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"If wommen hadde writen stories": Gender and Social Change in Geoffrey Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" and Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

Anne-Claire Michoux and Katrin Rupp

Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath and Jane Austen's Anne Elliot both note that male authoritative writing delimits women's social standing, something they are not willing to accept as an unchangeable fact. Each woman therefore offers textual alternatives that challenge the hegemony of male writing. While Austen uses free indirect speech to inscribe Anne's voice within the authoritative framework of the narrative, Chaucer presents Alisoun's body as a complementary text to the male literary corpus. As these two women thus resort to specifically female experiences, they call for a double revision of history: a transformation of society that allows women to participate in a world defined by male prerogatives, above all as authors, and a concomitant inscription of women in literary records as individuals with a voice of their own.

Keywords: canonicity, female authorship, gender, social change, textual reception

As a woman extremely well read in the classics of English literature, Jane Austen is likely to have been acquainted with Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath from the *Canterbury Tales* (1378-1400).[1] Indeed, in *Persua-*

[1] Austen could have read the *Canterbury Tales* in Thomas Tyrwhitt's 1775-78 edition, which was reprinted in 1798 and widely anthologised. She may also have been familiar with modernised versions, most notably John Dryden's adaptation of the Wife of Bath's Tale and Alexander Pope's paraphrase of the Wife's Prologue (Harris, *Jane Austen's Art of Memory* 189; for other paraphrases see Bowden 65-92).

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sion (1817), Austen re-examines some of the concerns regarding women's position in society as expressed by the Wife in her Prologue and her Tale, most prominently through the voice of Anne Elliot. Thus, both Alisoun of Bath and Anne Elliot note that writing is central to delimiting women's social standing, something they are not willing to accept as an unchangeable fact. Each woman therefore offers textual alternatives based on lived experience that challenge the hegemony of male writing.

Alisoun's experience derives from her body, specifically from the mouth and the vagina, the two female orifices that are metaphorically linked to textual im/propriety in patristic hermeneutics. As she indulges in pronounced loquacity and generous sexuality, she presents her body as an alternative text to the authoritative literature that tries to confine women's allegedly devious carnal appetites. She thus opens up a subversive site for a discussion of female authorship, which is illustrated by the tale she manages to insert into the male-controlled discourse that surrounds her. At the same time, she serves Chaucer as a model to explore his position as a vernacular writer, who likewise tries to integrate his writings into the canonical corpus of Latin texts. Yet, while Chaucer self-confidently situates himself as a vernacular writer among his Latin forebears, the Wife can only play with the idea of women as writers with a status equal to that of male authors.

Four centuries later, Jane Austen will actually be a woman writer whose status is, however, still a source of contention for her contemporaries. In *Persuasion*, Austen explores the limited possibilities women have in her society, and specifically contests the authority male writing has in determining not just women's social prospects, but how their character is shaped and perceived. Through Anne's voice, Austen rebuts the invariable depiction in books of women as fickle and argues for a re-evaluation of the parallel, unrecorded history of women's experiences. The novel's endorsement of lived experience allows Austen to uncover the actions of men that disown women their share in history.

Albeit in different ways, Alisoun and Anne equally want their voice to be heard in order to change the prevalent conception of women as inferior and in need of male control. According to Jocelyn Harris, one of the few critics to note the echoes of Chaucer's tale in Austen's novel, such a change envisages constancy in love and gender equality in a relationship as both Anne and Alisoun "plead for the authority not of

books but of experience" (*Austen's Art of Memory* 212).[2] Both women certainly challenge the concept of stereotypical gender roles. However, rather than just pitting female experience against male writing, as Harris suggests, we argue that they want their stories to be inscribed in the literary discourse and thus become an authoritative part of socio-cultural history. Their idea of inserting themselves into the male-dominated literary sphere and of, thereby, changing it is underlined by their constant association with textual production. Indeed, Austen resorts to free indirect speech to inscribe Anne's voice within the authoritative framework of the narrative. The narrator allows the heroine's consciousness to dominate the narrative and thus the story. In the case of Alisoun, textuality is closely tied to the sexualised female body, which figures as an alternative text to the male literary corpus.

In the General Prologue, we are told that Alisoun is from "biside Bathe" (445), an area which was well-known in the fourteenth century for its cloth production.[3] This is the place to be for the Wife as she is very skilled at "clooth-makyng" (447) and cloth-trading. Her textile inclinations are also underlined by the minute details we are given of her fashionable clothing: fine kerchiefs, a large hat, red stockings, soft shoes, a long foot mantle. Alisoun's prominent connection with textiles subtly aligns her with the specifically female domain of telling stories by means of fabrics. As Kathryn Sullivan Kruger shows, the making of textiles was traditionally associated with women in most societies. In addition to its practical and representative functions, the cloth is a textile narrative that contributes to the fashioning of a community's collective identity:

> the cloth, whether it was embroidered, woven, or dyed with the stories or symbols peculiar to their tribe, indicates the important presence of the contribution of women to the creation of culture, its texts, and its history (Sullivan Kruger 21).

