PART I

Objects and Gender in a Material World
What do women want? The riddle set in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” poses this quintessential question: “What thynge is it that wommen moost desiren?” Calling the object of desire a thynge implies something of material substance. Yet the solution proves to be wholly abstract: “sovereynetee” (3.1038). A quest for an abstract quality is in keeping with the genre of the tale, a Breton lai that takes up the ethical and moral valences that define Arthur’s court. It is thus unsurprising that this answer gains universal female assent in the queen’s court, a place that stages a rejection of material answers in order to embrace the knight’s decidedly more abstract answer.

By contrast, the genre that defines the Wife herself, the fabliau, would have yielded a considerably more physical answer, akin to her innuendos about women’s “queynte fantasie” to crave “what thynge we may nat lightly have” (516–17). Unlike lais, which habitually frame solutions in abstractions and ideals, fabliaux tend to address the dictates of desire in material terms. And, certainly, Alisoun’s prologue typecasts her as the sort of wife who inhabits the realm of the physical: obsessed with sex and eager to name and use body parts. Compared to the crude linguistic register typical of such tales (e.g., vit, con), Alisoun’s vocabulary seems more delightfully euphemistic (e.g., selly instrument, nether purs). Yet euphemism does nothing to decrease the materiality of her stated desires and her own focus on “things.” By one of her coy terms, bele chose (4.47, 510), her female member is called a “lovely thing” in French. By another, queynte (3.32, 4.44), it is “something elegant,” but the term conveys a blatantly low pun. In the course of her prologue, Alisoun’s repetitions of thynge may refer as readily to private parts (“oure bothe thynges smale” [121]) as to other sorts of desires (“gaye thynges
fro the fayre” [221]), creating a buyer’s sense of the world’s materiality: “for al
is for to selle” (414).

Yet while Alisoun’s tale may shift away from the prologue’s embrace of
material thynge, it does not entirely move away from materiality. I argue
here that, despite “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”’s veneer of Breton lai, it slyly
draws upon the fabliau genre, offering polite correctives on matters of love
and sex while embracing a joyously subversive fabliau subtext. The posed
riddle and chain of events invite a bawdy meaning: the fabliau thynge that
women most desire. If in her prologue the Wife amplifies the joke of what
women perennially seek, the answer to which sapped the energy of her old
husbands—“As help me God, I laughe whan I thynke / How pitously a-
nyght I made hem swynke!” (201–2)—then in her tale she uses a hybrid
genre, provocatively challenging any rewriting of love as abstract and roman-
tic, and instead suggesting that thynge still form the basis of all desire.

Such a blending of the disparate registers of romance and fabliau was
well known to authors before Chaucer, whose clever, well-timed allusions to
a contrasting genre became a way to provoke both laughter and reflection.
In the Continental French Guillaume au faucon, a wife’s decision to take a
lover—justified by lai conventions—is signaled by a register-shifting pun
on faucon/faux con. The sudden drop in tone disconcerts a reader’s expecta-
tions, yet such mixing of genre fits with how fabliaux themselves tended to
be preserved—not isolated but rather folded into broader collections. Gui-
laume au faucon resides in a Continental anthology, Paris, BN ms. fr. 19152
(c. 1300), that collects not just romances but also fabliaux, lyrics, and didactic
works. Likewise, the handful of fabliaux that survive from medieval England
crop up in trilingual anthologies of mixed content, namely the famous Ox-
ford, MS Digby 86 (c. 1280), and London, British Library MS Harley 2253
(c. 1340).

