CHAPTER 5

Suffering love in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*

In arguing for the convergence in Chaucer's poetry of his interest in philosophy and his interests in gender and sexuality, I have so far focused primarily on the ways Boethian philosophy can help us read the "courtly" or "romantic" scene of a masculine sexuality that is simultaneously objectifying and abject, and that takes pleasure both in the suffering of its object and in the suffering it inflicts on itself. In the previous chapter, however, I turned as well to the equally powerful interest Chaucer inherited from the *Roman de la Rose* and elsewhere in a utopian sociality that provides both a model for and a site of resistance to the small-scale intimacies available in erotic relations, friendship, and marriage. The final two chapters of this book will elaborate Chaucer's interest in the idea of a utopian intimacy in which "two become one," in the context of discussions that move beyond the relatively narrow sphere of courtly male desire to examine how ideologies of gender and sexuality function in the formation of medieval women as subjects and agents, and how those ideologies affect the dynamics of the intimate couple. My discussion will focus on the two texts in which Chaucer pursued his interests in these topics most thoroughly and powerfully, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale*. In keeping with my argument in the rest of the book, I will argue that for Chaucer the desire for utopian intimacy is always inflected by sadistic and masochistic urges, and that the internal relation between sadomasochism and utopian desire can best be understood by returning to Chaucer's interests in autonomy and the structure of agency.

Finally, I will continue, more by way of example than by explicit argument, my account of the proximity between Chaucer's poetry and allegory. This is itself an account with both literary and philosophical

stakes. In the previous chapter I argued that in the *Rose* allegory functions not as the static embodiment of abstract concepts, but as a supple vehicle for speculation concerning the structure of fantasy. Allegorical tropes in that poem serve as meditative sites that embed dialectical structures of thought and desire, and that invite the work of a reflective engagement with what makes desire and agency problematic. As I have been arguing, this is precisely what Chaucer does in the *Canterbury Tales*; and while his literary means for doing so are hardly identical to those of Guillaume and Jean, we will exaggerate those differences unless we understand the kinship among their intellectual and literary projects. Another reason for turning next to the Wife of Bath, then, is that while she is clearly derived from the figure of La Vielle in the *Rose*, of all the Canterbury narrators she has been the most thoroughly identified with a supposedly realist, quasinovelistic, character-based poetics; what is more, her mode of autobiographical self-disclosure has been taken as an index of a Chaucerian privileging of "the subject" that amounts to an ideological and philosophical commitment as well as the basis for a poetics.[1] In this chapter I will argue, however, that the Wife provides Chaucer with an occasion for exploring the *myth* of "the subject" – the myth, that is, of subjectivity as a private interior space constituted prior to the person's engagements in the social. Chaucer pursues this exploration not merely to subject that myth to critique, but to understand what gives it its ideological power; and his attention to the Wife's troubled engagement with that myth, and the scenes of fantasy through which she ambivalently inhabits it, constitutes an elaboration of the allegorical imagination rather than an evolution away from it.

To begin unpacking the structure of the Wife's fantasy relation to intimacy, and the way that structure opens into broader concerns with the constitution of subjectivity, let us turn to one of the more striking moments in the Wife's *Prologue*, a moment that captures in quasiallegorical form the interlacings of suffering and desire that mark out the territory of the erotic for Alisoun.

BLOOD AND MONEY

Well into her account of the "wo that is in mariage" (III.3) the Wife of Bath reports a strange dream, a dream she says she did not really have,

but which she used to seduce her clerk Jankyn, the man who would become her fifth husband.

> I bar hym on honde he hadde enchanted me—
> My dame taughte me that soutiltee—
> And eek I seyde I mette of hym al nyght,
> He wolde han slayn me as I lay upright,
> And al my bed was ful of verray blood;
> 'But yet I hope that ye shal do me good,
> For blood bitokeneth gold, as me was taught.'
> And al was fals; I dremed of it right naught,
> But as I folwed ay my dames loore,
> As wel of this as of othere thynges moore.
> (III.575–84)[2]

Alisoun reports using the dream as a sign of her erotic availability to Jankyn, given in the hope of arousing him and receiving signs of his desire for her. He is supposed to find this sexy, and since, in contrast to her first three husbands, Alisoun finds him sexy – he is the one with legs and feet "so clene and faire / That al myn herte I yaf unto his hoold" (III.598–99) – and since this is the way she thinks to initiate things between them, apparently she finds it sexy too. But what is supposed to be sexy about a dream in which her bed fills with blood as Jankyn "wolde han slayn me as I lay upright"?[3]

The trope of being slain by desire is of course common enough, and together with the dream's suggestion that masculine sexuality harbors a murderous intent, it links this passage to the sadomasochism and antifeminism I have been exploring throughout this book. But the erotics of this moment is rather different from anything I have discussed so far. Despite the differences among the *Knight's Tale*, the *Miller's Tale*, and the *Roman de la Rose*, each of those texts explores the erotic psychology of a narcissized masculine subject and agent, whose desire finds its immediate expression in voyeuristic delectation and an impulse to sadistic mastery. The Wife of Bath, however, is hardly peering in on Jankyn unobserved; she does not imagine him as a tasty morsel waiting to be consumed or a beautiful rose waiting to be plucked. Nor is the suffering embedded in this scene that of the voyeur's romantic abjection, his sense of the erotic object as turned away from him, oblivious to his demands. For Alisoun fully expects Jankyn to respond, and she is

giving him the kind of erotic target she thinks will arouse him. What she thinks will arouse him is the thought of his own violent power, together with the belief that he is getting a glimpse at her desire for that violence. On Alisoun's view, then, Jankyn is the one whose desires amount to a species of sadistic voyeurism. Through the seduction of her dream she is offering herself up to the masculine erotic pathology we have been examining; she wants to be found desirable by someone who occupies the position staked out as masculine by her culture's dominant ideology of gender and sexuality.