The production of textiles is therefore associated with a concept of female authorship that is defined by wielding the shuttle rather than the pen. Chaucer may tap into this gendered tradition of text/ile creation when he presents the Wife as an expert manufacturer of fabrics. At the same time, he of course alludes to the etymological link between text

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[2] Deidre Shauna Lynch also briefly remarks in her footnotes that "Anne sounds like the Wife of Bath in Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, who is exasperated by male clerics' representation of women" (248). See also Margaret Tudeau-Clayton in this volume.

[3] For more information on the surroundings of Bath as an important area of medieval cloth production, see Carruthers.

and textile – both terms derive from the Latin *texere*, to weave – a connection which was widely explored in medieval literary, philosophical and exegetical discourse.[4] More than any other of the Canterbury pilgrims, then, Alisoun the clothmaker is intimately linked with textuality from the moment we are introduced to her.

The Wife herself discusses women's (hypothetical) role as producers of texts. She has just launched into a diatribe against the "book of wikked wyves" (685) that her fifth husband Jankyn enjoys reading, a collection of medieval antifeminist treatises (notably including St. Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*), which depicts women as lecherous, greedy and garrulous.[5] Her furious conclusion is that women would well be able to answer, even to top such unfavourable descriptions of their sex if given a chance:

> By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,
> As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
> They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
> Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.[6]
> (693-96)

In Alisoun's textile imagination, women could easily re-dress men's stories, but they are in fact excluded from the clerkly oratory, this specifically male locus of written, Latinate learning. In order to counter men's writings effectively, women have to resort to other means. In her first line, the Wife famously juxtaposes the "auctoritee" inherent to the male, Latin texts produced in the oratory with "experience," the female sphere of vernacular orality and unrestrained sexuality that she embodies. By indulging in verbosity (her Prologue is by far the longest in the Canterbury collection) and enjoying a sexually active life in and probably outside marriage,[7] Alisoun confirms the picture of wicked women in Jankyn's book. At the same time she also undermines the role assigned to her by these misogynist traditions as submissive, chaste and silent.

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[4] For a further discussion of the text/textile link see the two essay collections respectively edited by Clegg Hyer and Frederick and by Burns.

[5] The Wife itemises the writers of these misogynist texts that are all "bounden in o volume" (681). See Hanna and Lawler for the complete primary texts included in Jankyn's book.

[6] Dinshaw (3-14) further examines the link of Adam's mark with the potentially erroneous marks Adam the scribe leaves on the manuscript page in Chaucer's short poem "Chaucers Wordes unto Adam."

[7] We are told in the General Prologue that the Wife has had five husbands so far, "withouten oother compaignye in youthe" (451).

She insists that her voice be heard and exposes in her tale male wickedness as embodied by the rapist knight. As the Wife thus advocates a reconsideration of gender biases, she is a perfect mouthpiece for Chaucer that allows him to re-examine the position of his vernacular texts in the literary corpus, which are consistently "feminised" and thus face challenges comparable to those of women like Alisoun.

As the Wife derives her power from the mouth and the vagina, she is a medieval type of Eve, the maternal source of deviant female appetites as located specifically in these bodily orifices. As Eric Jager shows, Eve's ears (which opened up to the snake's seductive speech) and her mouth (which willingly ingested the apple and subsequently instigated Adam into doing the same) are consistently sexualised in patristic discourse. Brought about by the unrestrained physical appetites of a woman, the Fall thus marks the beginning of sexual and textual impropriety. Indeed, patristic writers consider the deviant female body as a metaphor for improper writing, specifically vernacular or non-Christian texts, which requires the control of *auctoritas*, the proper corpus of canonical literature.[8]

Carolyn Dinshaw amply explores this sexual / textual poetics for Chaucer's works. As she points out, the Wife herself invites us to consider the intricate connection between her body and the authoritative text when she applies the term "glosing" (26, 119, 509), used in patristic discourse for proper textual hermeneutics, to both the reading of a text and her body.[9] The difference is that "The gloss undertakes to speak (for) the text; the Wife maintains that the literal text – her body – can speak for itself" (Dinshaw 115). Arguing that the Wife foregrounds her body as an alternative text to be read alongside the male literary corpus rather than being controlled or even obliterated by it, Dinshaw concludes that Alisoun "expresses a dream of masculine reading that is not antifeminist and a feminine relation to the condition of being read that is not antimasculinist" (117). According to Dinshaw, the Wife opts for "a renovated patriarchal hermeneutic that acknowledges, even solicits feminine desire" (25). While Alisoun certainly advocates feminine desire, the act of "being read" suggests that the female (textual) body remains a

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[8] See Jager, especially pages 75-82 and 99-142.