These two books reveal the kinds of ribaldry circulating in England in
the wake of Marie de France’s sophisticated lais but well before Chaucer’s
clever remaking of fabliaux in English. Digby 86 preserves in Dame Sirith the
earliest specimen of a fabliau in English, written some hundred years before
Chaucer’s “Miller’s Tale.” In Harley 2253 there exists a second example: The
Life of Saint Marina. Parading as hagiography, the tale’s “miracles” project
prurient, goliardic humor: the private parts of a secretly female monk put
on display in death; a secular girl’s restored sanity named as her “womones
cunde.” Little else survives in English, indicating the need to look toward
Anglo-French texts for other signs of indigenous models.
If authors before Chaucer played with hybrid genres, the Wife’s tale demonstrates that Chaucer himself continued the tradition. In its theme of women’s desire, “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” converses most directly with two fabliaux found in these books: from Digby, *Les quatre souhaiz de saint Martin* (The Four Wishes of Saint Martin), and from Harley, *Les trois dames qui troverent un vit* (The Three Ladies Who Found a Prick). Also surviving in Continental versions, both Anglo-French tales exploit the fabliau’s often obsessive fascination with private body parts named by shockingly blunt words, an element that spices up the Wife of Bath’s performance. In selecting these tales, I do not claim them as sources for Alisoun’s tale. I choose them, rather, for the fabliau humor centered on carnal female desire that they exemplify. Likely circulated in oral as well as written forms, their presence in England in the 1330s suggests that such French stories were available to the poet who brought the fabliau form fully into English. In both tales, women determinedly pursue the male *vit*, whether as a singular object or as a vast variety of different permutations on display. Likewise, in the Wife’s prologue, in lines too scurrilous for some scribes, Alisoun chooses “the beste” men by evaluating their “nether purs” and declares a personal wealth of learning from diverse schools:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes,} \\
\text{And diverse practyk in many sondry werkes} \\
\text{Maketh the werkman parfyt sekirly. (44c–44e)}
\end{align*}\]

These lines typify a fabliau law of womankind: the reductive premise that all women, despite their individuality, are unified in pursuing one carnal goal. Alisoun’s words connect her prologue to this comic theme found in male-authored fabliaux, and they forecast how that theme will be reprised in the context of her lai.

**A Surfeit of Vits: Les quatre souhaiz de saint Martin**

A plentiful array of vibrant sexual organs, in scopic close focus, marks the fabliau of women’s desire first examined here, *Les quatre souhaiz de saint Martin*. The story begins with a visual pun: a peasant plows his field. The simple man harbors a special devotion to Saint Martin, and precisely when he sets
hand to plow, the blessed saint appears, promising to grant him four wishes. The man’s humble bucolic activity imagistically foreshadows the upcoming narrative, for once the peasant involves his wife in the choices, each wish will involve *vits* and *cons*. Thus, even before Saint Martin appears, the interplay of harrow and tilled earth evokes the human instruments of copulation that will multiply and come to overpopulate the tale.

The peasant hurries home to tell his spouse of his good fortune, only to be greeted by shrewish verbal abuse, for the wife is certain he is lazily shirking his plowing duties. But he explains Saint Martin’s gift to her, even stating how he would distribute the wishes for four types of material gain: for “terre, richece, or & argent” (gold and silver, land and riches, 54). Faced with this, she changes tactics, relentlessly wheedling him into letting her have the first wish. The peasant eventually concedes and, hence, in a manner Alisoun might condone, he grants his wife a risky level of sovereignty. Put another way, by granting her the first wish, he has foolishly set faith in his wife before his loyalty to Saint Martin.

Before he concedes, however, there is another joke, which appears only in the Continental version. This bit of humor threatens the peasant’s own embodied shape. Initially wary of his wife’s intentions, the peasant fears she will transform him to a beast:

> “Ne connois pas bien voz amors?—
se deïssiez que fusse uns ours
ou asnes ou chievre ou jument,
jel seroie tout esraument.” (81–84)

[“If you should wish I was a bear
or jackass, or a goat or mare,
I would become one on the spot.
I know how much you love me: not.”]

And she comically answers: “en moie foi / je vous afi de mes .ii. mains / que
toz jors serez vous vilains” (“I swear / in good faith with both hands raised high, / you’ll stay a peasant till you die,” 86–88). This cynical response seems adequate to reassure him, but, in fact, her use of the first wish will shift his shape, for she wants him “chargiez de vis” ([covered with] penises galore, 95). Such does occur, in a riotous *tour de force* of surreal metamorphosis and magnification:
Quant ele ot souhaié & dit,
du vilain saillirent li vit.
Li vit li saillent par le nez
& par le bouche de delez,
si ot vit lonc & vit quarrez,
vit gros, vit cort, vit reboulez,
vit corbe, vit agu, vit gros . . .
Sor le vilain n'ot si dur os
dont vit ne saillent merveillous.
Li vit li saillent des genous. (103–12)

[Then, as soon as the woman spoke,
hundreds of pricks began to poke
out all over. Penises grew
around his nose and his mouth too.
Some pricks were thick, some oversized.
Some long, some short, some circumcised,
curved pricks, straight pricks, pointed and hardy . . .
every bone in the peasant’s body
was miraculously endowed
and prickled, fully cocked and proud.]

