

## The Wife of Bath: standup comic

MARGARET ROGERSON

When Chaucer's Wife of Bath tells her tale to the Canterbury pilgrims, she boldly takes centre-stage and situates herself in the world of carnival, the world-turned-upside-down.<sup>1</sup> Her narrative presents a series of carnivalesque reversals through which the traditions of male-centred Arthurian storytelling are refashioned. The knight in this tale is not a questing hero who returns in triumph from the mysterious outside world to the comforts of the court; rather, he is a rapist whose journey represents a form of judicial punishment meted out by his own aristocratic society. He is not a slayer of giants or dragons and certainly not a protector of the fair sex and, since he disqualifies himself as the hero of this adventure, his role is taken over by the woman who rescues him from the sentence of death. The marriage that takes place at the end of tale is not celebrated with the rejoicing that customarily follows a successful knightly quest, but provokes universal gloom. The bridegroom does not win a beautiful lady of high rank and good fortune as a prize for his sufferings on the quest, but, to save his own life, must give his body as ransom to an ugly old peasant woman. This woman does not give her own body as a token of love to the knight, but appears to lust after his youthful masculinity. The happily-ever-after is achieved finally through the most improbable of all reversals when the ugly old woman turns into a lady who is both fair and young. This last reversal does not result from a release from enchantment, but appears to be an act of the old woman's own volition, and, as such, it validates the power of the marginalised and the grotesque that is at the heart of carnival.

In this article I argue that the prologue to the tale is also an exercise in carnival, and that rather than being a true

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Chaucer's works in this article are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) and references will be included in the text.

autobiography of Alisoun of Bath, it is a joke routine for a standup comic. My reading of both prologue and tale as a comedy act has been influenced by the scholarly work of feminist film and television critic, Kathleen Rowe, whose studies of unruly women in modern comedy help to explain the appeal of Chaucer's Wife for medieval audiences and for those who observe her at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Following Rowe's lead, I propose that the Wife of Bath is in some ways a Roseanne Barr of the Middle Ages, who exploits the comedy inherent in the figure of the unruly 'woman on top', who is 'too fat, too mouthy, too old ... too sexual ... for the norms of conventional gender representation'.<sup>3</sup> The compelling energy that Rowe has noted in Roseanne, a television sitcom star of the 1980s and 1990s, is similar to the attraction of the Wife of Bath. Both ladies exude the excesses of the archetypal grotesque woman who can be a focus for comedy in any period. It is also important to observe that the creator and original live performer of the Wife of Bath was not a woman, but Chaucer, a member of the medieval male patriarchy. As Peter Beidler has pointed out, Chaucerian scholars assume that the Wife's prologue and tale were 'designed initially to be presented orally by Chaucer himself, either in the royal court or at some other gathering—a bachelor party, for example, or a visit by a diplomat, or a trade guild festival'.<sup>4</sup> The 'Wife' was, then, conceived of as a female role to be presented by a male reader, possibly for an all male audience, and I contend that 'she' can be interpreted as a foremother of Dame Edna Everage, Australia's own 'housewife-superstar',<sup>5</sup> as created and performed by Barry Humphries.

<sup>2</sup> In particular, 'Roseanne: unruly woman as domestic goddess', *Screen*, 31.4 (1990), 408-19; and *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Rowe, 'Roseanne: unruly woman as domestic goddess', 410.

<sup>4</sup> *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Wife of Bath* (Boston: St Martin's Press, 1996), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> 'Housewife-Superstar!' was the title of 'her' show in London, 1976: see Ian Britain, *Once an Australian: Journeys with Barry Humphries*, Clive

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To suggest that the Wife of Bath, a fictional character from the English Middle Ages, was devised as a standup comic is by no means anachronistic. Versatile comic performers, who were able to assume many roles, deliver stinging one-liners and delight their audiences with set-piece gag sequences were there then as much as they are here now. The Middle Ages had its own standup comics in the persons of the 'fools' who entertained in towns and at the court. Generations of English monarchs retained their favourite fools for their personal entertainment and the amusement of the broader public of the court.<sup>6</sup> Outside, in the world of the common people, the court practice was imitated by the mayors of larger provincial towns, like Newcastle upon Tyne, where fools were maintained from the public coffers.<sup>7</sup> This tradition of the medieval fool is perhaps best known today from the plays of Shakespeare, such as *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night*, where the standup comic, with his special licence as fool, offers comfort, comment and criticism through laughter.