[9] Incidentally, this connection of the body and text/ile is already hinted at in the Wife's portrait, where her clothes not only underline her hunch for stylish clothing, but actually suggest a merging with her body as the broad hat meets the size of her hips (both are "large") and the red stockings match the colour of her face.

passive object of the male gaze.[10] Aiming at exposing the control men have over women, Alisoun's sexual/textual poetics is, we contend, not limited to hermeneutics but extends to the position of a woman's textual body within a literary canon that is exclusively defined by learned men. As the pilgrim most prominently linked with textuality, the Wife thus arguably also mirrors Chaucer's concerns about the inclusion of his vernacular and hence "feminised" œuvre in the authoritative corpus of Latin texts.[11] However, while Chaucer manages to establish himself as a vernacular author in his own right – he is considered the father of English poetry by John Dryden –, Alisoun's desire that her tale be inscribed in the male literary discourse remains a hypothesis at her time ("If wommen hadde writen").[12] Female authorship will become a reality for Jane Austen some four centuries later, but as we will see, she too struggles to include her works in the literary canon.

Concerned as it is with exposing the normative ways of patristic texts, Alisoun's prologue culminates in the destruction of one such exemplar. Angry with the pleasure Jankyn takes in reading his misogynist book, Alisoun tears out some pages, which results in the couple's verbal and physical struggle. Alisoun eventually gains the upper hand, and her victory is sealed when she makes Jankyn burn his book as well as commit his land and money to her.[13] While Alisoun relishes in her achievement, Jankyn remains silent, thus adopting the subservient position usually assigned to women. Ultimately, he becomes literally speechless when he dies, possibly as a result of his economic, verbal and sexual submission to his wife.

The disappearance of Jankyn's misogynist book and indeed the man himself leaves a creative gap for Alisoun to fill with her own text, and she promptly announces: "*Now* wol I seye *my* tale, if ye wol heere" (826, emphasis added). The tale is hers above all because it reflects her own

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[10] This intricate connection and indeed conflation of body and text can also be found in medieval Charter of Christ poems and in several lives of saints. For a discussion of these texts see e.g. Kay.

[11] As Martin puts it: "Like her creator, she criticises through comedy, she weighs experience against authority, she is aware of the sexuality within textuality and she jokingly subverts the conventions of male authorship" (*Chaucer's Women* 217). Dinshaw points out that the Wife is the only pilgrim that reappears throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. She is "a source of delight for this male author [Chaucer] precisely because through her he is able to reform and still to participate in patriarchal discourse" (116).

[12] For a thorough discussion of Chaucer's endeavour to establish himself as an authoritative writer of English see e.g. Arner; Minnis (*Translations*); Scanlon.

[13] Martin ("Bookburning") discusses a potential link between bookburning in Alisoun's prologue and in Jane Austen's *Sir Charles Grandison*.

experience of the female body/text as subject to the male gaze. Indeed, the loathly lady's body is first the focus of male disgust and later of pleasure when it miraculously changes from foul to fair.[14] This metamorphosis appears to confirm the misogynist fantasies that women have to fulfil men's desires and that the knight acts upon when he rapes a maiden at the beginning of the tale. However, as Elizabeth Biebel points out, the prospect of making love to the ugly old woman is like a rape for him and "thus the loathly lady reveals to the knight what it is like to be marginalized and to be stripped of self-governance" (74). Having learnt his lesson, the knight places the power of decision into his wife's hands, thus relinquishing the cruel control he exerted on the maiden's body earlier on. For Biebel, "[t]he transformed couple in their nuptial bed represent a world in which individuals share mutual respect and equality" (75).

In order to reach such gender equality, women have to be given more power in society. Indeed, with her magical metamorphosis the loathly lady literally embodies a change in favour of woman's social station. Her physical transformation occurs out of her own volition or, if you will, the "sovereynetee" (1138) so important to women in the tale, thus underlining her power to function as the author of her own body/text. As the site of the hag's female authorship, the bed therefore figures as an alternative, but equally important locus to the clerkly oratory. As Hollie Morgan shows, rather than just being the traditional room of female confinement, the late medieval bedchamber was actually also a place "owned by women, physically and linguistically" (172).[15] As a place of female empowerment, the bed and its chamber "had wider social implications and witnessed events that affected society on both a local and a national level" (Morgan 172).[16] Indeed, in Alisoun's tale, the bed also marks the site where other social changes are advocated when the loathly lady tells the dejected knight that old age and poverty are not

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[14] Harris notes the correspondence between Wentworth's response to Anne's supposed physical transformation – he thought her "so altered he should not have known her again" (65) – and the knight's disgust in Chaucer's tale with the ugly old lady (*Austen's Art of Memory* 191).