These lines give only a sample of what is an astonishing display of proliferat-
ing plenitude, longer in the Continental version than in Digby, but clearly
the gem of both texts. The wife’s desire materializes before her eyes, creating
a monstrously multi-endowed priapic man, a hideous sight to which she is
willfully blind as she defends herself:

Quant li vilains se vit si fait,
“Suer,” dist il, “ci a lait souhait!
Por quoi m’as tu si atorné?”

“Sire,” dist el, “je vous di bien
c’un seul vit ne me valoit rien:
sempres ert mol comme pelice,
mes or sui je de vis molt riche.” (121–23, 127–30)
[Weighed down by penis upon penis, the peasant said, “This wish was heinous! Why give me all this finery?”

“Husband,” she said, “I’ll tell you why. Your prick couldn’t satisfy, just hanging limply like a fox stole, but now I’ve a wealth of cocks!”

In retaliation, the husband wishes similar deformity upon his wife, and cons diverse in shape, size, and age instantly materialize on every surface of her body:

con tort, con droit & con chenu
& con sanz poil & con velu
& con pucel & con estrait
& con estroit & con bien fait. (149–52)

[bent cunts, straight cunts, cunts gray and hoary, cunts without hair, cunts thick and furry, and virgin cunts, narrow and tight, wide gaping cunts, and cunts made right.]

The married pair is now humorously armored for lovemaking of all types and positions, but there is no joy in that. The wife reacts in horror, as did the husband:

“Sire,” dist ele, “qu’as tu fait? Por quoi m’as doné tel souhait!”
“Je te dirai,” dist li bons hom.
“Je n’avoie preu en .i. con puis que tant vit me doniez.” (157–61)

[“Husband, what have you done?” said she. Why have you wished this thing on me?” The good man said, “One cunt won’t do for all the pricks I got from you.”]
Private parts have become conspicuously public, a point made when the peasant tells his wife she’ll be “bien connue” (well known / “cunted,” 164). The wife then insists that the third wish must rid them of the *vits* and *cons*, and the foolish peasant again listens to his wife. The wish takes effect, but not as they expect:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{fu ele molt marie} \\
\text{quant de son con ne trova mie,} \\
& \text{li preudom, quant il revit} \\
\text{que il n'ot mie de son vit. (173–76)}^{16}
\end{align*}
\]

[ she was anything but cheered to find her cunt had disappeared, and he too, had an awful shock to find himself without a cock.]

Now there is no choice but to use the fourth wish to restore their proper parts. The fabliau thus ends, the pair “n'aurons perdu noiant” (no poorer off, at any rate, 182), but with the four wishes used up.

Both extant versions of *Quatre souhaiz* end with comically misogynistic laments. The French text assails women for clouding men’s judgment and bringing them to disaster: “que cil ne fet mie savoir / qui mieux croit sa fame que lui: / sovent l'en vient honte & anui” (man doesn’t use his brains / when his wife’s judgment sways his views. / Calamity often ensues, 188–90). The Anglo-French Digby version supplants this succinct maxim with a long rant against women and marriage, which the compiler draws invisibly from two other works, attaching them without break in the manuscript.\(^{17}\) Of the Digby addition, Keith Busby remarks:

\[\text{No other fabliau, however openly edifying, has a concluding diatribe of fifty-six lines to sober up the reader or listener after the compulsive hilarity of the tale itself. . . . Yet despite all the anti-feminism, . . . we must wonder whether the overkill of the conclusion does not have the opposite effect of making us in the end laugh as much or more at the weakness of the husband.}^{18}\]

Both endings illustrate the fabliau impulse to voice a male viewpoint that all that goes awry among humans stems from women—and from men’s foolishly fatal instinct to mix with them in marriage.
While the Wife’s tale obviously differs from *Quatre souhaiz*, the stories project a strikingly similar emphasis on the diversity of female desire. In the French fabliau, we see how a woman’s desire for a *vit* in multiple forms starts the whole mess, making calamity of the peasant’s devotion and good fortune. Indeed, an echo of Alisoun undergirds the poem’s implicit underlying problem: the wife is sexually unsatisfied, either because, as she says, her husband’s *vit* is worthless to her (“ne me valoit rien,” 128), or because she simply craves variety, frequency, and choice. Diversity is a key element in the fabliau: there are multiple forms in the world; why should a wife (or husband) want just one? Diversity marks the Wife’s fabliau voice in her tale as well, when she runs through the different answers different women would give to the riddle: wealth, honor, rich array, lust abed, husbands outlived, flattery, attention, and so on (925–34). In saying women are each individually distinct, she is also affirming that all women would enjoy this array of diverse gifts.