The Middle Ages also enjoyed a long-standing tradition of female impersonators on the stage. Indeed, drama historians agree that it was standard practice in the English theatre before the Restoration for all female roles, whether comic or serious, virtuous or morally flawed, to be played by men. Women did indeed perform in some private entertainments at court and were involved in amateur theatricals at parish level, but it was not until the professional London theatres were reopened with

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*James, Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 78. Humphries began his professional career in the early 1950s. By 1955, Dame Edna, or as she was then known, Mrs Everage, had joined his repertoire. As Peter Coleman comments, *The Real Barry Humphries* (London: Robson, 1990), p. 33, this Edna was 'a strident ridiculous housewife, a pantomime dame' rather than 'the thrusting pest of the 1960s, let alone the international *monstre sacré* of the 1990s'.

<sup>6</sup> For discussion of court fools, see Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> See J.J. Anderson, ed., *Records of Early English Drama: Newcastle upon Tyne* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), pp. xvii-xix.

the return of the monarchy in 1660 that women were officially recognised as actors.<sup>8</sup> In the lead-up to the closure of the theatres in 1642, the charge that men wore women's clothing and aped their voices, manners and deportment was one of the repeated criticisms of the stage voiced by the puritanically-minded. William Prynne, a voluble opponent of the stage, had this to say in his anti-theatrical tirade, *Histriomastix*, published in 1633:

a male might be effeminated into a female ... their sex might be changed by Art ... men are prohibited in the Law [i.e. *Deuteronomy* 22.5] to put on a womans garment, and such who doe it are adjudged accursed. How much more greater a sinne is it, not onely to put on womans apparell, but likewise to expresse obscene effeminate womanish gestures, by the skill or tutorship of an unchaste Art.<sup>9</sup>

Prynne's views were extreme, but they serve to demonstrate that the crossdressing male actors of his time were highly skilled in the portrayal of female roles. This, then, is the theatrical backdrop for a reading of the Wife of Bath's performance in *The Canterbury Tales*: a context in which the standup comic and the female impersonator were accepted as commonplace.

Medieval scholars commenting on the Wife of Bath acknowledge that both her prologue and tale are Chaucer's fictions, but there has been a tendency to make a significant distinction between the two narratives. The tale has been regarded as a fiction that can be understood as an extension of Chaucer's characterisation of the Wife in the portrait in *The General Prologue* and, later, in the prologue to her own tale;

<sup>8</sup> For discussion of women and the English stage, see, for example, Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama 1660-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 19-36; and James Stokes 'Women and Mimesis in Medieval and Renaissance Somerset (and Beyond)', *Comparative Drama*, 27.2 (1993), 176-96.

<sup>9</sup> *Histriomastix* by William Prynne, with a preface by Arthur Freeman (New York: Garland, 1974), p. 169.

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but her prologue has been aligned with non-fictional autobiography. Margaret Hallissy, for example, stresses that:

the story of the Wife of Bath's life, is domestic "truth," as opposed to the literary "fiction" of her tale. In "life," the quest for mastery can end in a standoff. In her "fiction," the Wife creates an idealized world in which, as Lee Patterson says, "mastery is sought only that it may be surrendered, an abnegation that allows both spouses to escape from the economy of domination that blights marriage."<sup>10</sup>