[15] In her book-length study, Morgan includes the function of the bed in the Wife of Bath's prologue, but not in her tale. Speaking of the tale specifically, Carter argues that "the bedchamber in which a husband is rendered as subservient as a lover subsumes the usual representation of the court, its hall, and Round Table, as the seat of masculine power" (335).

[16] One example of the national importance allocated to the bed as linked to (aristocratic) women is the moment when the bloodline is secured through the birth of an heir, which happens in an exclusively female environment of the chamber (see Morgan 194).

a shame and that nobility does not depend on rank, remarks that we come back to further down.

The loathly lady's observations tune in with the social changes at the end of the fourteenth century when chivalric privileges are increasingly challenged while a middle class is beginning to establish itself, as represented by the Wife of Bath. The rise of the non-ruling classes to more power is concomitant with a growing importance of the English language, a process that was also embraced by the aristocracy in its attempt to distinguish itself from the French enemy on the continent during the Hundred Years' War. However, while English was beginning to be employed for official purposes, its use in literature continued to be contested. As mentioned, Chaucer seeks to establish English as an authoritative language next to Latin and possibly French throughout his work, an attempt that is certainly favoured at his time by the socio-political changes which affected all areas of life.

In addition to being the site for the exploration of social changes that are ultimately beneficial to women, the bed also marks the place where the bodies of the hag and the knight are joined. In other words, the (complementary) dichotomy of female body/text and male text/body that Dinshaw posits is momentarily resolved here, which is precisely what the Wife is aiming at: women's bodies should not just be alternatives to male texts, but their bodies/texts should merge with the canonical male corpus. Her concluding wish that Jesus should send women "Husbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde" (1259) invokes a reformed, fresh male body/text in bed alongside that of the transformed female body/text. Furthermore, by appealing to Jesus rather than God, Alisoun may allude to the androgynous nature of Christ's body as both manly and maternal and thereby subtly underline her point that male and female (textual) bodies should be considered equal.[17]

As the tale's setting in "fayerye" (859) makes clear, female authorship remains, however, just a dream for the time being. It is only in this temporarily suspended world of fairies that women author their own texts and where the queen and her ladies are allowed to figure as judges to correct the erroneous body/text of the rapist knight. In the world of Alisoun, it is still men who correct women. Indeed, the Friar and the Summoner try to prevent her from telling her story after what the Friar terms her "long preamble" (831). Representing religious and judicial authority respectively, the two men want to silence the Wife by telling their own tales. Only when they are in turn silenced by the Host can

[17] For a study of Jesus as mother and man, see Walker Bynum.

Alisoun proceed with her narrative. As soon as she has finished, the Friar again patronises her when he exclaims: "lete auctoritees, on Goddes name, / To prechyng and to scoles of clergye" (1276-77).[18] Not only is the Wife's text denied any authority of its own, it is literally framed and controlled by men. Furthermore, Alisoun also depends on men to help her: the Host has to silence the two impostors and ultimately, it is of course Chaucer the poet who writes down her story,[19] a reality that women like Margery Kempe were also faced with.[20]

Through the technique of *mise-en-abyme*, i.e. through the Wife through the hag, Chaucer arguably reflects on the way his vernacular writing too is controlled by other men as evidenced by the numerous Latin glosses that accompany the Wife's prologue and tale in most manuscripts. As Graham Caie points out of the Ellesmere MS, most of the glosses are from St. Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*. The misogynist treatise that is prominently included in Jankyn's destroyed book of wicked women thus reappears on the manuscript page to frame the (female) textual body. Furthermore, since "the glosses are given a highly prominent position side-by-side with the text" (Caie 350) it seems that they not only vie with the vernacular text but actually try to outwit it with their Latinate erudition – just as the Friar and Summoner attempt to outmanœuvre the Wife by their alleged literary superiority. However, while Caie sees the glosses as moral correctives to the Wife's idiosyncratic interpretation of authoritative texts, they also offer "a playful or ambiguous layer of reading" (Kerby-Fulton 220). If, as Kerby-Fulton suggests, these glosses were actually authorised by Chaucer himself, the manuscript page thus opens up an additional site for him to gesture to the position of his feminised, vernacular text.[21] But even if Chaucer's hand in the glosses cannot be fully verified, they were read as comments empowering women. As Theresa Tinkle points out:

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[18] The Friar's desire to silence the Wife surely also stems from his anger at her mocking attack on his profession at the beginning of her tale.

