



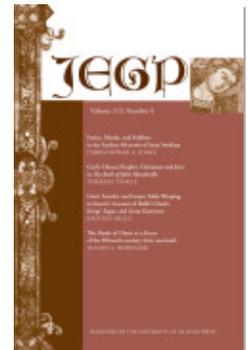
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JEGP, Journal of English and Germanic Philology, Volume 114, Number 1, January 2015, pp. 61-87 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press
DOI: [10.1353/egp.2015.0018](https://doi.org/10.1353/egp.2015.0018)



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“Rownded She a Pistel”: National Institutions and Identities According to Chaucer’s Wife of Bath

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[C]ountries are not defined merely by power and political sovereignty, but by the traditions, sentiments and aspirations of those who live in them.

—R. R. Davies¹

Although critical consensus on the national character of late medieval states has remained elusive, for a time in the late twentieth century, Chaucerians seemed to agree that, as Derek Pearsall writes, “no English poet” could be “*less* interested in England as a nation” than Geoffrey Chaucer himself.² Pearsall and other important scholars, including Ardis Butterfield, Elizabeth Salter, Thorlac Turville-Petre, and David Wallace, present Chaucer as a relatively tolerant observer among more xenophobic medieval writers, interpreting his “internationalism” as a distinct alternative to nationalism.³ Nevertheless, adapting the model of Benedict Anderson,

Larry Scanlon, Kathy Lavezzo, Brantley Bryant, Kathleen E. Kennedy, and Marcie Bianco offered priceless comments, suggestions, questions, and insights at critical moments in the development of this piece. I am deeply grateful to them and delighted to have this opportunity to thank them along with the editors of *JEGP*, including my anonymous reader, for all their vital help in improving and clarifying this essay.

1. R. R. Davies, *The First English Empire: Power and Identities in the British Isles* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), p. 82.

2. Derek Pearsall, “Chaucer and Englishness,” in *Chaucer’s Cultural Geography*, ed. Kathryn Lynch (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 297.

3. Ardis Butterfield, “Chaucer’s French Inheritance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 20–35; Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language, and Nation in the Hundred Years War* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009); Elizabeth Salter, *English and International: Studies in the Literature, Art, and Patronage of Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988); Thorlac Turville-Petre, “The Brutus Prologue to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” in *Imagining a Medieval English Nation*, ed. Kathy Lavezzo (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. 340–46; David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997). I do not mean to discount the great value of the above-cited work. Rather, since Chaucer’s projections of nationhood are as unsettled as all his political and social ideas, we must explore his national imagination (thorns and all) alongside the important extant studies of his guild consciousness, contribution to regional literary culture, and imagination of other forms of political community.

medievalists including Glenn Burger, Kathleen Davis, Patricia Ingham, and Kathy Lavezzo have begun to explore Chaucer's national imagination, whether conscious or unconscious, by analyzing not only Chaucer's representation of England as a nation but also his perspectives on nationhood's distinguishing features, such as exclusivity, sovereignty, history, futurity, common language, and identity.⁴ Building on their work, this essay seeks to explain how Christian nobility crystallizes as a particular form of class-crossing national identity in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, his only Arthurian romance. There in the legendary British past, the *Wife of Bath* interposes Dante Alighieri's understanding of nobility as a matter of character distinct from aristocratic lineage and wealth and tied instead to Christ's own goodness. Borrowing from the Italian Trecento to edify Arthurian England, the *Wife of Bath* ultimately redefines English nobility as a national form of identity available to different classes and genders within English Christian bounds. Thus the *Wife* uses internationalism as a technique to subvert aristocratic identity with cross-class/cross-gender national identity.

Set in King Arthur's fairy-filled sixth-century Britain, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* tethers Christian nobility to the genre of Arthurian romance, signaling its investment in courtly love and hence in a certain set of class and gender relations that promulgate romantic love and female sovereignty as transcendent ideals. Yet the further we read the more disputable and mundane these "ideals" appear.⁵ The romance suddenly undermines its

4. Glenn Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, *Medieval Cultures*, 34 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003); Kathleen Davis, "Time Behind the Veil: The Media, the Middle Ages, and Orientalism Now," in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (New York: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 105–22; Davis, "Hymenial Alogic: Debating Political Community in *The Parliament of Fowls*," in *Imagining a Medieval English Nation*, ed. Kathy Lavezzo (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 161–87; Patricia Clare Ingham, "Pastoral Histories: Utopia, Conquest, and the *Wife of Bath's Tale*," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, 44 (2002), 34–46; Kathy Lavezzo, "Beyond Rome: Mapping Gender and Justice in *The Man of Law's Tale*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 24 (2002), 149–80. See also Suzanne Conklin Akbari, "Orientation and Nation in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*," in *Chaucer's Cultural Geography*, ed. Lynch, pp. 102–34; Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 178–237; Peggy Knapp, "Chaucer Imagines England (In English)," in *Imagining a Medieval English Nation*, ed. Lavezzo, pp. 131–60.

5. For a rigorous study of Chaucer's tense relationship with ideals and ideologies, see Marion Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth-Century London* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007). Stephen Knight's reading of *The Man of Law's Tale's* relationship with *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, and especially Knight's positioning of Christianity as "the one possible location of a standpoint for a non-feudal and dissenting consciousness" in *The Canterbury Tales*, also makes a useful and somewhat contrasting comparison with my view of Christianity here: Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 155. While I agree with much of Knight's analysis, I am more suspicious of Christianity's role as a consistent tool of exclusion, one among other national limit factors that fuels xenophobia even as it promotes intracommunal justice throughout *The Canterbury Tales*.

ideals with the opening rape, and later with the claim that women want sovereignty more than love and can find it within a married household that celebrates both affection and the crossing of gender and class lines. In Chaucer's poetry, love acts as the central concept subtending marriage and the household, two overlapping national institutions that have their own philosophical and political bearing on the concept of sovereignty—and on the grand institution of the state.⁶ As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri remind us, love has long been understood as more than a feeling: "love is an essential concept for philosophy and politics." Although they do not cite Chaucer by name, Hardt and Negri do acknowledge a debt to medieval understandings of love as they refuse to "[l]eave it to the poets to speak of love."⁷ Likewise, Chaucer refuses to leave it to kings, jurists, philosophers, and Italians (like Dante, whom Hardt and Negri do mention) to debate the politics of love and sovereignty. In the Wife of Bath's experience, such debates belong in the heart of the household, in the bedroom, near the hearth, and always in the English vernacular.

Throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, sovereignty describes the legitimate power governing a hierarchical relationship, and it indicates shared ownership and judgment.⁸ Chaucer's Matter of Britain romances, The Man of Law's Tale and The Wife of Bath's Tale, both define nationhood through ideals of sovereignty and plots centered on marriage. The *Middle English Dictionary* records the first uses of the word *soverainte* in the fourteenth century. At this time, sovereignty indicated a moderate range of powers and authority applicable in spiritual, political, and romantic contexts.⁹ Academic political thinkers were actively engaged in distinguishing spiritual sovereignty from temporal sovereignty, divine sovereignty from papal sovereignty, papal sovereignty from regnal sovereignty, and imperial sovereignty from national sovereignty. Both descending and ascending theories of secular sovereignty's origins were popular, with Dante's 1313 *De monarchia* presenting an influential descending theory and Marsiglio of Padua's 1324 *Defensor pacis* offering an important ascending theory of sovereignty based on communal functionalism. In political practice, Richard II's prolific creation of titles attested to the force of descending kingly power; meanwhile, Richard's 1399 deposition and Edward

6. Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), p. 124.

7. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ., 2009), p. 179.

8. *Sovereignty* is a persistently difficult term; the definition above is, admittedly, a simplification. For a fuller survey of sovereignty's use and meaning throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, see my "Sovereignty Matters: Anachronism, Chaucer's Britain and England's Future's Past," *The Chaucer Review*, 44 (2010), 368–96.

9. *Middle English Dictionary*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu> (accessed March 3, 2013).

II's 1327 deposition exemplify the extent to which kingship depended on ascending magnetic power and approval in the period.¹⁰ The Wife of Bath is Chaucer's only character to use the word *soverainite* twice and the character most closely associated with marriage.¹¹ She idealizes the value of sovereignty more than the others that consider it, yet boldly confronts the practicalities, failings, and mundane negotiations through which sovereignty is achieved. In fact, she insists that all sovereignty—sexual, emotional, social, political, and ultimately national—originates and takes its most remarkable form in the household. The medieval household is a very particular sort of space, one shaped by magnanimity and prudence and energized by tensions between emotional sentiment and rational calculation.¹² Adopting Dante's understanding of Christian nobility, Chaucer's Wife of Bath promotes a cross-class national identity that collapses this space, integrating concepts as seemingly disparate as love and sovereignty. Her tale ultimately demonstrates that neither concept belongs exclusively to the traditional ruling class of those who fight, those who also star in most medieval romances.