My contention is that, while the prologue is clearly autobiographical in tone, it is just as fictional as the tale itself and Alisoun's life story can be understood as part of the routine of the standup comic. The Wife of Bath's 'autobiography' is, essentially, a set of lies that has been invented to make the audience laugh. Chaucer has achieved the appearance of an autobiography for Alisoun in a way that is analogous to the self-presentation of Roseanne Barr on her road to stardom:

an entity which ... she has knowingly fashioned through interviews, public performances and perhaps most unambiguously her autobiography. This book, by its very existence, enhances the potency of Roseanne-as-sign because it grants a historicity to her "self" and a materiality to her claims for authorship.<sup>11</sup>

The self-promoting 'truth' in the Wife's autobiography is similar in comic effect to Dame Edna's statements of her own preeminence among the stars of the London stage in 'her' autobiography:

Next door to my Shaftesbury Avenue theatre, Lady Olivier (lovely Joan Plowright) was doing her show which I think had something to do with seagulls. Needless to say, it didn't exactly have the audience in stitches and poor Joan was

<sup>10</sup> *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows: Chaucer's Women and Medieval Modes of Conduct* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp. 176-77. For the quotation from Patterson, see *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 313-14.

<sup>11</sup> Rowe, 'Rosanne: unruly woman as domestic goddess', 412.

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constantly thumping on the wall whenever my patrons laughed too loudly which was about every ten seconds. Success, I'm afraid, always carries a high level of noise pollution.<sup>12</sup>

My intention here is not to diminish the contributions to an understanding of the Wife of Bath provided by the many excellent discussions of the prologue and tale as confessional discourse,<sup>13</sup> but rather to draw attention to the Wife's self-presentation as comic story-telling. While Chaucer has encouraged his audience to imagine a three-dimensional Wife of Bath, the two forms of talk that this fictional character indulges in are equally fictitious: for the Wife, as much as for Chaucer, the prologue was a fiction.

That the Wife of Bath was recognised as a 'housewife-superstar' in medieval literary circles is not to be doubted. Chaucer himself took pains to keep her in the public eye by directing attention to her in *The Clerk's Tale* and by referring to her in one of his short poems, *Lenvoy de Chaucer à Bukton*. The Clerk dedicates a comic song to her at the end of his tale of Patient Griselda. He asks the other pilgrims to listen to the song 'for the Wyves love of Bathe' (*The Clerk's Tale*, l. 1170), and his gallant address to women is offered in the spirit of carnival. This comic song effectively turns the world of his tale upside down. In the tale, Griselda was superhuman in her silent suffering, not even allowing herself to grieve or complain when she had been deceived into thinking that her husband had ordered the murder of their two children or when she was about to be sent home destitute to her father. The song challenges women repeatedly to ignore the sterling example of wifely silence set by Griselda and to speak out boldly:

Lat non humylitee *youre tonge naille* (l. 1184)

Folweth Ekko, that holdeth *no silence* (l. 1189)

<sup>12</sup> *My Gorgeous Life: An Adventure* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 223.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Jerry Root, "'Space to speke": The Wife of Bath and the Discourse of Confession', *The Chaucer Review*, 28.3 (1994), 252-74. For a recent summary of critical approaches and sample essays on the Wife of Bath, see Beidler, *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Wife of Bath*.

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Ay *clappeth as a mille*, I yow consaille (l. 1200)

For though thyn housbonde armed be in maille,  
The arwes of *thy crabbed eloquence*

Shal perce his brest and eek his aventaille (ll. 1202-4)

(my italics)

According to the song, female voices are to be both loud and aggressive and yet the advice is given in jest. The joke is ostensibly against women, since none of the fair sex outside the realm of fiction can live up to the standards set by the idealised Griselda. The joke also involves the Wife of Bath. Not only is the song dedicated to her, but the garrulousness it advocates is also characteristic of her own performance. In addition, the Clerk's song echoes themes presented in her prologue and tale: male authorship of women's stories (ll. 1185-86); mastery within marriage (l. 1192); aggression towards husbands (l. 1201); and the use of jealousy against husbands by women who are both 'fair' and 'foul' (ll. 1205-12).<sup>14</sup>