[19] Speaking of the reversed gender roles in the tale, Carter interestingly maintains that Alisoun here "rewrites the script" (334), when writing is precisely something she cannot do.

[20] Since Margery Kempe was illiterate, she had to ask men to write down her mystical experiences. For a discussion of authoritative writing and the role of the female body in Margery Kempe's works see Herbert McAvoy.

[21] In her close analysis of the glosses' content and their interaction with the text in the Ellesmere MS, Kerby-Fulton finds that there is "support to the case for their being Chaucer's" (216).

> Whereas Chaucer develops the Wife of Bath as a contained subversion of *Against Jovinian*, many of his scribes present her as a credible lay preacher of marital rights and responsibilities, suggesting approval of her challenge to clerical asceticism. (116)

Just as Alisoun's body/text usurps the traditional position of the authoritative author/glossator, so Chaucer successfully insinuates his vernacular œuvre into the Latin corpus of his literary forebears. The Wife, however, remains a "fallible author," to adapt Alastair Minnis's term: she can exert some oral authority, but she cannot author a written text.[22]

Persuasion resumes the Wife's discussion of women as sources of "auctoritee" and the possibility for their story to be inscribed in the public discourse of history. The novel opens on this very notion of who writes history and whose authority lies behind it. In the opening scene, Sir Walter is poring over the entry for the Elliot family in the Baronetage, a publication which provides the list of the order of baronets, a title handed down from father to son. The Baronetage encodes patrilineage, a system that writes women out of history. The Elliot wives are an anonymous mass of "all the Marys and Elizabeths they [the male heirs] had married" (4). They are merely instrumental in producing descendants who will carry the family name and keep the property within the family line. Anne's mother suffers this fate: the grammatical construction "by which lady (who died 1800) he has issue" (4) dispossesses Elizabeth Elliot of her individuality and her role as mother since it assigns the children to Sir Walter. She is a simple vehicle, with no agency and no history. The Baronetage on the other hand represents a "textual mirror" (Tanner 206) for Sir Walter, who moreover inscribes his own version of history when he annotates the volume to add family events, thus constructing the Elliot family in his view. The pen is in his hand, giving him the advantage over the Elliot women.

Austen's narrative therefore points to two parallel histories: on the one hand the official, male, printed history, encountered in the Baronetage, newspapers, or the "navy-list" (70) that for instance records the ships Captain Wentworth commanded, and on the other hand the unpublished history of daily life, which concerns mostly women and cannot be traced in books. As Adela Pinch notes, "while men can find their past in books of public chronicles, women, like Anne Elliot, can turn only to personal memory, for which there is no book" (Pinch 111). Women cannot find their history in books, a silencing *Persuasion* de-

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[22] In *Fallible Authors*, Minnis argues that Chaucer explores heterodox ideas via the Pardoner and the Wife while staying fully within orthodox discourse.

nounces and attempts to redress. Men may have "satisfying relations to books" (Pinch 111), unlike women, but social changes in the early nineteenth century mean that even they can no longer simply rely on old forms of "auctoritee" to secure their social relevance. Rather than representing authority, Sir Walter's marginal inscriptions reveal his growing social impotence: Wentworth has entered the realm of official history through his naval career. It is through experience that his name in inscribed in history. "Auctoritee" no longer dictates place. Just like the loathly lady in Alisoun's tale, *Persuasion* calls for a double revision of history: both a transformation of the male-dominated society that "clerkes" commemorate and the reinscription of women in literary records as individuals in their own right.

As Sir Walter himself detects in his recognition of "the unfeudal tone of the present day" (150), England is undergoing large-scale social changes that unsettle a system based on property and ancestry.[23] Just like Chaucer, Austen, through an examination of the figure of the gentleman, questions the right England's nobility has to its authority to lead the country. As the hag argues in the Wife's tale,

> He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl,
> For vileyns synful dedes make a churl.
> For gentillesse nys but renomee [. . .]
> It was no thyng biquethe us with oure place.
> (1157-59; 1164)

"Place" refers to birth, an element that Sir Walter sees as defining identity, a view *Persuasion* disproves. Indeed, an inherited title such as Sir Walter's baronetcy does not confer the moral qualities that "gentillesse" implies. Gentility cannot be found in a book or in an inherited name but must be sought outside of official history, in a person's actions. The "auctoritee" of the Baronetage is replaced by experience, in the form of contributions to society. Wentworth as well as his fellow naval officers rise socially through meritocracy, not birth. Just as Alisoun's tale, *Persuasion* redefines "gentilesse," or gentility: the true nobility is one of character. It is in this redefinition of gentility which re-examines men's "place" as well as in her parallel exploration of women's inscription in history that Austen continues the debate Chaucer's Wife started.