One way of putting this contrast between Alisoun and the men would be to say that her desire takes its form from what that same ideology of gender and sexuality figures as the feminine position. The contours of her desire, in other words, are not to be explained by recourse to some peculiar feature of her psychology; Chaucer rather means the dream to allegorize some basic features of a much more widespread erotic form. The men seem to have been trained into thinking of themselves as in the first instance erotic subjects and agents confronting a world that consists of possible sources of gratification, and trained into thinking of women as in the first instance the objects that constitute that world. If, as I have argued, the masculine narcissist must imagine his erotic others to be subjects and agents as well, the structure of his desire depends on the way it refigures the demands such others make on him so that they seem to disappear, leaving him alone in a world of pure reflection. Alisoun's seductive gesture, however, proceeds directly from a sense of herself as addressing an erotic subject. That subject's demands do not get repressed or refigured, but immediately provide the terms by which she constitutes an erotics for herself. Alisoun seems, then, to have been trained into thinking of herself as in the first instance part of the world of objects that a man might want, and thinking of her existence as such an object as the basis for her elaboration of a subjectivity and an agency. Her own reading of the dream helps to specify some of the further contours of this self-conception. The blood that fills her bed, as she was taught, signifies gold, and the link between blood and gold leads her to expect that Jankyn will "do her good." Given that Jankyn, unlike the Wife's first three husbands, is not the one in this relationship with the money, and especially given her fantasy of Jankyn's murderousness, her blood

would seem to be something other than the sign of her expected financial profit. But whatever else her blood signifies, she offers it to Jankyn as an item of exchange, something for which he will provide an unspecified "good" in return. As wisdom passed on to her from her mother, this offer recalls an earlier relationship between blood and gold, in which a 12-year-old Alisoun's virginity was exchanged for the "good" of being married to a rich husband. If this dream sketches the contours of an erotics for Alisoun, its sexiness would seem to be inseparable from the sexiness of imagining her blood and whatever it might stand for – the virginity she no longer has, her suffering or death at the hands of her lover, perhaps even her very desire – as interchangeable with money, as commodities that a man might want to buy and she might want or need to sell.

I begin with this passage because it directly links the topics of this book with what many critics have taken to be Chaucer's central concern in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, namely the exploration of what it would be like to come into a sense of oneself as a woman, where the terms of that self-understanding are largely given by the patriarchal construction of "woman" as, among other things, a commodified sexual object. I think this critical emphasis has been right. But my sense of this passage also helps to indicate some differences I have with the best recent accounts of the Wife's project and of Chaucer's interest in it. On one such account the Wife, and Chaucer through her, means to offer a critique of patriarchy, perhaps alongside a critique of nascent capitalism.[4] But while the notion of critique means to capture the suffering and anger to which the Wife so frequently attests, her overall posture is more one of triumphant recollection than critical resistance, or even for that matter uncritical resentment. Throughout the prologue she declares that she has mostly gotten what she wanted from the world – "Unto this day it dooth myn herte boote / That I have had my world as in my tyme" (III.472–73) – and in relating the dream she clearly intends to be celebrating her seductive powers. She seems, then, too deeply to have internalized patriarchal ideology, and to take too much pleasure in her occupation of the position it assigns her, for the notion that she offers a protofeminist critique to gain a very firm footing. Alternatively, a number of critics have argued that the Wife understands her own prospects for happiness quite thoroughly in patriarchal terms.

She may still be out to reform patriarchy – perhaps she is miming the operations of patriarchal discourse to make a space for her own desire, or perhaps she strategically deploys antifeminist tropes to lure in and reeducate prospective lovers – but even in those cases her desire itself remains that of the patriarchal wife, and thus leaves her, and possibly Chaucer too, fully complicit in patriarchal wish fulfillment.[5] But, as I have argued throughout this book, not even Chaucer's male characters are fully complicit in patriarchal wish fulfillment; patriarchy is far too incoherent for anyone to understand their prospects for happiness thoroughly in its terms, much less someone who knows as well as Alisoun does how much the patriarchal deck is stacked against her. What is more, in trying to account for the Wife's internalization of patriarchal ideology and her posture of triumph, this second position tends to exaggerate her identification with what that ideology tells her she is.[6] And while the view of the Wife as protofeminist loses hold of the pleasure she takes in her occupation of an ideologized femininity, this second view loses hold of the depth of her suffering. For if patriarchal ideology ultimately determines the contours of her desire, then her suffering appears as little more than a historical tragedy the Wife herself could not appreciate: we can see that she is imprisoned by the historical conditions of her strategy, but as far as she is concerned nothing is lost.

I will argue, however, that from the Wife's own point of view quite a bit is lost. Her dominant terms for understanding herself may be given to her by patriarchal ideology, but she inhabits those terms with a good deal of ambivalence; and that ambivalence is the sign not of a conflict between her autonomous desire and an ideology that threatens to exclude it, but of a conflict internal to her desire itself – or, to put the point more precisely, a conflict in her will. This conflict has multiple sources: in the incoherences of patriarchal ideology itself, in the conceptions of subjectivity and agency that ideology depends on, and in an ontological problem concerning love which, even if it can never *historically* precede the production of erotic ideology, nevertheless has a certain *ontological* priority as a source of ideology. Here, then, we will see Chaucer continuing to pursue a Boethian philosophical interest in the relations between history and ontology, in a context quite far removed from any of the technical philosophical concerns that occupy the *Consolation*. To begin to see the form that interest takes, let us

return to the Wife's attempt to carve out a space for feminine agency and the conception of subjectivity that that attempt entails.

