Inventing Womanhood

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CHAPTER 1

AMAZONS AND SAINTS

Chaucer’s Tales of Womanhood

Since the earliest work on gender in late medieval literature, there has been a great deal of attention to Chaucer’s representations of women and whether those reveal a sly antifeminism or a sympathetic proto-feminism. Many scholars, including Elaine Tuttle Hansen, Jill Mann, and Priscilla Martin, have approached this issue by studying Chaucer’s female characters; others, such as Susan Crane, Sheila Delany, and Carolyn Dinshaw, have considered the feminine as a system of meaning or value. Studies of gender have engaged deeply with history and recent work extends that approach, examining Chaucer’s texts for evidence of cultural attitudes or representations of social concerns or trends. In this context, Chaucer takes a place as one source among many, often positioned alongside non-literary or less canonical texts; in fact, much current scholarship on gender focuses exclusively on the latter (as will later parts of this study). I want to build here on the critical work that emphasizes Chaucer’s texts as literary as well as cultural documents in order to argue that those texts still have significant contributions to make to medieval gender studies, and especially regarding the relationship between gender and language. My argument draws on both character- and value-based approaches, contending that Chaucer explores his interest in representing women not only through well-known figures such as the Wife of Bath and Griselda but also at the level of language itself.

Chaucer coins and employs gendered vocabulary in order to explore some of the ways in which cultural conventions about gender prove inadequate. Womanhood serves this purpose particularly well because it can span various female roles and identities—in other words, it offers a unifying foundation for more specific categories such as wifehood and widowhood while also applying to women’s experiences outside such categories. Although the Wife of Bath’s Prologue may be Chaucer’s most famous meditation on representations of the feminine, his richest explorations of womanhood occur in the Knight’s Tale and the Clerk’s Tale, where
he uses gendered language to examine how characters reconcile feminine virtue and social power.

*Womanhood* only appears once in the first tale and twice in the second, but the concept it invokes functions centrally in both. For Hippolyta and her sister Emelye, the question is whether they can conform to the feminine ideals the tale associates with ancient Greece (underscoring the communal, if class-specific, nature of womanhood), while for Griselda, the question is whether she can distinguish herself from the stereotypes to which most women are subject (emphasizing the exemplary nature of womanhood). The narratives explore the processes and effects of the momentous transformations that raise those questions: Hippolyta changes from Amazonian warrior leader to Athenian courtly queen and Griselda, in addition to moving from peasant maiden to marchioness and mother, exhibits aspects of hagiographical heroine and courtly love object. Chaucer plays up the ways in which these transformations cross or blur the boundaries between different ideals of femininity and thus demand a new way of thinking about gender; the addition of *womanhood* to his sources addresses that demand.

In both tales, the female characters’ transformations uncover problematic relationships to power. Chaucer begins with a model of submission and then complicates it as each narrative unfolds, showing how one submissive woman can exert power through intercession in the *Knight’s Tale* and how another can exploit submission itself as a powerful tool in the *Clerk’s Tale*. He interrogates how much power the women can exercise while still functioning as suitable models of femininity.

Paul Strohm has demonstrated that intercession, already integral to medieval notions of wifehood and motherhood, became increasingly important in conceptions of queenship during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Although Strohm expresses skepticism about whether intercession “represented a genuinely alternative feminine power,” he sees it as often most efficacious in texts; Chaucer’s depictions of female submission and power test the limits of that efficacy. While the tales show women taking on mediating roles as intercessors, wives, and consorts, then, the narratives also reveal the mediating power of *womanhood* itself, which offers a ground on which to work out different ideas about women, their roles, and their experiences—and thus allows for a more complex relationship between women, virtue, and power.

I. The *Knight’s Tale*

Charles Muscatine famously described the theme of the *Knight’s Tale* as “the struggle between noble designs and chaos.” The true chaos in the tale, however, originates from anxiety over the womanhood of the Amazon sisters: they repre-
sent an unusual and potentially threatening form of femininity. Although Chaucer revises his source text, Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, to emphasize the Amazons as women rather than warriors (renaming their country “Femenye” and eliminating descriptions of their past), he also preserves the impression that they are potentially threatening and that the courtly womanhood they adopt may be a façade. The tale establishes a model of womanhood in the Theban widows, who exhibit the key features of submission, status, and suitability and wield an appropriately feminine form of power: intercession. Hippolyta imitates these widows in her one major scene, the intercession with Theseus for Arcite and Palamon, which also contains the tale’s sole use of *womanhood*. This single proof, however, is insufficient to banish the doubt that the text cultivates about the nature of the Amazons.

Such doubt exists from the beginning of the tale; Hippolyta and Emelye have already converted from courageous fighters to courtly ladies, but Chaucer provides no explanation of how Theseus or the sisters themselves effected this metamorphosis. In light of other medieval representations of Amazons as fierce and masculine warriors, the apparent ease and speed of the transformation creates persistent doubt about the sisters’ womanhood. They may be like the “smylere with the knyf under the cloke” represented in Mars’s temple (1999), with womanhood as the “cloke” they adopt. Chaucer uses metaphors of violence to describe the Amazons’ effect on others, keeping alive the possibility that their change of heart is an act. Transplanted to Athens, they are dangerous both as military rivals and as women who are not contained by marriage, an institution alien to them. While unmarried, Emelye remains more warrior than wife and represents a possible excess or absence of sexuality. Although Hippolyta marries, it is uncertain whether marriage will constrain the former Amazon ruler and compel the same submission from her that the tale shows other wives exhibiting toward their husbands. The chaos ends not with the intervention of Theseus or the gods, but with the evidence that marriage safely contains both women: Emelye agrees to wed both suitors in succession (leaving no unsatisfied rival) and Hippolyta displays her submission to Theseus in the intercession scene. Ultimately, however, Chaucer undermines these proofs, suggesting they are incomplete and unreliable.

The trouble arises because Amazons are an enigma of femininity: are they women or not? Their nature (which is foreign, aggressive, and apparently irreconcilable with the courtly ideal) and their narrative tradition (which, contrary to conventions of romance, represents women claiming traditionally male forms of power in direct confrontations with men) challenge womanhood’s capacity for mediation. Ilse Kirk describes their peculiar status as “the opposites of the *ideal* Athenian women” and at the same time “*liminal*; they were androgyne (females and warriors); they lived on the borders of the known world; they were neither virgins nor married; they desired men but did not want male babies.” In the *Knight’s Tale*, the interest comes from trying to fit the “liminal” into the “ideal”—Theseus
brings the sisters into a more traditional society and its female roles of love object, wife, and queen. Both the possibility of transformation and the possibility of its failure are titillating; the tale holds the two outcomes in tension. Perhaps as a result of Amazons’ questionable natures, narratives about them tend to follow a certain trajectory. Batya Weinbaum notes that often “Amazon tales merely chronicle the imposition of the values of male superiority.” The other, untold half of such stories is what is being imposed upon and how that imposition is received. Can masculine authority truly convert Amazon warriors into exemplars of womanhood? And if so, what shape would that ideal womanhood take? Chaucer takes up these issues in the Knight’s Tale.

READING AMAZON AS WOMAN

Although the nature of the story and its female protagonists signal the importance of womanhood to the Knight’s Tale, Chaucer’s insistence on the Amazons’ femininity minimizes it. This very insistence is suspicious and a pattern of later revisions belies it; still, in the beginning, Chaucer’s changes highlight the Amazons as women and suggest that their womanhood is not problematic. For instance, he renames the Amazon country “Femenye,” a minor change with significant effect. Chaucer apparently invents this term and its two occurrences in the Knight’s Tale are the first recorded in English. The Knight explains that Theseus, “with his wysdom and his chivalrie, / . . . conquered al the regne of Femenye, / That whilom was cylene Scithia” (865–67).

“Femenye” substitutes gender for geography. Its usage suggests that Theseus’s victory is not only over the Amazons but also over womankind (an ambiguity reinforced by the idea that Theseus accomplished this conquest through “his chivalric”) and, by extension, over Hippolyta and Emelye not only as warriors but also as women. Both sisters are absorbed into a collectivity whose primary feature is its femaleness rather than its foreignness; the Knight does not explicitly refer to either as an Amazon. By making gender the salient characteristic of the Amazons, Chaucer minimizes the distance between them and the women of Athens and underscores their commonality.

Most critics have taken Femenye to be a marker of difference. The difference, however, is as much from other representations of Amazons as from other women. Elaine Tuttle Hansen claims that the very word “reminds us . . . that Hippolyta and Emily are not to be seen (yet) as courtly ladies in their initial appearance; they are described as Amazons, mythical, fighting, manlike women who have waged ‘grete bataille’ with Theseus.” They are, Hansen continues, “erstwhile powerful separatists, rivals to the hero who first defeats them with martial violence and then domesticates them through marital union.” I would argue, however, that Chaucer has eliminated any references that would allow us to construe the sisters as “manlike
women” or as conventional Amazons at all. Hippolyta and Emelye are rather disappointing Amazons and, indeed, depart from other popular medieval depictions.\textsuperscript{14} In \textit{The Book of the City of Ladies} by Christine de Pizan, Hippolyta attacks “forcefully” and when she is finally captured, the men “considered themselves so greatly honored by this capture that they would not have preferred the captured wealth of an entire city.”\textsuperscript{15} Sir John Mandeville describes the “reume of Amazon” as a place where “the women . . . wele not suffere men for to haue the gouernaunce of the reume” and “eueremore the quen is chosyn by eleccioun; here that is doutyest in armys, hyre they chese.”\textsuperscript{16} In contrast, Chaucer presents the Amazon sisters as womanly rather than warlike.

Rather than distinguishing Hippolyta and Emelye or reminding us of their alien nature, the word \textit{Femenye} prepares us for their assimilation into Greek society. Still, Femenye is threatening—in part because of its overwhelming femaleness and in part because its culture imagines femininity differently. Even renamed, the land of the Amazons remains a place where women rule themselves, living virtually without men, and exercise masculine forms of power, including not only aggression but also articulate speech. They live as an independent rather than subordinate community. Although these characteristics commonly appear in portrayals of Amazons, the \textit{Knight’s Tale} barely alludes to them. It separates Hippolyta and Emelye from their Amazon community, isolating them in order to facilitate change and diminish the threat to Theseus’s authority and state.\textsuperscript{17} By inventing and using \textit{Femenye}, Chaucer draws attention to the identity of the Amazons as women while recalling the unconventional conception of womanliness that they embody. The denial of this difference only generates more interest in its existence and anxiety about its potential irruption into the narrative.

