Tehran hostages, the perilous and apparently unhaltable build-up of nuclear arms)” (7). Indeed, Price’s choice of appearance with off-white make-up, which “gave to his face the pallor of a corpse,” is a direct response to the current fear of almost certain annihilation in the near future (7). Even Tom Crick’s generation, a generation that has survived the tumultuous Second World War, as well as the post-WWII era of the 1950’s and 60’s, are guilty of having “the bizarre subject of nuclear shelters emerging through the coffee and brandy…” (124). Moreover, there is Headmaster Lewis Scott, who is himself solely concerned with “equipping [children] for the real world,” that
considers the installation of a domestic fallout shelter “for the kids’ sake” (24). Returning to Price, the idea of initiating a society dubbed the “Anti-Armageddon League” acts as a desperate attempt to “pool people’s fears” in order to control them (238). Attempts at controlling fear are prevalent within Waterland and, specifically with Tom Crick, telling stories are an approach to “drive out fear” (241).

In addition to attempting to understand why Mary has kidnapped a baby, Tom Crick engages in telling stories of his past as “a fight against fear” (241).

It helps to drive out fear. I don’t care what you call it—explaining, evading the facts, making up meanings, taking a larger view, putting things into perspective, dodging the here and now, education, history, fairy-tales—it helps to eliminate fear. And why do you think I’m sitting here with you now, wanting to tell you more? (my emphasis, 241)

Storytelling is therefore contradictory, as Tom uses stories to not only understand the “here and now,” of why Mary would steal a child, but also to divert his current fears by focusing on the past. Tom Crick claims, however, that story telling is something that throughout history has been shared between adults and children “whose need of stories is matched only by the need adults have of children to tell stories […] in order to quell restless thoughts” (7). During his discussion with Price, Tom Crick asserts that “when the world is about to end there’ll be no more reality, only stories. All that will be left to us will be stories. We’ll sit down, in our shelter, and tell stories…” (298). Tom Crick does not tell stories of the past to “learn a lesson” from history, but rather to focus on the cyclical nature of historical events and history itself.

Tom Crick argues that history “goes in two directions at once,” which essentially cancels out any form of true progress (135). Since history “goes backwards as it goes forwards,” there is an established, universal equilibrium between achievement and disaster; or in Tom Crick’s case, there is
a relation between his childhood curiosity and subsequent fear later in life (135). While many historical achievements have advanced human civilization, Tom Crick insists that serious side effects always result from their establishment. Moreover, human beings, according to Tom, are utterly incapable of knowing whether or not “we are going forward, towards the oasis of Utopia” (135).

That the discovery of the printing press led, likewise, as well as to the spreading of knowledge, to propaganda, mendacity, contention and strife. That the invention of the stream-engine led to the miseries of industrial exploitation and to ten-year-olds working sixteen hours a day in coal mines. That the invention of the aeroplane led to the widespread destruction of European cities along with their civilian populations during the period 1939 to ’45… And as for the splitting of the atom… (135-136)

Following the equilibrium of progress and regression seen throughout history, Tom Crick begins to fear that his current feelings of unhappiness and guilt are the result of his and Mary Metcalf’s sexual curiosity during childhood.

The sexual curiosities of Tom Crick and Mary Metcalf during childhood are later replaced by both fear and insanity. In the beginning of their relationship, Tom considers Mary an “untouchable madonna,” but, at fifteen, he is also aware of her “itch of curiosity” (51). Within their secret meeting place at the windmill, Tom Crick observes that “she was the bolder of the two of us. It was she whose fingers first got the itch and were at work before I dared, and only then at her prompting” (51). However, in retelling this story, Tom is essentially denying his responsibility in her future sterility by pinning Mary’s curiosity as the sole offender. The innocence of their childhood curiosity nevertheless acts as the turning point in both their lives as “curiosity, which, with other things, distinguishes us from the animals, is an ingredient of love” (51). Mary’s pregnancy leads to a sequence of events
including her primitive abortion and subsequent sterility, the deaths of Freddie Parr and Dick Crick, as well as her own mental instability; these events, in particular the loss of life, thus “precipitated the silencing of Metcalf’s curiosity” (Powell 73). Indeed, prior to their visit with the “abortionist” Martha Clay, Tom attempts to reminisce with Mary but notices that she is “not interested in stories. Not curious” (Swift 296). Yet years after having witnessed the abortion, as Tom and Mary become newlyweds, Tom Crick believes that “she will always be, just as she was in those days when she lost her curiosity, stronger than him” (120). This prediction proves false, however, as Mary Crick later becomes mentally unstable, after losing both her fertility and curiosity in life, and is now literally dependent on Tom Crick. Indeed, with the disposal of the result of Mary’s curiosity, which was, like her curiosity, at one point beautiful and innocent, it is fear and insanity that supercede. Moreover, while their childhood curiosity at one point was natural and innocent, Tom Crick and Mary Metcalf’s irresponsibility initiates a sequence of events that “fall into time and history” (Karam). According to Tom, “history begins only at the point where things go wrong; history is born only with trouble, with perplexity, with regret” and for Tom Crick, this moment occurs when Mary loses her child, her curiosity, and ultimately, herself (Swift 106).

From a Romantic perspective, human curiosity, as a type of ambition, will never be content. Tom Crick himself speculates that “the world is so arranged that when all things are learnt, when curiosity is exhausted (so, long live curiosity), that is when the world shall have come to its end” (204). Concerning 1979 society, Tom is certain that the apocalypse is inevitable without curiosity to promote progress; yet it is curiosity that oftentimes leads to catastrophe. In this sense the advancement of human civilization, fueled by our curiosity of the natural world, simultaneously catalyzes the end of history. Tom Crick, nevertheless, encourages his class to stand passively and
“witness the strife, the entanglements, the consuming of energy, the tireless searching that curiosity engenders” (197). In discussing the origins of the eel species *Anguilla anguilla*, Tom stresses that “nothing is worse (I know it) than when curiosity stops. Nothing is more repressive than the repression of curiosity. Curiosity begets love. It weds us to the world. It’s part of our perverse, madcap love for this impossible planet we inhabit. *People die when curiosity goes*” (my emphasis, 206). However, as seen in both Tom’s and particularly world history, the implications of following one’s curious impulses can often have serious and fearful consequences.