THE MYTH OF THE SUBJECT

I have said that throughout her prologue the Wife of Bath remains committed to declaring herself triumphant over her husbands and the antifeminist ideology that would deprive her of a voice. Before exploring the ambivalences in the Wife's project, I want to be clear about just what she thinks that project is and about what conceptual commitments it reflects. The Wife's triumphant posture is nowhere more clearly in evidence than in her declaration of a marital agenda:

> In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument
> As frely as my Makere hath it sent.
> If I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwe!
> Myn housbonde shal it have both eve and morwe,
> Whan that hym list come forth and paye his dette.
> An housbonde I wol have—I wol nat lette—
> Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,
> And have his tribulacion withal
> Upon his flessh, whil that I am his wyf.
> I have the power durynge al my lyf
> Upon his propre body, and noght he.
> Right thus the Apostel tolde it unto me,
> And bad oure housbondes for to love us weel.
> (III.149–61)

As critics have emphasized for some time, Alisoun means this declaration as a strike against both a clerical suspicion of sexuality and the antifeminist gender politics such a suspicion fosters.[7] The medieval Church, following Paul, taught that spouses have an obligation to have sex with each other because of the danger that erotic desire – the "tribulation of the flesh" – would drive people to commit adultery. If marital sex was a moral duty, then, it remained the lesser of two evils, a nagging reminder that you had failed to live up to the perfection of complete sexual renunciation. As Paul put it, "it is better to marry than to burn with desire," and the medieval Church made it clear that rendering the "marital debt" was supposed to involve as little desire as

possible.[8] While this moralization of sex was directed at both men and women, since it was conducted mostly from an antifeminist perspective that associated the unruliness of desire and the flesh with "the feminine," the impulse to constrain sexuality involved an impulse to constrain women as well. But by claiming the free use of the instrument her maker fitted her with, the Wife recasts the marital debt from the sober doing of a moral duty into an ideal of the pure pursuit of erotic pleasure in marriage, an ideal for which Solomon serves as the presiding genius: "As wolde God it leveful were unto me / To be refresshed half so ofte as he!" (III.37–38). In keeping with this ideal, the Wife recasts the "tribulation of the flesh" from the fearful aching of unfulfilled desire into the quivering exhaustion of "having it" morning and night. Alisoun means the prospect to be both titillating and daunting, for any man who would seek such erotic repletion would also have to forego the antifeminism that fuels so much of the husbandly behavior she reports.[9]

The Wife's marital agenda suggests that her attempt to rehabilitate the feminine also involves attempts to rehabilitate pleasure, sexuality, and the body. Alisoun foregrounds the relations among those concerns from the moment she begins to speak, as she shouts down the Parson: "He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche. / . . . / My joly body schal a tale telle" (II.1180, 1185). Her voice, she implies, issues in a direct and unmediated way from her body rather than from the clerical activity of "glossing," a term for interpretation which in Alisoun's mouth carries a strong connotation of deceptiveness. "Glossing" may have the power of male institutional authority behind it, but Alisoun will have none of it:

> Glose whoso wole, and seye bothe up and doun
> That [our sexual "members"] were maked for purgacioun
> Of uryne, and oure bothe thynges smale
> Were eek to knowe a femele from a male,
> And for noon oother cause—say ye no?
> The experience woot wel it is noght so.
> (III.119–24)

"Experience" is a more reliable source of knowledge than "glossing," it would seem, because, like "the body," it constitutes a realm of authenticity free of the idealizing and prudish distortions that attach to a supposedly authoritative clerical hermeneutics. What is more, not only

does the Wife claim that experience has an epistemic privilege over glossing, in the first words of her prologue she declares that experience would be a reliable source of knowledge even in the absence of any public authority: "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage" (III.1–3). In imagining a world with no authoritative discourse, but in which experience would still authorize her to speak, the Wife indicates the conceptual center of her attempt to carve out a space for feminine agency. If her experience would tell her all she needs to know even in a world devoid of "auctoritee," and if her voice issues directly from her body, that is because her experience of that body constitutes a private realm of subjective certainty, a realm whose deliverances of knowledge are completely independent of the public world in which authority is established and conferred.

I think that Patterson and Dinshaw are right, then, in describing the Wife's agenda as complicit in a standard package of binaries through which medieval culture imagines gender difference, although I also think that this only begins to describe the conceptual structure of the Wife's commitments.[10] In particular, I think that Patterson captures something essential in his idea that in the Wife of Bath's discourse "the realm of the *asocial* – of the internal, the individual, the subjective" gets represented as the realm of "the feminine," and that this representation involves an implicit claim that "the basic unit of social life is a socially undetermined selfhood."[11] Patterson's first formulation gets its grip from the way Alisoun imagines that the contrast between masculine and feminine involves a series of parallel contrasts: between authority and experience, duty and pleasure, a denial or suspicion of the body and an identification with the body, an unreliable interpretive discourse and authentic self-expression or straight talk or the literal text. The feminine gets associated with an essentially subjective interiority because each term on one side of the series figuratively resonates with the others. But then, as I just suggested, the consequences of this figurative resonance go well beyond what Alisoun or anyone else thinks about gender difference. While a subjective experience that stands in need of no interpretation gets figured, along with pleasure and the body, as feminine, by the same token the body gets imagined as the site of "the literal," that is, of a nonidealized materiality that comes before

interpretation; doing your duty is taken to require the denial or glossing over of your true pleasures; and experience is taken not to involve or require interpretation, but rather to be a realm of subjective immediacy whose deliverances are not open to doubt.