The multiplicitous world, with its thingy-ness, corporeal diversity, and conflicting desires, is thus a characteristic of the fabliau outlook, and with it comes another theme shared by the Saint Martin fabliau and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”: the importance and difficulty of choice. The adventure of the knight of Arthur’s court comes down to a choice made wisely, as he deflects it back to the old woman. The peasant keeps peace with his wife by sharing the four wishes, allowing her to choose the first one, and then, rather as a panic response, the third one. What is perhaps the funniest likeness to Chaucer’s tale is how, amid a brash plethora of *vits* and *cons* (a bewildering “many”), and then none at all (an unthinkable void), the couple reaches a point of harmony that merely brings them to where they started. Both tales have romantic endings, that is, an implied “bath of blisse” (1253), even if the Saint Martin tale predicts more nagging in the peasant’s future. At least this couple has agreed that their one *vit* and one *con* represent a good state of affairs, and—however awkwardly and imperfectly—their marriage is affirmed. Transformation and shapeshifting have occurred only to confirm that neither wealthy *gentillesse* nor hideous monstrosity is to be their lot. A peasant remains a peasant, and he will plow his field.

---

**A SCARCITY OF VITS: LES TROIS DAMES QUI TROVERENT UN VIT**

*Les trois dames qui troverent un vit* is a fabliau with no male characters, only women. Where *Quatre souhaiz* brings forth a spectacular vision of *vits* in su-
perabundance, this tale produces a comically surreal world in which there is but one vit among many women. Women in this fabliau freely express what they want and even call forth a judicial proceeding ruled by a woman. In this basic way, it is similar to “The Wife of Bath’s Tale.”

In Trois dames, three dames traveling together on pilgrimage discover an unusual object. Looking down at the ground, one of them spies a splendid vit wrapped in a cloth:

vint a l’houre de tierce
La une garda en un senter
Si trova un vit, gros e plener,
Envolupé en un drapel.
N’i pit descovert qe le musel.
La dame le prist meyntenaunt
E de la trovure fust joyaunt. (12–18)

[it happened at the hour of terce
That one looked down on a path
And found a prick, thick and swollen,
Wrapped in a piece of cloth.
Only the tip was uncovered.
The lady picked it up at once
And was delighted by her find.]

The object is discovered with joy, and its alien uncanniness also provides pleasant intrigue for the reader. Here, the discovered body part, the vit, exists as its own discrete thing, detached and yet distinctively vital and alive. The fabliau’s humor devolves from the medieval custom of going on pilgrimage to venerate holy relics taken from the corpora of saints. The vit’s potency parodies the salutary effects of coming in contact with a holy finger or toe.

Dispute over who will possess a “part” of the vit becomes an ongoing pun as two of the three female companions argue over fair distribution of the object:

E cele que aprés aloit
Dit que ele averieit part.
“Certes,” fet ele, “vous le averez tart.
Ja part de ce ne averez!”
“Coment deble estes! Vous devez!
Je dis al trovour, demy myen!
E si je ne le ey, ce n’est mie bien!
Dreit est qe je part eye,
Quar je su vostre compaigne verrie.” (20–28)

[The one who walked behind her
Said she would have a part.
“Indeed,” she says, “you’ll have it later.
You’ll never have a part of this one!”
“You’re such a devil! You have to!
I say to the finder, it’s half mine!
And if I don’t have it, that’s not fair at all!
It’s only fair that I have a part,
For I’m your true companion.”]

The woman who carries the vit retorts, in exasperation: “Ja n’averez part ne prow!” (“You’ll never have any part at all!” 33). The second dame wants the matter to be judged, however, by an impartial outside authority, and they agree to take both object and dispute to a nearby convent, where “La abbesse, pur nul amour, / Ne lerra juger verité” (The abbess, having no bias, / Will never fail to judge the truth, 44–45). The phrase for the abbess’s impartiality— nul amour (no passion in the matter)— also alludes to her vow of celibacy (she lives without amour). She is supposedly indifferent to sex.

The finder consents to judicial arbitration in the convent: “E je le grant, de par Dé” (“I agree to it, on God’s part,” 46). With her oath, the fabliau poet introduces a dose of blasphemous humor: Do the ladies seek divine justice to know who God sides with, or has the speaker just sworn upon a part of God’s body? Here the joke resembles a goliardic pun, one that also appears in the Miller’s Prologue when the Miller suggests that Goddes pryvetee is analogous to a wife’s private parts (I.3164)— an outrageous idea that prompts Chaucer to apologize for reporting the vulgar words of this pilgrim: “Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys. / The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe wel this” (I.3181–82). A light satiric poke at the prudery, propriety, and pretensions of religion is, consequently, a key element of Trois dames, and it will play out in the story’s outcome.