The relationship between curiosity and fear in *Waterland* mirrors several historical events in history that have resulted in apprehensive consequences. Discussed in Tom Crick’s class, the invention of the guillotine during the French Revolution, while nevertheless a device to produce death, was initially meant to serve as one of the “great so-called forward movements of civilization” (135). Shortly thereafter, the people of France revolted against their monarchy and yet “when the children of the French Revolution threw off their tyrannical father Louis XVI and their wicked step mother Marie Antoinette […] they thought they were free” (335). During the Reign of Terror, however, the product of France’s curiosity in more “humane” methods of execution had been turned against them, and soon enough the guillotines were “hissing in the Place de la Revolution. They have been hissing now for months and will go on hissing for some months yet” (270). Tom asks,

Why was it that this revolution which did indeed achieve lasting reforms could not do so without *fear* and *terror*, without the piling up, in the streets of Paris alone, of (at a modest estimate) six thousand corpses, not to mention the thousands of corpses in greater France or the unnumbered corpses of Italians, Austrians, Prussians, Russians,
Spaniards, Portuguese, Englishmen—which were to be strewn over the battlefields of Europe? (my emphasis, 141)

Moreover, in more recent history, the completion of the Manhattan Project resulted in the production of the first nuclear weapons. Spawning from human curiosity of the potential of nuclear fission, the creation of the atomic bomb changed the world; during the Trinity test, Robert Oppenheimer himself remembered the line, from the Bhagavad-Gita, “now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds” (“Oppenheimer”). The famous splitting of the atom during the 1940’s held tremendous influence for decades by initiating the apprehension of nuclear annihilation during the Cold War. As mentioned, the fear in Price’s generation of when “all the buildings go red-hot and then go white and all the people go red too and white” was certainly prevalent in England, and the world, in 1979.

Ultimately, both the invention of the guillotine and the production of nuclear weapons gave rise to periods of immense fear and psychological suffering. Similar to these historical occurrences, Tom Crick’s curiosity during childhood has led to its future destruction, later replaced by his current fear and guilt over the past, which, in Tom’s opinion, is the archetypical pattern of history—curiosity and progress eventually lead to fear, guilt, and regression.

Tom Crick, his classmates, and 1979 society in general are embedded in a culture of fear. In his classroom, Tom begins to curiously investigate into the past in order to explain current events: mainly, why his wife has recently stolen a baby. However, instead of learning from his discovered mistakes, Tom Crick views history as cyclical in nature, and that the “theory of hubris […] provides that there can be no success with impunity, no great achievement without accompanying loss” (Swift 72). Tom is fearful that, regarding his own history, the causality of his childhood curiosity has led Mary to kidnap the child. This idea of curiosity as a form of progress is also coupled with fear as a
form of regression—which therefore halts any true progress in society overall. For example, with the invention of aeroplanes and nuclear weapons, while both forms of progress in history as products of Man’s infinite curiosity, there have also been somber consequences including World Wars and the very real fear of nuclear annihilation. The duality of curiosity and fear as means of progression leading to self-destruction is prevalent in postmodern history, which is ultimately reflected in the fictional history of Tom Crick in Graham Swift’s *Waterland* as a literary critique.
Waterland: A Reflection of Curiosity and Fear in Postmodern Society

Works Cited


The Wife of Bath’s Prologue by Geoffrey Chaucer presents the eponymous character’s views on the roles of women and wives in her medieval cultural setting. The Wife of Bath ties her self-referential construction of her own story with her connections to the world around her, comparing herself not only to the men she married and the male authorities who composed authoritative literary, analytical, and exegetical texts but also to the texts themselves, shaping her background as a wife into a formidable source that might be analyzed and cited in its own right. The Wife is also cognizant of those who will receive her arguments, considering her fellow pilgrims in the construction of her Prologue in a manner that is discernible on a sentence-level study of her word choice, argumentative approaches, and tone. Therefore, despite efforts to study The Wife of Bath’s Prologue primarily as a work of literature, the text also functions as a rhetorical exercise. The Wife of Bath’s role as a rhetorician is central to a well-rounded understanding of the Prologue because the Wife perceives her argument not merely as a reflection of her mindset but rather as a tool of persuasion. Although she achieves limited success within the context of The Canterbury Tales, the Wife of Bath’s arguments for the respectability and importance of wives and her suggestions that all arguments are necessarily colored by the perspectives of those who construct and receive them reflect her efforts as a rhetorician speaking both to her fellow pilgrim characters and to the readers of The Canterbury Tales.

The Wife of Bath’s Introduction

The Wife of Bath presents a false dichotomy between experience and authority in the opening line of her Prologue. More specifically, the Wife of Bath deals with the juxtaposition of male-dominated forms of textual authority and her personal experiences as a wife and a woman. However, even as she claims a binary opposition, she simultaneously problematizes the binary through her word
choice. She notes that “[e]xperience, though noon auctoritee […] is right ynogh” for her to express her views on marriage, with the use of “though” suggesting that, despite the ostensible division between experience and authority, the concepts are linked and are not wholly in opposition (Chaucer 1–3). The word choice “though” sets up a qualification against the same dichotomy she is ostensibly upholding, allowing her to subtly challenge the concepts she sets out to deconstruct throughout the remainder of her *Prologue*. The phrasing also indicates the Wife’s willingness to make concessions to her audience. While she argues for her right to speak about and form an opinion on the subject of marriage, she still upholds the accepted forms of male-created exegetical authority in her introduction, or *exordium* (Corbett and Connors 256). By conforming to established methods of argument based on written analyses of texts, the Wife of Bath indicates that she has the capacity to operate using the same structures as respected critics. Thus, she preemptively combats the potential counterargument that her eventual criticism of the ubiquity of male-established authority stems from any inherent feminine weakness. The Wife establishes her abilities as a rhetorician and “proves that in citing Authorities she can beat the scholars at their own game,” thus amplifying her critique (Shoukri 103). Since she can deftly work within the systems of textual authority, her argument for the value of alternative approaches is given more credence. Therefore, through the Wife of Bath, Chaucer bolsters his wider satirical approach; just as the Wife’s validity is measured through her ability to conform to norms of discourse, Chaucer similarly succeeds in exploring the characters of both the Wife and her detractors to the extent that he is able to construct cohesive representations of their viewpoints.