*Lenvoy de Chaucer à Bukton*, like the Wife of Bath's prologue (l. 3), directly addresses the matter of the 'wo that is in mariage' (l. 6). Like the Wife (l. 52), the persona, 'Chaucer', who speaks tongue-in-cheek in this poem, asserts that it is better to be 'wedde than brenne' (l. 18). The addressee of the poem, again like the Wife in her prologue (l. 1), will learn about the woes of wedlock by 'experience' (l. 22). If these verbal echoes are not enough to recall the Wife of Bath's prologue, Chaucer advises his audience explicitly to read 'The Wyf of Bathe' (l. 29).

The extent of the Wife's fame outside Chaucer's own works cannot be measured with any accuracy, but something of her star status is suggested by John Lydgate's *Mumming at Hertford*, written to be presented before the youthful King

<sup>14</sup> The issues of mastery within marriage and female aggression are dealt with extensively in the Wife of Bath's prologue and tale; for her discussion of male authorship, see her prologue, ll. 688-710; and for jealousy, see prologue, ll. 481-94.

Henry VI in 1430. Lydgate, a younger acquaintance and avowed fan of Chaucer was strongly influenced by the older poet and even went so far as to present his *Siege of Thebes* (1420-22) as a sequel to *The Canterbury Tales*.<sup>15</sup> In the *Mumming at Hertford*, he paid a special tribute to the Wife of Bath. The text was to be read while players mimed the action and is a satiric presentation of a verbal contest between six men who, significantly, speak only through an advocate, and their overbearing wives who, also significantly, are perfectly capable of speaking for themselves. The proposition for the debate in the *Mumming* is that there is no earthly strife that compares with 'wedding of a wyff'.<sup>16</sup> In their refutation of this proposition, Beatrice Bittersweet, Cicely Sour-cheer and the other wives specifically invoke the authority of the Wife of Bath in their argument to prove that wives 'make hir housbandes wyne heven' (l. 170). Lydgate's *Mumming* indicates that the Wife was known to the courtly audiences for this dramatised reading as one who was both argumentative and garrulous, and as one who was accustomed to being a 'woman on top'. The talent for argument and domestic violence exhibited by the women in Lydgate's *Mumming* is also amply demonstrated by the Wife of Bath when the old woman of her tale indulges in a marriage bed lecture on the nature of true gentility and when the Wife herself tells how she quelled her own five husbands in her prologue. In the *Mumming*, the slapstick comedy of the battle of the sexes was acted out in mime when the husbands' advocate described the domestic situation of his clients. Hobbe the Reeve comes home hungry from ploughing and finds his wife drunk, with no hot dinner on the table and can only expect a clout over the head with a distaff if he complains; Colin the Cobbler is also beaten up by his wife both physically and verbally, 'six for oon of worde and strookes' (l. 66); and the other men are treated in

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of this work, see Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate* (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 151-56.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Noble MacCracken, ed., *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, Part II, Secular Poems, Early English Text Society OS 192 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. 675-82, line 22. Subsequent references will be included in the text.

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much the same manner. The Wife of Bath gives a similar account of her dealings with her husbands in her prologue: her outlandish verbal attacks on her three old husbands effectively prevent them from getting a word in and accusing her of any wrong doing (ll. 235-450) and her rough and tumble fight with husband number five, lying still as death until he gets close enough for her to land the final punch, gives her the 'governance ... of his tonge, and of his hond also' (ll. 814-15). The slapstick comedy implied in her spirited marital revelations makes her a fitting model for the wives of the *Mumming* both verbally and physically.