Although the addition of \textit{Femenye} is a relatively small change, a larger alteration works to similar effect. Chaucer excises the first book of Boccaccio’s \textit{Teseida}, which contains a description of the Amazons, their battle with Theseus, and his marriage to Hippolyta. Whereas \textit{Femenye} recharacterized Amazons as a group, this revision obscures Hippolyta’s and Emelye’s individual pasts as warriors and leaders. Boccaccio justifies his inclusion of that information:

\begin{quote}
[T]he author has written about these things for no other purpose than to show from what place Emilia came to Athens. And because the subject—that is, the behavior of these Amazon women—is rather strange to most people, and therefore more interesting, he wanted to portray it [in] somewhat more detail than was perhaps necessary.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

Chaucer, on the other hand, justifies excluding the same material:

\begin{quote}
And certes, if it nere to long to heere,
I wolde have toold yow fully the manere
How wonnen was the regne of Femenye
By Theseus and by his chivalrye;
And of the grete bataille for the nones
Bitwixen Athenes and Amazones;
And how asseged was Ypolita,
The faire, hardy queene of Scithia;
And of the feste that was at hir weddynge,
And of the tempest at hir hoom-comynge;
But al that thyng I moot as now forbere. (875–85)

While Boccaccio notes the importance of this information for Emilia’s character, Chaucer focuses on its relevance for Hippolyta; this comment points up her nearly complete absence from the rest of the tale. It may seem that Chaucer has taken Boccaccio at his word and determined that this part of the story is not “necessary.” But by cutting out the material relating to the Amazons, their nature, and their culture, Chaucer screens from the reader not only the process of transformation but also the baseline from which the transformation must occur. As Elizabeth Fowler points out, the tale emphasizes the political model of conquest over consent but questions about the sisters’ consent persist because the narrative skirts the scenes that would resolve those questions. 39

The elimination of the Amazons’ context affects Emelye’s character by highlighting her questionable status as a woman, which necessitates convincing proof of her femininity. Never having ruled in her own right or demonstrated a capability for war or leadership, Emelye is defined primarily as the younger sister of both Hippolyta and Theseus. Unlike her older sister, however, Emelye does not marry before coming to Athens and so her position in that society is uncertain; it is unclear whether she will follow the normal course of marrying or even whether she is marriageable. Because she is seen as a sister rather than a warrior, her womanhood is still in doubt—a doubt that her beauty, two suitors, and obedience only partially address. Hansen argues that Emelye threatens Theseus and male authority; only her marriage “domesticates the dangerous female excess that an Amazon sister-in-law might represent in Theseus’s royal household.” 40 I read the threat Emelye represents as both subtler and more enduring. Marriage does not “domesticate” her; as I will argue below, she remains threatening at the tale’s conclusion. Instead, her marriageability demonstrates her womanhood. In other words, the fact that not one but two noble suitors perceive her as a potential wife rather than a potential foe suggests that she has exchanged Amazonian ideals of femininity for Athenian ones and can now be understood through the traditional categories of maiden, wife, and widow. 41

Palamon and Arcite’s attraction helps validate Emelye’s womanhood; she does not exhibit the fearsome beauty of Boccaccio’s Hippolyta, which I will discuss
below, but a beauty suitable for a courtly lady. While their rivalry implies that Emelye is still dangerous as a source of conflict, the suitors (and their enduring devotion in the absence of encouragement, following the tradition of courtly love) also function as an assertion of her womanhood proportional to the reasonable doubt about it. The multiple suitors further demonstrate her exchangeability, a crucial proof of her submission to male authority. But this evidence is not conclusive; Chaucer continues to imply that Emelye is a threat by associating her with violence and instilling doubt about her transformation in the same scenes that establish her qualifications as a romance heroine.

The violent associations begin with Emelye's first appearance in the narrative action, when she wanders into the garden in view of Palamon and Arcite and they immediately desire her. Their attraction renders her a valid love object but raises the issue of how well she will conform to this and other feminine roles. Her beauty, at least, seems conventional; before the men see Emelye, the Knight assimilates her to the courtly model and establishes her as eligible for their desire by comparing her to a lily, a rose, and the month of May (1035–39). However, the repeated emphasis on Emelye's "freshness" (1037, 1048, 1068, 1118) underscores that she is demonstrating a fresh identity: beloved maiden instead of Amazon. Her beauty provokes Palamon to wonder whether she "be womman or goddesse" (1101), which reminds us of the possibility that she is truly neither but something else altogether. If this passage is a critique of romance, as some critics have suggested, it might also be read as a critique of the traditional, and more limited, ways of understanding womanhood: there is something more to Emelye's character and experience than extant terms can express. Arcite claims that "be she mayde, or wydwe, or elles wyf" (1171), Emelye is unavailable to them because they are imprisoned. How she fits into womanhood is in question here, and Arcite lists the three traditional roles as the only options. The tale works within this frame even while interrogating it, setting up Emelye's identity as "mayde" before she comes to occupy the latter categories.

Emelye's trip to the temple of Diana affirms her status as maiden, incorporating Amazon characteristics into that more typical identity. She goes to the temple with a group of "hir maydens" (2275). Praying to Diana, Emelye addresses her as "Goddesse of maydens" and asks to be "a mayden al my lyf" rather than a "wyf" (2300, 2305–6). This wish is less Amazonian—since Amazons were not necessarily virgins and were often described, as in Mandeville's *Travels*, as having sex in order to satisfy their desires or produce daughters—than practical. In Athens, Emelye can be a maiden, wife, or widow, and she chooses the first. Establishing her maidenhood locates her within this society and makes her later roles as near-widow (when Arcite dies before their marriage) and wife (to Palamon) more credible. Some characteristics of maidens dedicated to chastity resemble those of Amazons—hunting and living together in female groups, for instance—but in a form Athenians can more easily recognize and accept. By identifying herself as a maiden, Emelye chooses
the feminine role in Athenian society most comfortable for her.24 This move also refocuses the interest of the tale on the less complex issue of her “maydenhede” rather than her womanhood (2329). Maidenhood requires a physical intactness and conventional beauty that others judge Emelye to possess, whereas Chaucer depicts womanhood as a condition with more subjective ties to virtue and moral behavior.

When it becomes clear that she must exchange the role of maiden for that of wife, however, Emelye seems to adapt easily. Courtly society, like other patriarchal systems, is partly predicated on the exchange of women between men; Emelye is exchanged between Theseus and a suitor and then again between suitors. Chaucer highlights her exchangeability and makes Emelye more amenable to it than Boccaccio’s Emilia. Chaucer also facilitates it in practical terms by eliminating her first wedding; although Arcite will later refer to Emelye as his wife (2775), they do not marry in this version of the story as they do in Boccaccio’s. The Knight comments on this characteristic of Emelye’s, noting that she, like all women, is changeable in her affections: “For wommen, as to speken in comune, / Thei folwen alle the favour of Fortune” (2681–82).

The narrative suggests that, instead of being a failing, this characteristic positions Emelye firmly within an imagined community of women. It also makes her yield more easily to Theseus’s command that she marry Arcite, and then to Arcite’s wish that she marry Palamon. When Theseus suggests this second marriage to Emelye, he appeals to her as a woman to take “hym for housbonde and for lord. / Lene me youre hond, for this is oure accord. / Lat se now of youre wommanly pitee” (3081–83). Emelye offers no protest—indeed, no words at all—to this proposition, but marries Palamon “with alle blisse and melodye” and “hym loveth so tendrely” (3097, 3103). The narrator implies that her “wommanly” nature makes her agree to the exchange: the marriage to Palamon, like the engagement to Arcite, is an act of submission to Theseus, the incarnation of male authority.

In Boccaccio, Emilia does speak at this moment and her speech reveals a stronger attachment to Arcita; she mourns him more vocally and at greater length and expresses reluctance to wed Palemone.25 When Emilia appears before Theseus for his last speech (the equivalent of the “first mover” speech of the Knight’s Tale), she is “still weeping.”26 In her objection to Theseus’s proposal, Emilia claims that Arcita may have died due to Diana’s displeasure, suggesting not only a reluctance to marry again but also that she should never have married. Boccaccio’s Emilia resists being exchanged and holds more firmly to her maidenhood, undergoing a more visibly difficult transformation than Chaucer’s Emelye and giving voice to that difficulty.

Even as Chaucer fits Emelye into more traditional femininity, however, he hints at the inexact and awkward nature of that fit. Through localized changes to the men’s first sight of Emelye and Arcite’s deathbed scene, Chaucer evokes the danger involved in loving an Amazon and hints at the implausibility of her transformation, contributing to what Muscatine described as the chaos in the tale. Chaucer first
uses violent language to describe Emelye’s effect on Arcite and Palamon. Immediately upon seeing her, Palamon “bleynye and cride, ’A! / As though he stongen were unto the herte” (1078–79). Here the narrator rather than Palamon applies the simile (suggesting that the image surpasses a lover’s convention), although Palamon echoes the language within a few lines. Arcite experiences a similar effect: “And with that sichte hir beautee hurte hym so, / That, if that Palamon was wounded sore, / Arcite is hurt as mueche as he, or moore” (1114–16). Susan Crane posits that such language helps to transition Emelye from warrior to woman; at the same time, however, it draws attention to the fact that such a transition is necessary and reminds us that Emelye is a very different kind of woman from the traditional love object of romance.

Although medieval poets commonly employ metaphors of violence to describe the effects of love, here Chaucer changes the subject of these metaphors from the god of love to the beloved. Emelye acts both as the object of desire and the perpetrator of violence: the men’s gaze upon her becomes a weapon that she turns on them. In the Teeseida, the scene plays out quite differently; the two men feel “joy” and “delight” as they gaze with “rapt attention” at “a celestial beauty.” After a time, Arcita sees the god of love “and in his hands he holds two gilded arrows. . . . Yes, he has given me such a wound that I shall be racked with pain.” While Arcita sees this vision in Emilia’s eyes, she merely reflects it back to him: the god of love rather than Emilia inflicts the wound. The distinction between the god of love, “that fierce archer [who] has lodged within my heart something that is draining away my life,” and Emilia, whose “form is so engraved upon my heart and so delights my spirit,” is clear, leaving Emilia unimplicated in and untouched by the violence the men experience from Emelye in the Knight’s Tale. In Boccaccio, the violence conforms to traditional love imagery and so we can read Emilia as a romantic heroine, successfully transformed from her Amazon identity. Chaucer ties the violent imagery to Emelye herself as the perpetrator, reminding us that she is not a traditional love object but was and still may be a warrior; she exercises a power over her suitors that sometimes resembles and sometimes inverts ideals of courtly femininity.

The violent effect of Emelye on her suitors extends beyond her first encounter with them; even the language Arcite uses as he dies, when we might assume that their engagement has sealed her transition from warrior to lady, reminds the reader that Emelye is an Amazon. Once again, this language revises Boccaccio. As Arcite speaks to Emelye from his deathbed in the Knight’s Tale, he addresses her with a mixture of epithets that mark her contradictory status as lover and enemy: “Allas, myn hertes queene! Allas, my wyf, / Myn hertes lady, endere of my lyf! / . . . / Fare wel, my sweete foo, myn Emelye!” (2775–76, 2780). At the moment of his death he speaks his last words, “Mercy, Emelye!” (2808), again indicating that she somehow endangers him. Though differing only by a single word, this final speech conveys an opposite message from Arcita’s speech in the Teseida, in which he says only,
“Farewell, Emilia.” Before his death, Arcita addresses Emilia with less ambiguous epithets, calling her “my heart’s desire,” “my only love,” and “my own dear heart.” Boccaccio’s Emilia, in short, is more foreign and more overtly threatening at the outset but Chaucer’s Emelye, while not emphasized as foreign or threatening, remains a source of tension and chaos throughout the tale.

**MODELING AMAZON AS QUEEN**

The *Knight’s Tale* ends with Emelye’s marriage, leaving the couple “lyvynge in blisse, in richesse, and in heele” (3102). Even the trace of linguistic violence disappears; the Knight’s final comment is that “nevere was ther no word hem bitwene / Of jalousie or any oother teene. / Thus endeth Palamon and Emelye” (3105–7). However, this conclusion does not erase the doubts about the Amazons’ womanhood. Hippolyta’s marriage, which occurs at the outset of the tale, sets up an exploration of wifehood, the phase of womanhood that generally follows maidenhood. In leaving many questions about Hippolyta unsettled, Chaucer implies that Emelye’s wedding may not be the resolution that it seems to be. Although Hippolyta demonstrates womanhood through her intercession for Palamon and Arcite, following the example of the Theban widows and their submission, status, and suitability, she largely disappears from the narrative after this early scene and concerns about the authenticity of her transformation go unanswered.

The first reference to Hippolyta in the *Knight’s Tale* is a brief narrative of events rather than a delineation of character. After defeating the Amazons, Theseus “wedde the queene Ypolita, / And broghte hire hoom with hym in his contree / With muchel glorie and greet solempnytee, / And eek hir yonge suste Emelye” (868–71). Hippolyta’s passivity (in grammar as well as action) signals that she has been brought under male authority. A few lines earlier, her country was renamed Feme-nye, a sign that her power has been taken from her by the Knight as well as Theseus. Following this beginning, the tale continues to restrict the development of Hippolyta’s character; she becomes almost completely silent and passive. As David Wallace notes, “Given Chaucer’s lifelong dedication to female eloquence, Hippolita’s speechlessness seems strange and anomalous.” While Emelye is the focus of and impetus for the plot—at times participating in the speech-making as well as the action—Hippolyta fades into the background, effaced through a few key changes.