We can see the grip of Patterson's second formulation concerning the basic unit of social life if we return to a topic raised by Alisoun's seduction of Jankyn, her closely linked interests in power and in the commodification of marriage and sexuality. We see that link, for instance, in her declaration that her husband will be her debtor and her thrall, and that the marital debt gives her power even over his own body; in her complaint concerning the husbandly wish to assay women at market before marrying them, as one assays "oxen, asses, hors, and houndes" (III.285) before a purchase; and in her admonition "And therfore every man this tale I telle, / Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle; / With empty hand men may none haukes lure" (III.413–15). These and other similar comments suggest that the Wife's interest in the commodification of marriage and sexuality, and the violence involved in this commodification, is informed by a much broader picture of what sex and marriage essentially are, namely that they are relations of exchange in which power ultimately rules the day – or, to put the point even more broadly, that they are relations between essentially self-interested parties. The language of commodity exchange appears when each party thinks that, at least with respect to some particular event, their interests are served by their relation, as when the Wife allows her husbands the use of her "instrument" in exchange for money or land: "[When] he had maad his raunson unto me; / Thanne wolde I suffre hym do his nycetee" (III.411–12). But, as Alisoun makes clear with the immediately subsequent lines concerning the luring of hawks, even in such cases there is always profit to be had. Relations of exchange, that is, always have power and even violence at their core; or, to reverse one of the Wife's tag lines, gold signifies blood.

In this connection, the idea that the Wife lays claim to a "socially undetermined selfhood" becomes relevant not only as a thought about her relations to gender ideology, but also as a much broader thought about the conceptual relationship between social units and their constitutive parts. On the view the Wife expresses in these passages, people come into social relations prepackaged, as it were, with a set of desires,

interests, hopes, fears, and so on – with, that is, an "individuality" and a "subjectivity" – that determine their aims in participating in social life. We might describe such a view of social life and its basis as atomistic. On such a view, social units – marriages, families, friendships, gossip groups, towns, and so on – are made up of discrete parts, people whose identities are determined first, prior to their engagement in the social unit. The self would then be socially undetermined in the sense that individual people would be the atoms of which social units are composed, and descriptions of social life would be descriptions of how these antecedently determinate parts get put together and interact. This view of social life functions as a reformulation of a claim about subjectivity because in fact they present versions of the same thought. For if one thinks that a person's subjectivity is determined independently of the intersubjective space of interpretation, it is a small step from there to thinking that the contents of that subjectivity – a person's desires, interests, and so on – are determined independently of the desires and interests of anyone else; and it is an equally small step from there to thinking that everyone's only true interest is self-interest.

I do not mean to suggest that this provides the final word on the Wife's structure of belief and desire; the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* are not, as Patterson would have it, about "the triumph of the subject."[12] I mean rather to be sketching a picture in which the Wife is deeply invested, a way she has of representing herself not only to others but to herself – or, in the terms of Aristotelian psychology, a *phantasm*.[13] And to keep a focus on the allegorical generality of this self-representation, we should remember at this point that Alisoun is hardly alone in being held captive by this picture. I have been arguing throughout this book that at the center of the philosophical interests both of Chaucer and of the intellectual tradition to which he belonged is a powerful myth concerning personhood: that the essence of personal identity resides in an essentially private subjectivity, and that what is to be found in that subjectivity is a primary concern with the self that precedes the person's concerns with everything and everyone else.[14] This myth is at the core of the Miller's naturalism, of the fratricidal Theban polity the Knight set out to critique, of the Prisoner's resistance to philosophical therapy in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, and of the narcissized masculine sexuality on display in the *Roman de la Rose*. But even in cases, such as

that of the Miller, when this myth so dominates a person's imagination that he is prepared to avow it wholesale as the truth of what we are and the secret of happiness, its grip is never total. As each of these texts in a different way has helped us to see, our engagement by this myth is necessarily both deep and deeply ambivalent. And this is no less true for the Wife of Bath than for her masculine counterparts.

We can begin to chart the territory of the Wife's ambivalence by turning to one of her favorite topics, the body. "In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument": this is just one example of the Wife's habit of figuring both her and her husbands' genitals as an "instrument" (III.132, 149), or a "harneys" or apparatus (III.136), or a "thyng" (III.121; see also "bele chose," III.446, 510, and "quoniam," III.608). Again, this is a common enough set of tropes, and it fits relatively easily with the Wife's picture of the self as metaphysically private, a subject inside a body. It also fits well with the social atomism that that picture encourages. In imagining sex and marriage as relations of power and exchange, Alisoun figures the sexual organs as instruments or things, and even, as we have seen, as commodities: they are the tools of the trade, or things to be traded. But if the Wife figures her genitals, or more broadly her body, as an instrument or apparatus, a thing to be used by her in achieving her ends and by her husbands in exchange for money, land, and power, then she cannot identify as fully and directly with her body as her picture suggests she does.[15] Our relation to an instrument or tool – a hammer, say – is a relation to something we use to effect our will; something that is separable from us, external to us; something we can pick up and put down. If, as would be the case with the body considered as an instrument, we cannot pick it up or put it down, we might, as Alisoun seems to do here, imagine it to be an inalienable tool, something external to the self which nevertheless must always obey our wishes; but even here we are still far from something that can serve as the ground of a person's authority and self-presence. What is more, since instruments can break or fail, and since, as Alisoun intimates at several points, the body must inevitably grow old and die (cf. III.474–75), this instrument that cannot be put down will at times feel less like an inalienable tool than like something to which we are stuck, or, as the more common trope has it, something *in* which we are stuck, as in prison. I will return to this thought later; I know that

Alisoun's avowed identification with the body makes it seem as though this particular trope is quite far from her mind. For now, I only want to suggest that, coexisting uncomfortably with the Wife's identification with her body as a locus of subjective self-presence, is a counterthought, itself closely allied with the very same picture of the metaphysically private self, that her body is only an instrument of her will, an object or even a space of commercial transaction, an apparatus from which she is absent or behind which she recedes.