The Wife of Bath's Tale focuses closely on domestic solidarities, suggesting that state-sponsored institutions such as the court and the church do not operate without more immediate connections to the lived experience of English folk of all classes. Somewhat predictably, Chaucer's only Arthurian romance is also his most direct reflection on national ideals. More surprisingly, it locates the authority for its universalizing national fictions in such alternative and intermediate institutions as gossip, the household, and folk magic. The Wife of Bath's particular imagination of national sovereignty ultimately redeems a community in turmoil, but not without complications. As Kathy Lavezzo has demonstrated, the Man of Law's imagination of ancient Britain claims Roman legal and religious authority for England without the usual subordination and obligation to the empire, rendering England sovereign and strong.¹³ Just as sovereignty descends from international sources, namely the Roman Empire and Church, in The Man of Law's Tale, it ascends from domestic institutions

10. Miri Rubin, *The Hollow Crown: A History of Britain in the Late Middle Ages* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 169.

11. Criseyde uses *soverainite* once in *Troilus and Criseyde*. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Clerk, Franklin, and Parson each speak the word once. While other figures, such as the Man of Law in his tale and the pilgrim Chaucer in The Tale of Melibee, certainly debate the concept, Chaucer (the author) uses the word sparingly.

12. David Starkey's discussion of medieval English readings of Aristotle's *megalopsychia* and *phronesis*, magnanimity and prudence (or providence), shapes my understanding of magnanimity and the space of the household. Starkey, "The Age of the Household: Politics, Society and the Arts c. 1350–1550," in *The Later Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen Medcalf (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 225–90.

13. Lavezzo, "Beyond Rome," p. 167.

in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*. This is not to say that the Wife, whose tale follows the lawyer's in the traditional Ellesmere order, simply swallows his concept of sovereignty whole. She amends it with her own concerns about class and gender relations and her learned, yet anachronistic interpolation of Dante, an international source she translates and domesticates. In this way, the Wife exploits both history (the Matter of Britain, in particular) and Dante's wisdom as strategies that work to shape politics subjectively, rather than as objective truths to be revered. Nevertheless, she applies the Man of Law's general principle of relation between sovereignty and nation: the claim that exalts sovereignty as that which both follows and might restore the nation.¹⁴

Karma Lochrie and Paul Strohm also inform my reading of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, for they identify gossip and the household, respectively, as the alternative and intermediate institutions through which the Wife's plot unravels.¹⁵ *The Wife of Bath's Tale's* engagement with these two institutions can certainly be taken on its own terms, but I want to argue that Chaucer reads these domestic relations as emblematic of the larger national structures in which they are imbricated. In other words, Chaucer finds an emblem of the English nation and its history in vernacular exchanges between husbands and wives. English national sovereignty becomes a cross-gender, cross-class relationship working through the Wife's own fantastic and anachronistic reimagination of Arthurian romance.¹⁶

14. Kenneth Hodges, one recent medievalist to engage with Benedict Anderson's concept of nationhood, rightly challenges such claims: "The rise of nationalism may not be a simple process in which imagined communities develop the sense that they ought to be sovereign; it may include groups that begin to imagine themselves as a community because they share a sovereign." Hodges, "Why Malory's *Launcelot* is not French: Region, Nation, and Political Identity," *PMLA*, 125 (2010), 558. Hodges describes a clear political trend in historical life. My essay does not refute Hodges, though it explores how Chaucer's art re-envisions the historical relationship between nation and sovereignty that Hodges posits.

15. Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), pp. 56–92; Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, pp. 121–44.

16. So much has been written about the Wife of Bath's feminist and antifeminist moves that a complete list would preclude further commentary. However, I want to note the following works, which examine issues of literary, legal, and political form, and have most influenced my thinking on the Wife and feminism: R. J. Blanch, "'Al was this land fulfilful of fayerye': The Thematic Employment of Force, Willfulness, and Legal Conventions in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*," *Studia Neophilologica*, 57 (1985), 41–51; Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, 79–100; Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 113–31; Ruth Evans, "The Devil in Disguise: Perverse Female Origins of the Nation," in *Consuming Narratives: Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Elizabeth Herbert McAvoy and Teresa Walters (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 2002), pp. 182–95; L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, "Fulfuld of Fairye: The Social Meaning of Fantasy in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*," in *Geoffrey Chaucer: Wife of Bath's Tale*, ed. Peter Beidler (Boston: Bedford St. Martin's Press, 1996), pp. 205–20; Fradenburg, "The Wife of Bath's Passing Fancy," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 8 (1986), 31–58; and Patricia Clare Ingham, "Pastoral Histories." Kathleen Davis's work on the way *The Man of Law's*

Strohm notes that in 1352 Parliament declared the rebellion of wives against husbands treasonous, classing it with rebellion against other persons thought to have special responsibilities and thus to be owed faith and obedience. He considers this application of the idea of treason as a “protective deterrence to a category of previously unprotected institutions,” that is “‘intermediate’ institutions—the guildmaster’s workshop or merchant’s salesroom, the husband’s household or private chamber, the parish church or college or chantry or monastic precinct.” This legal extension “recognizes the political character of these ostensibly non-political institutions, asserting that the master in his shop and the husband in his household and the priest in his parish participate analogically and symbolically in the regality of the king.” According to Strohm, “Royal and other [patriarchal] interests alike are ultimately served by the institution and protection of an accessible and influential model of hierarchy at a level close to the lived experience of most of the middle strata.”¹⁷ He goes on to argue that by linking the Wife of Bath’s erotic and economic desires, Chaucer makes her an example of a fourteenth-century treasonous wife, one who challenges legitimate hierarchies and by extension sovereign power. Lochrie argues that gossip constitutes her mode of resistance, because, as the Wife uses it, gossip rivals more traditional authoritative discourses. I want to extend Lochrie’s reading of the Wife’s political force by demonstrating the constructive strength of her resistance in the context of Strohm’s explanation of the relation between the household and the political realm. In *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, national sovereignty is neither fully intelligible nor fully achievable without cultural institutions like gossip and the household. Although the Wife of Bath herself appears as a treasonous wife resisting the sanctioned discourses of her day, her Arthurian romance insists that British wives from the Queen down to the

Tale’s orientalism “works *through* . . . women” also influences my reading of *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*. According to Davis, the Man of Law suggests that women bear their communities’ collective ethnic and religious identities and are thus the sites through which a distinct English identity emerges in a world order wherein an unconvertible Islamic East opposes Christian Europe, including England (“Time Behind the Veil,” p. 116). I will argue that the Wife of Bath makes women similarly necessary to defining Englishness, but in her view, women are needed to challenge the constraints of temporality and to help make decisions, as participants in sovereignty rather than as simple bearers of identity or of children. See also Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1992), pp. 26–57; Kathleen E. Kennedy, *Maintenance, Meed and Marriage in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 31–60; Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 280–321; and Susanne Sara Thomas, “The Problem of Defining Sovereignty in the Wife of Bath’s Tale,” *Chaucer Review*, 41 (2006), 87–97.

17. Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow*, pp. 124–25.

loathliest lady have long held a legitimate stake in national sovereignty. Her tale claims legitimacy for sovereign women: here sovereignty’s legitimacy is rooted in the fact that it is necessarily shared and consolidated across class and gender lines. Chaucerian sovereignty ultimately depends on the Wife’s alternative and intermediate institutions and more specifically, as we shall see, on her understanding of the value of vernacular language and domestic bonds.