The first and most dramatic of these changes is, again, Chaucer’s elimination of Boccaccio’s first book, which shows Hippolyta as a fiercely beautiful and courageous ruler. She is not only a leader but also an aggressor, maltreating the Greeks who land on her shores. She engages in military battles, leading her troops as their “duchess” (and thereby, as Wallace notes, holding a rank equal to Theseus’s) and negotiating the surrender of her forces in defeat and of herself in marriage. At this
point Boccaccio offers a description of Hippolyta that pays homage to her beauty as well as her prowess in war:

Hippolita was marvellously beautiful
and aflame with fearless courage;
she was like a morning star
or a fresh rose in the month of May;
very young and still a maiden,
rich in possessions, and of royal lineage,
wise and well-mannered, and by nature
passionate in arms and fierce beyond measure.36

Like the Knight’s description of Hippolyta as the “faire, hardy queene of Scithia” (882), this more extended portrayal balances references to her beauty and courage. Boccaccio’s description, however, is more complimentary and detailed, mentioning Hippolyta’s qualifications as a warrior-leader as well as her other qualities. Her lineage and wisdom equip her to be the wife of Theseus but also to be a ruler in her own right. Beauty forms an important part of womanhood for Emelye (and later for Griselda), but Hippolyta’s beauty is extraordinary—rather than certifying her femininity, it indicates her foreignness. The Knight’s more limited description of Hippolyta occurs in the passage that describes what he will not tell us about her story (875–92). He summarizes her character in much the same way that he summarizes the events of Book I of the \textit{Teseida}—we are denied full access to both.37

What is not said about Hippolyta is significant. Chaucer carries out her conversion from Amazon leader to ladylike consort by identifying her only as the latter from the beginning of the tale. The Knight never refers to her as the “ruler” of the Amazons; in both early references, he designates her “queene.” In the first instance, when the Knight explains that Theseus “wedde the queene Ypolita” (868), her status as queen seems due to her marriage. She has become Theseus’s queen, the queen of Athens, rather than the queen of her own people. Within the tale, she holds that latter position only retrospectively. In the second instance, which is part of a brief look back at the events preceding the narrative, the Knight does call her the “queene of Scithia” (882). This title describes her status as ruler of the Amazons, but by identifying this earlier and more powerful position as that of a “queene” (rather than using “duchess,” as Boccaccio does, or another title that would suggest only “leader” and not “consort”), Chaucer renders Hippolyta’s role less authoritative and less foreign; he eases the disjunction between her positions in Scithia and Athens.

Much as \textit{Femenye} encouraged us to see the Amazons as women rather than enemies, this use of “queene” prepares us to see Hippolyta as a possible and future consort rather than a rival (a connotation that terms like “ruler,” “sovereign,” or “king” might evoke). Chaucer’s language makes it seem as if Hippolyta has been
absorbed seamlessly into Athenian culture under the structure of Theseus’s authority. As Crane points out, “marriage is consequent on military defeat with no intervening movement of consensual subordination or self-transformation on the part of the Amazons.” Such a transformation, however, cannot be as quick or painless as it seems in hindsight at the opening of the Knight’s Tale. The “tempest at hir hoom-comyng” that the Knight describes likely refers to the reaction of Athens as well as the weather (884) and by glossing over the stormy transition of Hippolyta, Chaucer invites the reader’s suspicions.

The identification of Hippolyta as queen and the slippage of her queenship between Scithia and Athens provoke the question of whether her previous status will translate appropriately into her new environment. Class is as perplexing an issue here as it will be in the Clerk’s Tale, where Griselda’s rapid elevation to the upper class necessitates proof of her womanhood. The importance of class to womanhood is an intriguing issue, since the term seems to designate a category based solely on gender while its usage frequently suggests an association with status. Class and gender are in tension as factors determining identity; neither is complete alone but it is unclear whether one overrides the other. Within the Canterbury Tales, womanhood is not a condition common to all women, but neither is it restricted purely by class. Chaucer suggests that women can lay claim to womanhood on the basis of their virtue; virtue is often related to social class but the former overrides the latter (as the example of Griselda illustrates). If womanhood were a simpler matter of class or gender, then the test/demonstration dynamic in the Knight’s Tale and the Clerk’s Tale would be obviated or at least altered. In Hippolyta’s case, the problem of her status parallels that of her womanhood: Amazon society defines both in ways significantly different from Athenian society. In addition, the establishment of her womanhood is a vital prerequisite to establishing her suitability as queen. She has no firm ground for Athenian identity in either class or gender, but the latter must be settled before the question of the former can be entertained.

If the status of the Amazons’ womanhood is in doubt, the tale does present a definitive model of womanhood: the Theban widows. Untroubled by any questions about class, the widows exemplify what virtuous women should be and how they should behave. Chaucer promotes the widows from plot mechanism (justifying the war that brings Arcite and Palamon under Theseus’s authority) to feminine ideal. He accomplishes this through revisions, making the Amazons clearly present for the widows’ scene and interpolating a parallel intercession scene featuring Hippolyta modeling her behavior after the widows. Their appeal to Theseus demonstrates womanhood in the three areas most important for Hippolyta to prove her own: deferring to male authority (specifically Theseus’s), possessing high status and acting accordingly, and demonstrating suitability for wifehood and motherhood. For Emelye, her beauty established her status, her suitors established her suitability for wifehood, and her exchangeability established her submission to male author-
ity. These elements are more directly relevant to Hippolyta and the need to pin them down is more imperative because of her position as queen. She emulates the widows but her disappearance after that single moment allows doubt about her womanhood to linger for the remainder of the tale.

Chaucer makes the Amazons witness the plea to Theseus, thereby elevating the widows to overt paragons of womanhood. The presence or absence of the Amazons is uncertain during the scene in Boccaccio, while they are undoubtedly present (though as silent observers only) in Chaucer. When the scene begins, the Knight mentions only Theseus and it seems possible here, as in Boccaccio, that he may be encountering the widows alone:

This duc, of whom I make mencion,
When he was come almoost unto the toun,

He was war, as he caste his eye aside,
Where that ther kneeled in the heighe wye
A compaignye of ladies. (893–94, 896–98)

The narrative reveals that Hippolyta and Emelye witnessed the scene only when Theseus dismisses them from it, after the widows’ appeal and his response: “And [he] sente anon Ypolita the queene, / And Emelye, hir yonge suster sheene, / . . . / And forth he rit” (971–72, 974). This reference clarifies the role of the Amazons in their new society: they are sent home just as the action begins. More importantly, Theseus’s encounter with the widows and its result demonstrate how women are expected to behave—and how they can legitimately exercise power—in Greek society and in relation to Theseus. This “compaignye of ladies” understands how to appeal to Theseus through both their physical and verbal performances. Their appearance, which affects Theseus before a word is spoken, testifies to their womanhood, similar to the ways in which Griselda’s appearance will signal her womanhood to Walter from a distance. Through speech, the widows present themselves as intercessors—a traditional female role and relation to male authority—and so function as models of womanly power.

The Knight begins by carefully describing what the Amazons must have seen, the visual aspect of the widows’ performance for Theseus. They are kneeling

. . . tweye and tweye,
Ech after oother clad in clothes blake;
But swich a cry and swich a wo they make
That in this world nys creature lyvynge
That herde swich another waymentynge;
And of this cry they nolde neverte stenten
Til they the reynes of his brydel henten. (898–904)
The widows’ appearance illustrates their womanhood. Their identity as a “compaignye” exemplifies its communal nature, though it is communal only within this exceptional group of women. The black clothing and ceaseless wailing signify devotion to their dead husbands and powerlessness in the face of male authority. While its very excess marks their grief as a performance, it is caused by one male power figure and designed to enlist another on their behalf. Their kneeling position is one of submission, indicating that they are both acknowledging Theseus’s authority and asking for his mercy. They are intimating that they are subject to him.

Theseus initially responds impatiently, asking why the women “Perturben so my feste” (906). Once they have his attention, however, the widows expand their performance into a speech emphasizing the same themes: his authority and their submission. Throughout her address, their spokesperson stresses more generally the widows’ miserable condition. Before speaking, she swoons (913). Near the beginning of her speech, she asks, “Som drope of pitee, thurgh thy gentillesse, / Upon us wrecched wommen lat thou falle” (920–21). At the conclusion, the other women join her in echoing, “Have on us wrecched wommen som mercy, / And lat oure sorwe synken in thyn herte” (950–51). More specifically (and more effectively), the eldest widow appeals to Theseus on several counts: his prestige, their own high class, and their devotion to their (dead) husbands.

The primary ground for the widows’ appeal is their submission to Theseus, which they first demonstrated physically and now express verbally. Their appearance and actions testify to their complete deference to his authority; in addition, the first word spoken by the eldest widow is “lord” (915). She puts off answering Theseus’s questions (905–11) in favor of acknowledging his power. This move occupies the first fifteen lines of her speech and within that span she addresses Theseus as “lord” four times, beginning and ending with the epithet (915, 922, 927, 930). She applies the same word to Creon and to their dead husbands, suggesting that it is less a precise title than a general signifier of male authority. She also refers to Theseus as a “conqueror” and acclaims his “glorie,” “honour,” and “myght” (916, 917, 930). The speaker emphasizes that they “han ben waitynge al this fourtenyght” to see him (929). Only after establishing the widows’ relation to Theseus as one of powerlessness to absolute power does she embark upon her story.

But if acknowledging Theseus’s position as a male authority figure is an essential element of their petition, the widows’ own status is equally important in defining them as the rightful objects of his mercy and, by implication, as proper figures of womanhood. After her first appeal to Theseus as one of the “wrecched wommen” in need of his “gentillesse,” the eldest widow justifies her plea: “For, certes, lord, ther is noon of us alle / That she ne hath been a duchesse or a queene” (922–23). At least some of these women are equivalent in rank to Hippolyta, whom the Knight consistently describes as “queene.” In the intercession scene—in which Hippolyta models her behavior on the widows’ and thereby demonstrates her womanhood—
the Knight will refer to her not by name but by rank. Similarly, he identifies the eldest widow only by her marital state (widowed) and rank (“wyf to kyng Cappaneus,” 932). The status of the widows conditions Theseus’s response: “Hym thoughte that his herte wolde breke, / Whan he saugh hem so pitous and so maat, / That whilom weren of so greet estaat” (954–56). While their change in fortune itself seems pitiful, such a change is possible only for those of the upper class. The status of the widows adds credibility and force to their appeal, particularly because it is connected to their virtuous natures.

The fact that these women were married to the powerful men of Thebes illustrates their suitability as wives. That they remain devoted to their late husbands further demonstrates that they performed (and continue to perform) their wifely duties. Because this submission to their husbands occurs after the women have gained a certain measure of autonomy through the men’s deaths, their actions make them admirable models of womanhood even outside the bounds of wifehood. The widows are paragons of womanhood: they are untainted by sexuality and they demonstrate obedience even though they are no longer bound by marriage, the institution that usually compelled such submission. Their model of womanhood can be recommended to and imitated by other women with minimal potential for subversion; it is perfect for a troubling figure like Hippolyta.

While my analysis has stressed the widows’ subordinate position, they do exercise power in their interaction with Theseus and this point is important to understanding Hippolyta’s later intercession. The widows base their appeal on their role as intercessors for their dead husbands; they approach Theseus on behalf of “alle oure lorde whiche that been yslawe” (943). Intercession was an accepted mode of power—or at least influence—for women. The crucial point about the widows’ plea is that it works: they enlist Theseus in their cause and instigate a battle. Although they accomplish their objective indirectly, these women exercise power while still embodying the ideals of womanhood. Submission may be a crucial quality of womanhood, but powerlessness is not. If, in the Greece Chaucer portrays, women cannot fight battles and lead warriors, they can speak eloquently and affect the course of events. If women lack the authority to make and enforce their own decisions, they can nonetheless influence the decisions that are made.41

It seems unlikely that Hippolyta, the former ruler of a realm, could be satisfied with this limited power. Even if she could, however, the tale has offered no evidence that she possesses the foundation for it, the elements of womanhood demonstrated by the Theban widows. Her wedding is prefaced not by courtship but by battle and marriage makes her a trophy of war as much as a wife. In the narrative, she is still an unknown quantity. Her intercession on behalf of Arcite and Palamon proves that the question of Hippolyta’s womanhood is inextricable from the problem of feminine power and, while pretending to settle both, resolves neither.42 Hippolyta’s intercession is Chaucer’s invention, mirroring the widows’ earlier scene and exhibit-
iting her conformity to that same set of behaviors and values. Chaucer puts her womanhood directly at stake: “The queene anon, for verray wommanhede, / Gan for to wepe” (1748–49). It is difficult to imagine applying this description to an Amazon warrior but that very difficulty works paradoxically to reassure and to preserve doubt. While a similar course of action unfolds in both texts, Boccaccio does not include either Hippolyta or an intercession. In the Teseida, Emilia discovers the two lovers fighting and brings Theseus to the duel. When he asks their names, Arcita offers to reveal them on the condition that they are granted pardon and Theseus agrees. The negotiation occurs entirely between the men, with Emilia serving as the mechanism that brings them together as well as the source of the fighting. No other women appear. In Chaucer, on the other hand, Hippolyta is the central figure and the scene is pivotal in determining her status as woman and queen.