The body is not the only site of the Wife's ambivalence, although it is the one that most directly problematizes the sense of her that prevails in current criticism. A site of ambivalence that brings us back to the Wife's concern with eros can be seen in a comment she makes about Jankyn's sexual prowess:

> But in oure bed he was so fressh and gay,
> And therwithal so wel koude he me glose,
> Whan that he wolde han my *bele chose*;
> That thogh he hadde me bete on every bon,
> He koude wynne agayn my love anon.
> (III.508–12)

Consistently with her agenda of reclaiming sexual pleasure from clerical suspicion, the Wife links skill in bed, not just the sober doing of a duty, to the production of love and the promotion of marital concord. But by describing Jankyn's sexiness as a capacity for glossing her, she also links it to the antierotic realm of clerical *auctoritee*, and more broadly to the unreliable interpretive discourse that belongs to the realm of the mediated, the idealized, and the public. And if glossing is what excites her and wins her love, then the possibilities of sexual pleasure and marital happiness are not finally articulable for her in terms of a metaphysically private experience, an atomized self, or a grounding materiality, however deeply she may wish to imagine them as being so.

A similar ambivalence, and the last one I will mention for now, appears in the representations of utopian married sociality that conclude the Wife's prologue and tale. On the one hand, feminine "maistrie" becomes the precondition of marital concord in both moments of narrative closure, and the answer to the question of what women most desire in the tale. This is hardly surprising, since according to her picture of the self and its engagements in social life, what

everyone most desires is "maistrie," and in the state of affairs she wants to redress it is mostly men who have it. Yet Alisoun's description of these utopian marriages as spaces of mutual obedience, kindness, and *trouthe* has made it a critical commonplace that, as Dinshaw puts it, "what she wants is reciprocity, despite her talk of 'maistrie'; she most wants mutual recognition and satisfaction of desires."[16] The standard critical response to this ambivalence has thus been to erase it: the Wife *says* that her, or women's, or everyone's fundamental desire is for domination, but that is just part of her rhetorical strategy; her *real* fundamental desire is for reciprocity.[17] Given the centrality of the Wife's social atomism to her whole way of imagining the self, however, the thought of a fundamental desire for domination cannot be so easily set aside. The critical task here, it seems to me, should not be that of saying how the Wife reconciles the conflict between her desires for domination and for reciprocity, but that of saying why she cannot. The rest of this chapter, then, will pursue the question of how an unassimilable desire for utopian intimacy intersects with a dominant self-conception in which others are imagined as alien to the self, and one's relations with them are imagined as fundamentally determined by power.

THE EROTICS OF AMBIVALENCE

The body provides a good place to begin because of its centrality to the Wife's agenda. Why does she imagine the body as an instrument, given that doing so compromises her identification with what she also feels to be the ground of her experience and her agency? We can get an idea from the way the Wife's confident assertion of perpetual profit in bed modulates into something closer to a confession of anger and disgust:

> Namely abedde hadden they meschaunce:
> Ther wolde I chide and do hem no plesaunce;
> I wolde no lenger in the bed abyde,
> If that I felte his arm over my syde,
> Til he had maad his raunson unto me;
> Thanne wolde I suffre hym do his nycetee.
> And therfore every man this tale I telle,

Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle;
With empty hand men may none haukes lure.
For wynnyng wolde I al his lust endure,
And make me a feyned appetit;
And yet in bacon hadde I never delit.
That made me that ever I wolde hem chide.
(III.407–19)

Alisoun claims that chiding, sexual withholding, and making herself sexually available while pretending to enjoy it were the means by which she "hadde the bettre in ech degree" (III.404) over her husbands: this was all just part of her strategy for power and profit, and so fits quite well with her marital agenda. But the passage ends with her chiding her husbands because she is angry and disgusted at the shrivelled old meat that never gave her pleasure. And while that anger and disgust is partly directed at her husbands for being so monumentally undesirable, it is also directed at herself. For in pursuing her strategy she trades away her pleasure in exchange for a claim to victory; she centers this strategy on a willingness to "suffer" sex, to undergo it or be passive in the face of it; and in doing so through a "feyned appetit," a false representation of her desire, she places herself on the side of the "gloss," of what she figures as the realm of the inauthentic and the denial of bodiliness and pleasure. In all these ways, her basic conception of her agenda and of the strategies through which she might put it into practice requires that she surrender the very things which it is the whole purpose of her agenda to reclaim, and requires as well that she align herself with the forces that have dispossessed her.

While Alisoun's anger and disgust at her husbands is real, then, and while they richly deserve it, her chiding also has the function of diverting attention from the sordid compromises her agenda necessitates: "husbandly bacon" represents an external source of pollution that can contain a potentially more damaging sense of inner pollution. One of the principal advantages of the Wife's instrumental view of the body is that it defends her against both of these sources of disgust. If her body is not just *her*, but is rather her instrument, something she owns and uses, then even the most sordid of her marital and erotic compromises hardly amount to anything. All that she trades away, all that can become polluted or possessed, is her body; it isn't *her* there, bearing up under

her husband's desire; in fact, since his desire is for her body, that desire can make no claim on her at all. She remains behind the scene, arranging and controlling it for her profit; she is untouched; she preserves, we might say, her chastity.