Thus, from the first line of her *Prologue*, the Wife of Bath seeks to ingratiate herself to her audience of mostly male pilgrims, avoiding direct attacks against established concepts and instead adopting subtlety. The manner in which her lexicon sets the foundation for the eventual acceptance of
her argument is discernable, but her approach avoids the risk of alienating potential audiences from
the onset. Just as she gradually works up to the deconstruction of authority and the general
subjectivity of perspective, she also builds up her criticism as the Prologue progresses. The Wife does
not directly dismiss authority; rather, she points out flaws in various exegetical sources and shows
rather than tells about the weaknesses in authoritative texts. The Wife of Bath’s subtlety highlights
her role as a rhetorician within The Canterbury Tales, with her fellow pilgrims serving as her
audience. She exhibits audience awareness by opting to work within and subvert established forms of
male-dominated textual authority rather than outright rejecting male textual authority from the
beginning of her Prologue. If the Wife were merely stating her own views, she might be less tactful;
her decision not to alienate her audience but rather acclimate the pilgrims to her perspective through a
carefully-constructed argument establishes her piece as an instance of rhetorical persuasion developed
with an audience in mind rather than as a one-way expression of a viewpoint.

The Wife’s efforts to understand her audience underline her attempts to establish herself as a
rhetorician. By keeping her audience in mind, the Wife of Bath constructs her Prologue not merely to
reflect her own thoughts, but also to convey her arguments in a convincing matter. In her rhetorical
act, the Prologue does not exist as an end in itself; rather, The Wife of Bath’s Prologue is meant as an
instrument of persuasion. The Wife of Bath thus considers the existing biases of her fellow pilgrims
in hopes of crafting an argument that is tailored to the values and beliefs she knows her audience
already holds. Since she approaches her Prologue as a rhetorician, the Wife’s narrative neatly aligns
with rhetorical concepts. One such concept is insinuatio, through which a rhetorician “counteract[s]
prejudices or misconceptions […] about the subject of […] discourse” in order to persuade an
audience (Corbett and Connors 264 – 65). The Wife of Bath employs insinuatio by revealing that the
personal experiences of women can be self-sufficient even when used to form arguments in tandem with male-composed Biblical exegesis and scriptural texts. Her act of textualizing herself and using texts and experiences interchangeably makes the implicit argument that the privileging of male textual authority is unwarranted; since she shows that wifely experience provides similar discursive capabilities rather than simply stating her opinion as fact, she weakens the prejudices of her male audience in a manner that is difficult to immediately dismiss. Thus, the Wife of Bath proves to be adept at finding ways to “convince an audience” while tempering her confrontational approach with tactful treatment of her audience’s perspective (Corbett and Connors 264). Despite supporting a radical change in perspective, her rhetorical exercise is tailored to maintain and fit the norms of her fellow pilgrims’ expectations.

The Wife of Bath’s Defense of Wives and Marriage

The Wife of Bath’s concern for her audience guides her entire argumentative approach. Since she acknowledges the worth of textual authority, she attempts to legitimize her wifely experience through comparisons to textual authority. The Wife of Bath essentially textualizes herself by referencing her background as a source material within her comparative arguments. An early example of the conflation of established texts with her own life is evident when the Wife confronts the issue of multiple marriages.

Addressing the concern that she “ne sholde wedded be but ones” (Chaucer 13), the Wife of Bath questions that judgment by alluding to and aligning herself with the Biblical figure of the Samaritan. Although the Wife acknowledges the common interpretation that “the fifthe man/[w]as noon housbonde to the Samaritan,” she questions “why,” challenging accepted notions by encouraging her audience to reflect upon commonly accepted judgments (Chaucer 21 – 22). Thus, she encourages
active reasoning while simultaneously highlighting weaknesses inherent in the perspectives covered by existent textual authority, prompting her fellow pilgrims to think about heretofore unchallenged assumptions and, in the process, potentially consider the validity of the alternatives the Wife offers. The Wife of Bath seeks to involve her pilgrims directly in the process of challenging established authority; rather than simply stating that her differing perspective exists, she attempts to lead her audience to temporarily inhabit her questioning perspective. The Wife exhibits her role as a rhetorician actively engaging her fellow pilgrims instead of simply projecting her ideas towards them.

Rather than offering an answer to her first question regarding the Samaritan, the Wife recalls the Socratic method by constructing a train of inquiry when she immediately asks: “[h]ow manye [husbands] myghte she have in mariage?” (Chaucer 23). The lack of an established specific and concrete answer to the Wife’s question highlights the arbitrary nature of imposing a limit on the frequency of marriages in the first place. The Wife of Bath’s persistent questioning also serves a rhetorical function by actively encouraging her audience to reconsider long-standing assumptions.

Indeed, the Wife of Bath’s questioning reflects the practice of posing rhetorical questions, which are questions that “[do not] require […] direct and immediate answer[s] from the audience or reader” (Corbett and Connors 269). Although she eventually provides responses to the questions she poses, the Wife of Bath’s questioning serves a similar philosophical function to the Socratic method by playing in to her larger questioning of the universality of perspectives. Even when she makes direct assertions within her responses to specific exegetical details, she is merely making direct assertions about her specific perspective.