As the hunt begins, Chaucer sets up the intercession scene first by reminding the reader of Hippolyta’s peculiar position and then by increasing Theseus’s cruelty. The tale describes the hunting party: “Theseus with alle joye and blis, / With his Ypolita, the faire queene, / And Emelye, clothed al in grene, / On huntyng be they riden roially” (1684–87). This language reiterates that Hippolyta is no longer a ruler; she is the “queene” who accompanies Theseus, “his Ypolit.” She is no longer “faire” and “hardy,” as at the beginning of the tale, but only “faire”; perhaps she is also no longer a woman and a warrior but only the former. Theseus discovers the fighters on his own and reacts not by gazing at them in wonder, as he does in Boccaccio’s version, but by immediately pulling his own sword and demanding, “Namoore, up peyne of lesynge of youre heed” (1707)—a more violent version of his initial impatient response to the Theban widows. No negotiations take place between the men; Palamon reveals their identities and the reason for their conflict without hesitation or bargaining. He concludes his speech, as in the Teseida, by asking to be put to death but again Chaucer alters Theseus’s response. Boccaccio’s Theseus replies, “God forbid that it should be as you ask, even though through your folly you have deserved it.”43 In the Knight’s Tale, however, Theseus answers, “Youre owene mouth, by youre confessioun, / Hath damnéd yow . . . / ye shal be deed” (1744–45, 1747). This more extreme reaction makes the intercession necessary; similarly, in the Clerk’s Tale, Walter’s cruelty will create the conditions for Griselda to demonstrate her virtuous womanhood.

The intercession begins immediately as the women react to Theseus’s proclaimed death sentence:

The queene anon, for verray wommanhede,  
Gan for to wepe, and so dide Emelye,  
And alle the ladyes in the compagnye.  
Greet pitee was it, as it thoughte hem alle,  
That evere swich a chaunce sholde falle,
For gentil men they were of greet estaat,  
And no thyng but for love was this debaat;  
And saugh hir blody woundes wyde and soore,  
And alle crieden, bothe lasse and moore,  
“Have mercy, Lord, upon us wommen alle!”  
And on hir bare knees adoun they falle  
And wolde have kist his feet ther as he stood;  
Til at the laste aslaked was his mood,  
For pitee renneth soone in gentil herte. (1748–61)

This passage contains the sole occurrence of *womanhood* in the tale. It suggests that Hippolyta has transformed from an Amazon ruler to an exemplar of Greek womanhood suitable to serve as Theseus's consort. If their marriage represents the final stage of Theseus's conquest of the Amazons, then this moment seems proof that the conquest is complete: Hippolyta behaves not as a captive warrior but as an Athenian queen. She does not act on her own power but appeals and submits to the authority of her husband.

There are important structural parallels between this intercession and its earlier counterpart. Like the widows, these women take a deferential posture: “And on hir bare knees adoun they falle / And wolde have kist his feet ther as he stood” (1758–59). Submission is again the keynote. Both scenes also emphasize the presence of a company of women led by a queen. As Wallace points out, the intercession scene marks “the assimilation of Hippolyta into generic ‘wommanhede.’” This “assimilation” is significant because one of Hippolyta’s most threatening aspects is her history of thinking and acting for herself; she stood out even among women who were wildly unusual by traditional standards. That she can act as a part of this Greek female community suggests that she is not threatening as an individual. She is no longer a military rival but one of many Athenian women and her most distinguishing feature is not a battle scar or amputated breast but her rank as queen. The intercession recontextualizes Hippolyta within her new culture and establishes her on the spectrum of womanhood in Greek society. She now relates to Theseus and to a female community as an Athenian woman rather than as an Amazon or a creature completely of another kind. Here she appears in a revised version of Femenye—one in line with new ideals of womanhood.

However, a striking difference between the parallel scenes hints at the cost of this assimilation: rather than speaking eloquently and at length as the eldest Theban widow did, Hippolyta remains virtually silent. She is not completely speechless—this is the single moment in which we may be hearing her voice, but it is subsumed in the communal voice of the women. Although she leads their actions, she does not speak for them. And while the eldest widow gave a thirty-two-line speech, Hippolyta speaks only in the chorus, which echoes the communal plea by
the widows (“Have on us wrecched wommen som mercy” [950]): “Have mercy, Lord, upon us wommen alle!” (1757). Like the widows, the queen and her women address Theseus as “Lord” and ask for his “mercy,” indicating that he holds the power and they have only the right of appeal. Also like the widows, the queen and her women characterize themselves collectively. The beginning of the tale implied that Hippolyta could lead and speak for the Amazons; now she must demonstrate that she can act in concert with Athenian women and their ideology as the tale represents it. That she leads in the crying shows that she feels pity, an important feminine (and queenly) quality. That she does not speak for the women shows that she exercises only intercessory power, deferring to Theseus rather than presuming to make suggestions herself. The women intercede by asking for mercy for themselves, not for the two lovers—they do not suggest a solution to the problem or articulate their feelings, unlike the widow who movingly described her community’s suffering. The general and even tentative nature of Hippolyta’s intercession confirms her womanhood more broadly. She intercedes out of pity to avert fighting and bloodshed, reflecting a system of values that differ fundamentally from those she acted on as an Amazon.

While Hippolyta exercises power, it is not the direct power of a ruler but the indirect influence of a supplicant. Acting as an intercessor in this scene testifies to her womanhood since intercession was often seen as the traditional role of the mother. David Herlihy notes that in medieval families the mother “was ideally placed to serve as intermediary between the often conflicting male generations.” In this intermediary role, human mothers became analogous to the Virgin Mary, to whom many appealed to intercede with Christ or God. Here Hippolyta, though not acting as a mother, does intercede between two male generations. Although intercession is a wifely role, it carries particular significance for a queen due to her husband’s authority. Paul Strohm notes that the model of queen as intercessor dominated the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a “reconception” based on “a reassertion of their familial roles as wives and mothers.” He continues: “This new form of queenly influence was petitionary, in the sense that it cast the queen as one seeking redress rather than one able to institute redress in her own right, and intercessory, in that it limited its objectives to the modification of a previously determined male resolve.” For Hippolyta, intercession demonstrates her suitability as a queen but also hints at her suitability as a wife and future mother. In the end, she is exercising the only form of power that the tale makes available to her.

As an intercessor, however, Hippolyta’s skill does not equal the widows’. Theseus’s different reactions to the two groups of women derive from the differences in their verbal approaches. The widows’ speech instantly affects him: “This gentil duc doun from his courser sterte / With herte pitous, whan he herde hem speke. / hym thoughte that his herte wolde breke” (952–54). Theseus cites the particular reason for his pity: their words. After remarking on the widows’ bad fortune, he “swoor his
ooth, as he was trewe knyght, / He wolde doon so ferforthly his myght / Upon the tiraunt Creon hem to wreke” (959–61). Since the queen and her women speak only a single line, they cannot elicit the same emotional reaction. Instead of reacting immediately to the women, Theseus reconsiders the situation and reasons to himself:

And though he first for ire quook and ster te,  
He hath considered shortly, in a clause,  
The trespas of hem bothe, and eek the cause,  
And although that his ire hir gilt accused,  
Yet in his resoun he hem bothe excused,  
As thus: he thoghte wel that every man  
Wol helpe hymself in love, if that he kan,  
And eek delivere hymself out of prisoun.  
And eek his herte hadde compassioun  
Of wommen, for they wepen evere in oon. (1762–71)

After their tearful appeal, the women are forgotten by Theseus and finally appear only as a secondary consideration (“And eek his herte hadde compassioun / Of wommen”). After this brief reference, Theseus embarks on a speech about love expanding on the ideas he worked through during his soliloquy. Once again the women disappear from the situation.

The women reappear some forty lines later when it is clear that Theseus has made his decision based on his own reflections rather than on the women’s intervention. Theseus himself draws this distinction. While he raised the widows up and embraced them after their plea (957–58), he leaves the queen and her company kneeling:

And therfore, syn I knowe of loves peyne  
And woot hou soore it kan a man distreyne,  
As he that hath ben caught ofre in his laas,  
I yow foryeve al hoolly this trespaas,  
At requeste of the queene, that kneleth heere,  
And eek of Emelye, my suster deere. (1815–20)

Theseus defines both Amazons in relation to himself, as his “queene” and “suster”—they not only have little personal power but also little individual identity. He also underscores Hippolyta’s submissive kneeling, signaling its symbolic importance to him. Still, these women—like the widows—exercise power through intercession: the outcome of the situation is what they desire. Although Theseus only faintly credits their “requeste,” that moment intervened between the death sentence and forgiveness.
If, as I have argued, Hippolyta exhibits womanhood here, then it is significant that there is no stamp of approval like that Walter will give to Griselda's womanhood. Rather than acclaiming his wife's womanhood, Theseus stresses her submission to him; the enduring image is of the pleading queen “that kneleth here.” Because Hippolyta is virtually absent from the rest of the narrative, no subsequent image replaces that one. This single intercession cannot prove her womanhood. Hippolyta poses a direct threat to masculine authority that a moment of submission—and this is the only interaction between Hippolyta and Theseus that the tale describes—cannot dismiss. In other words, the transformation that the tale initially glossed over continues to be glossed over but continues to be troublesome. Theseus’s reaction to Hippolyta’s intercession reinforces rather than resolves any misgivings; his continued emphasis on her subordination suggests that he, at least, is not convinced. Hippolyta demonstrates womanhood in this scene, but an isolated act cannot certify her transformation. More rigorous testing and more convincing proofs would be required, which is what we find with Griselda in the *Clerk’s Tale*. Walter’s doubt and curiosity are aggressive reflections of the sublimated attitudes toward the Amazons in the *Knight’s Tale* and Chaucer foregrounds Griselda’s womanhood through Walter’s repeated testing of it, making her the center of the tale in a way the Amazons were not.

II. The *Clerk’s Tale*

Gender issues in the *Clerk’s Tale* have attracted more critical attention than in the *Knight’s Tale* but scholarly views of Chaucer’s Griselda remain split. More traditional readings stress her passivity or submission in support of the *Clerk’s Tale*’s allegorical or exemplary significance.47 Newer feminist or historicist interpretations stress her assertiveness, even if only ironically.48 In this fuller picture, Griselda’s identity itself becomes a crucial focus of Chaucer’s interest. As Carolyn Dinshaw suggests, the interpretive puzzle of the relationship between Walter and Griselda raises “the question of the feminine.”49 This section suggests that for Chaucer the question of the feminine is literally a question of *womanhood*. I will argue Chaucer offers Griselda as a mediating figure: in an essentially ironic strategy, he intensifies the extremes already present in the tale in order to intensify her mediation.50

Walter, largely a cipher in most previous accounts of the tale, plays a central role in Chaucer’s irony.51 However inexplicable his cruelty or mysterious his motives, in testing Griselda he seeks to answer the same question as Chaucer: whether her femininity can successfully combine apparently contradictory elements (such as her incompatible duties as wife and mother: to submit to her husband and, in doing so, allow the killing of her children). As we will see, Chaucer’s morally ambiguous
deployment of Walter also enables him to project the question of Griselda’s womanhood onto a larger scale, as a juxtaposition of the courtly and the hagiographic. I will consider womanhood’s close relation to Griselda’s “translation” and her trials, two issues that have occupied much previous scholarship. The word womanhood appears twice in the Clerk’s Tale: when Walter first sees Griselda and when he ends the tests and offers an explanation. The concept is also significant in several other passages where Chaucer does not directly invoke the term, including the marriage contract, Griselda’s “translation” and its subsequent reversal, and the three trials.