The dames arrive at the convent and are made to await the arrival of the abbess, who comes directly from Mass accompanied by the prioress and cellaress. The aggrieved lady now makes her complaint to the abbess:
“Veiez si une moie compaigne
Qe doner ma part ne me deygne
De une choses qe ele ad trové.
Pur ce, qe ele ne m'en a donee
Ma part, come fere deveroit.” (67–71)

[“See here one of my companions
Who doesn’t deign to give me my part
Of a thing she’s found.
As a result, she hasn’t given to me
My part, as she should do.”]

The abbess orders that the object in question be displayed as evidence. The lady who found the vit draws it from her breast, and then the narrative focus shifts to the abbess’s reaction. She

mout le garda de bon oyl.
De l’abbesse, counter voil
Qe molt le regarda volenters.
Granz suspirs fist, longe e enters. (85–88)

[gazed at it with much favor.
Regarding the abbess, I wish to report
That she looked at it very gladly.
She heaves great sighs, long and full.]

The vit is working its irresistible magic, its miraculous power. Not surprisingly, the abbess now orders the vit’s confiscation, claiming it is the convent’s lost property, a door-bolt:

“C’est, de nostre porte, le verrous
Qe l’autre jour fust adyrrez.
Je comaund qu’il soit bien gardez
Come ce qu’est nostre chose demeye.” (92–95)

[“It is, of our door, the bolt
Which was lost the other day.
I order that it be well guarded
As that which is our property.”]
She commands one of her companions, *dame Eleyne*, to put it back (“*mis arere*”) where it belongs:

```
E ma dame Eleyne ad pris
Le vit, qe fust long e grant,
E sachez qe ele meyntenaunt
Le prist e gitta en sa maunche,
Que molt estoit delgé e blanche. (100–104)
```

*[And my Lady Helen has taken]*

```
The prick, which was long and huge,
And know that she quickly
Took it and thrust it into her sleeve,
Which was slender and white.]*

Perhaps the abbess’s command and this suggestive gesture imply that the *vit* is now to be enshrined and revered in a place where its powers will be aptly shared, with each of the nuns having a *part* of it. At any rate, its sanctity and generative potential have now been appropriated by Church officialdom; it has been authoritatively removed from the common laity. And what is the lesson? The three *dames* depart, bitterly cursing the abbess and declaring they would never again consent to “share such a thing”:

```
De tiele chose aprester,
.................
Mes cele qe la trovera
A tous jours la tendra
Come relyke molt desirree
E de totes dames honoree. (113, 115–18)
```

*[But whoever shall find it]*

```
.................
Shall always hold onto it
As a relic much desired
And honored by all women.]*

Satire of the Church is certainly present here, with a cynical depiction of carnal desire and promiscuity among cloistered women. The final admo-
zione to secular women, who seem equally prone to promiscuity, is that anyone lucky enough to find a desirable *vit* will do best to keep it solely for herself.

**THE DESIRED THYNG IN “THE WIFE OF BATH’S TALE”**

While the Wife of Bath openly labels her tale a Breton lai, inflections of fabliau intrude whenever the Wife’s distinctive prologue-rhetoric waylays the narrative. One of these moments has already been mentioned: the listing of women’s fickle responses to the central question: “Somme seyde wommen loven best richesse, / Somme seyde honour, somme seyde jolynesse” (925–26), and so on. Another is the funny digression on Midas and his wife, which Alisoun uses to illustrate how women wish to be thought discreet despite their proclivity to divulge secrets. Midas’s wife is driven to blurt out “Myn housbonde hath longe asses erys two!” (976) because the secret “swal so soore aboute hir herte” (967). Notably, this story is about body parts only the wife knows about (the barber in Ovid’s tale being comically effaced). It parallels the point in the prologue when Alisoun reveals her need to tell her *gossib* every embarrassing thing about her husband: how “hadde myn housbonde pissed on a wal” (534). A man’s *pryvetee* is a wife’s open property. Whether the secret be a hidden organ or a crime, a wife will blab it. The secret’s capacity to swell her heart adds to how the man’s ass-ears are like genitalia, for this “knowledge” transmitted from husband to wife creates a sort of pregnancy and expulsive birth. Like the peasant wife in *Quatre souhaiz*, Midas’s wife is privy to something humiliating about her partner’s body, and her action gives it public exposure.