The Wife of Bath could have presented the same critiques of the vilification of multiple marriages using only declarative statements, but the form of question-asking itself comprises a branch
of her argument against the dominance of male textual authority in Biblical exegesis. Simply by questioning the conclusions drawn from Biblical exegesis, the Wife is suggesting that those sources contain elements that may or should be questioned. Furthermore, her method of posing questions actively engages her audience by prompting her fellow pilgrims to reflect upon the questions and anticipate her answers, thus reducing the impact or potential shock of her arguments once she directly states them. Corbett and Connors note that rhetorical questions “challenge the audience” and “make them more alert,” both reactions which make the pilgrims more susceptible to accepting or at least considering the Wife’s perspective (269). Indeed, by the conclusion of her Prologue, the Wife of Bath reveals that even her own perspective is colored by her experiences—but, since the same can be said about the accepted perspectives presented in sources of male textual authority, her views are equally valid and worthy of respect. The Wife is upfront about her own bias from the onset; although her self-representation may not “provide [the audience] with any authoritative perspective,” it may “be received as a rhetorical act, a narrative informed at every turn with the particular biases of its shaper” (Kiser 138). The Wife pairs her challenge to the audience with a candid acknowledgement of her own partiality in a two-parted show of respect, implying that she thinks enough of her audience both to trust them to work through complex arguments and to be honest about her own qualifications as a rhetorician. The Wife of Bath avoids a patronizing appearance while at the same time undercutting her ideological opponents—as she acknowledges her own limitations, she reveals the limitations inherent in all perspectives.

Through the Wife’s carefully-chosen methods, therefore, she discredits exegetical authority by revealing that even views which are largely accepted may not be logically sound; their weaknesses are not nonexistent but simply obscured because people do not challenge the views or examine them for
potential flaws. Thus, the popularity or common acceptance of a given interpretation is not enough to fully justify the interpretation as universal or even accurate. The Wife’s critique aligns with the O-proposition, or particular negative form of categorical proposition, which denies a subject in some but not universal cases (Corbett and Connors 38). Specifically, her argument may be summarized by the statement that some accepted analyses from scriptural scholars are not correct. Through her use of the categorical proposition, the Wife of Bath has provided a sound basis for eventually supporting the importance of considering feminine experiences and has effectively placed herself on more equal footing with the exalted texts she wishes to deconstruct, but her argument also has other facets. In the process of self-textualization, she has connected herself to a Biblical text and by doing so leveled the apparent unbalance between experience and authority, elevating her experiences by citing and supporting them as if they were not simply literary works, but works worthy of being argued in tandem with Biblical texts.

To further push her defense of the Samaritan, the Wife of Bath also ties in Biblical contradictions, such as the case of King Solomon who “hadde wyves mo than oon,” to suggest that religious teachings are not conclusively opposed to multiple marriages (Chaucer 36). Through citing King Solomon, a respectable male figure, the Wife of Bath shows that the same issue of multiple marriages garners differing reactions depending upon the gender of the figure involved. By interpreting the texts in a manner which enables her to deconstruct and contradict negative views of marriage, the Wife of Bath also lends authority to her own voice by way of logos, or rational appeals (Corbett and Connors 18). Having already established that she has had five “[h]ousbondes at chirche door,” the Wife sets up an implicit connection between her life and the text of the Bible—which, within the context of Christian belief, may itself represent a merging of authoritative texts and
accounts that are believed to reflect actual occurrences (Chaucer 6). The implied connection between the Wife and the Biblical text supports her defense of experience; since the Bible, the most authoritative text in Chaucer’s community of pilgrims, also functions as an account of the life experiences of Christian spiritual figures, the Wife’s descriptions of her own life might be viewed as similarly textual and, thus, authoritative. The Wife of Bath goes on to compare herself to the Bible when she quotes Jesus from the Biblical source, showing that she and the Samaritan are linked even through the number of the “five housbondes” they have married (Chaucer 17).

While the Wife of Bath refers to the statement as a “repreeve,” perhaps as an ironic comment on the censuring exegetical interpretation, the Biblical account she cites is ambiguous. In the story, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman “thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly” (John 4:18 King James Version). Whether Jesus is indicating that the Samaritan’s current husband cannot be considered a true husband or that she is currently residing with an unmarried partner is unclear; the Wife of Bath herself states that “[w]hat that [Jesus] mente therby, I kan nat seyn” (Chaucer 20). However, regardless of the intended implication, Jesus’ statement of the Samaritan’s marital status is neither followed by a direct rebuke nor a value judgment. The Wife highlights the ambiguity of the Biblical text’s stance of the issue of multiple marriages as she continues to highlight Biblical vagueness; simultaneously, Jesus’ own lack of outwardly expressed arguments against the Samaritan woman might undermine the harsh judgments of exegetical critics (Chaucer 16).

The Wife of Bath further bolsters her argument by singling out the contradictions inherent in a disapproving stance toward multiple marriages. She cites the Biblical suggestion that “God bad us for to wexe and multiplye,” initially seeming to ignore the common interpretation of that text as a
promotion of childrearing and instead claiming to “understonde” the “gentil text” through the context of her sexual experience (Chaucer 28 – 29). The Wife of Bath’s sidestepping of the traditional interpretation of “wexe and multiplye” might reflect either feigned ignorance or willful dismissal of the supposed importance of reproduction—or, perhaps, a combination of both perspectives. The Wife of Bath’s atypical approach enables her to explain how support for female sexuality may be interpreted from Biblical texts; indeed, if sexual activity within marriage might be cast as a divine instruction, multiple marriages might actually be ideal by providing more opportunities for procreation to occur. Here, the Wife employs specific examples through *logos* to counter moralistic and emotion-based objections to multiple marriages, with reason serving as a traditionally male-associated means of establishing credibility within an argument. The Wife of Bath’s show of preferring reason to emotionality serves the dual function of aligning herself with Aristotle’s ideals for primarily rational rhetoricians and conflating herself with common masculine qualities, thus establishing a twofold appeal to her fellow pilgrims (Corbett and Connors 18).