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[23] English society is in a period of transition, emblematised by the Musgrove family in the opposition between the parents' "old English style" (38) and the children's new modern approach, exemplified in the "improvement" (39) the family home undergoes.

The social changes advocated in the Wife's tale and in *Persuasion* open up a site for women to assert themselves. Even though Anne may seem the embodiment of submissiveness and compliance (Wentworth after all blames her for following her surrogate mother, Lady Russell's advice to break off their engagement, for giving in to "persuasion"), her family at times literally crawling over her,[24] Anne's voice is in fact heard throughout the novel. While a change from a first-person narrator in the Wife's case to a third-person narrative could indicate that agency has been lost, Anne's voice is not heard directly but filtered through the narrator's. Critics have observed that it is Anne's consciousness that dominates the narrative, through the use of free indirect speech.[25] What we hear is *her* story. The reader's perception of her character is not determined by a man's voice.

Both Alisoun and Anne dispute the right that male "auctoritee" has to determine women's character. Like Alisoun, Anne pursues this debate opposite a male interlocutor. Surprised by his friend Captain Benwick's sudden engagement to Louisa Musgrove, when he had seemed incapable of overcoming his fiancée Fanny Harville's death, Captain Harville shares with Anne his thoughts on the differences in the endurance of feelings between men and women, the advantage falling on men's side. Anne contests Harville's claim that women are less faithful. Harville nevertheless believes that history corroborates him:

> "[L]et me observe that all histories are against you – all stories, prose and verse. If I had such a memory as Benwick, I could bring you fifty quotations in a moment on my side the argument, and I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman's inconstancy. Songs and proverbs, all talk of woman's fickleness. But perhaps you will say, these were all written by men."
>
> Anne replies:
>
> "Perhaps I shall. – Yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything.' (254-55)

For Captain Harville, it would seem that all of world literature is one large "book of wikked wyves." His knowledge of "all histories" is, how-

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[24] The young William Musgrove, Anne Elliot's nephew, decides to "fasten" (86) himself to his aunt and Anne is unable to remove him physically or by giving him orders.

[25] See for instance Booth 250-51; Litz; Prewitt Brown.

ever, dubious since, unlike his friend Benwick, Harville is "no reader" and needs "constant employment" (106). He does not share his friend's "decided taste for reading, and sedentary pursuits" (104). Anne's comment is equally striking since she is an avid reader, is described as "fall[ing] into a quotation" (91) and as recommending to Benwick "a larger amount of prose in his daily study" (108) to help him overcome his grief. Just as the Wife is slightly disingenuous in her claim that she will not allow books any authority yet refers to a plethora of classical texts to build her case, Anne recognises the usefulness of literature and of the works of male "first-rate poets" (108). Even as she acknowledges their value, Anne underlines their limitations as models for lived experience, especially in telling a woman's story. Through her speech, which concentrates on individual experience, Anne is able to communicate her own story to Wentworth and assure him of her unchanged feelings.

What has taken place in this scene is in fact a reversal of power. During this conversation, Wentworth was writing a letter addressed to Anne, a direct response to her comments. He lets the pen fall exactly at the moment when Harville claims they will never agree. Anne's suspicion that it is "because he had been occupied by them, striving to catch sounds" (254) is later confirmed. Her words indeed cause Wentworth's agitation: "'I can hardly write. I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me'" (258). Her speech almost dictated the content of his letter since it is a direct response. Anne disarms Wentworth with her words. She has been able to redress the truth and this time influence the course of her history. It seems that it is only when the pen falls from men's hands that women can reposition themselves.

Austen's feminist agenda is even more apparent when we examine the history of the composition of this sequence. *Persuasion* is a rare case in Austen scholarship, for a manuscript of the final chapters survives. The original hand-written version portrays an intimate scene between the two protagonists. There is no gender debate or discussion of authority and authorship, as there is in the published novel. In the revised, published, chapters, Anne speaks while Wentworth is silent and the defence of women's character in the face of unfair scholarly and fictional representations is at the heart of Anne's conversation with Captain Harville.[26] The Regency loathly lady – indeed, at "seven and twenty" (151), Anne is considered too old to entertain thoughts of marriage – has convinced the modern knight to trust a woman's words.

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[26] See cancelled chapters, Austen *Persuasion* 278-325.