The instrumentalization of the body, then, is essential to the Wife's ability to maintain a functional agenda, for it allows her to imagine her immunity to suffering and pollution, through the thought that there is something that is unqualifiedly her, fully intact, not passive in any way; something that is fully distinct from the territories of marital and erotic exchange. Her agenda had already promised such a thing, and called it the body: on this view, the territory of exchange is that of social life, and the body was supposed to be distinct from that territory in part because it was supposed to mark out the unity of her subjectivity and the locus of her self-interest. But we have seen that this view by itself does not hold up, for her agenda requires that her body itself become both a territory of exchange and an instrument whose use is up for sale. So she has to imagine that this intact, distinct something that is "really her" is more "internal" than her body – call it her soul. The Wife's social atomism is thus tracked by an atomism with respect to herself, a way of seeing herself as made up of discrete parts, one of which is inside the other. And here the Wife's attitude turns out to be less distinct from the Platonist and Christian myths than is typically supposed. For if the body she is inside on this view is a site of disgust and loss, then her body is after all a kind of prison for her soul; and if she wants to distinguish herself from that body's erotic transactions to preserve an interior chastity, then a Pauline renunciation of sexuality is perhaps closer to her heart than she would care to admit.

The Wife of Bath's need to imagine an immunity to suffering and pollution is a powerful one, particularly in the context of the gender politics the prologue sketches. But it brings with it even more powerful costs. We see these costs first of all in the very fact that the Wife has two ways of imagining her immunity, which involve two ways of imagining the scene from which she recedes and the person she is apart from that scene. This does more to trouble the question of her identity than to answer it: is her body essential to who she is, or is she merely in it? We might well wonder, after such a double receding, after she has given up what otherwise seems to her to be the ground of her identity, what is to

stop her retreat from suffering and pollution at the site of her soul; for, as her internalized disgust suggests, her sense of pollution does not stop with the body. Perhaps, then, her soul is not far enough away from the scene of suffering, pollution, and compromise, and she is even further inside – only where would that be? What could be far enough away? Perhaps all really *is* "for to selle," and there will be no one left to reap the profit.

But as disturbing as the threat of a potentially infinite dwindling away of identity may be, it is not the only problem the Wife faces here. Let us assume that an erotic territory of the kind the Wife wishes for could exist – one whose sufferings would either be unreal or would attach to something external to her, like a body, and so in either case would leave her untouched. Such a territory would also leave her untouched by its pleasures and any other satisfactions of desire; they, like the sufferings, would either be unreal or would happen only to her body. But this is not what Alisoun wants or wants to claim. It is not that her instrument has had pleasure, *she* has; and in satisfying her desires, she was right there, not behind the scene but in it. Unlike her identification with the body, this is one thought to which the Wife seems unambiguously committed. But what is the pleasure of being in the erotic scene like for her, given the suffering and pollution she associates with it?

Consider again the false dream by which Alisoun seduced Jankyn. A consequence of the Wife's social atomism, and a way of reading Jankyn's wish for her death and the flow of her blood in the dream, is that she sees Jankyn's desire as a violent objectification she suffers or undergoes: she is passive with respect to it, merely its object. The puzzle then is that she seduces Jankyn at all. She desires his desire for her, *this* desire for her. Given her impulse to recede from the erotic scene, one advantage to the thought of a violent objectification is that it allows her to imagine that the target of Jankyn's desire is merely an object rather than her. Maybe what he wants and gets is her body; maybe it is her phantasmatic projection into the territory of exchange; in any case it is something she can treat as distinct from her. His desire, in other words, cannot threaten her chastity; it cannot invade the privacy of her subjectivity; it cannot disturb the thought that her interests and desires precede her social relations and provide her with a determinate basis on which to act. We have seen why the Wife would want to hold to such a fantasy, but it hardly explains why she would want to seduce Jankyn; it

hardly suggests anything erotic. As I have said, it also requires her to wish her suffering away: she can only have this fantasy to the extent that she ignores or denies the existence of the very thing that motivates it. So there must be some other desire involved here.

A more properly erotic desire is suggested by the Wife's ambivalence over the body. She wants to imagine that the body serves as the experiential source of her autonomy and pleasure; but she also thinks of the body as an instrumentalized and commodified object. To the extent that she remains identified with such an object, then, her desire to lay claim to her autonomy and pleasure cannot be separated from the thrill of imagining her own instrumentalization and commodification. The thought that she finds pleasure in being the target of an instrumentalizing and commodifying desire gains further support from her other ambivalence over glossing. If she is aroused by glossing, then she remains attracted to something she associates with the denial or destruction of the body. And if we follow through on the association of glossing with violence, then it looks as though Jankyn's ability to give her pleasure in bed and his habit of beating her on every bone function for her less as the opposites she says they are than as mutually constitutive features of a single eroticism. If Alisoun thinks of the self as a body, and the body as an instrument, then that is partly because she equates being loved with being violated, or more broadly with being used. In this sense, she wants to take up the place reserved for her in a familiar patriarchal fantasy, and to mark herself as an appropriate object of masculine narcissism. Unlike her desire for sheer absence from the erotic scene, this desire does define an erotics, a masochistic one in which sexiness lies in being violently made into an instrument of the other's pleasure, a suffering passive thing.

This is still hardly a desire for utopian reciprocity; but I would suggest that it is closer to such a desire than it may seem to be. The Wife's desire to be used, and more broadly the idea that she desires Jankyn's desire, implies that at least in this case she does not simply want power over a passive husband, since if she did what he wants would not be in question. Similarly, the thought that the Wife desires *Jankyn* suggests that she does not simply want either a profitable exchange or the instrumental use of him for purposes of gratification, since if she did she would really only want something *from* him, and *he*

would not be in question. And the same goes for what she looks for in him: if she wants him to desire *her*, then she cannot simply want him to see her as some substitutable commodity or instrument. But her picture of the self and its entrance into social life does not allow for any other way of conceiving desire, and however ambivalent her commitment to that picture is, she is so deeply invested in it that without it her marital and erotic agenda would collapse. To let that picture go would be hard; it would involve suffering, and it would require her to identify with her suffering rather than assigning it to some imagined or projected "exterior." Letting go her picture of the self would even feel like a kind of death. But it would be a death she would also desire, for, as I have argued, that death is essential to the very possibility of the erotics she wants to claim. And now we can say what the content of that death wish is: it is a wish for the death of the self configured around the myth of the subject, a wish that is for everything in her that clings to that myth, everything that resists the pleasure and pains of a utopian reciprocity, to be stripped away or purged.