As a term mediating between the secular and the sacred, womanhood’s appearance in the Clerk’s Tale may draw on two contemporary, if divergent, versions of female sanctity: the maternal martyr and the virgin saint. Barbara Newman has identified as the “hagiographic ideal [of] the maternal martyr” as an important hagiographic tradition. This motif was popular in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and used child-sacrifice plots as a strategy by which mothers could become saints. A woman who gave up her children “no longer did so to attain a virile or gender-neutral state of equality with men. By a peculiar paradox, it was precisely this renunciation of her children that set a holy seal on her motherhood, reconciling it as far as possible with the ideal of sexless, sacrificial maternity embodied in the Virgin.” Griselda does not become a saint, but she does achieve this superior form of motherhood by sacrificing her children; then, by relinquishing her husband, she achieves a similarly superior kind of wifehood. What is ultimately validated in both cases, however, is her womanhood: it is the ground on which these priorities play out (wifehood over motherhood) and it remains when these other roles have been stripped away. Newman compares the maternal martyrs of hagiography to the “cruel mothers” of romance (among whom she numbers Griselda) and argues that the rising popularity of child-sacrifice plots in the later fourteenth century “seems to be correlated with a shift toward the alternative consensual model of marriage . . . [in which] the indissoluble loyalty of the wedded pair . . . takes precedence over their fertility.” If Newman is right, then this change could have provided another impetus for fourteenth-century writers’ interest in womanhood.

We can illustrate the richness Chaucer found in the notion of womanhood by briefly comparing Griselda and her mixed spirituality with Cecilia, a virgin saint and one authentic hagiographic protagonist. Noting that “virgin martyr legends of the fourteenth century focus on conflict and emphasize the saint’s antisocial behavior,” Karen Winstead goes on to argue that such legends “distanced the saints from the rank-and-file faithful by emphasizing their miraculous powers, their virginity, and their contempt for the institutions of marriage, family, and state.” As the author of the Second Nun’s Tale, Chaucer actively participated in this trend. He presents Cecilia not as a passive sufferer but as a powerful figure who controls and changes her circumstances. However, even here he demonstrates his interest in Cecilia as a woman. Rephrasing his sources, he makes Almachius’s first question to
her, “What maner womman artow?” (424). The sources make the question more simply about Cecilia’s condition, and Chaucer allows her answer to retain that simpler focus: she answers by identifying her class status as a woman. Still, the question itself points to a deeper concern with the nature of women and how they can behave and encourages readers to wonder what kind of woman acts as Cecilia does and how her actions are womanly.

As the author of the *Clerk’s Tale*, Chaucer appears less interested in the hagiographic trend described by Winstead. Instead, he seems to want to determine the relationship between these aggressive female saints and other narrative characterizations of women—much as the relationship between Amazon warriors and courtly ladies interested him in the *Knight’s Tale*. Griselda’s character (submissive but powerful) and her situation (suffering followed by triumph) provide a basis for this investigation. Some critics have read Griselda as the antithesis of the Wife of Bath and an attempt at rehabilitating antifeminist ideas. I would argue instead that Chaucer explores the antifeminist archetype to see whether some of its elements could be productively recuperated. He experiments with the related unruly female saint figure by combining some of its characteristics with the virtuous feminine model, which Griselda often represented and was used to exemplify in conduct books. Can a woman be both powerful and virtuous, both articulate and submissive? If Cecilia and the Wife of Bath are near one end of the spectrum of womanhood and Constance and the Virgin Mary the other, is there a middle ground? In other words, what do you get when you mix Jankyn’s *Book of Wikked Wyves* with *Le Ménagier de Paris*?

Using the Griselda story to explore these questions was a departure from its literary origins and from other contemporary versions. Griselda is a twofold exemplar, modeling for wives as well as Christians, but no other writer exploited this status to consider the divergent representations of women in courtly and religious texts. Most writers who used the exemplum acknowledged its dual significance; however, the Clerk’s multiple morals amplify this divided tradition rather than attempting to reconcile it. At the conclusion of the tale, he tells us that the story is “nat for . . . wyves” but for “every wight” (1142, 1145); in the envoy, he reworks his advice for “noble wyves” and “archewyves” (1183, 1195; the latter term another invention of Chaucer’s). Some scholars have read the Clerk as hedging between Chaucer’s sources: Petrarch’s version, which asserts the universal moral of the exemplum, and the anonymous French prose translation *Le Livre Griseldis*, which directs its message toward “des femmes mariees.” Such interpretations assume that the broader Petrarchan moral is unusual, but this view is too narrow. It is true that, like *Le Livre Griseldis*, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Philippe de Mézières’ *Livre de la Vertue du Sacrement de Mariage*, *Le Ménagier de Paris*, and the play *Estoire de Griseldis en rimes et par personages* (based on de Mézières’ *Livre*) all seem to stress the specifically female nature of Griselda’s virtue, and indeed, that the French versions explicitly address wives. Nevertheless, each of these fourteenth-century versions also acknowledges
Griselda as a human exemplar as well as a womanly one. Even Petrarch himself describes her virtue not as inimitable but as capable of being imitated only with difficulty (“vix imitabilis”) by women and exhorts his readers to emulate what he specifies as her feminine or womanly constancy (“femine constanciam”).

Griselda’s identity as a woman is a significant feature of every medieval version of the tale. However, by introducing the concept of womanhood, Chaucer makes this feature a focus of investigation. The adaptation of the story in different genres (conduct books, drama, religious exempla, etc.) and languages (literary Latin as well as various vernaculars) suggests its potential for this kind of use. As Judith Bronfman points out in her history of the Griselda story, “In less than 50 years, Griselda had appeared in virtually all the dominant literary genres of the [fourteenth] century: she had been in a prose cycle tale, an independent prose tale, an epistolary tale, an exemplary tale, a drama, a poetry cycle tale, an independent poem.” The Griselda story was adaptable for all of these genres by all of these authors for the same reasons that it was appropriate for Chaucer’s examination of womanhood: it provided the basis for multiple interpretations, it was relevant to ideas about and representations of medieval women, and—most significantly—Griselda herself was a nexus of power and submission. As the suffering heroine, she could be cast as exercising a female form of power or enduring in the face of capricious male authority. She could be the submissive, virtuous, and lovely ideal of courtly poetry or the unpredictable, independent saint of contemporary hagiography. The nature of the story and its main character lent themselves to an exploration of what otherwise seemed to be irreconcilable representations of women; Chaucer’s addition of womanhood to the story introduced the possibility that these representations were not contradictory but could be combined through the new abstraction. Womanhood designated a concept that could mediate between these conflicting roles and represented femaleness as a comprehensive spiritual quality.

AT FIRST SIGHT

Griselda is an unlikely paragon of feminine behavior. She transgresses or exceeds the major categories in narrative and social ideals of medieval femininity: maidenhood, wifehood, motherhood, and widowhood. How could a model maiden mortgage her virginity against an upwardly mobile future, presenting it as her dowry in compensation for her peasant status? How could a model mother agree to her children’s murders? And how could a model wife be “widowed” not by her husband’s death but by his replacement of her with a younger, prettier, and nobler version of herself? Chaucer mobilizes these paradoxes in order to investigate the ideas of womanliness underlying them. The word “wommanhede” first occurs with Walter’s first sight of Griselda and it contravenes an important poetic convention:
Upon Grisilde, this povre creature,
Ful ofte sithe this markys sette his ye
As he on hunyng rood paraventure;
And whan it fil that he myghte hire espye,
He nought with wantown lookyng of folye
His eyen caste on hire, but in sad wyse
Upon hir chiere he wolde hym ofte avyse,

Commendynge in his herte hir wommanhede,
And eek hir vertu, passyng any wight
Of so yong age, as wel in chiere as dede. (232–41)

This passage rewrites one of the most celebrated *topoi* in medieval literature: the first sight of the beloved. In most first sightings—as we saw in Palamon and Arcite’s response to Emelye in the *Knights Tale*—the lover is struck powerfully by the woman’s image and wounded by love.

When Dante first sees Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova*, he describes her appearance and then its effect on him: “At that moment I say truly that the spirit of life, which dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble so strongly that it appeared terrifying in its smallest veins; and trembling it said these words: ‘Behold a god more powerful than I, who comes to rule over me.’” In Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, Palemone saw in Emilia’s eyes the god of love, fitting an arrow to his bow. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer offers his magisterial version of the *topos*. Troilus has “scorned hem that loves peynes dryen” but “sodeynly hym thoughte he felte dyen, / Right with hire look, the spirit in his herte” (I, 303 and 306–7). When he first sets eyes on Criseyde, his heart speeds up and he appreciates her appearance, including her “wommanhod” (I, 283). In this scene from the *Troilus*, Chaucer uses “wommanhod” in purely erotic terms, associating it with her “lymes” and “the pure wise of hire mevynge” (I, 282 and 285); in the *Clerk’s Tale* scene, Chaucer makes “wommanhede” the pivotal term in his annexation of the hagiographic to the erotic. Walter does commend Griselda “in his herte” and, like many objects of courtly love, Griselda is gazed upon but does not respond or appear aware of her effect. There is no mention of love, however. The encounter should be an erotic connection; instead, Walter is struck by her sanctity. He looks “upon hir chiere” but there is no description of her beauty or even her physical appearance, beyond the mention of her womanhood. The attraction is about how Griselda looks—since Walter has no other information—but not in the expected way.

The emphasis is on Griselda’s “wommanhede, / And eek hir vertu.” The Clerk
has already enumerated the unseen virtues that he associates with Griselda’s womanhood here; the signal virtue is submission, which is characteristic of womanhood and was also key in the *Knights Tale*. Her first virtuous quality is that “No likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne” (214). This establishes that sensual desire does not motivate her any more than it purportedly does Walter’s notice of her. Griselda also drinks little, knows no idleness, and exhibits “rype and sad corage” (220). Her exemplary respect and care for her father, however, overshadow her other virtues. The Clerk explains, “in greet reverence and charitee / Hir olde p ovre fader fostred shee” (221–22). He reiterates the point more strongly later: “And ay she kepte hir fadres lyf on-lofte / With everich obeisaunce and diligence / That child may doon to fadres reverence” (229–31). In other words, Griselda sustains her father’s very existence through her marvelous reverence and obedience to his will. The people also notice this virtue in Griselda: “and wondred hem in how honest manere / and tentifly she kepte hir fader deere” (333–34). These virtues, involving submission to male authority, are specific to womanhood. Patience, the virtue of Griselda’s that most readings emphasize, is a form of this chief virtue of womanhood although critics have not directly connected the two.

Chaucer refigures this scene by making Walter’s attraction to Griselda an attraction to her womanhood. Chaucer clearly links “wommanhede” with Griselda’s physical appearance, indicating that the condition is at least partially visible in a woman’s body. The implied connection builds on one made some lines earlier between virtue and physical beauty. Griselda is “fair ynogh to sighte” (209) while not a remarkable beauty until her virtue is taken into account: “But for to speke of vertuous beautee, / Thanne was she oon the faireste under sonne” (211–12). Although the relationship is largely metaphorical, these lines establish an association between beauty and virtue that prepares the way for the hint that Griselda’s womanhood manifests itself in her body and catches Walter’s eye. His reaction to Griselda is unusual no less by the standards of his established personality than by the tradition of first meeting scenes. The physical nature of her womanhood has attracted Walter’s attention but not “with wantown lookyng of folye.” Instead, she is the object of his “sad” admiration. This seems out of character for the marquis since one of the first things we learn about him is that “on his lust present was al his thoght” (80). His passion for hunting demonstrates this temperament and he is engaging in that very activity when he sees Griselda. If he has noticed this peasant girl for ostensibly virtuous reasons, then his fascination would seem an exception to his general preoccupation with his own desire.