Chaucer clearly sets up the Wife of Bath as a comedian in her portrait in *The General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales* when he lists among her attributes her ability to 'laughe and carpe' before an audience 'in felaweshipe' (l. 474). This talent is, of course, essential in standup comedy. In addition, the Wife of *The General Prologue* shares a number of other talents with Dame Edna Everage and the ladies of modern sitcoms. Her aggression in this portrait, directed against other women who would take her place as the first to make her offering at church, is reminiscent of the comic aggression of Hyacinth Bucket ('Bouquet') from the television series *Keeping Up Appearances* as well as Dame Edna in her efforts to belittle her bridesmaid and companion in widowhood, Madge Allsop:

Madge is the browbeaten symbol of Dame Edna's tyrannical aggrandisement ... Madge is the ghost of emptiness past. Edna is forever beaming, Madge forever po-faced. Edna is dynamic, Madge affectless. Edna is all talk, Madge all silence.<sup>17</sup>

The female friend is a recurring comic motif: Dame Edna has her 'Madge', Hyacinth Bucket has her 'Elizabeth', and the Wife of Bath has her 'Alisoun' (ll. 530, 548). Although the Wife's friend has only a small part in the story that is being told, she is clearly important to her as an ally, although she is, suitably, colourless.

<sup>17</sup> John Lahr, *Dame Edna Everage and the Rise of Western Civilisation: Backstage with Barry Humphries* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), p. 226.

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The Wife's physical appearance—her outlandish clothing, her red face, her broad hips and the sexual appetite suggested to the medieval audience by the gap between her front teeth—align her with Roseanne in the 1990s. The Wife's status as a mature woman who was unconcerned about hiding her sexuality could also be commented on with the words Kathleen Rowe has used to comment on the comic screen actor Mae West:

as she aged, the spectacle she made of herself became even more outrageous because of our culture's difficulty in seeing sexual forwardness in older women as anything but grotesque.<sup>18</sup>

These aspects of the unruly woman are, it would seem, as medieval as they are modern.

There is more to Chaucer's portrait of Alisoun in *The General Prologue* than a physical picture of a carnivalesque woman pushing herself forward and flaunting her sexuality. The poet's method of description has a number of features that are characteristic of the technique of modern comedy routines. He uses sexual innuendo and double entendre:

*Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce,  
For she koude of that art the olde daunce* (ll. 475-76)  
(my italics)

and pointedly describes even her apparent devotion to Christian pilgrimage as 'wandrynge by the weye' (l. 467), a phrase suggestive of worldly interest in sexual matters. He also uses the equivalent of the modern comedian's suggestive pause, 'nudge, nudge, wink, wink, say no more ...', in his description of her sex life:

Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve,  
Withouten oother compaignye in youthe —  
*But thereof nedeth nat to speke as nowthe.* (ll. 460-62)  
(my italics)

<sup>18</sup> *The Unruly Woman*, p. 117.

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A third comic technique is that of apparently naïve character assassination when he describes her potential demeanour at the charitable offering in the church as ‘so wrooth ... /That she was *out of alle charitee*’ (ll. 451-52) (my italics).<sup>19</sup>

While it is Chaucer who makes these remarks in *The General Prologue* and not the Wife, the possibility that her own mode of talking is similar in method to the poet’s description of her might be inferred even before she begins her prologue and tale. Indeed, in her own delivery, the Wife of Bath lives up to her portrait; she describes herself as ‘a verray jangleresse’ (a mighty chatterbox, l. 638), and so she is. She likes to hold the floor and is certainly not going to be upstaged by any witty comments from the other pilgrims. When the Pardoner tries to interrupt her comedy act and take over the limelight (ll. 163-68), she puts him down with threats that her ‘tale’ — and here she refers to her prologue not to the story of Arthur’s knight — will make him tremble at the very thought of matrimony (ll. 169-83). He becomes the object of her scorn, for like any standup comic, she cannot allow a member of the audience to make wisecracks at her expense. She must turn the tables on him by focusing her performance directly on him and making him feel uncomfortable in the limelight. She is not to be silenced or displaced either here or at the end of her prologue when she is about to begin her real ‘tale’ and the Friar and the Summoner interrupt and threaten, momentarily, to take her place. The Friar, like the Pardoner, might regret his outburst, for the quick-witted Wife manages to incorporate him into the opening of her tale and he pays for his interruption by being made the object of a joke as the Wife quickly reappropriates the centre-stage from him by making the limelight uncomfortable for him through her suggestive remarks about the sexual appetites of men of his calling (ll. 864-81). The Wife is no ordinary story-teller, but a polished performer who is used to working her audience and

<sup>19</sup> As Sigmund Freud noted in his study of laughter, the ‘naïve’ is a significant factor in comedy, see *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1960), vol. 8, pp. 182-88.

