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Introduction

It might have been my mother or it might
have been the Wife of Bath.

—HILARY MANTEL, *THE MIRROR AND THE LIGHT*, 595

Hilary Mantel's reference to the Wife of Bath, in her wildly popular 2020 novel set in the time of Henry VIII, makes two assumptions: first, that modern readers know who the Wife of Bath is; and second, that they understand what she might have signified in Thomas Cromwell's world. In this scene, Cromwell (Henry VIII's right-hand man) is telling his closest colleagues about how Geoffrey de la Pole will respond to interrogation, saying that he will endlessly obfuscate and will keep contradicting himself, saying something happened in October or March; in Sussex (far south) or Yorkshire (in the north); that the person involved might have been his mother or might have been the Wife of Bath. The implication is that Chaucer's heroine is as well known as the months or English geography or one's parents. And, although she is presented here as a foil to Geoffrey's mother, in fact the two women are rather similar. Margaret de

la Pole, suspected of treason to the king (and later executed for it), was a woman who, like Alison of Bath, challenged authority and went her own way, as many medieval women did.

Mantel correctly implies here that in the sixteenth century *and* in the twenty-first, Alison of Bath was and is part of the cultural fabric of many English-speaking women's and men's lives. Why has this character from a fourteenth-century poem had such a dramatic impact across time?

The Wife of Bath is the first ordinary woman in English literature. By that I mean the first mercantile, working, sexually active woman—not a virginal princess or queen, not a nun, witch, or sorceress, not a damsel in distress nor a functional servant character, not an allegory. A much-married woman and widow, who works in the cloth trade and tells us about her friends, her tricks, her experience of domestic abuse, her long career combatting misogyny, her reflections on the ageing process, and her enjoyment of sex, Alison exudes vitality, wit, and rebellious self-confidence. Alison is a character whom readers across the centuries have usually seen as accessible, familiar, and, in a strange way, real. For many people she is by far the most memorable of the Canterbury pilgrims. Almost from the moment of her conception, she exceeded her own text, appearing in Chaucer's other writings (in a way no other character does) before being seized and appropriated by readers, scribes, and other poets alike. Over and over again, in different time periods and cultural contexts, readers see her as 'relatable' in certain ways, as a three-dimensional figure who is far more than the sum of her parts. She may be 'ordinary,' but she is also *extraordinary*.

However, Alison of Bath is not a real woman, nor was she based on a real woman, or created by a woman. She is not even a fully rounded, psychologically complex character in the same

way that, say, Dorothea Brooke or Clarissa Dalloway are. But neither is she an eternal type, the principle of the feminine, an everywoman, Eve.

The *Wife of Bath* is, in some ways, a mosaic of many sources, all penned by men, most of them misogynist. Yet she does not come across as simply a jumble of the writings of Saint Paul, Jerome, Jean de Meun, and Walter Map. No one before Chaucer had turned the antifeminists' words around and against them as Alison does; no one had imagined a female character with this kind of wit, rhetorical technique, and personal experience going head-to-head with the most authoritative of authorities. Chaucer performed some kind of alchemy when he fused his cluster of well-worn sources with contemporary details and a distinctive, personalised voice and produced something—someone—completely new.

Indeed, before Chaucer, there had never been characters like this at all in English literature: characters from ordinary life who talk about themselves and their own experiences in detail, narrating personal histories and encouraging sympathetic response and identification. The emergence of this self-conscious, narrating 'I' figure was largely a new phenomenon in the late fourteenth century, as I will discuss in the first chapter. The fact that Chaucer developed this kind of literary narrator in the form of a confident, well-off mercantile woman who tells jokes, enjoys sex, and thinks for herself about the male canon and the exclusion of women's voices from it is astounding.