I have argued that the Wife clings to the myth of the subject in an attempt to reclaim her autonomy from a patriarchal ideology that threatens to make it illegible, and that a central feature of this attempt is an ambivalent attitude towards a body that seems at once to ground and threaten her autonomy. I have also argued that her identification with the body is closely associated with her social atomism, her sense of her desires and interests as given prior to her relations with others. One thing the Wife would have to imagine as being purged in her death wish is thus the phantasmatic instrumental body, the tool she finds at once so inalienable and polluting – as though the body sown in corruption might pass away, to be replaced by a new body redeemed of its sufferings. The Wife's masochism, I would suggest, involves a deeply Pauline desire for the corruptible to put on incorruption, and so to be transformed. Masochistic suffering and death, however, are no more the final objects of her desire than is domination: if Alisoun imagines a "death of the body," that is a way of imagining what is involved in entering into a new life of utopian intimacy. But how are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come? These are questions the Wife addresses in her tale, and I will conclude this chapter by turning to them.

THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

The *Wife of Bath's Tale* concludes with a promise of utopian intimacy predicated on the appearance of a transfigured body: the hideous old hag who has rescued the rapist knight of the tale from punishment becomes fair and young, and the two "lyve unto hir lyves ende / In parfit joye" (III.1257–58). Magical transformations aside, there is a clear parallel here to the resolution between Alisoun and Jankyn at the end of the prologue: "After that day we hadden never debaat. / God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde / As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde, / And also trewe, and so was he to me" (III.822–25). But the language of reciprocal kindness and *trouthe* is more jarring in the prologue than that of perfect joy is in the tale, and not only because the former lacks a fairy-tale setting to shield it from the hard edge with which the Wife has narrated her own history. For the resolution of the prologue is predicated on Alisoun's gaining from Janykyn "the governance of hous and lond, / And of his tonge, and of his hond also" (III.814–15); and her control over a tongue and hand that fill out the list of Jankyn's major possessions pulls the moment back into the orbit of her picture of the self and social life. It seems as though Jankyn's body has become an instrument of her will after all, and this has the effect of suggesting simultaneously that he is a slave rather than a loving partner and that her control of him only goes so deep, to those things that can be represented as his possessions but perhaps no further. The perfect reciprocity of the prologue's conclusion can be no more than the reciprocity of atoms in social space, an exchange of kindness and *trouthe* between partners whose wills remain utterly discrete.

The conclusion of the tale shares with that of the prologue the narrative structure of a granting of feminine "maistrie" that precedes the final cessation of hostilities. But the differences in how the granting is cast provide the key to understanding the appearance of that celestial body in the tale. The rapist knight, faced with the fairy-tale choice of having his wife young and beautiful but perhaps unfaithful, or old and ugly but always faithful, gives over his choice to her:

> My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
> I put me in youre wise governance;

> Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance
> And moost honour to yow and me also.
> I do no fors the wheither of the two,
> For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me.
> (III.1230–35)

The knight promises that he will wait on his wife to specify what will give pleasure and honor to both of them, and that he will find his satisfaction in whatever pleases her. Unlike Alisoun's sovereignty over Jankyn, then, the governance the knight grants his wife does not stop at the tongue and hand. It reaches all the way through him, leaving no possibility of an inner reserve that goes untouched. But while this governance is more complete than that imagined in the prologue, it is also less tyrannical. The knight does not forego his desire or become an instrument of his wife's will: in offering the promise he is still laying claim to his own satisfactions and to the fulfillment of his own pleasure and honor. The knight's promise, then, is the one moment in the Wife of Bath's discourse in which clear and unambiguous voice is given to the desire for intimacy as Cicero and Jean de Meun understand it, namely as the desire for relations with an *alter ego* who occupies the deepest sites of one's selfhood, someone whose alterity constitutes not a break with one's ego, but a constitutive extension of it.

It is remarkable that the knight should be the figure to give voice to such a desire, for he is the single figure in the Wife of Bath's discourse for whom the possibility of such a desire is most alien. Up to this point the knight has served as an allegorical representation of patriarchy at its worst. His desire takes aim at its object in a purely instrumentalizing way, and so registers as pure threat, pure violation:

> And happed that, allone as he was born,
> He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn,
> Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed,
> By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed.
> (III.885–88)

The casualness of this description is striking: it just happened that the knight raped a young woman, as though it were the most routine of acts, as though when he sees her walking before him she exists for nothing other than the immediate gratification of his desire. It is

appropriate, then, that in order to save his life from the just retribution of the law he must discover what women most desire, for it has seemingly never occurred to him that there might be a question worth asking about feminine desire. Or, to put the point as Alisoun does in another allegorical moment in the tale, it is as though the knight's violence stems from a feeling that he cannot approach what seems to him to be the mysterious otherness of women, a self-enclosed dance that excludes him; for even when he wants to draw near to such a dance, it vanishes under his approach, to be replaced by the sheer loathsomeness of an ugly, aged femininity (III.991–99). The knight, then, is a figure not so much for blindness to the bare existence of a feminine other or feminine desire as for a fear of this otherness, a suspicion that it constitutes a magic circle that excludes him, or that if he should come close to this otherness he would find it repulsive.