Chaucer’s version of this scene amplifies a more implicit feature of Boccaccio’s original treatment, which Petrarch eliminated. In the *Decameron*, Gualtieri finds Griselda “very beautiful” and thinks “a life with her would have much to commend it.” He concludes the marriage contract and then gives a speech to his followers, reiterating that he is marrying not because he wants to but because they
have requested that he do so; he explains, without identifying Griselda, that he has “found a girl after my own heart” and plans to marry her. Petrarch’s account omits this second speech, as do Le Livre Griseldis and the Clerk’s Tale. More crucially, Petrarch also anticipates the scene with the comment that “a mature, manly spirit lay hidden in her virginal breast” and explains the virtue that Walter sees in her as “excellent beyond her age and gender.” In Boccaccio, Gualtieri realizes he must marry, remembers the pretty peasant girl he has noticed, and decides they would have a good marriage. In Petrarch and those texts derived from him, Walter sees Griselda and, knowing that he needs a wife, makes a practical choice to marry her based on her virtue, which proceeds from her mature, virile spirit. Chaucer’s revision makes Griselda a figure of womanhood, both beautiful peasant, as in Boccaccio, and virtuous exemplar, as in Petrarch. Seeing Griselda as an object of love or a notably beautiful woman places her within the particular tradition of female representation associated with romance and courtly poetry. Depicting her as an embodiment of virtue locates her in a different tradition of saints’ lives and exempla. In the Clerk’s Tale, Griselda is both beautiful and virtuous but the focus of Walter’s desire will become her womanhood. By exploiting the peculiar nature of the first sight scene and shifting the focus to Griselda’s womanhood, Chaucer opens a space between narrative traditions.

FROM MAID TO WIFE: WOMANHOOD AS TRANSLATION

Chaucer’s exploration of the concept in the rest of the tale is no less narrative. On the one hand, Griselda’s exemplarity is all excess, ambiguity, and paradox. On the other hand, Chaucer’s exposition of this narrative continually returns to the political realities of her gender and class, but only through the refractive fictions of her relation to Walter. The trials of Griselda’s womanhood are generally taken to begin with the birth of her first child. In fact, they begin with the marriage contract that sets the terms for her wifehood and motherhood. Although apparently an agreement between the couple to marry, the contract does not focus on whether Griselda will be Walter’s wife but on how she will perform that role. This is her first trial and, by engaging in an unusual kind of negotiation, Griselda gives initial proof of her womanhood. Most critical interpretations of the contract focus on the promise of submission that Walter requires; if he is concerned with safeguarding his freedom, then it seems logical for him to seek verbal assurance from Griselda on that issue. He asks her to be “redy . . . / To al my lust” (351–52), echoing the narrator’s description of Walter’s concern with “his lust present” (80). Walter makes it clear that he addresses Griselda not to seek her assent to the marriage—“As I suppose, ye wol that it so be,” he says confidently (347), having already set the date and ordered clothes and jewels made for her (253–60)—but to present his “demandes” regarding
her behavior (348). The question is not whether Griselda will consent to marriage; it is about the additional terms on which Walter predicates his agreement to marry.

The marriage agreement begins as an exchange between men, father and prospective husband. Walter speaks to Janicula, asking, “If that thou wolt unto that purpos drawe, / To take me as for thy sone-in-lawe” (314–15). Janicula replies, “I wol no thyng, ye be my lord so deere; / Right as yow lust, governeth this mateere” (321–22). Walter’s superior social status and his power over Janicula complicate their relationship; Walter is in a position to dictate the terms of the marriage agreement. Still, the agreement is contractual and couched in terms of negotiation: they have a “collacioun” and “tretys” (325, 331). A structure now exists for Griselda to move from being under her father’s authority to Walter’s. When this happens, Walter can reasonably expect that Griselda will accord him an obedience and reverence similar to that she showed her father.

When Walter approaches Griselda, he makes it clear that an agreement exists between himself and Janicula to which they expect her to accede: “It liketh to youre fader and to me / That I yow wedde” (345–46). Without pausing to hear Griselda’s response, Walter gives the provisions of the agreement:

I seye this: be ye redy with good herte
To al my lust, and that I frely may,
As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
And nevire ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?
And eek when I sey “ye,” ne sey nat “nay,”
Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?
Swere this, and heere I swere oure alliance. (351–57)

Although Walter presents these as questions, they are clearly the only terms under which he is prepared to conclude the marriage. An impressive amount of patriarchal authority backs them: Janicula’s authority as Griselda’s father and Walter’s authority both as her prospective husband and as the marquis who rules father and daughter as his subjects. Under these circumstances, a refusal is virtually impossible, especially from a woman whose submission to male authority has already been established. The conditions Walter offers Griselda are the first test to which he subjects her, preceding the more frequently recognized trials during the marriage. In all of these tests, her womanhood is at issue; she must agree to (and later demonstrate) its characteristic virtue: submission.⁷¹

Although the contract is a set of requirements, only Griselda’s consent puts it into effect. Walter constructs a model of behavior that she must agree to emulate (or not); however, this model was predetermined. Before seeing Griselda, the Clerk tells us, Walter sat in his “paleys honurable” and “shoop his marriage,” considering the kind of wedded life he desired and, presumably, how to achieve that (197–98).
Walter’s complete ideal is not yet clear to the audience, but Griselda goes beyond the question of consent by reshaping the model he has proposed. This reaction sharply contrasts with Emelye’s silent acquiescence to Theseus’s command that she wed Palamon. Griselda’s reaction to Walter’s offer highlights the importance of her role in the contract by refiguring the terms of the deal: her promise to submit exceeds his request. She swears, “nevere willyngly, / In werk ne thoght, I nyl yow disobeye” (362–63). The remarkable pledge of obedience in thought as well as deed is a testament to her womanhood. Even by raising the demands on herself, Griselda exercises a certain degree of control in the exchange and this, too, is a function of her womanhood. Chaucer uses Griselda’s character to explore the contradictions of womanly behavior: she is articulate and exercises a kind of feminine power while not only retaining but even heightening her virtuous submission.

After Walter and Griselda agree to marry but before he gives her the ring, she is “translated.” This “translation” renders her transformation from maiden to wife and potential mother in visible and material terms; although it has been a focus of several contemporary studies, most consider the linguistic or literal significance of the phrase rather than the means by which that change is completed. The translation must later be undone (as far as possible) when Walter pretends to dissolve the marriage. As Griselda returns his gifts of clothing and ornaments—the material of her translation—she also describes the dowry gifts she gave, including her “maydenhede” (837, 866). Along with its indispensable complements, sexual availability and submission, Griselda’s maidenhead forms an important part of her womanhood, which serves as a priceless (and irrecoverable) counter-gift in the exchange with Walter.

After she agrees to the marriage terms, Walter presents Griselda to the crowd outside and a group of women “dispoillen hire right theere” (374); they comb her hair, dress her in new clothes, and adorn her with ornaments. The improvement is dramatic: “Unnethe the peple hir knew for hire fairnesse / Whan she translated was in swich richesse” (384–85). She is “another creature” (406). It is only after Walter sees that the translation was successful that he “hire spoused with a ryng” (386). And it is only now that Griselda is loved as she was not upon first sight; everyone “hire lovede that looked on hir face” (413). This change of clothes renders Griselda’s womanhood visible to all, whereas before only Walter’s keen eye discerned it. His ability to identify this quality in a lower-class maiden distinguishes him from his people, who “have no greet insight / In vertu” (242–43). It is within Walter’s power not only to recognize Griselda’s womanhood but also to make it apparent to his people through her translation. At the same time, this change of clothes signifies a change in her womanhood. Griselda’s finery renders her sexuality visible, transforming her from the object of Walter’s admiration to the legitimate object of his sexual desire. In Italy, the setting for the tale, a husband’s gift of clothing to his wife in the Middle Ages functioned as “proof of the carnal consummation of the mar-
riage,” a sign that the wife was honoring the conjugal debt.75 Similarly, Griselda’s change of clothes signifies simultaneously her change of social status and her new sexual availability to Walter. This in turn is an expression of her womanhood, a state in which the sexual act plays such a large role.

The change of clothes also transforms Griselda from a maiden into a wife and potential mother, two important states of womanhood. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber explains that gifts of clothing were customary in medieval Italy: “During the days or months preceding the marriage and within the year following, the husband provided what was in effect a wardrobe for his wife, a kind of countertrousseau.” These gifts were “indispensable symbolic agents in the integration of the wife into another household and another lineage.”76 Susan Crane reads clothing as an important signifier in literary terms as well, arguing that Griselda’s “reclothing accomplishes her absorption into Walter’s household and her subordination to him in marriage.”77 Walter’s translation of Griselda is an acceptance of her into his household and, perhaps most importantly, as the mother of his lineage. As his wife, her appearance functions as a symbol of his wealth and power. He effects the transformation in public so that his people will recognize Griselda as the legitimate mother of his heirs. Making good on the earlier suggestion that the virtues of womanhood can become physical and visible, Griselda’s body is the site where her incompatible roles—peasant and marchioness, maiden and wife—are reconciled.

Griselda’s translation must be undone when the marriage dissolves. The clothing Walter provided—the mechanism of her metamorphosis—was a marriage gift that she now returns. Although the exchange of gifts originally seemed unequal, the reversal of the translation reveals that it was a mutual exchange involving somewhat unusual commodities. When Walter orders Griselda to return to her father’s house, she catalogs both of their contributions: “To yow broghte I noght elles, out of drede, / But feith, and nakednesse, and maydenhede; / And heere agayn your clothyng I restoore, / And eek your weddyng ryng, for eve remore” (865–68). Walter’s gifts, clothing and a wedding ring, were visible and valuable in economic terms. Klapisch-Zuber identifies such gifts as a counterbalance to the wife’s dowry in medieval Italian marriage customs.78 But while Walter’s gifts are fairly straightforward and typical, Griselda’s are not. Because of her lower-class origins, she does not bring the customary cash dowry. She did not come to the marriage empty-handed, however; she brought her husband “feith, and nakednesse, and maydenhede.” Klapisch-Zuber carefully notes, “An analysis of the dowry cannot be confined to its economic terms alone.”79 Walter cannot measure Griselda’s dowry in economic terms but her womanhood is undeniably valuable to him. She makes the connection between maidenhead and wifehood, saying that she will henceforth live as a widow: “For sith I yaf to yow my maydenhede, / And am youre trewe wyf, it is no drede, / God shilde swich a lordes wyf to take / Another man to housbonde or to make!” (837–40). “Maydenhede”
was the dowry she brought as a “trewe wyf” and, having given it, she cannot “take / Another man to housbonde.” In Chaucer’s usage, maidenhead is part of (though not synonymous with) womanhood, and Griselda’s maidenhead is an important part of both her womanhood and the dowry she brings to Walter.

Griselda returns to the importance of her “maydenhede,” pointing out that Walter cannot restore it to her as she has restored his dowry gifts. In its place, she requests a “smok”

. . . in gerdon of my maydenhede,
Which that I broghte, and noght agayn I bere,
As voucheth sauf to yeve me, to my meede,
But swich a smok as I was wont to were,
That I therwith may wrye the wombe of here
That was youre wyf. (883–88)

Griselda asks for “a smok” like that she wore before her translation, conflating to some extent her “maydenhede” with her clothing. The smock is symbolic of her former sexual condition in addition to being a sign of her former social condition. Griselda also discloses the purpose behind her request; she wishes to “wrye the wombe of here / That was youre wyf.” She associates the fine clothing with her role as a wife and with her womb, or ability to bear children, which we have already seen to be a critical element of womanhood. This second change of clothing is an attempt on Griselda’s part to reclaim her former sexual status, at least partially, and she represents this attempt in sartorial terms.  