Another "loathly lady" who redresses men's words is the penniless Mrs Smith, Anne's old school-friend.[27] Mrs Smith illustrates the detrimental effect men's words can have and the truth of the importance of allowing action to speak for one's character. An invalid and a widow, confined to cramped lodgings in an undesirable part of the city, Mrs Smith is symbolically removed from history. If her means are so straitened it is because her husband had been tricked by the duplicitous Mr Elliot, heir to the title of baronet and Kellynch Hall, proving that lineage does not automatically confer gentility. Her only way of re-inscribing herself in Bath society is to produce Mr Elliot's letter which reveals his true character and regains her a respectable position in society, as it re-establishes the truth and Mr Elliot's guilt. Mrs Smith's testimony challenges Mr Elliot's claim to the title of gentleman.[28] This also coincides with Alisoun's claim that women would write many shameful accounts of men's deeds if they were given the possibility. Like Alisoun, Mrs Smith's main source of wisdom is experience. She too weaves, her knitting maintaining her connection to the outside world. It is her illness, however, that has taught her to value experience. It has also placed her in contact with people whose knowledge comes from observation and lived experience rather than from a theoretical authority, as she saw with her nurse, Mrs Rooke:

> "Hers is a line for seeing human nature; and she has a fund of good sense and observation, which, as a companion, make her infinitely superior to thousands of those who having only received 'the best education in the world,' know nothing worth attending to. Call it gossip, if you will; but when nurse Rooke has half an hour's leisure to bestow on me, she is sure to have something to relate that is entertaining and profitable: something that makes one know one's species better." (168-69)

What is valued here is practical experience, opposed to the theoretical "best education in the world," and its ability to improve one's knowledge of human nature. It is the close and constant interaction with individuals that gives Nurse Rooke this authority. Gossip is surprisingly aligned with knowledge, arguing for an alternative history away from the volumes of literature produced by men. It is thanks to Mrs Smith's chatting, for instance, that Anne is able to discover Mr Elliot's real character and his intention to marry her. As "fund" implies, this parallel source of

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[27] Harris draws a comparison between Mrs Smith and the loathly lady in relation to their pronouncements on poverty (*Austen's Art of Memory* 200).

[28] Mr Elliot is often presented as a most "gentlemanlike" man, e.g. 152.

knowledge is considered more valuable than scholarly instruction. It provides a truer insight into human nature and is of real human benefit to its listeners, since it enables Mrs Smith to overcome her personal difficulties and redress Mr Elliot's (his)story. Similarly, Alisoun's confides her "herte" (531) and her "privetee" (531) to her "gossib" (529), her close friend whose name is also Alisoun, thus literally putting double emphasis on the lived experience of women.

Regency women's fate seems even more precarious than that of women in Chaucer's time. Where Alisoun marries for personal reasons and relies on her trade to support herself, marriage is often the only recourse available to women of Anne Elliot's class. A member of the gentry, Anne cannot work to secure her independence and her father's mismanagement of his finances places her in a very uncertain position. Jane Austen is often presented as a romantic writer, whose heroines marry the (wealthy) man of their choice, with the promise that they will live happily ever after. Yet Austen's novels, *Persuasion* included, do not paint a naïve, sentimental picture of marriage. There are in fact very few happily married couples in her fiction. Her novels sketch a trenchant analysis of the reality of matrimony in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, revealing its financial imperative. Austen may not have used so daring a statement as Mary Wollstonecraft's declaration that marriage is a form of "legal prostitution" (229), but her novels reveal a clear awareness of the often harsh reality of marriage in her period.

That is not to say that Austen shares a radically different view of marriage from Alisoun and that she rejects the institution of marriage as a whole. Like Chaucer's Wife, Austen believes that the ideal marriage is one based on mutual respect and gender equality. With the union between Admiral and Sophia Croft, Austen offers a model for marital companionship and partnership, which is best exemplified by their idiosyncratic way of driving their gig, "no bad illustration of the general guidance of their affairs" (99). When Mrs Croft notices her husband might hit a post, "by coolly giving the reins a better direction herself, they happily passed the danger; and by once judicially putting out her hand, they neither fell into a rut, nor ran foul of a dung-cart" (99). This instance of a woman's recovery of a man's action is a daring narrative choice. Sophia Croft thus demonstrates the "sovereynetee" Alisoun's loathly lady argues is women's strongest wish. Sophia Croft has clearly always been in the habit of deciding the events in her life. We learn that she has accompanied her husband during his naval expeditions, and she concedes that some women have an even greater experience of life on board ship, having "crossed the Atlantic four times" (75).

More significantly still, Sophia corrects her brother Captain Wentworth's pronouncements on women: "'I hate to hear you talking so, like a fine gentleman, and as if women were fine ladies, instead of rational creatures. We none of us expect to be in smooth water all our days'" (74).[29] Mrs Croft does not just express her opinion, she challenges her brother's construction of women. She also enters the realm of male speech by using a maritime metaphor, which quietly argues for the similarity of men's and women's experiences. Women can have their voice heard and begin to achieve "sovereynetee." The very fact that Austen was able to publish her work suggests that the Wife's hypothesis has become a reality. Ironically enough, Austen's own voice would, however, be remodelled by male "auctoritee" for over a century, as the textual reception of *Persuasion* shows.