The third blatant insertion of the Wife’s fabliau voice comes in the tale’s final lines:

    Jhesu Crist us sende
    Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
    And grace t’overbyde hem that we wedde;
    And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
    That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;
    And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
    God sende hem soone verry pestilence! (1258–64)
This epilogue expresses a carnal wish to have many young virile husbands in succession and to outlive them all, never having to endure an old man. This statement reflects both the Wife’s own life history and the catalogue of desires given in the tale: “somme seyden lust abedde, / And oftetyme to be wydwe and wedde” (927–28). It also replays, wryly, the Breton lai just told, where these desires implicate both genders. The young knight is drawn to youth—the maiden he impulsively rapes, the twenty-four lovely dancing fairies—and when he finds himself married to Eld, he is physically repulsed. The fantasy ending brings him a wife of both youth and beauty. To read the lai through the eyes of the old woman (an ageless fairy): she has acquired a husband “meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,” and she will, most certainly, outlive him. The old woman, who is perhaps the Fairy Queen, can easily possess the Wife of Bath’s dream—the reductive wish of fabliau women—and have it forever fulfilled.

Reading “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” as a fabliau akin to Trois dames—that is, as a story centered on the finding of a vit—ushers in an abrupt shift of perspective. One may see its premise as being the entry of a lusty vit into the domain of all-women. The knight, who embodies a self-contradiction (nobility and criminality), has, in a sense, poked through the gender “veil” by means of a willful, reckless act. The consequent tale turns upon how women may choose to deal judiciously with the discovery of an interesting vit. Left to the world of men, the knight would have died for his crime. In the world of women (natural and supernatural), the vit is an intriguing find, and the community may deliberate as to its proper fate and placement. It has generative potential, but in order to remain among women, its owner must answer the question, which, once the lesson has been imbibed, will redeem and tame the unruly vit. One may even imagine the fairy world to have orchestrated the whole affair, setting up the maid as bait (she too may be of fairy, indeed, the same fairy) in order to snatch his vit into the fairy realm. By this reading, the knight is like Marie’s hero Lanval, seduced by fairy because a failure in the human world of Arthur’s court has made him susceptible.

In seeing Alisoun’s tale as being about a man entrapped by and wed to fairy, one may recall, retrospectively, the warning with which she began, regarding the “minor” dangers posed by predatory friars compared to those faced in the former age:

Wommen may go saufly up and doun.
In every busshe or under every tree
The passage introduces a memory of *incubi* who snatched women. Alisoun provides a tale wherein the genders may be reversed by sleight of hand: in a land ruled by an “elf-queene” (860), it is *men* who may not travel safely. Long-term abduction is committed by a *female* shapeshifter. In its deepest mythic roots, the tale draws from Celtic stories of the sovereignty hag (the source for the loathly lady) who possesses in serial succession whoever is the man of most virility, in order to maintain the land’s fertility and the kingdom’s potency.24

The ultimate life-lesson for the young knight with the wayward *vit* concerns lineage, the passage of time, and his own mortality. A crucial point in the old woman’s sermon involves the true meaning of *heritage*:

> “Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentillesse,  
> Nat of oure eldres for hire old richesse.  
> For thogh they yeve us al hir heritage,  
> For which we clayme to been of heigh parage,  
> Yet may they nat biquethe for no thyng  
> To noon of us hir vertuous lyvyng.” (1117–22)

A noble inherits noble blood but not noble virtues. Those qualities devolve solely from his own behavior, for which he is responsible. *Gentillesse* is not, therefore, something “planted” in one’s offspring:

> “If gentillesse were planted natureelly  
> Unto a certeyn lynage doun the lyne,  
> Pryvee and apert thanne wolde they nevere fyne  
> To doon of gentillesse the faire office.” (1134–37)

The old woman frames this argument in terms both abstract and material, entwining high-minded lai values with carnal fabliau. The “faire office” performed “pryvee and apert” speaks both of noble deeds enacted modestly and, euphemistically, of lustful acts aristocrats might never cease to perform were *gentillesse* passed on that way.25 The register remains courtly even as it connotes something more crass. The elegant notion of “planting” *gentillesse* “natureelly” likewise invites a sexualized interpretation. The knight has planted
his seed indiscriminately, resulting in a reckless destruction of his heritage. Not only has he disgraced his line, but by wasting seed he has squandered his opportunity to sow it aptly in the future. As a consequence, he must now marry someone old and common, and he must sacrifice the hope of progeny. He has brought this consequence on himself by stupidly misdirecting his vit.