I. NEGOTIATING SOVEREIGNTY IN THE WIFE OF BATH’S PROLOGUE

The Wife of Bath uses the word *soverainte* first in her prologue. Beginning with her own lived experience, she carefully shapes sovereignty and the commitments it entails through negotiations that render legal, verbal, emotional, material, and cultural assets exchangeable. This sovereignty might be absolute, or extreme, in that at first the Wife holds ultimate power, then it is her young husband Jankyn’s to use and abuse until she finally regains it—but it is neither an eraser of multiple wills and agencies, nor a permanent role. It is political in the Aristotelian sense, precisely because it changes hands. The Wife’s domestic story focuses closely on the practical ways in which power changes hands in an ordinary world. Thus, Chaucerian sovereignty develops as a human variety that works through negotiable relationships, through consent and exchange, rather than through absolutely autonomous individuals.¹⁸

The trajectory that the Wife takes in her fifth marriage shows how women can ultimately win sovereignty despite the fact that whatever power they hold is always unequal to the physical and cultural power of the men with whom they must negotiate. When Alisoun marries Jankyn, she has amassed lands and other property by outliving four former husbands. Early in this story, we learn that the Wife gives Jankyn “al the lond and

18. In fact, Chaucer’s original audience would likely have found absolute autonomy unfamiliar if not impossible to imagine. For an enlightening study of agency and constraint in such hierarchical yet negotiable relationships, see Kennedy, *Maintenance, Meed, and Marriage*, pp. 31–59. Reading Chaucer’s poetry in its medieval legal context, Kennedy demonstrates that unequal relationships, such as those between husbands and wives or lords and retainers, could actually limit individual autonomy in both directions. As Kennedy notes, even though “this state of affairs may grate on our modern sensibilities, in medieval practice, these were honorable, indeed highly respected, relationships” (p. 59). I want to suggest that autonomy’s medieval limitations, as Kennedy explicates them, might actually illuminate the Wife of Bath’s conception of sovereignty, rendering it necessarily cooperative, hence less offensive to some modern sensibilities, and more appealing than modern concepts of sovereignty.

fee" that she had inherited (III.630); she also names him "oure sire," a conventional title that indicates his authoritative and institutional role in their household (III.713).¹⁹ Alisoun's sacrifice of control emboldens Jankyn, who abuses his power by ceaselessly reading disparaging assertions to her from his misogynist book of wicked wives. So Alisoun takes matters back into her own hands and slaps him hard enough to cast him into their hearth, the proverbial center of their home. There in the physical center of the household, power shifts most rapidly: recovering swiftly, Jankyn knocks Alisoun out with a blow to the head. Unconscious, she appears to be very near death. Returning to consciousness, she asks, "O! hastow slayn me, false theef? . . . / And for my land thus hastow mordered me?" (III.800–801). The Wife's rhetorical question construes Jankyn's physical violence in legal and economic terms, accusing him of murder and naming him a thief. He may be physically stronger, but her use of language shows that she better understands both the confluence of economic, legal, ideological, and physical domination and the contemporary institutional discourses through which Jankyn achieves such dominance. Thus, the Wife renegotiates the terms of their relationship. Playing on Jankyn's fear of his crime's consequences, Alisoun rises from her near-death experience with "al the soveraynetee" (III.818). Ultimately, the Wife's keen use of vernacular language works to multiply her power: through it, she interprets Jankyn's cultural attitudes as emotional oppression, translates emotional oppression into physical violence, and names that physical violence in familiar terms of legal and economic violation, murder, and theft.²⁰

Mercifully, when the Wife regains sovereignty she does not abuse it; she is immensely kind and true to Jankyn, as he is to her. They love each other and live happily ever after. Considering the first fragment tales, which suggest that the decline of marriage as an institution is a contemporary problem, this marriage's recovery bodes well in terms of *The Canterbury Tales*' running commentary on the state of English society and institutions. Let us briefly review the preceding tales in the Ellesmere order. The first fragment moves from The Knight's Tale with its forced marriages, to the Miller's and Reeve's fabliaux, which revel in crossing marriage's sexual boundaries, to The Cook's Tale, where prostitution appears as the healthier and more lucrative of these two sexual institutions. Thus, marriage in The Wife of Bath's Prologue responds to the first fragment's view of marriage as an institution in decline, ultimately seeking to redeem the failing institution.

19. All references to Chaucer's work are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry Benson (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1981), hereafter cited by line number alone.

20. In *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, Burger makes a similar equation and concludes that the Wife's performance in the brawl with Jankyn expresses "a desire to make the most of the present based on a clear-sighted, multiple understanding of that present moment" (p. 99).

Reading the tales intertextually, we might even interpret *The Wife of Bath's* Prologue and Tale as a moment of reversal and, in Christological terms, an episode of and about resurrection. The Wife's resurrection, like Christ's own, has redemptive force. Looking closely we can see that her domestic story imitates the Passion of Christ, taking the same trajectory: love, sacrifice, death (or near death), and glorious resurrection. Despite her imitation, however, the Wife is not Christ; and so her resurrection's redemptive value beyond her marriage is more limited. Alisoun's triumphant resurrection redeems the human institution of marriage rather than the souls of the faithful. Likewise, the Wife's earth-bound sovereignty, rather than being ordained by God, is achieved only through human rhetorical strategies and irrecoverable physical losses. However ideal her final portrait of her marital life without "debaat," we cannot discount the difficulties and irreparable costs she incurs to get there, costs that her husband does not share (III.822). One of the first and most important things Chaucer tells us about the Wife is that "she was somdel deaf"; and she mentions twice herself that Jankyn's blow leaves her deaf (I.446; III.636, 668). What's more, the Wife's introduction of herself as a voice authorized by lived experience in spite of written authority, and as a gossip, means that she relies heavily on her ears for access to social and political information. The sensory damage and the physical and emotional trauma of this domestic violence are irreparable. Her story provides a thoroughly human explanation of how worldly sovereignty is won at great cost, divulging this truth: what is gained with sovereignty never exactly equals what is lost.

Deciding whether sovereignty is worth the cost is a separate judgment. But, in any case, sovereignty (both personal and national) is wedded to pain, loss, and destruction. Chaucerian sovereignty's temporary and negotiable nature and its relation to pain resist the utopian and fantastic terms of the Arthurian world to which the Wife of Bath transports it.²¹ Nevertheless, we shall see that in her tale as in the prologue, she defines and redefines sovereignty within the household and through concepts of love and marriage.

21. In "Pastoral Histories," Ingham addresses the value of the Wife of Bath's particular utopian imagination. Ingham departs from a critical history that has paid relatively little attention to the idealized Arthurian setting of *The Wife of Bath's* Tale and emphasizes the ways in which the "Wife of Bath's pastoral medievalism . . . encode[s] a particular scene of conquest and political resistance between England and Wales occurring around the time of Chaucer's writing" (p. 37). Her postcolonial reading takes "the utopian dreams of the medieval colonized as a serious strategy of resistance" and draws on the work of Raymond Williams, demonstrating how the Wife's pastoral can point us toward a time before the capitalist "commodification of land, people, and things," before capitalism's link with colonialism (pp. 37, 40). Ingham argues further that "[p]astoral histories can be revolutionary insofar as they help us see alternatives to the institutions we have been taught to think of as necessary, as unavoidably 'real'" (p. 40). She reminds us that the Wife's story, despite being criticized for its unrealistic and utopian view of love, "suggests that affairs of love are

II. REVISING HISTORY TO ENNOBLE SOVEREIGNTY IN THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

The Wife of Bath's Tale introduces Arthur's Britain with a strange combination of nostalgia, reverence, and doubt. Although the Wife's nostalgia portrays the past as a sacred and powerful space, the tale ultimately measures Camelot, that epitome of patriarchal English nationhood, against the Wife's authoritative experience of contemporary marital relations.²² From the start, the tale's vision of history is anything but straightforward. The Wife begins by nostalgically invoking "th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthur,/ Of which that Britons speken greet honour," acknowledging the common opinion that the Arthurian past, the good "olde dayes," was a golden age for the island, and that pastness plus kingship offer authority, practically equaling honor according to British opinion (III.857–58). But she also complicates that opinion. First of all, the ambiguous name "Britons" simultaneously conjures archaic images of the island's ancient Celtic inhabitants, Arthur's Continental kin in Brittany, and, as Patricia Ingham has shown, contemporary Welsh nationalists, "an insular minority . . . linked linguistically and culturally with the name Britain itself . . . a group with long-standing experiences of English annexation."²³ Whether

the intimate sites wherein social institutions are destroyed or changed"—even though the tale raises structures of erotic desire and political conquest "at their most oppressive, their least utopic" (pp. 41, 43). My reading picks up on the Wife's awareness of the limitations of romantic utopianism where Ingham leaves off, taking it further and, perhaps, in a new direction. As the rest of this essay will demonstrate, I read the Wife's relatively sober views of love and sovereignty as admission that neither of these concepts can be experienced as ideals. The characters in the Wife's life story and in her tale access love and sovereignty only through institutional forms whose content always depends more on laborious and often tedious negotiation than on idealization. In my reading, such national institutions as marriage and the law are both necessary and necessarily revisable.