However, she takes a rhetorical risk by challenging her *ethos*, or “the character of the speaker as it is manifested through the speech,” and enabling her use of language to display a manipulative intent (Farrell 41). The success of the Wife of Bath’s approach to the Biblical passage rests on her fellow pilgrims’ response to her sardonic show of misunderstanding, since Corbett and Connors note that “overtly and excessively clever” uses of language “can repel readers rather than engage them” (269). Therefore, rather than simply dismissing the popular, procreation-supporting interpretation of the Biblical source, the Wife must go on to both explain and defend her uncommon reading in order to reestablish her audience’s willingness to remain receptive to her ideas.

To clarify her interpretation of the “wexe and multiplye” message, the Wife of Bath argues
that multiple marriages are at least functional, and notes that since “no nombre mencion made [God],/ Of bigamye, or of octogamye,” men, who are ostensibly lesser authorities than God, should not speak of marriages with “vileynye” or criticism (Chaucer 28, 32 – 34). The Wife of Bath thus cleverly reduces the status of her opponents—since much of the strength of exegetical arguments rests upon assumptions of the speakers’ righteousness and divine justification, the Wife highlights the inherent contradiction of male writers expressing arguments divergent from or supplementary to Biblical support while simultaneously maintaining self-proclaimed authoritative roles. Furthermore, by expanding the hierarchical scope and depicting men as subordinated to a divine source, the Wife of Bath complicates the assumption that men serve an ultimate role of power over women such as herself.

Refutatio and Confirmatio

The Wife of Bath goes on to defend sexuality within the context of marriage, which serves as her refutatio, or discrediting of potential counterarguments (Corbett and Connors 256). Rather than assenting to the notion that “virginitee” is the ideal state for women, she points out that both chastity and marriage have places in Christianity (Chaucer 62). The Wife of Bath argues for a balance between both sexual statuses; she compares the chaste to “pure whete-seed” and wives to “barly-breed,” using the metaphor to tie in a Biblical reference to her defense of sexual experience (Chaucer 143 – 44). She notes that “with barly-breed […] Oure Lord Jhesu refresshed many a man” (Chaucer 145-46). Despite its inherent lack of complete purity, the bread (and, by extension, wives) can serve a helpful and holy purpose. Thus, like barley bread, wives might serve a function that is separate from the pure wheat of the chaste, but one that is equally functional and worthy of respect. Similarly, the wifely experience she cites while constructing her argument may be viewed as comparable to textual
authority despite its differing form.

Just as women may serve variant roles through marriage or chastity, the Wife of Bath bolsters her argument by examining the multiple functions of genitals as the proof of her case, or confirmatio (Corbett and Connors 256). The variability of functions available to both anatomical features and women in general translates to her overarching argument concerning the validity of multiple perspectives within public discourse, thus defending her role as a rhetorician. In the process of constructing her confirmatio, the Wife of Bath also reaffirms her ability to contribute to existing modes of academic discourse by providing specific examples to support her logos, or rational appeal (Corbett and Connors 18). While she notes how the anatomical features may be used for “purgacioun/of urine,” she also lists the other purposes that sex organs serve (Chaucer 120 – 21). Aside from purgation and sexual intercourse, genitals can be used “eek to knowe a femele from a male” or to identify people through the categorization of physical sex (Chaucer 122). By employing description, the Wife of Bath is able to develop the definition of sexual organs in a manner which encourages new ways of perceiving the defined objects (Corbett and Connors 36). The Wife’s close attention to the multiple uses of these “instrument[s]” may apparently seem to be a digression from her exegetical argument, but she thematically returns to her use of “wexe and multiplye” in a sex-positive context (Chaucer 132, 28). Just as the genitals have a variety of uses, the act of sexual intercourse may also be said to have several different justifications. Besides procreation and pleasure, the Wife of Bath suggests that she uses sex as a means of obtaining “power” over her husbands’ bodies and thus power over her husbands in general (Chaucer 158). Thus, the Wife of Bath is able to find a means of asserting dominance even in a marriage context which traditionally served to place men in power.

Through her use of metaphor and anecdotal evidence, the Wife of Bath recontextualizes...
Biblical references while working in the contemporary experiences of wives, thus upholding the positive aspects of sexuality against the arguments of male Christian authorities. In the process, the Wife of Bath manages “to turn the tables effectively on the traditional arguments in favor of virginity” (Traversi 98). She chooses to focus not on the effect of the sexual activity, but rather on the practice itself. Her defense of sexuality and the role of wives leads her to the declaration “[y]blessed be God that I have wedded fyve” (Chaucer 44). After deconstructing criticisms of both multiple marriages and sexuality within marriage and thus discrediting misogynist exegetical depictions of wives through her refutatio, the Wife of Bath directly celebrates her own experience, confidently asserting that her five marriages should be a source of pride rather than shame (Corbett and Connors 256).

Who Peyntede the Leon?

The Wife of Bath’s argument takes a significant turn when she cites one of her husbands, Jankyn, in her self-textualization process. Her anecdotal discussion of Jankyn is also where she introduces two of the major themes of her Prologue, marking both the initial direct rejection of male textual authority and the “[w]ho peyntede the leon, tel me who?” example of how existing textual authority is skewed by perspective (Chaucer 692). Referencing a fable wherein a lion critiques a man’s artistic depiction of a man killing a lion, the Wife hearkens back to the first stage of Aphthonius’s progymnasmata, a rhetorical instruction sequence (Corbett and Connors 484). However, even while she uses a reference to a fable to add an easily understandable component to her discussion, she displays her rhetorical adeptness by incorporating the fable into the penultimate phase of the progymnasmata, which demonstrates her ability to construct and deliver an argument (Corbett and Connors 485). In her description of the fable, the Wife of Bath indicates that the lion would have
painted the scene differently—just as the misogynistic trends of textual and religious discourse would differ if women were allowed to participate (Carruthers 209). The Wife’s use of allusion to argue for the subjectivity of perspectives is well-placed when juxtaposed with her account of how predominant male-constructed views can seem both figuratively and literally violent from the perspective of one in a subordinated position.