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able to ad lib her way out of trouble. This is another parallel with Barry Humphries' portrayal of Dame Edna, for as Ian Britain comments, although the Dame seeks audience involvement:

There can be no doubt ... as to who dominates and controls the action once she appears ... She will brook no interference or competition from her assembled followers. At one of her stage shows in London in recent years, a voice-over grimly announced before the proceedings began: "Should a particularly malign manifestation occur near you, *kindly desist from drawing attention to yourself*. Fully qualified exorcists are stationed throughout the auditorium"<sup>20</sup> (my italics)

Despite her treatment of them, the audiences keep coming back for more:

Dame Edna is ... a theatrical phenomenon: the only solo act to play (and fill) the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane since it opened for business in 1663 with Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Homorous Lieutenant*.<sup>21</sup>

So it is with the Wife of Bath. She gives the Pardoner a put down, but he presses her to go on with her story—'spareth for *no man*' (l. 186) (my italics). Further, at the end of the prologue, despite its length, she has engaged the company so successfully that the Host is anxious for her to continue and urges her to 'telle forth youre tale, and that is best' (l. 853). Although the Summoner might seem to complain that hers has been 'a long preamble of a tale' (l. 831), Chaucer indicates that the general reception of her performance has been favourable. Clearly, she is not to suffer the same fate as the pilgrim, Chaucer, whose *Tale of Sir Topas* is met with derision as 'drasty rymyng [that] is nat worth a toord' (l. 930).

The Wife herself makes a comment that can be used as evidence that her prologue is a comedy act, that she is making it all up and that the account of her life is to a large extent fanciful and exaggerated. When she resumes after the Pardoner's

<sup>20</sup> *Once an Australian*, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> *Dame Edna Everage and the Rise of Western Civilisation*, p. 2.

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interruption, she graciously agrees to do so with the following caution:

... I praye to al this compaignye,  
If that I speke *after my fantasye*,  
As *taketh not agrief* of that I seye,  
For myn entente nys but *for to pleye*. (ll. 189-92) (my italics)

She is aware of the story-telling game that the pilgrims are involved in, and as the author of this particular autobiographical 'tale', she utters a disclaimer in much the same spirit as Chaucer, the pilgrim narrator, frames his own authorial disclaimer in the prologue to the rather risqué *Miller's Tale*:

The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe wel this.  
So was the Reve eek and othere mo,  
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.  
Avyseth yow, and *put me out of blame*;  
And eek *men shal nat maken ernest of game*. (ll. 3182-86)  
(my italics)

The Wife is conscious of herself as the author of her prologue in the same way as Chaucer is conscious of his own authorship of the sexual romp in *The Miller's Tale*. She identifies her prologue as a harmless fiction that has arisen from her own 'fantasy'. According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, 'fantasye' has a number of meanings; among these are 'the imagination' (1a); 'a lie' (2b); 'a product of the creative imagination' (3b); and 'amorous fancy or desire' (5).<sup>22</sup> These are the meanings that are important to the reading of the Wife as a standup comic as they combine the concepts of fictional composition and the sexual fixation that often operates in this form of entertainment.

There is a good deal of bravado and hyperbole in the Wife's brazen account in the prologue of how she dealt with her husbands. Throughout her performance she exhibits the expertise of a live performer who knows how to work the

<sup>22</sup> *The Riverside Chaucer* adopts the less loaded meaning 'inclination' *MED* (4b) as the translation for this instance of the word.