Womanhood is generally a virtuous condition of being, but within the system of gift and counter-gift that comprised marriage, Griselda’s womanhood is also a valuable commodity. While the socioeconomic importance of the dowry is undeniable, Griselda brings the most critical elements to marriage in her sexuality and submission. These two related components of womanhood become Griselda’s dowry. Her sexuality is made available to her husband through her submission. Marital intercourse is more than a site for the exercise of masculine authority; it justifies the existence of such authority. The sexual act, with its ramifications for noble lineage and inheritance, is perhaps the most important reason for a man to have authority over his wife. Submission to the husband ensured that a wife would render the conjugal debt, remain sexually faithful, and continue to bear and raise children in spite of the physical danger that such rigorous maternity represented in the Middle Ages. The ability to produce suitable or legitimate offspring can thus be seen as a defining feature of womanhood, important enough to the husband to justify murder in his mind, as the stories of several female martyrs attest. Sexual submission is also important synecdochically; if a wife did not submit to her husband sexually, her submission in other areas was irrelevant. Apart from practical considerations of
heritability, sexual submission was significant symbolically to the husband and to others outside the marriage. Women were most valuable as the producers of heirs and motherhood was the most critical facet of womanhood. Other feminine virtues relate, directly or indirectly, to this vital role.

WOMANHOOD ON TRIAL

Walter tests Griselda’s submission, the focus of her marriage promise and an important component of the womanhood that she brought as her dowry, by pretending to murder their children and take a new wife. These trials are the heart of the Clerk’s Tale and the focus of the Griselda story in every medieval version; they have inspired a corresponding amount of scholarly interest (and bewilderment). Why does Walter test his wife and why, having begun, does he cease? Elaine Tuttle Hansen suggests that Walter tries Griselda because she demonstrates threatening masculine virtues by ruling well in her husband’s absence. Kathryn Lynch argues that Walter is trying to gain knowledge of Griselda empirically since he cannot completely trust his intuitive sense of her virtue. Andrew Sprung, apparently unable to discern any viable motivation for the trials, claims that Griselda is simply a figure of male fantasy. Each of these readings, however, oversimplifies Chaucer’s depiction of either Walter or Griselda. Walter’s testing is crucial to Griselda’s model virtue; his extreme demands create the necessary environment for her to demonstrate convincingly the mediating power of womanhood, but through this demonstration she exceeds his ideal of womanhood as complete submission. Thus both Griselda and her husband contribute to her exemplarity.

The trials demonstrate Griselda’s virtue by putting her womanhood doubly at stake. Walter is nervous about Griselda’s ability to produce suitable and legitimate heirs (which, for Walter, means heirs that his people will accept), a major function of womanhood. Her lower-class origins give the lineage she mothers questionable status in his mind and he projects this anxiety onto his people, even though they evidence little concern on this point. This is a corollary, however, to Walter’s concern about Griselda’s suitability as a wife, specifically within the context of the marriage terms he has set. Because he designed those terms to ensure his own authority and freedom within the marriage, Griselda must display that chief virtue of noble womanhood, submission. The anxiety of his people over the lack of heirs motivated Walter’s decision to wed, but his own anxiety over marriage as an institution ill-suited for a marquis focused on his present pleasure determined his choice of wife. As a result, it is critical that Griselda’s womanhood be tested and proven in both of these ways. Having commended her “wommanhede” at first sight, Walter ends the trials by proclaiming that he has tested Griselda “For no malice, ne for no crueltee, / But for t’assaye in thee thy wommanheede” (1074–75). These two moments frame the tale.
The close association of the trials with the children demonstrates their importance in the tests of Griselda’s womanhood. Before the birth of their first child, the couple “In Goddes pees lyveth ful esily” (423) and Griselda “Koude al the feet of wyfly hoomlinesse” (429). Her excellence extends to governance: “The commune profit koude she redresse. / Ther nas discord, rancour, ne hevynesse / In al that land that she ne koude apese” (431–33). Negotiation, mediation, and “juggementz of so greet equitee” are also within the realm of womanhood for Griselda (439). In this early phase of their marriage, Walter shows no inclination to test Griselda; in fact, he congratulates himself on having chosen wisely (425–26). Before long, however, their daughter is born and this birth initiates Walter’s desire to test his wife. Although the narrative does not present the two events in a causal relationship, their connection is evident in the action of the story: “Whan that this child had souked but a throwe, / This markys in his herte longeth so / T o t empte his wyf” (450–52). The association between the birth of the child and the onset of the testing is also apparent in their close juxtaposition in the text. The daughter’s birth occurs in the final stanza of the second section and the third section opens by referring to the child and then immediately describing Walter’s wish to test Griselda.

The birth of a daughter is an important proof of Griselda’s womanhood because it attests to her fertility and ability to bear children; that is, her ability to fulfill her responsibility as a wife. However, this proof is not completely satisfactory, as the reaction of the people reveals:

Glad was this markys and the folk therfore,
For though a mayde child coome al bifore,
She may unto a knave child atteyne
By liklihede, syn she nys nat bareyne. (445–48)

The birth of a daughter is an encouraging sign that Griselda “nys nat bareyne” and the primary connotations here are hopeful. However, for the first time in the tale, there is a hint that Griselda may be less than perfect: she has not yet proven that she can produce an heir to perpetuate the line. The Clerk’s condemnation of Walter’s testing as “Nedelees” (455) follows this passage. The Clerk seems satisfied with Griselda’s virtue, saying that Walter “hadde assayed hire ynogh bifoire, / And foond hire evere good” (456–57). It is not, however, her goodness that is at issue but her womanhood and specifically her ability to provide an heir. Griselda herself seems to have internalized this perspective; she would “levere have born a knave child” (444). For Griselda, as well as Walter and his people, the birth of a daughter is a positive sign of her fertility but does not finally resolve the issue of the ruling lineage.

Up to this point, Griselda’s lower-class origins have not manifested themselves in any negative way, but Walter may see the threat of this possibility in the birth
of his daughter. The reason he offers for the first trial intimates this: “They [the people] seyn, to hem it is greet shame and wo / For to be subgetz and been in servage / To thee, that born art of a smal village” (481–83). He offers the daughter’s birth as the explanation behind the complaints of his people and proposes her death as the only solution. Walter manufactures this excuse, with no apparent basis in reality. The fact that he chooses this fiction, when he need not have offered any explanation at all—when not providing an explanation might have better served to prove his dominance and authority—is notable and reflects his own anxiety over Griselda’s womanhood and lower class.

Four years pass between the removal of the daughter and the birth of their second child, a son. Walter has given Griselda no other trials in this time. But after the birth of this second child, his yearning to test her returns: “Whan it was two yeer old, and fro the brest / Departed of his notice, on a day / This markys caughte yet another lest / To tempte his wyf yet ofter, if he may” (617–20). Here again the onset of a trial is closely associated with a child. In this case, it is not immediately after the child’s birth but at another milestone in his early development, the day of his weaning, that Walter desires to test the mother. The birth of a son testifies to Griselda’s womanhood and her ability to provide her husband with an heir. As such, it would seem sufficient to end the doubts inspired by the birth of a daughter. Walter does not stop the trials, however, indicating that this proof is inadequate. Griselda’s womanhood has been proven because she has produced an heir but, due to her lower-class origins, the suitability of this heir is still in question for Walter.

Womanhood is not simply a question of fecundity; if the people do not accept the line mothered by Griselda, her function as a wife and a woman is unfulfilled. Walter articulates this concern in the justification he offers for the second trial, the apparent murder of their son:

My peple sikly berth oure mariage;  
And namely sith my sone yboren is,  
Now is it worse than evere in al oure age.  
...  
Now sey they thus: “Whan Walter is agon,  
Thanne shal the blood of Janicle succede  
And been oure lord, for oother have we noon.”  
Swiche wordes seith my peple, out of drede. (625–27, 631–34)

Again, Walter crafts the excuse without basis, but his choice of fictions is significant; although his people have the heir they wanted, he remains uneasy about the larger question of the children’s acceptability. He has also constructed an excuse that would seem particularly plausible to Griselda. Her concerns closely resem-
ble the fictional concerns of the people, as demonstrated by her sense of her own lower-class status and her desire for a “knave child.”

After the sergeant takes the son, the Clerk interrupts the tale briefly to ask “of wommen” (696) whether this is not enough: “What koude a sturdy housbonde moore devyse / To preeve hir wyfhod and hir stedefastnesse” (698–99). The birth of her children verified Griselda’s motherhood; their simulated murder has tested Griselda’s “wyfhod” by requiring her to subjugate her motherly feelings to her wifely loyalty. In fact, her perfect submission does cause Walter a moment of doubt about her motherhood, and “if that he / Ne hadde soothly knownen therbifore / That parfitly hir children loved she,” he would have had grave suspicions (688–90).

As the final test, the sham marriage will confirm Griselda’s womanhood by demonstrating both the nobility of her children (and thus the viability of her motherhood) and her enduring devotion to serving her husband’s “lust” (757, 962) even when she is no longer his wife (and thus the perfection of her wifehood). The sham marriage planned by Walter requires the participation of his children. This choice is more than simply arbitrary or convenient in terms of plot. In addition to being another test of Griselda’s submission and, by extension, womanhood, the sham marriage is a demonstration of Walter’s control over his daughter and a test of her womanhood. This final piece of evidence—the daughter’s womanhood—also proves Griselda’s womanhood and thus brings the testing to an end.

Timing is as important a consideration in the sham marriage as it was in the two prior trials. Five years have passed since the second test and, once again, the interval between tests has passed peacefully. Walter begins preparations “Whan that his doghter twelve yeer was of age” (736). Twelve is “the age at which a woman allegedly achieved the majority that supposedly corresponded to puberty and marriageability.” For practical reasons, Walter could not have carried out his plan until his daughter reached marriageable age. He might have pretended to marry someone else at any point during the five years, but he has waited until his daughter was of an age to play her part. The involvement of the daughter in the charade makes it a double test of Griselda (her motherhood and her wifehood) and a double test of womanhood (Griselda’s and her daughter’s).

Walter’s justification for the third test is the same as for the others: the fictitious complaints of his people about Griselda’s lower-class background. He explains that he chose her based on his own desires, but that now he must consider what his people want:

Certes, Grisilde, I hadde ynogh plesance
To han yow to my wyf for youre goodnesse,
As for youre trouthe and for youre obeisance,
Noght for youre lynage, ne for youre richesse;
But now knowe I in verray soothfastnesse
That in greet lordshipe, if I wel avyse,
Ther is greet servitute in sondry wyse.

I may nat doon as every plowman may.
My peple me constreyeth for to take
Another wyf, and crien day by day. (792–801)

“Lynage” and “richesse,” Walter implies, are what his people would prefer in a marchioness; in choosing Griselda for other reasons, he acted like a “plowman.” He suggests that Griselda’s class has tainted his own and perhaps endangered his position as ruler. The irony, of course, is that while Walter equates lower status with greater freedom, Griselda’s lower class has not allowed her to act more freely; she has experienced “greet servitute” in both of the social classes that she has inhabited and Walter’s pretense of submitting to his people’s wishes points up Griselda’s submission as not only more sincere but also carrying serious costs. While Walter is again inventing this excuse, it is true enough that his people have begun to talk about his marriage; rather than speaking against Griselda, however, “the sclaudre of his diffame / Made hem that they hym hatede therfore” (730–31).

The opinion of the people quickly changes when they see the proposed new wife, unaware that she is the daughter of Walter and Griselda. The daughter’s submission to her father’s plan gives initial evidence of her womanhood but the people’s reaction to her as a prospective wife for their marquis is the crucial validation. The concerns of the people led to the first marriage and were used by Walter to explain each of the tests; now the opinion of the people helps to end the trials even as it seems to undermine Griselda’s position.85 They admire the daughter at first sight:

And thanne at erst amonges hem they seye
That Walter was no fool, thogh that hym leste
To chaunge his wyf, for it was for the beste.

For she is fairer, as they deemen alle,
Than is Grisilde, and moore tendre of age,
And fairer fruyt bitwene hem sholde falle,
And moore plesant, for hire heigh lynage. (985–91)

The people focus on the daughter’s beauty and her potential motherhood. It is the daughter’s perceived superior womanhood, in both those senses, that reconciles them to Walter’s ill treatment of his current wife and the murders of his children (for which they previously “hatede” him). Although this reversal leads to a lamentation on the people’s inconstancy, it is not their fickleness that is important here but their perception of the daughter. Walter’s anxiety over the suitability of the children
borne by Griselda can only be soothed by his people’s acceptance of them, so it is absolutely vital that the people recognize and affirm the nobility of the children. Their opinion is later substantiated when Walter marries off his daughter “richely,” giving her “Unto a lord, oon of the worthieste / Of al Ytaille” (1130, 1131–32).