Having gradually built up her criticism of authoritative texts in the beginning of her Prologue, she finally displays a vindictive response when discussing Jankyn’s book about wicked wives. Her anger provoked by the antifeminist discourse leads her to “rente out of his book a leef”—just as she dissected the logic of her opponents’ arguments in her earlier Biblical exegesis, she literally attempts to tear the book apart (Chaucer 667). The link between her rhetorical arguments and the physical destruction of Jankyn’s book is supported when Robert B. Burlin notes that “[f]rom Jankyn, too, she acquired the basic method of bludgeoning her opponents with texts and examples” (221). The example of the wicked wives text provides a background for the Wife’s general self-textualization, as the details that the Wife of Bath reports about the incident may be read as symbolic of her general methods of interpretation and argument. Jankyn’s response to the Wife of Bath’s attack on the book is to “smoot [her] so that [she] was deef,” resulting in the physical injury that caused her partial hearing loss (Chaucer 668). Since the Wife posits herself as a text, the symbolic significance of the event can be interpreted as a multifaceted imposition of deafness. Perhaps the Wife is not only deafened in the physical sense, but also grows figuratively deaf to the misogynist arguments of Jankyn and the book that provoked the attack.

Indeed, although they establish and document her role as a wife, the stories that the Wife shares about her husbands may reveal more about the Wife’s development of her argumentative
methods than about her husbands themselves. Edgar J. Duncan argues that the character of “Jankyn would be of little consequence” were it not for his role in facilitating the Wife of Bath’s criticism of wicked wives texts (208). Although Jankyn may have physically harmed her, the Wife manages to reconcile the situation by asserting control in their married relationship. Through the *invective* stage of the *progymnasmata*, she confronts the stereotype-perpetuating and male-biased faults inherent in the misogynist texts Jankyn reads and thus “exposes the inherent evils” of works which, characterized by their attacks on women, might themselves be classed as *invective* texts (Corbett and Connors 486).

The Wife seizes control over the wicked wives texts by dismantling them using the same rhetorical approaches as the texts themselves; she also commands Jankyn as a reader and previous supporter of the wicked wives texts.

In the process, the Wife of Bath gains more than just a position of power over her husband—she also gains the tools she will use to argue on her own behalf in defense of women and wives in general. The methods with which she argues can be traced back to the more primitive, physical ways that she fought against Jankyn; Jerry Root notes that “[t]he anaphoric frame ‘thou seyst’ puts her husbands’ language in quotation marks which constitute an appropriation as physical as the act of tearing out the pages of Janykyn’s book” (264). Anaphora consists of “repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive clauses or verses,” and the Wife’s use of anaphora to attribute valuations of wives to her husbands places emphasis on the fact that the views men express are derived from their own perspectives—that is, even prevailing androcentric mindsets are colored by those who constructed the viewpoints and were not constructed in value-neutral vacuums (Lanham 8). The repetition of “[t]hou seyst” reminds her readers of the subjectivity of men through mere quantity; the Wife uses the exact phrase four distinct times and employs slight variations elsewhere (Chaucer 254 –
337). However, anaphoric repetition also “gives a sense of order, permanence, and stability” by applying structural strength to the construction of language, thus showing the Wife of Bath’s attention to her rhetorical role through both the content of her language and her ability to mold it in aesthetically pleasing ways, increasing the “musicality of the lines” to serve “an expressive function” (D’Angelo 143). The Wife of Bath’s use of anaphora also highlights the function of “[r]epetition as incantation,” showing through her use of language how her rhetoric mimics the Biblical sources with which she attempts to align herself (D’Angelo 143).

The Wife of Bath’s ability to critique and thus control her husbands’ language reflects her tendencies to control her husbands in general, supporting her opinion that she does not have to escape marriage in order to derive benefits. Instead, she confronts her opposition directly; rather than abandoning her marriage when faced with the demeaning wicked wives texts, she overpowers their harmful influence by selecting mimicry over avoidance. Just as she uses close-reading and allusions—examples of literary critical methods—to combat existing literary criticism, the Wife of Bath confronts the accusations contained within wicked wives texts by reacting with anger and violence—essentially, by becoming a wicked wife in the eyes of her husbands. Appearing to comply with expectations lends her the ability to subvert the very structures she operates within.

While the Wife of Bath uses allusions to and analyses of texts in her attention to specific arguments in order to support individual points, she also uses them to support her general argumentative approach when she poses the “[w]ho peyntede the leon, tel me who?” question (Chaucer 692). The reference to the painting of lions represents the Wife’s objection to the entire dominant construct of male-centric—and, in the case of the wicked wives texts, misogynist—takes on women and marriage. The wicked wives texts, androcentric exegesis, and other forms of established
authority present only one perspective while downplaying and refusing to acknowledge the voices of women. Thus, the allusion the Wife makes supports both her individual arguments and the beneficial nature of her presentation of those arguments. Simply by providing an alternate perspective, the Wife of Bath makes efforts toward dismantling the structure in which only one viewpoint is allowed to gain prevalence. In terms of exposing the importance of conversation and debate while discrediting specific aspects of mainstream interpretations, the Wife of Bath is successful.

At the same time, however, the painting of lions reference limits the authority of the Wife of Bath. Throughout her Prologue, she makes efforts to present her arguments in a variety of ways while backing them up with her experiences, observations, and the same texts she critiques. Still, in the process of criticizing certain dominant opinions and interpretations, she highlights the faults inherent in all viewpoints. The Wife of Bath notes that “if women hadde written stories,” they would present the flaws and negativity of men in much the same way that the wicked wives books degrade women (Chaucer 693). However, simply providing counterpoints to misogynist texts does not prove her own viewpoint as correct. For her arguments concerning the importance of wives to be fully supported, her logos should be developed further to outline how her arguments are significant even in the light of her suggestions concerning universal subjectivity.