This book sets out to tell Alison's life story—from the earliest biblical sources to the present day—by asking two questions. Where does she come from, and what happens to her after her triumphant emergence in her prologue and tale? Undoubtedly Chaucer's favourite character, she has generally been his readers' favourite too (with some notable exceptions—such as the

poet William Blake, who called her ‘a scourge and a blight,’ and the critic D. W. Robertson, who thought her ‘hopelessly carnal and literal’).¹ Her story is a story about class, gender, and narrative. Her unique position is derived not only from her sex but also from her background in trade and production (not land and ancient inherited wealth).² Things changed for women after the Black Death in England in very specific ways, and these material changes coincided with Chaucer’s development of a new way of thinking about literary character. In literary terms, she is by far Chaucer’s most developed example of a pioneering way of exploring narratives of the self; his confessional prologues are a distant ancestor of the soliloquy and the novel, forms that allow an author to stage a particular kind of revelation of the inner life.

What does it mean to write a ‘biography’ of someone who never existed? During the course of the first part of this book, I set the experiences of real, historical women alongside their fictional counterparts as part of an exploration of gender in history and culture. History and fiction cannot be straightforwardly separated in many of my sources. For instance, if we take a *historical* document—a petition presented to Edward III by the silkwomen of London in 1368—it is clear that there are *fictional* elements. The women declare that they have ‘no other means of livelihood than their craft,’ as they appeal for sympathy in their attempt to stop a rich Italian merchant pushing up the prices of material in London, presenting themselves as poor and desperate.³ However, many silkwomen were wealthy business owners, often married to rich mercers, employing apprentices, sometimes owning other businesses and benefitting from inheritances. Late medieval London silkwomen included Agnes Woodhouse-Gedge, who inherited money and property from her brother, married a rich mercer, and owned a brew-

house in Peckham; and Isabel Bally-Otes-Franck, who married three mercers, had her own shop in Soper Lane, and was twice lady mayoress.⁴ Similar women are almost certainly behind the 1368 text. The petition genre demands that they depict themselves as abject, in need of the king's support, when in fact some of them were substantial businesswomen with fingers in many pies. At the same time, the women also claim that they are motivated by concern for 'the king's special profit' and for the 'common profit of the realm,' while the threatening foreigner, Nicholas Sarduche, employs 'subtle operations.' They appeal to a widespread fear of foreign secrecy and selfishness, while associating themselves with the important contemporary value of 'common profit.'⁵ There is clearly much that is fictional in this account.⁶

If we look at a *literary* text from around the same time—*Troilus and Criseyde*, a tragic romance set in the time of the Trojan War—Chaucer depicts a scene in which a group of women read a book (at the beginning of Book II). This scene tells us nothing about how Trojan women experienced texts or even about how Chaucer thought Trojan women experienced texts. Instead, it reflects the *historical* reality of how well-off Englishwomen in the fourteenth century read books. Criseyde and her friends and relatives are together, relaxing, while one reads aloud a romance (the quintessential medieval genre) from a medieval codex—it seems to be the twelfth-century *Roman de Thebes*.⁷ The others listen, and then they discuss it. The terms used—'book' (86, 95) and 'romaunce' (100), as well as 'lettres rede' (103), indicating its rubrication—clearly evoke a medieval (not classical) reading experience.⁸ This fictional scene is imbued with details that reflect historical reality, and it helps us to understand more about late-medieval reading practices and leisure activities.

At this time, we also see the emergence of autobiographical texts, and these texts have a particularly complicated relationship with fiction and with history. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, sometimes called the first autobiography in English and telling the life story of a woman who lived in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, is certainly based on the facts of her life, but is also modelled on other texts.⁹ Margery's experiences often mirror suspiciously closely the experiences of saints and other holy women as she makes her life story fit into pre-ordained paradigms.¹⁰ For Margery, as for the silkwomen, her text passed through a male filter, as it was written down by a male scribe who had at least some control over its form and order.¹¹ Very often, in texts from these centuries, we see female experience expressed by a male voice. Fiction and fact are blended together and repackaged for us by male ghostwriters who often turn out to be unreliable.

In the first part of this book, I explore a whole range of evidence to try to understand where the Wife of Bath came from and how her first readers might have understood her and connected her to women they knew. In these chapters, I set the Wife of Bath in her late-medieval context, weaving together narratives of real women's experiences in post-plague Europe and the misogynistic literary stereotypes that shaped expectations of textual—and actual—women.