Even if women are temporarily allowed to hold the pen, as Austen does for her heroines, her text is ultimately reclaimed and refashioned by male writing. *Persuasion* was published posthumously alongside her first completed novel, *Northanger Abbey*, to which we shall return. Her brother Henry, with whom Jane Austen often stayed while conducting business with her publisher John Murray, appended a Biographical Notice which in effect framed Austen's words and conditioned the reading of her works for decades to come. The notice constitutes what Gérard Genette calls a "zone of transaction" that exerts "an influence on the public, an influence that [. . .] is at the better service of the reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (2). Our reading of this zone slightly qualifies the usefulness Genette underlines since we see it as a way of framing and controlling female speech, just as the glosses in medieval manuscripts control the Wife's words. Henry's short biographical account inaugurated the enduring image of Austen as a writer shying away from political commentary, constructing her as the polite, proper lady of the early nineteenth century: demure, deferential, always bending to male authority, she is more importantly to be seen as having shunned the title of "authoress." While this does not deny authorship – Austen is still credited as the creator of her works – it greatly limits the range of her voice. Henry insists on her reluctance to publish her works, suggesting she did not wish for her work to participate in history. Henry symbolically picked up his sister's pen and through his writing determined the reception of her texts, while claiming to present his sister to the public in the way she would have wanted.

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[29] In her reference to "rational creatures," Mrs Croft echoes Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*.

Austen's brother assigns himself the role of transmitter and translator of her words by dictating how her novels should be read. The title of *Persuasion* itself was Henry's decision, when Cassandra Austen's letters indicate that the "The Elliots" was Austen's mostly likely choice (Todd and Blank lxxxiii). This is particularly visible in his postscript to the notice, which includes some extracts from her private correspondence that are supposed to be "more truly descriptive of her temper, taste, feelings, and principles than anything which the pen of a biographer can produce" (331). While this on the surface looks like it is giving Austen her own voice, it is in fact another instance of framing and controlling female speech. The letters are not presented in full but edited (only a few lines are reproduced, and they are accompanied by Henry's comments), thus constructing a specific image of their author. This piece of paratext conditioned the understanding of both Austen's work and her life. It encouraged future generations of readers to overlook the potentially subversive, unseemly, and unbecoming aspects of Austen's work. Austen's own life and work have been rewritten by male discourse. Subsequent editors of her novels sealed this vision of Austen as detached from political controversy. In the preface to his Standard Novels Series, Richard Bentley claims that "She is, emphatically, the novelist of home" (Bentley xv). Her pen cannot go further than the parlour. It is a form of silencing, which recent criticism has sought to reverse.[30]

Austen operated in a world of print dominated by men, a fact to which her work is sensitive. Published together with *Persuasion*, *Northanger Abbey* contains a much-discussed defence of the novel which can be interpreted as an epitext that develops the argument that the pen has always been in men's hands. Public opinion is shaped by male "Reviewers" (*Northanger Abbey* 30), who often dictated the fate of women's productions. A marked example of this is the reception of Frances Burney's last completed novel, *The Wanderer* (1814), whose popularity was greatly affected by the vitriolic and very personal review produced by the highly influential John Wilson Croker for the *Quarterly Review* (April 1814). A significant element of Croker's review is its pointedly gendered attack: women in general and older women in particular are not welcome in the male world of print, just like Anne is socially side-lined because of her age. Croker effectively silenced Burney since his review led her to subsequently abandon novel-writing.[31] *Northanger Abbey*'s defence of the

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[30] See for instance Butler; Johnson; Kirkham.

[31] Harris suggests that *Persuasion* is partly a response to this review (*Austen's Art of Memory* 25-27).

novel demonstrates Austen's early awareness that, even though women's writing can enter the public sphere of print, it is not given the same authority as men's, when female productions offer a more accurate exploration of "human nature" (31). In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen establishes a clear difference between men's and women's writing. Supremacy is granted to abridgers of history and compilers of poetical extracts, when, Austen argues, the novel is far superior.[32] The defence contests the authority granted such works as the *Spectator*, arguing that the novel provides "the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties" (31). It offers an endless source of human experiences. While men are still placed on the side of "real" history as Alisoun remarks, women in Austen's time are now writing novels, a secondary, supplementary form of history, no less authoritative for being fictional, that increasingly could not be silenced.

[32] There may be a parallel between Austen's "man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior, with a paper from the Spectator, and a chapter from Sterne" (Austen, *Northanger Abbey* 31) and the compiler of Jankyn's "book of wikked wyves" since both are anthologies of sorts. Despite this seemingly bleak picture of the fate of women's words, *Persuasion* presents different examples of women redressing their stories.

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