Indeed, through revealing the subjectivity of misogynist perspectives, the Wife of Bath indicates that her own viewpoint is subjective. If allowed to compose and present their opinions, women would theoretically point out the flaws of men not because women could reveal a universal, objective reality but because they would be responding to their own situations and frustrations. Although the Wife of Bath lends an authoritative status to her accounts of her experience, she effectively reveals her own biases in the process. Here, Chaucer’s satire becomes evident: since the
Wife of Bath is so successful at challenging traditional authority, she cannot simultaneously maintain the unquestionable authority of her own arguments. Just like the men she criticizes, the Wife can only argue from her own perspective and thus cannot claim to be wholly correct. This inherent tension could be read as a weakness on the Wife of Bath’s part, but Chaucer’s construction of The Wife of Bath’s Prologue is more complex and effective than such a reading would suggest. The weaknesses in her argument and the oversight of her own bias actually lend support to the overall message of her text by exposing similar flaws in the opposing views she studies. Lisa Kiser notes that “through the Wife’s performance, one can detect Chaucer’s own awareness (perhaps portrayed in the extreme) of the human urge to organize and politicize knowledge—and thus to select, distort, and misrepresent it” (142). The weaknesses in the Wife’s ability to maintain a role as an authoritative orator are part of her and Chaucer’s argument about the biases of all attempts to display and articulate knowledge; paradoxically, given the nature of the Wife’s argument, her weaknesses actually strengthen and provide evident support for her thesis. Since no viewpoint is represented flawlessly, none can be deemed definitive. Although Kiser reflects on the more negative and manipulative aspects of the “fiction” of “human discourse,” the observation also has less cynical implications—perhaps distortion and variation are simply aspects of how perspective functions (142).

Thus, while she may not be able to present her perspective as completely, objectively true, the Wife of Bath underscores the importance of representing multiple views in an atmosphere that is closed off to dissent. Therefore, the Wife of Bath’s ultimate argument for the subjectivity of perspectives is strengthened by any evident flaws in her argument; since she, too, is bound by her own perspective, the important role of perspective in general is highlighted. Her trustworthiness as a rhetorician is simultaneously shielded from criticism—since her argument rests on the assumption that
there is no objective human understanding and everyone is bound by their own experiences, her bias is thus made understandable rather than presented as a weakness in her character. After all, her argument is not that bias is always negative, but rather that one bias should not prevail.

The Wife of Bath’s Prologue in the Context of The Canterbury Tales

Since the Wife of Bath’s audience consists of her fellow pilgrims, her role as a rhetorician can be better understood by reflecting upon her place within The Canterbury Tales as a whole. As one of the only females participating in the pilgrimage, the Wife serves a unique role amongst her fellow travelers. The identification of her character as the Wife of Bath rather than with a given name indicates the importance of the marital role of a wife in her identity. Just as Chaucer identifies the Knight, the Miller, and the Friar with their professions, the Wife’s participation in the social institution of marriage is presented as her defining role; Chaucer thus uses The Canterbury Tales to comment on roles or types of people rather than to examine specific individuals. The Wife of Bath also comments on the broad roles of husbands and wives when she challenges misogynist assumptions and argues for the virtue of female perspectives and female sexuality throughout the Prologue; she speaks of subverting the patriarchally-established marriage structure through using her role as a wife to obtain power over her husbands.

However, a distinct difference exists between the Wife’s identification and those of her male travelling companions, as is evident through considering a definition of wifehood. The differentia distinguishing a wife from any other role available to women is the association with a husband (Corbett and Connors 34). The fact that the Wife of Bath’s role is necessarily tied to the men she married while Chaucer’s male pilgrims are characterized by professions that do not reference sexual relationships shows the Wife of Bath’s ultimate dependence upon men and her unavoidable links to
gender-based social hierarchies. Even the power she enforces over her husbands is power gained through her associations with them, thus revealing that her arguments for the importance of wives still privilege the existing authority of men. The implications of the argument concerning perspectives in *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* are thus more far-reaching and radical than her actual life experiences; her *ethos* as a character who participates in the marriage structure perhaps overshadows the equality for which she speaks.

The Wife of Bath’s tendency to seek “soveraynette” in marriage implies that she is not critical of the structure of marriage itself. Indeed, as her label within *The Canterbury Tales* reflects, her character is dependant upon marriage and is identified by her wifely nature. Thus, she does not only agree with the construct of marriage but also adopts her role within that institution as a representation of her entire being (Chaucer 818). If she opposed marriage, she probably would have remained a widow after her first marriage instead of choosing to wed four more husbands. However, instead of avoiding marriage, she seeks to manipulate the construct of marriage to serve her own means—she places herself in a position of power instead of eradicating the structure that necessitates and perpetuates that power. In fact, the Wife of Bath seizes control not in spite of her role as a wife, but because of it—her empowerment relies upon her presence within an oppressive structure within which there is control to be seized. The Wife’s attempts to derive power through her wifely role provide a stark contrast from Emelye in *The Knight’s Tale*, who prefers chastity because she fears that she will lose her autonomy within marriage. Just as the Knight suggests an alternative view of a woman’s potential for power in his *Tale*, another pilgrim also problematizes the Wife’s status. The Prioress is similar to the Wife of Bath in that she is another female pilgrim; however, her title, reflecting her role as a nun, is more similar to those of the male pilgrims in that it does not specifically reference a direct
relationship to a male figure. Although the Wife of Bath herself asserts that her role as a wife affords her strength as a women, the larger context of *The Canterbury Tales* suggests that chastity might actually be a valid alternative—not for the moralizing reasons that the Wife discounts in her *Prologue*, but perhaps for the possibilities for socially acceptable means of asserting autonomy without depending upon relationships with men.