22. Arthurian legend worked as an important vehicle for English nationalism in the later Middle Ages. Although Camelot seems almost synonymous with utopia, Arthurian literature is particularly adept at mourning the sacrifices that come with English nationhood. Here we might note in passing that, while Arthurian legendary history turns on Arthur's successful fight against the obligation to pay tribute to Rome, his domestic life disintegrates while he is fighting the Empire for national sovereignty. *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*, one of the most beautiful and significant fourteenth-century romances, trades Arthur's marriage for national sovereignty, ending with the image of Arthur as a weeping woeful widow longing for lost family. For thorough analyses of Arthurian literature and legend see Catherine Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur: Remaking Arthurian Tradition* (New York: Macmillan, 2002); Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies*; and Michelle Warren, *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100–1300* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2000).

23. Ingham, "Pastoral Histories," p. 38. See pp. 37–40 for Ingham's complex and long-reaching discussion of the term *Briton*, the nationalist politics of *The Riverside Chaucer's* glosses, and "the invisibilities produced by 'realist' history" (p. 39).

the Wife claims to be communicating with the past, making this her tale's initial instance of anachronism, or with the politically oppositional (her Britons do speak in a present tense), her invocation of Britons queries and limits Arthurian authority even as she asserts it.

What we learn next impeaches the morality of an already historically and politically suspicious scene. In this Arthurian romance, one of Arthur's knights rapes a soon forgotten maiden, yet lives happily ever after with a lovely and faithful wife. Of course, he must first marry a hag and then learn a lesson: female sovereignty is to be respected. But the tale's happy ending seems a bit too happy for the Rapist Knight, no matter what he has learned. Even before the plot begins, the Wife of Bath reminds us of lessons learned from the domestic violence in her personal story: women generally live their lives in greater danger of physical violence than men. And sex, which is often idealized as the ultimate consummation of love, the ultimate utopian ideal, is very closely related to violence against women. Sex all too often takes the form of violent crime against women, as in rape; and in other cases, sex excuses and assures the continuity of destructive relationships, as in the Wife of Bath's relationship with Jankyn, the youngest, most sexually attractive, and most physically violent of her husbands. In the Wife's view of history, this genre of violence is inescapable: the main difference between Arthurian past and clerical present is the nature and source of violence against women. In the past women had to beware of the supernatural malevolence of incubi; in the Wife's moment, "Wommen may go sauflly up and doun" with nothing to fear but the "dishonour" that friars might do to them (III.878, 881). Here the Wife draws our attention to the social nature of the harm that clerical authority poses for women and to the fact that when a woman is sexually violated, she both loses honor and suffers physical violence. Thus the Wife points out that women also live their lives in greater danger of violence to their reputations, their social standing and honor, than men. Whether or not this is any less a threat than the supernatural threat that fairies and incubi pose is obscured by Chaucer's ever-ironic tone. The questions of exactly how supernatural force, fantasy, and the human name of sovereignty affect structures of public opinion and social honor remain open until the end, though history emerges as a tool that may be used to shape such national political structures—rather than functioning as a sacred truth that simply grounds them.

The action begins when Arthur's knight, in lieu of some friar or incubus, rapes a maiden. The Wife's presentation first associates this knight closely with Arthur and then makes a one-to-one equation between his personal integrity and that of the woman he violates. The knight seems at first to

be Arthur's responsibility; as the Wife says, "this kyng Arthour/ Hadde in his hous a lusty bachelor" (III.882-83). This Rapist Knight appears to be contained by Arthur's household, and so his actions reflect on it more directly than on any other house or community. But the question of free will and a knight's relationship to his sovereign comes quickly into play as we learn that despite the fact that Arthur houses this knight, he rapes a maiden all on his own after hunting waterfowl one day: it "happed that, allone as he was born, / He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn" (III.885-86). Here it is impossible to decide whether the phrase "allone as he was born" applies to the knight or to the maiden. The phrase could indicate that this knight himself was as alone as when he was born when he saw the maiden. Or, it could report that, when he first saw her, he perceived her to be as alone as he was when he was born. This ambiguity reminds us that every human being, regardless of class, enters this world as alone as the next. Of course, every human needs the help of a woman, a mother, but the Wife deemphasizes this fact. Instead, she introduces these two characters as individuals, invoking their singular and parallel arrivals on earth as opposed to their class or their particular families of origin. Most important is the fact that they live in Arthur's kingdom, under Arthur's law. Next we learn that "maugree hir heed,/ By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed" (III.887-88). We must then ask, since these two people come into the world in the same lonely manner, how is it that the will of one can ever come to outweigh that of the other? The Rapist Knight never pauses to consider the ethics of this question, but rather uses *verray force* to overcome the maiden, bringing dishonor upon her, himself, and Arthur's house: the entire national kingdom.

This beginning swiftly resets Camelot on earth. Despite its own utopian desires, the tale thus acknowledges that—nostalgic or forward-looking—there has never been a utopian time or place on earth, not even in Camelot. Like many tales told on the way to Canterbury, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* takes place in a Britain characterized by disrespect for the institutions of marriage and the law. The Church is nowhere in sight. There is nothing fair about the state of affairs in Camelot: the most honorable King's own honor is compromised by his association with a dishonorable knight, and women live in extreme danger of violence. As Harry Bailley indirectly admits, woman's virginity, like time, is irrecoverable: time "wol nat come agayn, withouten drede,/ Namooore than wole Malkynes maydenhede" (II.29-30). Nevertheless, the tale offers sovereignty as a form of mitigation. In response to the Queen's entreaties, Arthur will share his sovereignty, and that changes the course of justice. The rape cannot be undone, but sovereignty can still redeem marriage, and, more indirectly, national community. The Wife, having made her own sacrifices for marital sovereignty, translates the rape into the more

general "oppressioun," sacrificing the maiden's personal sovereignty for a more communal version.²⁴ As she explains,

For which oppressioun was swich clamour
And swich pursute unto the kyng Arthour
That dampned was this knyght for to be deed,
By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed—
Paraventure swich was the statut tho—
But that the queene and other ladyes mo
So longe preyden the kyng of grace
Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place,
And yaf hym to the queene, al at hir wille,
To chese weither she wolde hym save or spille.
(III.889–98)

A close reading of this passage reveals that justice depends on civic intervention, proceeding neither from the law nor the queen's discretion alone. First, popular "clamour" and legal "pursute" bring the rapist to be damned "by cours of lawe."²⁵ Arthur, the sovereign, seems likely to have remained oblivious otherwise. Next, "the queene and other ladyes mo/ So longe preyden the kyng" that he "yaf" the knight to the queen. The king can delegate his sovereignty because it depends on the civic will from the very beginning. As in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, sovereignty is legitimate because it changes hands and thus can be shared. Arthur's delegation essentially produces a feminine reduplication of the same dynamic. The Rapist Knight's life belongs to the queen, speaking for herself as well as for the other ladies. The Queen rules according to a new ordinance, one oriented specifically toward this newly established form of public female sovereignty: to live he must tell her what "wommen moost desiren" within "twelf-month and a day" (III.905, 909).

As the Rapist Knight rides through the kingdom asking what women want, he encounters no dragons, no monsters, no Saracens, no Scots, no treacherous relatives, nor any of the other usual occupational hazards. Diversity of public opinion provides the only obstacle. He will find an authoritative solution in the network of feminine gossip, which, as Lochrie argues, "offers a rival interpretive community to that of conventional medieval *auctoritas*."²⁶ After more than twenty-five lines recounting the various things that "some seyde women loven best" and about thirty more relaying an Ovidian story

24. L. O. Aranye Fradenburg observes a similar, but inverse transformation at the very end of the tale. In her reading, the tale ends on a less revolutionary note, perhaps backpedaling by exchanging communal fantasies of sovereignty and continuity for a private, individual fantasy of fulfillment. As Fradenburg explains, "through the hag's transfiguration—the threat of change posed by group fantasy is privatized and domesticated" ("The Wife of Bath's Passing Fancy," p. 54).

25. For exceptional analysis of the particularly legal significance of this language, see Kennedy, *Maintenance, Meed, and Marriage*, pp. 55–56.

26. Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, p. 59.

that proves woman's inability to keep secrets, the knight gives up and turns, sadly, "homward" (III.925, 988).²⁷ At this point, it seems that the knight will never learn what he needs to know to save his life. All he has learned is that women form a community at once too vocal and too diverse for him to comprehend. However, on the way home, he meets the "olde wyf," who understands this alternative institution (III.1000). As Lochrie explains, gossip's "primary distinguishing feature is exchange."²⁸ The old woman presents this feature as both a lesson and a secret—that is, as something offered in exchange for an as-yet-unnamed favor. She assures the knight that no woman will gainsay "of that I shall thee teche" and "[t]ho rowned she a pistel in his ere" (III.1019, 1021). The diction of this short line encrypts a deeply significant answer—not only to the Rapist Knight's quest, but also to the Wife of Bath's signature question regarding the relation of authority to experience. The Middle English words *rounen* and *pistel* present multiple meanings including "[t]o speak about (sth.) in secret or private, whisper" and "[a] written legend or story" as well as "[a] spoken communication," respectively; thus, together they intimate the compatibility of lived experience and written authority.²⁹ This *pistel* encodes a message that, conflating such *auctoritee* with experience, works as a written character, a letter, an epistle, and most precisely—in this context—a powerful runic whisper. The Wife of Bath's word choice casts the Old Wife's message as an article of both written and spoken authority and signals their compatibility symbolically if not literally. The Rapist Knight learns that sovereignty is what earthly women desire. As it resolves the opposition between written authority and experience, the principle of exchange that this knowledge instantiates effectively enables sovereignty to return from the feminine to a more fully public form, and enables marriage to become a fully competent model for a national community.

The Rapist Knight returns to find "[t]he queene hirsself sittyng as a justise" (III.1028). She has become "lige lady" and "sovereyn lady queene," because of the clamor and legal suits that bring him to public justice in the first place, because of the ladies who joined her in praying for the King's grace, and finally because of his grace itself (III.1037, 1048). To this forum the Rapist Knight must tell "[w]hat thing that worldly women loven best" (III.1033): he is constrained to act as an emissary from the feminine world of gossip. The secret he now reveals, that women desire sovereignty, certainly looks back to Alisoun's agreement with Jankyn. But in the current

27. The classic discussions of the Wife's Ovidian revision are Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 280–321, and D. W. Robertson, Jr., "The Wife of Bath and Midas," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 6 (1984), 1–20.

28. Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, p. 65.

29. *Middle English Dictionary*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu> (accessed March 3, 2013).

context, it also affirms the public—as opposed to domestic—character of this desire, for he now speaks before a queen sitting in judgment as if she were the king. Almost as soon as the Rapist Knight announces that every worldly woman wants “sovereynete, / As wel over hir housbond as hir love,” the old woman reappears and demands that the “sovereyn lady queene” force the knight to comply with his agreement to grant her next request (marriage) in exchange for teaching him this answer (III.1038–39, 1048). While this exchange returns the tale’s main focus to the domestic, it also takes the domestic as the origin of a reevaluation of national community. The Rapist Knight’s response to the Old Wife is unequivocal: “My love?’ quod he, ‘nay, my dampnacioun! / Allas, that any of my nacioun / Sholde evere so foule disparaged be!’” (III.1067–69). As the end rhyme of “dampnacioun” with “nacioun” implies, the knight assumes that his fortune, his identity, his reputation, and the continuity or demise of it all, his very damnation and redemption, are bound to that of his aristocratic family: the exceptionally particular “nacioun” he invokes here.³⁰ This common Middle English understanding of *nacioun* as aristocratic bloodline or family, however, does not stand for long. The woman meets the knight’s objection on its ground. With an anachronistic invocation of Dante Alighieri she redefines the Rapist Knight’s “nacioun” to include poor, ugly, and common English folk like her. The Wife of Bath puts Dante’s fourteenth-century *Purgatorio* into the mouth of a sixth-century British wife, thus offering her an English national future. As if already living in the future, the Old Wife uses Dante to reject the Rapist Knight’s antiquated understanding of the nation as his aristocratic genealogical family. She reeducates him, erasing his *nacioun* and replacing it with her concept of the nation as a class-crossing political and cultural family, governed lovingly, yet slyly, governed best by sovereign wives.

The anachronism of the appeal to Dante is nearly as significant as its content. In this tale the Wife of Bath equates the ubiquity of fairies and incubi with the contemporary ubiquity of friars and clerks. As Aranye Fradenburg observes, such a comparison shows us that “[r]eality shifts over time and space, and what can seem the very touchstone of reality in one context will seem an elaborate dream in another.”³¹ Similarly, as Robert Blanch has shown, the Wife of Bath’s “deliberate invocation of the present through the use of anachronism (fourteenth-century penalty for rape) blurs the pastness of the tale—the remote Arthurian setting.”³² The Old Wife’s anachronistic reference to Dante in her bedroom lecture also blurs the pastness of Arthurian Britain. However, the effect here is

30. See Ingham, “Pastoral Histories,” p. 42, for a different, yet related and perhaps compatible reading of *nacioun*’s collective meaning here.

31. Fradenburg, “Fulfil of Fairye,” p. 217.

32. Blanch, “Al was this land fulfild of fayerye,” p. 44.

to clarify England's national future. As the archaic fantasies of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* return to the problem of female sovereignty, a discourse at once learned and vernacular, intimate and institutional, they reveal a truth about historical continuity. The Old Wife speaks through Dante, helping the Rapist Knight to decide which values are worth carrying from the past to the present, which solidarities should shape future reality, and what kind of "gentillesse nys but renomee" (III.1159). Her lecture urges us to see that what can seem the very touchstone of gentility, of political and cultural solidarity in one context, will seem an obstacle to English redemption, an elaborate excuse that deters national continuity, in another. The Rapist Knight will submit to her sovereign judgment, agreeing to ally himself with her and, by extension, with folk like her.

Responding to the Rapist Knight's concern for his family's reputation, the lady acknowledges his aristocratic ties and explains why they are inadequate. She reminds her "deere housbonde" of this and, with this conventional title, of the fact that he is participating in the institution of marriage (III.1087). "Fareth every knyght thus with his wyf as ye?/ Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures house?" she asks (III.1088–89). The Rapist Knight has, of course, already broken the law of Arthur's house by committing rape, and yet he complains out of loyalty to his house. Now he is married to the lady before him; she is his own wife and he her *deere housbonde*. The Rapist Knight has failed to honor his loyalties to the aristocratic *nacioun* he invokes above, but the wife's reminder offers another chance at patriotism. He can honor the law of Arthur's sovereign nation, understood to include women of all classes, by honoring the symbolic and analogous solidarities of his own lawful household. "I am youre owene love and youre wyf;/ I am she which that saved hath youre lyf," she explains (III.1091–92). There is a form here, a protocol, and the Old Wife means to follow it. She also offers additional help, a fantastic combination of her elvish shape-shifting and Christian redemption. She assures her husband that she "koude amende al this," her loathliness, her age, and her base-lineage "er it were dayes thre," invoking the legendary time it took Christ to rise from the dead (III.1107). This conflation of magic and religion relocates redemption in this new form of vernacular English nationhood.

The Old Wife begins her lecture by attacking the supposition that lineage ensures gentility, a point that Dante and his contemporaries refute. As she professes, lineage grants "old richesse," but "Crist" makes it possible for men to do "gentil dedes," the source and sign of gentility, respectively (III.1110, 1117, 1115). She seems certain of this opinion, which was widespread by the fourteenth century, and goes on for twenty-five lines before mentioning Dante. When she does mention Dante, she makes it count, stretching the allusion over three lines, uttering Dante's name

twice: "Wel kan the wise poete of Florence,/ That highte Dant, speken in this sentence. / Lo, in swich maner rym is Dantes tale" (III.1125-27). Here she defines national community through a learned, but anachronistic reference to a text that had not been written by the moment of her tale's setting. The Old Wife turns the Rapist Knight's attention away from his family of origin and toward his own behavior and his marriage by lecturing him in the English vernacular on Dante's wisdom originally delivered in the Italian vernacular. Here the vernacular language of household exchange becomes as important in the Wife of Bath's tale as it is in her own fourteenth-century English household, for the Old Wife redefines national community, replacing exclusive aristocratic nobility with a more inclusive spiritual and moral nobility, supported by lines directly translated from Dante's *Purgatorio* VII.121-23: "Rade volte risurge per li rami/ l'umana probitate; e questo vole/ Quei che la dà, perché da lui si chiami" (Rarely does human worth rise through the branches./ And this He wills who gives it,/ so that it shall be sought from Him).³³ Dante could not possibly have composed these lines until seven or eight centuries after Arthur's supposed sixth-century reign, under which the character speaking lives. She does not preserve Dante's end-rhyme even though she claims she will, subtly hinting that Dante's Italian verse is only fully accessible in his original Italian and implying that even deeper differences lie beneath the surface of the texts. Nevertheless, she translates his meaning line by line, saying, "Full selde upriseth by his branches smale/ Prowesse of man, for God, of his goodness,/ Wole that of hym we clayme oure gentillesse" (III.1128-30). The Old Wife does not need to cite Dante in order to substantiate her argument with credible *auctoritee*. Her subsequent, chronologically correct references ("Reedeth Senek, and redeth Boece") do just that, rendering hers a learned discourse, and even a Christian discourse in the case of Boethius (III.1168). This gratuitous dropping of Dante's name does two things that the other references cannot do. First, it admits that Chaucer's ideals of national sovereignty as well as his definitions of national community depend in part on revising, or perhaps even misreading, national history: his nationalism depends on anachronism. Second, it demonstrates how thoroughly the spiritual and national spheres interpenetrate with each other through the domestic.