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audience. From the very beginning of her discourse, she appears to be making emphatic contact with the fictional pilgrims through her frequent use of rhetorical questions:

But that I axe, why that the fifthe man  
Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?  
How manye myghte she have in mariage? (ll. 21-23)

Why shoulde men thanne speke of it vileynye? (l. 34)

What rekketh me, thogh folk seye vileynye  
Of shrewed Lameth and his bigamy? (ll. 53-54)

The mode of address implies an eye contact as well as a verbal one. Her approach is of a very personal and immediate kind, for not only is 'I' the subject of her discourse, the pilgrims are frequently called upon directly for their collective, or perhaps even individual, opinions, their agreement or their attention. Yet even in these clearly directed remarks, the pilgrims are not given licence, as the Pardoner and Friar discover to their cost, for any witty contributions:

*Telle me* also, to what conclusion  
Were membres maad of generacion,  
And of so parfit wys a wright ywroght? (ll. 115-17)

*Now herkneth* hou I baar me proprely. (l. 224)

*Now wol I seye yow sooth*, by Seint Thomas. (l. 666)  
(my italics)

Throughout the prologue and the tale that follows it there is ample demonstration of the skills of the standup comic that have been mentioned earlier in this article: the use of sexual innuendo, the comic pause, and apparently naïve character (self)-assassination. Just a few examples will suffice to illustrate the Wife's expertise. There is plenty of sexual innuendo in the prologue in her somewhat less than coy fixation with the reproductive organs of her husbands, whom she chose for their 'nether purs' (l. 446) as much as for their bank accounts. In the same vein, she also flaunts her own genitals as a form of exchange and her granting or withholding of sexual favours as a means of control over her husbands. She reports that she

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challenged her jealous and miserly old husbands with the promise that they would have ‘queynte [elegant thing, i.e. sexual favours] right ynogh at eve’ (l. 332). Later, she insists that she also told them that she could have been a rich woman if she sold her ‘*bele chose*’ (beautiful thing, i.e. sexual favours) (l. 447) but that she keeps all of it ‘for youre owene tooth’ (l. 449):

Is it for ye wolde have my queynte allone?  
Wy, taak it al! Lo, have it every deel! (ll. 444-45)

Her prideful wallowing in her own sexuality—‘I hadde the beste *quonian* myghte be’ (l. 608)—and her continued sexual appetite, despite her apparent maturity—

I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age  
In the actes and in fruyt of mariage! (ll. 113-14)—

put her in the same comic class as Roseanne and Mae West. Her sexual needs expressed in her determination not to remain chaste, even after outliving five husbands (ll. 45-46), and in her ogling of her fifth husband Jankyn’s legs as he carried the coffin of his predecessor to the grave (ll. 596-99), prepare for the rather more subdued, but nevertheless unruly, sexuality of the old woman in the tale. Sex appears as a commodity in the tale of Arthur’s knight and the old woman, but in this case, it is the young knight whose body is the form of exchange (l. 1061). The tale also makes comic use of the matrimonial bed, a location often used in modern sitcoms. The final scene is played out in this suggestive setting and there may even be an element of sexual innuendo in the old woman’s words just before she gives her husband the choice of ‘foul and old ... or ... yong and fair’ (ll. 1220; 1223):

... I knowe youre delit,  
I shal fulfille youre worldly appetit. (ll. 1217-18)

While there is, of course, no explicit ‘nudge, nudge, wink, wink’ in the tale, such comic pauses can be read between the lines in an imagined oral delivery, as for example, between the suggestively understated reference to the ‘lymytour’ (l. 874) as a sexual predator who will only ‘dishonour’ women (l. 881) and

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the abrupt beginning of the rape episode that follows (l. 882). In the prologue, however, there are two very clear comic pauses. The first of these occurs in the Wife's description of her three old husbands who were barely able to pay their dues in the matrimonial bed:

Unnethe myghte they the statut holde  
In which that they were bounden unto me.  
*Ye woot well what I meene of this, pardee!* (ll. 198-200)  
(my italics)