The relative benefits of chastity and marriage are among the many issues debated throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, as the interactions between the pilgrims throughout their respective *Prologues* are characterized by the differences in the pilgrims’ opinions. For instance, the Miller and the Reeve use their *Tales* and *Prologues* to criticize and satirize one another in an approach that is later mirrored by the Friar and the Summoner. The Wife herself addresses her predominantly male fellow pilgrims as a group, perhaps indicating that the gender-based differences between herself and the men are, for her, more pressing than the interpersonal conflicts between the individual pilgrims. Just like Chaucer, the Wife of Bath categorizes her audience as a type, which allows her to analyze and attempt to persuade her fellow pilgrims by placing individual differences aside to focus on the common values of her audience and develop her persuasive attempts.

**The Conclusion of *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue***

The conclusion of *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* provides the most immediate means of assessing the Wife’s success as a rhetorician. Towards the end of the *Prologue*, the Friar comments that “[t]his is a long preamble of a tale!” (Chaucer 831). The Friar’s comment on the length of the *Prologue* highlights the importance of the text and the impact of the Wife’s self-textualization; the *Prologue*, like the Wife of Bath’s experience, is her tale. However, the Friar’s dismissive complaint reflects a failure in the Wife’s ability to convey the importance of her argument to her fellow pilgrims.
At the same time, the responses of the other pilgrims are not wholly negative. The Host chastises the Friar’s interruption and reroutes the focus back to the Wife, saying “lat the womman telle hire tale” (Chaucer 851). Although the Host’s interjection might be somewhat patronizing, he still indicates some respect for and acceptance of her viewpoint by arguing for her right to be heard.

Additionally, the Wife’s role as a rhetorician is colored by her status as a fictional character; even though she argues for her audience of pilgrims, Chaucer also uses her to speak to the larger audience of the readers of *The Canterbury Tales*, who might have a fuller appreciation for the Wife of Bath’s argument. Since *The Canterbury Tales* is a work of satire, the Friar’s disrespectful reaction may be construed as both a potential source for ridicule and an ironic affirmation of the Wife’s major premise. Even while the Friar targets the Wife of Bath, his reaction sets off a quarrel with the Summoner, highlighting the clash of perspectives evident in the general interactions of Chaucer’s pilgrims.

Therefore, while the pilgrims don’t all accept the Wife of Bath’s *Prologue*, the mere existence of their differing viewpoints shows the existence of multiple perspectives and the resultant erroneous nature of privileging one viewpoint.

The unfinished nature of *The Canterbury Tales* actually enhances the Wife’s message and reflects the importance of showcasing differing perspectives over indicating which perspective is correct—readers of the *Tales* are exposed to the characters’ stories and interpersonal relationships, but no one knows which character would have won the story contest. The lack of affirmation in the form of a winner to the contest places all of the pilgrims on a similar level and also invites readers to actively consider which *Tales* are most effective. Even if the Wife’s *Prologue* and *Tale* are overlooked, any application of critical thinking to *The Canterbury Tales* affirms the Wife’s call for her audience to question existing texts. Thus, while the Friar’s reaction does not reflect a personal
recognition of the Wife of Bath’s argument concerning the subjectivity and resultant validity of various perspectives, his display of personal bias through his dismissal of the Wife’s Prologue suggests Chaucer’s intent to lend credence to the Wife’s argument despite the realistic suggestion that the complexity of her rhetorical approach might not immediately convince all audience members.

**Conclusion**

On a functional level, the conclusion to *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* serves a transitory purpose; the Friar’s interruption and the Host’s encouragement enable the Wife to tell a fictionalized story that reinforces the pro-wife themes proposed in the larger story of her Prologue. Thus, the Prologue leaves a lingering mark on the following text in the *Canterbury Tales* sequence; regardless of the Friar’s negative response, the recurring ideas of power within marriage and womanly autonomy in general preserve the Wife of Bath’s arguments in the minds of the readers. The Wife’s argument, then, is successful in terms of destabilizing the hierarchy of male textual authority; simply by juxtaposing an alternative perspective with previously dominant notions, the Wife of Bath overcomes the masculine monopoly on discourse. The primary crux of her stance, after all, rests in her early statement that she should have the right to “speke of wo that is in mariage” (Chaucer 3). Since the Wife of Bath speaks of subjective points of view and the connected argument that all perspectives might be considered similarly flawed as well as similarly valid, immediate agreement from her fellow pilgrims would not be the ultimate marker of her success. The mixed and mundane response the Wife derives from her Prologue only serves to emphasize the differing viewpoints held by the Chaucer’s characters, all of whom perceive themselves to be correct. Through her use of rhetorical practices and concern for her audience, the Wife of Bath ultimately makes a comment on the ongoing conflict between perspectives that draws upon the same diverse and combative personas to whom she projects
The Wife of Bath’s Prologue, unlike the male exegetical texts the Wife critiques, both provides intellectual stimulus for its detractors and stands up against their criticism. The primary basis for her questioning of Biblical and masculine authority rests on the importance of presenting her own perspective as a wife. Therefore, when some of the pilgrims or readers of *The Canterbury Tales* disagree with the Wife of Bath, they are essentially following her lead by critiquing her authority and constructing their own arguments based on their experiences. The controversial nature of *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* indicates more rhetorical effectiveness on the Wife’s part than a passively accepting audience response would. Since the Wife urges her audience to question authority, attacks on her own experience-derived status show that her suggestion to consider the biases of authority figures and put forth one’s own position is being embraced even—or, perhaps, especially—by her critics.
Works Cited


“Devyne and Glosen”: A Rhetorical Analysis of The Wife of Bath’s Prologue


About the Kirby Canon:

This edition of *The Kirby Canon* is a collection of winning student essays within the English Department curriculum from the 2007-2008 academic year. Some of the essays were nominated by English faculty, while others were self-nominated. The essays were divided between a panel of two faculty members. In an effort to remain unbiased, the panel did not judge essays from students who submitted a paper to from their classes. After choosing a group of the top submissions from each category—101, 120, 201, 200-level, and 300-level—the final decisions were made by a graduate of the English Department.

*The Kirby Canon* originated as an English 101 essay contest; however, it was later expanded to incorporate all upper level English course categories. This expansion allowed for the anthology to be used as a pedagogical tool for all courses within the department.

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