This second function is less obvious, but if we follow Dante back to the original context in which the lines appear, Chaucer's tale teaches us a deeper lesson about the role and nature of sovereignty in English

33. All references to and translations of the *Purgatorio* are to Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, ed. and trans. Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), hereafter cited by line number alone.

national politics. Dante delivers the original Italian lines of wisdom through Sordello, a thirteenth-century Italian poet who wrote in Provençal and appears in the *Purgatorio* to lead Dante and Virgil through the Valley of Princes. Sordello makes his wise digression in his native language as he identifies the souls of eight international Christian princes who all happen to have died in the late thirteenth century, and all happen to be singing the hymn “*Salve, Regina*” in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Heaven. We learn that some of them produce sons and heirs less noble than themselves and others, notably England’s own Henry III, produce sons who surpass them in nobility.³⁴ But these various kings, emperors, and dukes all depend on the Queen of Heaven for spiritual salvation, as they spend their time in Purgatory singing her praise. The dead princes’ hopes for salvation rest on the Queen of Heaven’s saintly sovereignty, reinforcing the respect for female sovereignty that the Old Wife and Queen Guenevere attempt to teach the Rapist Knight. Sordello implies that family lines of aristocratic and royal nobility pale in comparison with the Virgin’s heavenly sovereignty—and his wise analysis seems to depend on the collection of thirteenth-century examples that immediately inspires it in the *Purgatorio*. Thus, Chaucer stages the impossible by deploying anachronism to transmit this historically inspired fourteenth-century wisdom backward to ancient Britain. In any case, Dante offers the same ideas about the relation of human nobility to God and spiritual nobility in his earlier *Convivio*. This earlier context may be even more important to understanding the stakes of Chaucer’s borrowing.

In the *Convivio*, Dante explains that nobility does not descend from “l’antica ricchezza” or “old richesse” through family lines: “ché ’l divino seme non cade in ischiatta, cioè in stirpe, ma cade ne le singulari persone . . . la stirpe non fa le singulari persone nobili, ma le singulari persone fanno nobile la stirpe” (the divine seed does not descend into a stock or family; it descends, rather, into individual people . . . it is not a family line that makes individuals noble, but individuals who ennoble a family line [*Convivio* IV. iii.7; IV.xx.5]).³⁵ Dante is everywhere wary of the particular

34. *Purgatorio*, ed. and trans. Hollander and Hollander, p.134, nn. 61–63, p. 157, nn. 82–84. While Henry III compromised English national sovereignty by favoring foreign French nobles in England and submitting as a vassal to the king of France in order to keep his lands in Gascony, his son Edward I proved to be a nationalist hero who blamed the French for wanting to exterminate the English language. For more on the nationalist moves of this royal father and son, see Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature and National Identity, 1290–1340* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), pp. 3–9, 110.

35. Direct references to the *Convivio* are from Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, ed. Giorgio Inglese (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1993). Translations are from Dante Alighieri, *The Banquet*, trans. Christopher Ryan (Saratoga: ANMA Libri, 1989), hereafter cited by book, chapter, and line numbers alone.

threats to spiritual and public nobility that all familial ties—and especially an inflated impression of the value of aristocratic lineage—might pose. In fact, he begins the *Convivio* by explaining that the philosophical wisdom he is about to deliver is inaccessible to many, not only because of internal causes such as physical deafness or spiritual obsession with vices, but also because of external causes such as family and civic responsibilities or living in a land remote from learned people and institutions—a land much like England, as it must have appeared to many Continental intellectuals in Chaucer's day. Let us remember that the Wife of Bath who tells the story in which Dante's words appear is herself partially deaf, which challenges the *Convivio's* assumptions about internal causes. However, the external causes that obstruct learning are most suggestive:

Di fuori da l'uomo possono essere similemente due cagioni intese, l'una de quali è induttrice di necessitate, l'altra di prigrizia. La prima è la cura familiare e civile, la quale convenevole a sé tiene de li uomini lo maggior numero, si che in ozio di speculazione esser non possono. L'altra è lo difetto del luogo dove la persona è nata e nutrita, che tal ora sarà da ogni studio non solamente privato, ma da gente studiosa lontano.

(Likewise two causes external to man can be specified, one resulting in unavoidable constraint, the other in laziness. The first is family and civic responsibilities, which quite properly absorb the energies of the majority of men, with the result that they cannot find the leisure required for cultivating the mind. The other is the deficiency in the place where a person is born and raised: this is sometimes such that it not only lacks any institute of higher learning, but is even remote from the company of learned people [*Convivio* I.i.4]).

Dante originally offers the wisdom that moves the Rapist Knight to ally himself with the Old Wife as a gift to those who are too busy to learn it on their own because of civic and family responsibilities—*la cura familiare e civile*—which he classes together. As we have seen, Arthur's knight needs to reconsider the value and meaning of this link. By importing this wisdom from the *Purgatorio* and *Convivio* back to sixth-century Britain, Chaucer simultaneously mitigates his own familiar anxieties about English institutions of learning, Dante's concern about the distractions that family and civic affairs necessarily present to searching minds, and the Rapist Knight's misunderstandings about his national responsibility. Chaucer imagines a learned British wife who somehow brings her husband closer to the very wisdom that wives and other family and civic responsibilities obscure in Dante's *Convivio*. Thus Chaucer invents a way in which family and civic responsibilities can actually lead one to (rather than away from) wisdom, regardless of what Jankyn and his book of wicked wives preach. That wisdom—that sinless living, rather than aristocratic lineage and wealth, equals nobility—in turn leads Arthur's wayward knight to understand how

his civic and family responsibilities are classed together and how they have little to do with aristocratic or economic constructions of class. He must find solidarity with his wife—this is his legal, civic, family, and ultimately national responsibility. Through this vernacular exchange with his common wife, Arthur's Rapist Knight becomes more civically, spiritually, and philosophically aware. Even though the feminine world of secrecy and gossip and the masculine world of more traditional authoritative discourses do appear definitively separated by rigid boundaries earlier in the tale, this bedroom lecture merges the two, celebrating the flexibility of class and gender roles.