Possessed by the feminine fairy world, the knight is forced to understand the sex act as a signifier of his own existence marked for death. In bed with the old woman, facing Eld, he wallows and winds, and she comically asks: “Fareth every knyght thus with his wyf as ye?” (1088). Starting off in the tale “allone as he was born” (885), the pubescent youth launches himself into sexuality, which Chaucer figures as egotistically male, violent, and misogynist, and soon finds himself propelled on a mortal path. The old woman’s sermon teaches that a man should regard his heritage—his inherited lineage and future progeny—as the meaningful precondition for sex. In full control of his vit, a man ought to stay in bounds, wed his station, and create a legitimate bloodline. The consummation of sex, a mortal act, generates new life while the male agent progressively expires.

In the fairy world of Alisoun’s tale, the female agent does not die. She lives on, enjoying and outlasting a male vit “fressh abedde.” Matters of mortality chasten the male and tame the vit. He needs one female, youthful and faithful. But she, like God, is exempt from those rules. Chaucer sets the sexualized fabliau woman in a realm of inexhaustible pleasure, where she is the font:

“An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf
Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.
So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,
Of the remenant nedeth nat enquere.”
(“The Miller’s Prologue,” I.3163–66)

Wives may be faithful or not; only they and God know. Nonetheless, they bring pleasure to men, and they endow life through progeny.

SACRED PARODY

What part does God play in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”? If the quality of gentillesse descends solely from God (1117, 1162), then a fabliau figuration of
that reality might suggest God’s impartation of virtue as analogous to the “faire office” of our human progenitors. In other words, the fairy woman’s introduction of God as the true force in a man’s heritage implies that supernatural parentage overshadows the meager role of one’s ancestors. Alisoun’s tale envisions the Progenitor of gentillesse working through a fairy realm of all-women to regenerate man, who, doomed by his own willfulness, has been reduced to and by his sinful vit. Thus, in thinly veiled fashion, the tale allows God’s own part to be perceived in both spiritual and carnal terms.

With religious parody deeply embedded in the fabric of Chaucer’s tales, this fabliauesque reading of “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” may not be too far-fetched. The overt depiction of Christ’s ostentatium genitalium in Renaissance art, well delineated by Leo Steinberg, should cue us to the frequent material expression of Christ as male Lover or God as paternal Progenitor in medieval texts, pointing toward profound mysticism, irreverent parody, or both at once. A little-known text in which a vit of both matter and spirit is prodigiously active is the thirteenth-century Le lai d’Ignaure, recently highlighted by Barbara Newman. In it, twelve noble wives engage, individually, in private affairs with one gallant knight named Ignaure. When they learn that they all have the same lover, they are initially upset, but then they accept the situation because it is so pleasurable. When their husbands discover the affairs, however, they brutally kill and dismember the knight, and then cruelly feed his vit and heart to their unwitting wives. Newman reads this lai as “an obscene parody of erotically tinged [eucharistic] devotion,” noting how the ladies “share the heart of a single lover” as well as “what women most desire.” The parody exceeds a lai’s decorum by invoking the exaggerated sexual desires of fabliau women. The well-endowed lover (Christ’s body) can be agreeably shared. When the ladies learn of their husbands’ treachery, they choose to die together by fasting, all the while praising their lover’s beauteous parts.

In like manner, the two Anglo-French/Continental French fabliaux discussed here, Quatre souhaiz and Trois dames, deploy bawdy forms of parodia sacra. The wishes spiritually bequeathed by Saint Martin turn instantly material: the peasant dreams of land, riches, gold, and silver, but when filtered through the wife’s obsessions, the wishes comically veer toward the flesh. The final outcome confirms the wisdom of the Creator when it comes to sexual organs, a truth described lasciviously by Chaucer’s Merchant as “belynaked” Adam being given Eve as his “paradys terrestre,” allowing them to “lyve in unitee” ("The Merchant’s Tale," IV.1326, 1332, 1334). Like the deni-
zens of Eden, the peasant couple possesses primal complementarity, *vit* and *con*. To appreciate these gifts, they must comically lose and regain them.