When he was creating Alison as a character, Chaucer's own skill and inspiration were powered by literary sources and by his historical environment, but the character came to full being in the mind of the reader, as I will discuss in detail in the first part of this book. In the second half of the book, the focus will shift to readers and reinventors across time who have remade Alison for their own historical moments.

In the centuries following Alison's emergence into literary history and into the consciousness of readers and writers, she has ventured far and wide. I explore, for instance, what Shakespeare made of Alison; the seventeenth-century imprisonment of printers who printed ballads about her; Dryden and Pope's efforts to make her less scandalous; her eighteenth-century journeys to the Continent, where Voltaire took her on, and across the Atlantic, where she went on the stage; communist readings of her in the twentieth-century; and twenty-first century reclamations of Alison by Black women writing post-colonial poetry and drama.

For many readers, the Wife of Bath became a shorthand for Chaucer, the most memorable aspect of his entire oeuvre. If we look, for example, at Ted Hughes's poem, 'Chaucer,' it is much more about the Wife of Bath than any other feature of Chaucer's writing.¹² It is fundamentally about Hughes's lover, Sylvia Plath, or his perception of Plath, filtered through his understanding of the Wife of Bath. Like many readers, Hughes uses the Wife of Bath as a way of thinking about his own life and desires. He describes a scene in a cow field near Cambridge, where Plath declaims the opening of Chaucer's General Prologue and then switches to reciting the Wife of Bath. Addressing Plath, Hughes says, 'Then came the Wyf of Bath, / Your favourite character in all literature. / You were rapt.' As she recites the Wife of Bath, she also, to Hughes, becomes a version of the Wife of Bath: she 'could not stop' talking (in case the cows panicked). We are given an image of a woman endlessly expressing herself, just as the Wife of Bath's Prologue is many hundreds of lines longer than any other *Canterbury Tales* prologue. Hughes writes 'You had to go on. You went on,' in a 'sostenuto rendering of Chaucer,' that became 'perpetual.' The tribute to her rhetorical power is

prefaced with implicit references to sexual desire. The poem begins with Chaucer's address to springtime fertility, the piercing of the drought of March with April's sweet showers, and continues with a joyous reference to 'one of those bumpers of champagne / You snatched unpredictably from pure spirit.' Like Alison, Hughes's Plath is here vibrant, vital, appetite-driven, verbally powerful, and infinitely desirable.

The focus on Alison/Plath as speakers, commanding attention, is made funny, even mocking, given that the audience is bovine. Perhaps the cows represent male readers, incapable of appreciating her; perhaps we might read this as a comment on the 'natural' rhythms of Chaucerian metre; but there is also an implication that this is the sole kind of attention that female declaiming can command. She can only hold the interest of slow, lumbering beasts, and her position is undoubtedly silly. This somewhat uncomfortable, hesitant mockery of the female voice—listened to by an unintelligent, animalistic audience, finally driven off by a capable man (Hughes himself)—is a mild version of the discomfort that Alison has often provoked in her readers. When examining her adventures across time, it is striking that this is not a story of decreasing misogyny. Many twentieth-century responses, which often focused on her body and her sexual appetites in an extreme and caricatured way, were *more* misogynist than fifteenth-century engagements with Alison, which were often more concerned with combatting her rhetorical power. For many readers and rewriters, Alison has been a figure to be feared, hated, mocked, ridiculed, and firmly put in her place. Undaunted, she is still very much alive and well in literary and popular culture all over the world.

The Wife of Bath is one of only a handful of literary characters—others include Odysseus, Dido, Penelope, and King Arthur—whose life has continued far beyond their earli-

est textual appearances.¹³ I can think of no other examples of this kind of character—a socially middling woman—who has had anything like Alison’s reach, influence, and capacity for reincarnation.

The first ordinary middle-class woman in English literature has—like most women—had a great deal to do. Her extraordinary journey has, so far, spanned continents and centuries; and she has endured humiliations and attacks as well as celebration and almost incredible influence. This is Alison’s tale.

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