Because of the *Purgatorio* allusion, we can say that English sovereignty and English solidarity become visible through Dante. The Old Wife interprets Dante not as an enemy, but as an ally (despite his potentially problematic warning about the dangers of family) and actively redeploys him as a lens through which English folk can identify those with whom they must share sovereignty and forge national solidarities: each other, regardless of class or wealth. Only after this Dante-inspired bedroom lecture is the Rapist Knight able to put himself under the sovereign judgment, the "wise governance," of his lower-class English-speaking wife (III. 1231). Only then do this husband and wife follow the model of Arthur's house, where sovereignty is negotiable and shared. The household of Rapist Knight and Old Wife, who each stand for a number of English Christian identities, elaborates the make-up of English sovereign community: it includes men, women, old, young, aristocratic, poor, lowborn, learned, vernacular, criminal, and loathly. This national community signifies redemption and solidarity across sundry, yet flexible identities and classes. Once the Knight accepts his wife's sovereignty, English institutions, marriage, the law, and the knighthood in particular (which have been languishing throughout the preceding tales told en route to Canterbury) begin to look strong and healthy—and she begins to look young and beautiful. Although the Old Wife marries a rapist, she improves the case for lower-class women, because even as she transforms into the picture of a sovereign lady, the Rapist Knight's decisive submission to her judgment, which she distinguishes from youth, lineage, and wealth, implies that England's sovereign national future belongs to common English-folk like her.³⁶

The Rapist Knight comes to his lecture under the impression that his gentle identity is rigidly bound to his family, passed down the line genealogically like possessions or titles. His wife sets him straight, informing

36. See Fradenburg, "Fulfuld of Fairye," and Fradenburg, "The Wife of Bath's Passing Fancy."

him that property, titles, and renown—the sum of ancestral goods—“is a strange thing to thy persone” (III.1161). Thus she echoes the Wife of Bath, who reminds us that every human being enters this world as alone as the next at the beginning of the tale when she describes the scene in which the knight spots the maiden he rapes, “allone as he was born” (III.885). Particular families of origin are irrelevant, as “men may wel often fynde/ [a] lordes sone do shame and vileynye” (III.1150–51).³⁷ The Rapist Knight is the prime example of this: regardless of the titles and things he owns, “al” the “good” that he offers the Old Wife in place of his body when she demands marriage, his impoverished judgment leads him to commit churlish deeds (shame and villainy) when he is alone with the maiden in the forest (III.1061). The Old Wife’s rhetoric demonstrates that the Rapist Knight’s singular identity is linked with hers just as his integrity is linked with that of his rape victim through his behavior. Taking precedence here are their identities as individual citizens under the law, proto-English subjects living in Arthur’s realm under Arthur’s law, where judgment appears to be even more important than ownership in determining the nature and make-up of sovereign community. The Rapist Knight’s new wife teaches him that the identity he believes he inherits from his family, his *nacioun*, is not his national inheritance, insisting that all ancestral goods are foreign to individual identity.

Here national continuity, like gentility, depends on breaking with the idea of the nation based in ancestral history and taking to an idea of nationhood based on shared ethical standards of virtuous living and ultimately on civic responsibility. National solidarity, like national sovereignty, requires collaborative decision-making and the sort of shared identity that people formally choose when they consent to marry and form new households. The Old Wife does not discard the ideals of shared identity or familial domesticity, but she revises them significantly. When, in response to her husband’s complaint about her appearance and age, the Old Wife asks him to choose whether she be young, beautiful, and potentially unfaithful or old, ugly, and absolutely faithful, he, like the Canterbury-bound pilgrims to Harry Bailley at the end of The General Prologue, consents to his wife’s sovereign rule with a hint of reticence, realizing that it is at once the best and the least he can do:

37. This reading supports and is supported by Burger’s observation that “[t]he Wife does not mention lands or movable goods provided by her family as dowry, nor indeed anything at all about the social situation of her family. Her autobiography would insist that she is only able to draw on what is ‘natural’ to her as a woman, that is her body, as her equivalent to family name, movable goods, or land in the marriage business” (*Chaucer’s Queer Nation*, p. 88). By consistently denaturalizing aristocratic views of the family as nation, as all that matters, and all that is inheritable socially, economically, institutionally, and finally politically, the Wife is able to begin to tell her story of an emerging cross-class, cross-gender English nation.

This knyght avyseth hym and sore siketh,
 But atte laste he seyde in this manere:
 “My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
 I put me in youre wise governance;
 Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance
 And most honour to yow and me also.
 I do no fors the wheither of the two,
 For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me.”

(III.1227–35)

Although the Rapist Knight’s bitter sighing may be taken as a sign of his disingenuousness, his air of resigned consent matches the resignation of the pilgrims in the frame narrative as well as that of Alisoun and Jankyn in *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*. This is to say that resigned consent, whether careful or careless, regularly establishes sovereignty in *The Canterbury Tales*. The form of resignation instantiates collaborative judgment, signals both a history and an expectation of love, affection, congeniality; thus it commits to shared identity and continuity. Here the Rapist Knight admits that his honor and his pleasure are bound to those of the Old Wife. He participates in the institution of marriage, the form of love, which—in *The Canterbury Tales*—is at best an expectation that serves a political and cultural function: national cohesion and continuity. Whether the Rapist Knight means it or not, the Old Wife has supplied the content of the form: an ethics of national sovereignty, wherein judgments are particularly English cross-class, cross-gender affairs that instantiate solidarity and promote continuity. And whether readers believe that he truly empathizes with her or not, the Old Wife responds as if she feels that he understands her and her desires.

After the Rapist Knight consents to the Old Wife’s sovereignty, both temporality and the threat of national decay disappear with her moribund body. In *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, the Old Wife does away with the threat of temporality. She refuses to wait for generations, or to rest her hopes for continuity on any line of ancestry such as that on which her husband originally depends. Instead she embodies a sort of presentist nationalist dream, enacting continuity by regenerating her own body, her own youth, and magically transforming herself into a woman young, beautiful, and true. National sovereignty makes the old woman’s transformation into a young woman possible; but at this moment hers appears to be a new, non-reproductive, erotic, and intellectual continuity of youth.³⁸ This fantastic

38. This continuity is a kind of inverse of the genealogical, biological, and dynastic continuity that Custance reproduces for Rome through Maurice in the preceding *Man of Law’s Tale*, which we expect to find in conventional romance. Perhaps this is the Wife’s way of reminding the *Man of Law* and his sect that women themselves are worth more than the infants they are capable of producing for men.

and impossible transformation tells a factual truth about human nature: women can turn the clocks back in ways that men cannot. Women can reproduce life within their bodies in a vital way that men cannot imitate. Though the Old Wife's transformation bypasses conventional reproduction, she ultimately amplifies this biological fact, both celebrating the power it represents and refusing its limitations by exceeding and innovating such reproduction through her own spectacular regeneration. Indeed, this transformation tells us yet more about human culture: national continuity depends on real or feigned belief in impossible transformations such as the Old Wife's, real or feigned belief in the transcendent force of love, despite proof that what humans call love is too often as lackluster as that ever-unsatisfying resignation that establishes political sovereignty. Ultimately, national continuity depends on a suspension of disbelief that accepts anachronism as national history. Thus Chaucer suggests that a national community is one that joins in such irrational hope across familial, age, gender, class, and intellectual divides. This is the moral of national sovereignty in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*: sovereignty matters because it compares ownership with judgment and ultimately finds judgment to be heavier and more useful. Sovereignty extends the expectation of solidarity and love from the family, which conserves wealth and bequeaths possessions through genealogical lines, to the nation, which pools judgment toward a common wealth. Here sovereignty legitimizes extant institutions and unions, complicates identity, and upsets hierarchical structures by demanding cooperation across lines of difference. Thus, Chaucerian sovereignty shapes a particularly transmutable English nation. This nationhood is "not defined merely by power and political sovereignty, but by the traditions, sentiments and aspirations of those who live" in the *Wife of Bath* and Chaucer's England.³⁹ Yet after listening to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, it is difficult to imagine how one might distinguish political sovereignty from even the most intimate sentiments and most softly whispered aspirations of Chaucer's English pilgrims.

As Glenn Burger has explained, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* presents a pre-nation-state nation, a queer nation that is perpetually in process and unpredictably moving "beyond things as they are."⁴⁰ The Old Wife's transformability appears as a final complex metaphor for Chaucer's English nation. In Fradenburg's words, "The old woman's magical changeability

39. Davies, *The First English Empire*, p. 82.

40. Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, p. 199. Burger shows that because of both the flexibility with which the *Tales* imagines an English national community and the oppositional ways in which postcolonial theory allows readers to imagine the *Tales*, Chaucer's work illuminates the successes and limitations of the modern nation-state.