*Trois dames* also offers a nuanced parody based on the carnal desires of fabliau women. When the *dame* who first discovered the *vit* swears on “God’s part,” suggestive interpretations from different registers begin to converge. Where has this potent relic come from? *Whose* is it? While it is treated in the fabliau manner, as a desirable male member sought by all women, its uncanny presence as a relic to be adored draws from the language of religious piety. The issue of its being shared is never quite settled, even as it is decisively denied to secular women and appropriated by the Church (represented here as a convent of nuns imbibing God’s body in their daily Mass). The parody seems to stretch beyond the comic carnal desire of women for any fortuitously discovered male *vit*, to suggest a yearning for an all-powerful Presence, as imbued in a holy relic, figured here perhaps as the indelible phallic mark of Christ’s humanation. As in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” the double register comes as an eyebrow-raising suggestion taken from the unruly world of fabliau.

It is the nature of fabliaux to celebrate the natural life-force endowed to humans by their Creator. In focusing on salacious body parts, fabliaux exaggerate and laud sexual desires acted on for greedy pleasure. Following the terms of the genre, the deed need not be condemned, even when it is transgressive, which is why “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” a hybrid story that weds lai and fabliau, figures the knight’s act of rape as mindless, instinctual, and violent, yet not a capital offense against womankind. Instead, the knight’s manhood—baldly put, his *vit*—becomes a *thyng* for women to contemplate. Figured as more voracious than men in their sexual appetites, fabliau women value lusty men. Their comic materialism seems to enact a God-given joke on mankind: that the sex act is really about *passing on* in the double sense of leaving a trace of oneself (*heritage*) and of dying. The joke is ultimately on the fabliau man, who discovers that the generative principle—subsumed in women—will overtake *him*, not the other way around.

**Notes**

1. “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” III.905; cf. 921, 1007, 1033. All citations of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Subsequent references to this tale will be noted by line number parenthetically in the body of this essay.
2. MED, s.v. queinte (n.), sense 2. See also Laura Kendrick, Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 92–97; and Alistair Minnis, “From Coilles to Bel Chose: Discourses of Obscenity in Jean de Meun and Chaucer,” in Medieval Obscenities, ed. Nicola McDonald (Woodbridge, UK: York Medieval Press, 2008), 156–78, at 172–73.


MI: Medieval Institute, 2000), 351–76, at 364–65. For the text of Marina, see The Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript, ed. and trans. Susanna Fein, with David Raybin and Jan Ziolkowski, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 2014–15) (hereafter cited as “Harley”), 2130–41 (line 217). The same English pun on kind (nature, kind) and cunt exists in Dame Sirith: “Wel ȝerne he him bipoute / Hou he hire gete motue / In ani cunnes wise” (lines 13–15); and in the Harley Lyric Annot and John: “Coynte ase columbine, such hire cunde ys, / Glad under gore, in gro ant in grys” (Harley, 2:122–23; lines 15–16).


11. In the truncated Digby version, the wife merely pleads and flatters, calling her husband “moun dous amy” (line 34; Short and Pearcy, 33).

12. Cf. Digby, lines 49–58 (Short and Pearcy, 34).
15. Cf. Digby, lines 88–94 (Short and Pearcy, 34).
17. See Short and Pearcy, 34–35. The other works are Le Blasme des femmes and Le Chastisemusart.
19. Note Alisoun’s mention of Solomon who “hadde wyves mo than oon,” causing her to wish “it leveful were unto me / To be refresshed half so ofte as he!” (36–38).
22. A place that arises in Chaucer’s imagination in “The Knight’s Tale”’s “regne of Femenye” (I.866) and seems often to occupy his thought. On Chaucer’s evolving focus on women, see Carolyn P. Collette’s perceptive Rethinking Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women (Woodbridge, UK: York Medieval Press, 2014). The Harley lyric The Poet’s Repentance locates a poet’s bliss in being the only man in the “lond of levedis alle” (line 72; Harley, 2:144–45).
23. Humans snatched by fairies is a frequent motif of lais and romances. Besides Lanval (which was rewritten in Middle English as Sir Launfal), abduction of a man by a woman fairy happens in Thomas of Erceldoune’s Prophecy (The Romances and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune, ed. J. A. H. Murray, EETS OS 61 [London, 1865], 1–46). Chaucer’s Sir Thopas hopes that such a marvel will overtake him (VII.787–96).
26. Compare Lee Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History (Madison: Uni-

27. For a somewhat analogous expression of “Goddess pryvetee” in Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale,” see Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play*, 5–19.


Works Cited

ARLIMA (Archives de littérature du moyen âge), http://www.arlima.net/mss/france/paris/bibliotheque_nationale_de_france


British Library Digitised Manuscripts, http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/


Gallica (Bibliothèque nationale de France), http://gallica.bnf.fr