The people’s reaction to the daughter includes the first explicit reference to the importance of motherhood. Walter did not mention it when he first saw Griselda or in the marriage contract and, although the people noted Griselda’s “fairnesse” (384) after her translation, they did not remark on the “fruyt” that might result from that marriage. Within the narrative, this silence about Griselda’s motherhood allows Walter to fabricate the reaction of his people to his children. It also heightens the dramatic effect of this scene: the people unconsciously confirm Griselda’s motherhood in the act of disparaging it. Still, the people’s desire to avoid a “straunge successour” inspired them to ask Walter to marry and continue his line and so the absence of any earlier mention of motherhood seems odd (138). Perhaps the passage of time has made them more anxious on this point, or perhaps Walter’s rejection of the children has made his people question their suitability. Most notably, this absence underscores the effectiveness of Walter’s translation of Griselda and the effect of its undoing. Walter’s translation of Griselda completely convinced the people, if not Walter himself, of her potential motherhood; the retranslation of Griselda’s womanhood leaves her in an indeterminate space between maidenhood and widowhood, undercutting her motherhood. The crowd’s reaction to the daughter hints that they did not anticipate such beauty and nobility from Griselda’s offspring; the daughter herself is “fairer fruyt” than they expected.

The establishment of the daughter’s womanhood is also partial evidence of Griselda’s womanhood because it speaks to the suitability of the children she has produced. The crowd’s recognition of the son as noble completes the proof of the mother’s womanhood by legitimating him as an heir. The people credit Walter’s good governance for bringing these noble children into his family: “Hir brother eek so fair was of visage / That hem to seen the peple hath caught plesaunce, / Commendynge now the markys governaunce” (992–94). “Commendynge” recalls Walter’s original sighting and valuation of Griselda and her virtues. The trials have vindicated Griselda’s womanhood: she has demonstrated submission, the salient virtue of womanhood; given birth to two legitimate children, including an heir to perpetuate the line of the marquis; and established her wifehood by relinquishing it. Through the translation, its reversal, and its (forthcoming) reinstatement, her womanhood persists.

Once Griselda’s womanhood has been proven, the trials can end. I have already noted that the text explicitly offers this justification for Walter’s cruelty. Walter was drawn to Griselda because of her womanhood and then successfully tested it through three trials, all associated with their children and her submission of them to his will. When Walter reveals the sham of the third trial and stops testing Griselda, he says to her:
This is thy doghter, which thou hast supposed
To be my wyf; that oother feithfully
Shal be myn heir, as I have ay disposed;
Thou bare hym in thy body trewely.

Taak hem agayn, for now maystow nat seye
That thou hast lorn noon of thy children tweye.

And folk that ootherweys han seyd of me,
I warne hem wel that I have doon this deede
For no malice, ne for no crueltee,
But for t’assaye in thee thy wommanheede. (1065–75)

This passage openly identifies Walter’s motivation for testing Griselda: “t’assaye in thee thy wommanheede.” Now that it has been proven, the roles of mother and wife that were stripped from her are restored. Walter identifies the son as “myn heir,” accepting him as noble and suitable to carry on the line and stressing Griselda’s role as mother of the heir. The explanation Chaucer offers is an interpolation; in his sources, Walter states, tautologically, that the trials were to test his wife. Here he accompanies his justification with a less credible claim: he has not tried Griselda out of “malice” or “crueltee.” The tale contradicts this claim, and the Clerk has bluntly condemned Walter’s actions as “yvele” (460). His behavior, however, was necessary for two reasons. First, the malicious and cruel nature of his demands upon Griselda proves his sovereignty in marriage. Second, his malice and cruelty allow Griselda to prove her womanhood completely and effectively.

Walter’s concern that he might lose sovereignty through marriage has permeated the tale. In their initial request that he marry, his people ask, “Boweth youre nekke under that blisful yok / Of soveraynetee, noght of servyse, / Which that men clepe spousaille or wedlok” (113–15). As a ruler whose mind is always on his own “lust,” however, no “yok” is amenable to Walter. He responds to their petition by saying, “I me rejoysed of my liberte, / That seelde tyme is fo unde in mariage; / Ther I was free, I moot been in servage” (145–47). His choice of Griselda (when his people asked for a marchioness “Born of the gentilleste and of the meeste / Of al this land” [131–32]), his unreasonable demands within the marriage contract, and his trials of her demonstrate that his “soveraynetee” remains intact. It is rather Griselda who is “bisy in servyse” (603) and “mooste servysable of alle” (979). Walter continues to explain his rationale for the trials by asserting that he took away the children “to kepe hem pryvely and stille, / Til I thy purpos knewe and al thy wille” (1077–78). In truth, however, the trials have taught him nothing about his wife’s individual “purpos” and “wille” but instead have reassured him that she has none beyond what he imposes. Only tests excessive in their malice and cruelty could definitively establish—to Walter and his people—that he is not “in servage” but is
instead served by the unusual marriage he has constructed.

Perversely, Walter’s cruelty also creates the environment necessary for Griselda to prove herself an exemplar of womanhood (without such extreme tests, the womanhood of the Amazons was never proven in the *Knight’s Tale*). Like the spouses themselves, the two qualities—cruelty and perfect womanliness—are interdependent: womanhood is most apparent (and possibly most meaningful) in the context of unreasonably demanding male authority, while only that kind of authority would require the type of exemplary womanhood Griselda exhibits. Walter’s malice sets up in sharp contrast the conflicts and categories that she must mediate. The need to provide a suitable male heir (a need played upon and exaggerated by Walter) heightens the ordinary demands of motherhood for Griselda as a former peasant. On the other hand, the demands of wifehood are also greater because of the promise of obedience that is the basis of her marriage, inspired by Walter’s desire to preserve his sovereignty to the greatest degree. He pits her wifehood against her motherhood and raises the stakes of each.

Walter’s malicious demands require excessive virtue to endure, which creates the impression of Griselda’s patience as Job-like and saintly, bringing undertones of hagiography to the secular context of the tale. Enduring the cruel trials also requires great love, however, which Griselda also demonstrates. She refers to her love as she reiterates her excessive marriage pledge (and even ups the ante further) in response to the testing (857 and 973). This cultivates the sense of Griselda as a figure of romance; “Deth,” she says, “may noght make no comparisoun / Unto youre love” (666–67). Hence Walter sets up the conflicts Griselda must mediate (between the social roles of wifehood and motherhood and the literary categories of hagiography and romance) and it is the “malice” and “crueltie” he denies that make the conflicts extreme enough to warrant and witness an extraordinary response. Walter stages the trials for his own ends but becomes, almost in spite of himself, a crucial participant in the construction of Griselda’s exemplary womanhood.

Walter’s revelation is followed by a third translation: Griselda is again stripped and reclothed, this time with a “clooth of gold” and a “coroune” (1117–18). Finally “she was honured as hire oghte” (1120); this honor, however, is due as much to her husband’s agency as her own—both have contributed to this realization of her excellent womanhood. The moment when Walter first admires Griselda’s womanhood and the moment when he ends the trials bracket the tale, providing answers to the puzzling questions of why Walter chooses Griselda and why, having chosen her, he tests her so excessively. However, the ideal of womanhood that Griselda ultimately displays—which exceeds Walter’s predetermined model—marks a new conception of what is womanly.

This new conception is admittedly extreme: in order to pass Walter’s tests, Griselda must prove herself to be possessed of a womanhood that becomes threat-
ening through its endurance and ultimate triumph. The Clerk concludes the tale with several assurances that most (if not all) other women would fail such tests. Womanhood may have the potential to combine these different ideals of womanhood, but most women would have less of the steadfast saint in their combination. In other words, Griselda’s womanhood is so exemplary that it may mark the limit of the mediating power of womanhood. Chaucer employs a two-part strategy at the tale’s conclusion to allay any discomfort that might be caused by this new conception: first, he draws on Petrarch to universalize Griselda’s example and, second, he reminds the reader of more familiar images of powerful women as manipulative wives rather than secular saints. This recharacterization of womanly power undermines Griselda’s authority while, at the same time, preserving the possibility that there are multiple forms of feminine power.

Immediately after ending the story, the Clerk offers the Petrarchan moral:

This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde
Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
For it were inportable, though they wolde,
But for that every wight, in his degree,
Sholde be constant in adversitee
As was Grisilde; therfore Petrak writeth
This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth. (1142–48)

Chaucer redirects us to the allegorical level of the poem: Griselda’s womanhood is important insofar as it stands in for subjecthood, and so the tale is not for “wyves” but for “every wight.” This interpretation makes the “storie” not about Griselda’s powerful submission—her “humilytee”—but about the human ability to endure suffering and “be constant in adversitee.” Walter’s cruelty is muted somewhat, but we are left with serious gaps between his allegorical likeness to God and his behavior as Chaucer represented it and the Clerk judged it.

After invoking and summarizing Petrarch, the Clerk signals a shift in perspective by offering “o word . . . er I go” (1163). This “word” turns out to be the envoy, which, apparently unlike the tale itself, is meant specifically for wives; he addresses it to the Wife of Bath and “al hire secte” (1171). Such women are nearly anti-Griseldas: unable to combine different models of womanhood as successfully as she did, they resemble the traditional overbearing wife of the fabliau. While Walter’s excessive exercise of authority enables Griselda’s exemplarity to exceed his own ideal, these women are comfortably comic because they can be powerful only in a vacuum, when husbands cannot or do not know how to exercise their own masculine and marital authority.

In the end, Chaucer may be retreating from the new and anxiety-producing model of womanhood that Griselda represents into conventional images of more
limited feminine authority, returning the readers to the kind of female characters that can more easily be recognized and enjoyed. Chaucer renames these stereotypes, however, calling such women “archewyves” (1195) and, in the context of Griselda’s story, we might read them from a different perspective: as an alternative and more accessible (if less effective or comprehensive) form of feminine authority. In a distinct and fundamental departure from Petrarch, Chaucer uses the tale to question and ultimately to broaden ideas about what is womanly and how women can exercise power, creating womanhood as a category that can encompass “archewyves” as well as Patient Griselda. The addition of womanhood reshapes the story and allows Chaucer to use it to explore the new concept and examine new ways of representing women that sought their similarities as a gender beyond traditional social roles or generic archetypes.

Chaucer’s texts make vital contributions to the earliest phase in the development of new terms like womanhood that allow writers to think about women in new ways. His use of gendered language confirms that questions about how to reconcile womanly virtue with feminine power are among the most pressing raised by figures who somehow transcend or transgress the possibilities that social custom or literary precedent have defined for them. More generally, his work shows that texts offer a space for experimenting not only with new vocabulary but also with new concepts; in these cases, Chaucer explores the potential for female social power by reimagining what might look like a limited form of influence (intercession) or even an absence of authority (submission). He is able to do so by manipulating and combining extant ideas of femininity—primarily literary stereotypes, such as those found in romance, hagiography, and legend, but also cultural identities such as mother and wife; this kind of experiment is more easily performed in texts than in life, but might have social as well as literary ramifications.

Womanhood is a motivating interest of Chaucer’s throughout his work, but the Canterbury Tales provides its most in-depth and varied exploration. Recognizing this larger interest recasts the economy of the collection; rather than being an anomalous beginning or a dead end, the Knight’s Tale makes a crucial contribution to our understanding of Chaucerian womanhood. Chaucer advances this project not only through the Knight and the Clerk or even in those tales in which the term appears but also in the many contexts and through the many portrayals of femininity that the collection presents. Nonetheless, the high-stakes transformations of Emelye, Hippolyta, and Griselda offer particularly fruitful circumstances for revisiting common associations between femininity and submission in order to test how much power women can exert while still privileging feminine virtues. While Gower is less focused on issues of power and approaches the relationship between gender and language from a different angle, the next chapter will show that he exhibits a similar interest in how transformation can test or reveal womanhood and its connections to moral behavior.