works to reassure the knight—and by extension the aristocracy—that it can mingle, even in marriage, with the common (poor, ugly) body without losing its own identity.”⁴¹ Although the final image of the young and happy couple suggests that cooperation across lines of difference will actually produce a homogeneous noble identity for all involved and, taken a little further, might even imply that commoners do not matter, we can neither escape the abundant loss and sacrifice here, nor can we disregard the unsettling and revolutionary valences of the Old Wife’s shocking transformation. No attentive reader fails to remember the maiden whom the Knight rapes at the beginning of this relatively short tale. The forgotten and remembered maiden conjures the cost of English national sovereignty. English national redemption, like Christian redemption, requires both sacrifice and belief in the impossible, belief in legends that could not possibly have happened as reported: in anachronism, in resurrection of the dead.⁴² Thus Chaucer’s Matter of Britain romances admit that neither love nor history is true, but insist that we cannot imagine a national future without also resigning ourselves to belief in such institutional lies. We might rest here, dissatisfied with the Wife’s reductive ending, its resolution of “social conflict through sexual fulfillment, and sexual conflict through upward mobility,” its insinuation that “problems of class and gender” might “marvelously vanish into thin air”—however, the incredible transformation delivers yet another truth about human nature.⁴³ The Old Wife’s magical makeover represents the one true thing on which Chaucer’s national imagination depends: humanity’s endless capacity to recreate itself. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri base their ideal commonwealth on the very same truth: “[t]he most important fact about human nature . . . that it can be and is constantly being transformed. A realist political anthropology must focus on this process of metamorphosis,” they explain.⁴⁴ From this perspective, the Old Wife’s transformation into a beautiful new wife is not simply or necessarily a homogenization. We must also acknowledge it as startling evidence that neither political community nor individual identity is ever only what it seems to be on the surface, or at first glance—and that any human relationship, whether political, sexual, domestic, institutional, or all of the above, will have to accommodate unexpected changes if it means to survive over time. Thus, *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* celebrates the flexibility of identity and of class and gender politics as the key quality that keeps communities, from households to nation-states, functional as history unfolds.

41. Fradenburg, “Fulfil of Fairye,” p. 219.

42. But here missing female bodies (the maiden’s, and now the old hag’s body) take the sacrificial place of Jesus’s body, as in the *quem quaeritis* trope of the medieval liturgy.

43. Fradenburg, “The Wife of Bath’s Passing Fancy,” p. 54.

44. Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, p. 191.

III. LOVE'S NOT TIME'S FOOL: LOVE AS TRANSPORTATION BEYOND THINGS AS THEY ARE

For the Wife of Bath, as for Hardt and Negri, love is many things: a concept, a power, an action—in short, a vehicle that helps those it unites to move beyond things as they are. Approaching love as an action rather than as a sentiment, Hardt and Negri explain, “When we engage in the production of subjectivity that is love, we are not merely creating new subjects or new objects in the world. Instead we are producing a new world, a new social life.”⁴⁵ Thus, they transport love beyond romantic convention—or rather ask it to transport them there—by insisting on its revolutionary potential, its capacity to transform social life, not merely to idealize it or to envision it differently. There is no William Shakespeare here proving love is not love that alters when it alteration finds. Oh no—in this case, it is a never-fixed mark: love is not love that fails to alter what it finds. Hardt and Negri specify a radical love of the other and stress such love’s power to displace corrupt institutions, like the modern nation and even the family, and to replace the sovereignty that defines them with “constituent power,” and yet they cling to institutional form. “The central difference” between conventional definitions of institution and theirs, “perhaps, has to do with agency: whereas according to the conventional sociological notion institutions form individuals and identities, in [their] conception singularities form institutions, which are thus perpetually in flux.”⁴⁶ Similarly, Chaucer’s reading of the Arthurian past suggests that institutions like the nation, the law, literature, and even history itself always coexist in flux, depending not only on alternative and intermediate institutions like the household and gossip but also on transmutable individuals like the Old Wife, singularities, as Hardt and Negri would say, who redefine these overlapping institutions by finding ways to be included in an ever-evolving social life. Despite Hardt and Negri’s desire to imagine a commonwealth free of national identities, sovereignty, and corruptible institutions, their vision bears a striking resemblance to Chaucer’s identity-obsessed imagination of England as a sovereign nation. Of course Chaucer’s is decidedly a queer nation, in Burger’s vital formulation. Chaucer’s queer nation is in constant flux, being transported by something called love past time and convention, past things as they are even as it rests on history—but on history as the past never was.

National sovereignty depends on institutions; it is nothing more than an idea without them. In Chaucer’s view, national institutions represent the possible and practical ways, the most tangible ways, in which even common members of the nation might experience and influence

45. Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, pp. 180–81.

46. Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, p. 358.

national sovereignty. However, Chaucerian sovereignty also depends on anachronism. Sovereignty is seldom compelling on a national scale without claiming to found or to be founded on fantasy, unlivable experiences, anachronism, a past that could not have been. The Wife of Bath's legendary Arthurian history is not only utopian but also tendentiously anachronistic and shrewdly in touch with the real power of Chaucer's institutional realities.⁴⁷ Her national memory is selectively nostalgic, sick for a fantastic (if not quite utopian) home that never was, and so all the more determined to make it present. What Homi K. Bhabha presents as the double discourse of nation's narration paves a way for anachronism. We imagine and address the nation-people as both "performative subjects" and "pedagogical objects"—living out of synch, simultaneously in the present and in a transcendent, diachronic history.⁴⁸ At the same time that the Wife of Bath represents the immediately accessible and historicized fourteenth-century English institution of marriage (as well as the intermediate household and the alternative institution of gossip), she also experiments artistically and literarily with anachronistic national romance, unlocking the powerful significance of an otherwise inaccessible and impossible history. Her pilgrimage performance admits that remembering a past that could not have happened is the only way to ensure a national future; meanwhile, participating in unreliable, imperfect institutions is the only way to live a national present, a present continuous with both past and future. The Wife of Bath reveals that local, synchronic experience and transcendent, anachronistic imagination are not only compatible but also aid and abet each other in the project of reifying and realizing national fantasy.

Although Chaucer's anachronism in the Wife's national story funds the continuity of a relatively pluralistic and inclusive national community, we must recognize that the moral is hardly one of absolute or timeless inclusion. Like most medieval romances, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* puts enormous value on the heteronormative couple and claims that dyad as the essential building block of the nation and of the common good. This attitude toward marriage foreshadows traditionalist arguments against marriage equality and lives on in conservative reluctance to acknowledge legally the legitimacy of households formed by two mothers or two fathers

47. In fact, Burger offers an important analysis of the Wife's female masculinity, her manner of behaving like one of Ann Middleton's new men by using "the forms of another's institutional power to further her own ends (rather like an upwardly mobile 'gentil' man who will act like his betters to further his own ends)" (*Chaucer's Queer Nation*, p. 95).

48. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 139–70, quotation from p. 151.

in recent UK and US national debates.⁴⁹ Furthermore, although *The Wife of Bath's Tale* advocates crossing class and gender lines for love and solidarity, it avoids lines of color and religion, markers of medieval and twenty-first century “race.” Dante’s view of Christian nobility overshadows the power of folk magic and its deep ties to pre-Christian British religious practice here. Regardless of Chaucer’s internationalism, measured exclusivity makes a powerful impact on Chaucer’s location of England and Englishness even as these somewhat flexible boundaries stretch to include commoners. Ultimately Chaucer’s internationalism and inclusivity fail to erase the impact that nationalism, xenophobia, and other forms of exclusivity make on Chaucer’s historical imagination. When the Chaucerians with whom I began this essay cite Chaucer’s internationalism, they suggest attitudes more universalist, less provincial, and finally distinct from the exclusory fears and hatreds represented by pilgrims like Chaucer’s Orientalist Man of Law and Squire and his anti-Semitic Prioress, whose xenophobia most certainly does work to situate Chaucer’s English among other nations. Chaucerian internationalism has signified something closer to cosmopolitanism in our critical discourse, although *cosmopolitanism* is not the word Chaucerians have used. I want neither to take a side in the historical debate about the national character of medieval states nor to deny Chaucer’s internationalism; I aim rather to distinguish between cosmopolitanism, which could threaten Chaucerian nationalism in its assimilation of universal values and customs, and internationalism, which does not. This essay works toward that goal by admitting the interdependence of nationalism with internationalism and exposing Chaucer’s exploitation of that relationship in his *Wife of Bath's Tale*, where Italian literature sheds light on English national identity. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* adds particularly national and social valences to Dante’s Christian nobility in applying it to Chaucer’s cross-class, cross-gender model of English nationhood. This Matter of Britain romance presents Christian nobility and mixed-class marriage as the keys to delivering English sovereignty as well as to reaching the more sentimental aspirations without which the tale’s leading lady lives for so long. These keys work like love—opening the doors of the nation to the beloved, opening the concept of the nation to new identities within critical limits, opening the arms of the nation to embrace others, but not all others.

49. For a brief and incisive reflection on the politics of sex, marriage, and religion in medieval and contemporary English texts, see Carol Braun Pasternack, “Text, Sex, and Politics: Present and Past Reflections,” *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, 1 (2010), 361–71.