So far I have discussed the tale's ending as though the miraculous transformation that occurs there is the one that befalls the ugly old hag. But the conceptual structure of the narrative is, I think, closer than such a reading would suggest to that of the Pygmalion episode at the end of the *Rose*, in which the transformation of the love object is preceded by a change in the erotic subject. Given the knight's figurative function in the tale, the hag's transformation looks more like the expression provided by the narrative machinery of romance to an earlier, more inexplicable change, whereby the knight is suddenly able to address her as "my lady and my love, and wyf so deere." That any woman, much less this one, appears to him as dear rather than alien and frightful; that he can regard her with a loving gaze, rather than one of appropriation, suspicion, or repulsion – this is a change that truly would seem to require a miracle. And once it has occurred, the woman in question is already beautiful; she has no transformation to undergo, the knight need only "cast up the curtyn, looke how that it is" (III.1249). According to this trope of casting up the curtain in bed, seeing how it is with another depends on seeing her with the eyes of love. If you do not, the curtain remains drawn, you cannot know what is there, and you will be condemned to imagining that behind the veil lies only frightful deformity. Once you do, the curtain has been lifted not only from between you and the other, but from between you and yourself: for what is revealed to the knight is not only the beauty of the other but the

truth of his own heart's desire. His fearfulness has not only objectified and instrumentalized the others in his world, it has shielded him from himself.

As I said in discussing the Ciceronian account of friendship to which this package of tropes refers, it is almost impossible to think this way without indulging in sentimentality, even though a sentimentalizing reading of such an account gets it precisely wrong. The question then is what produces this sentimentalizing impulse. Alisoun's own sentimentality – the flipside of her *Realpolitik* desire for power – appears in the thought, expressed in the old hag's transformation, that love might free her from the pollutions and sufferings of her erotic life, free her, that is, from the phantasmatic "ugly body" to which patriarchy has bound her. Here again the Wife gives voice to a repressed Pauline longing: "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Her sentimentality thus resides in her way of imagining her desire for freedom, as a wish for deliverance from the imprisoning, "dead" stuff of which she is made, and deliverance by a redeemed version of the very agency of her imprisonment.

But the freedom the Wife seeks here goes beyond that which patriarchy and her husbands have denied her. The other as separated from you, as though by a curtain: this trope is a version of a thought that dogs the Wife's picture of the self, the thought of the body as a site of exterior stuff, instrumental or imprisoning as it strikes you, either way something that shadows the one inside, the one who can never be reached. The other as self-enclosed, excluding you, harboring frightfulness or threat: this trope too is a version of the thought of subjectivity as an essentially private realm in which each person nurses the fundamental motive of a narcissized self-interest. The rapist knight, then, allegorizes not only the men in Alisoun's life and the world they have made, but also the dominant terms of her own self-understanding, the myth of subjectivity by which she hopes to snatch pleasure and freedom from that world; and his redemption is as much a figure for her own redemption from that myth as it is for the redemption of patriarchy from its worst excesses.

Perhaps the sense that a sentimentality inevitably attends talk of utopian intimacy is itself a product of that myth. The charge of sentimentality stems, I think, from the idea that a utopian intimacy

would be a state of bliss, that the perfection of such an intimacy would consist of a subjective state of pure pleasure and total gratification. That is why the conclusion of the tale reads so easily as a wish fulfillment, either Alisoun's wish to be young and beautiful and loved, or the masculine wish for a beautiful, young, and faithful wife: we are inclined to suspect that the drive to narrative closure is driven by some wish for a subjective gratification that the conclusion promises to supply.[18] But to think this is to repress the pairing in Cicero's account of the happiness of friendship with its totalizing demands; and in the contexts of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, there is something chilling about such demands, and something fearful about wanting an intimacy that includes them, something quite far from anything that could function as a wish fulfillment. To return to the Pauline imagery that hovers over this scene: if the ugly body, old and bound for death, is sown in the corruption of instrumentalizing desire and fear, the dead are resurrected, in the twinkling of an eye, with a new celestial body sown in the incorruption of love. Such Pauline language is beautiful and moving; but this is still talk of death. And it would be a terrifying prospect, and a kind of death, to look at another who appears to you as an ugly and frightful threat – as men must appear to Alisoun, but also in a sense as women appear to the men we have been discussing, both here and throughout this book – and see them as beautiful, see your relations with them as a place for a transformative fulfillment. It would seem to require, that is, the death of your "body" or your "matter"; or, to put the point in terms that can help explain the Wife's hyperbolic metaphors, it would require a willingness to forego the identity your history has given you, and in that sense to suffer the death of the stuff you are made of. In order to understand the desire for the incorruption of love, we would have to imagine our way into such a willingness much more fully than Alisoun's tropes of masochistic harrowing and magic transformation can allow.

The place Chaucer most powerfully pursues such an imagining, I think, is the *Clerk's Tale*. It may seem odd to mention the *Clerk's Tale* here, for in its representation of Walter's tyranny and Grisilde's victimization it would seem to leave utopian intimacy far to the side. But the Clerk's focus on Walter's obsessive inflicting of pain on Grisilde and her equally obsessive embrace of it belongs, I will argue, to a

radically antisentimental account of love, one that will lead us to the ontological problem concerning love that, I think, underlies the ideological and erotic ambivalences we have been examining. And the Clerk quite directly picks up on the Pauline tropes I have been exploring here. When Walter marries Grisilde and brings her from her "throop" into his palace, he has her stripped from her "povre weedes" and reclothed in royal garb, as though having borne the image of the earthy she should now bear the image of the heavenly; and Grisilde greets this not as an imposition but as something she herself wills. What is involved in Grisilde's willingness to do this, and Walter's desire to have her do it? These are questions to which I will now turn.