The second comic pause comes when the Wife is brazenly boasting of her continued sexual appetite in her old age (over forty!) and attributing both this and her combative nature to the influence of the planets:

Yet have I Martes mark upon my face,  
*And also in another privee place!* (ll. 619-20) (my italics)

Perhaps the most prominent feature of the Wife of Bath's performance as a standup comic in her prologue and tale is her use of the naïve. Much of the material that she puts forward in her prologue to support her right to dominate her husbands, and in the tale to outline the possible answers to the question of what women most desire, is taken from the anti-feminist discourse of the medieval patriarchy. Ironically, this was the very discourse that formed the substance of the favourite reading matter of her fifth husband and was the focus of their final battle.<sup>23</sup> The Wife as narrator of the tale teasingly agrees with the antifeminist commentators that women like to be flattered (l. 931); and that they like to be told they are virtuous even, or especially, when they are not (ll. 941). Even when she appears to disagree that women like to be thought capable of keeping secrets, her exposition on the matter is an indictment of women. With apparent naïvety, she misuses the story of Midas as a story against women's ability to keep a secret by casting

<sup>23</sup> For texts and discussion, see Ralph Hanna III and Traugott Lawler, eds., *Jankyn's Book of Wikked Wyves* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

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Midas' wife as the one who betrays the secret of his freakish ears to the marshes (ll. 951-82). But she is only apparently naïve here, and her aim is not to provide evidence against her sex, but to make her audience laugh.

It is perhaps natural that Chaucer, a male author, should use the anti-feminist discourse of his peers to characterise a woman, but I would argue that he treats this woman as a carnival figure who validates the unruly 'woman on top' through comedy rather than as an example that proves that women need to be repressed. Like Barry Humphries' Dame Edna, Chaucer's Wife capitalises on the obvious inconsistency between the sex of her performer and the sex of his performance. Chaucer and Humphries as a male author/performers project the same unruliness as, say, Roseanne, Hyacinth and Mae West, but with the difference that the threat of the unruly woman is mediated through their masculinity. This does not stop the audience from recognising the Dame and the Wife as 'her': rather it presents a form of standup comedy that is outrageous both because it is female and because it is not female.

In *The General Prologue*, Chaucer outlined a grand design for *The Canterbury Tales* in which each of his twenty-nine pilgrims would tell four tales on the round trip between London and the shrine of St Thomas in the great cathedral city. Taking into account the potential contributions of Chaucer, who accompanies the group as a fictional pilgrim, the total number of tales envisaged in this plan comes to a staggering one hundred and twenty. Scholars have often noted, with regret, that Chaucer did not complete the project, and for all its enduring acclaim, *The Canterbury Tales* remains an unfinished work with only twenty-four tales, some of them incomplete, that can be retrieved from the surviving manuscripts. A number of the pilgrims listed in *The General Prologue* do not have a tale assigned to them in the collection, and on face value, only Chaucer, the pilgrim, tells more than one tale: the extravagant rhymed adventures of Sir Topas and the moralistic prose story of Melibeus. It is my contention that the Wife of Bath as standup comic also tells two tales. The conclusions of her two

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tales are, contrary to the opinions of Margaret Hallissy and Lee Patterson quoted earlier, the same conclusion. In the prologue, the Wife appears to be 'on top' after the comic fist fight with her fifth husband, but after she gains the mastery, she and Jankyn are able to live in harmony without debate, both kind and faithful to one another (ll. 822-25). In the tale, the old woman appears to be 'on top' when her young knight yields the mastery of their marriage to her, but this is the key to their happily-ever-after: without debate she yields to him in reciprocation, and, 'no lenger wrothe' (l. 1239), they live 'unto hir lyves ende /In parfit joye' (ll. 1257-58). This happy compromise is, perhaps, the only fitting conclusion for the performance of an unruly female character by a male actor.

MARGARET ROGERSON is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Sydney, with a particular interest in medieval drama.