“What Sharp Words”:
Critics of the Wife of Bath and Sovereignty in Marriage

Clerical and historical misogyny, antifeminist self-aggrandizement, and romantic distortions: these are the criticisms Susan Crane lays upon the Wife of Bath in her article, “Alison’s Incapacity and Poetic Instability in the Wife of Bath’s Tale.” For, although Alison attempts to redefine and defend the notion of women’s sovereignty in marriage, she becomes lost in her own rhetorical confusion, conflating satire and romance in such a way that her message actually rebounds against her. Yet while Crane’s argument is effectively reinforced by historical as well as textual evidence, it is, in a sense, as inconclusive as Alison’s. In contextualizing the Wife of Bath in the terms of her historical and cultural construction, it is Crane herself who imposes upon Alison the contrarieties of her narratives. The Wife of Bath is simply “a fiction who tells a fiction”—no more, no less (Crane 20). At its core, Alison’s notion of sovereignty in marriage is one that favors neither feminist nor misogynistic traditions, but rather one which proposes a mutual exchange of power—a quid pro quo transaction that ensures a happy ending for husband as well as wife.

Crane’s article asserts that the Wife of Bath “confronts the social belief that feminine power should be strictly limited, and…attempts to establish a defense of secular women’s sovereignty that opposes the conventions available to Alison” (20). And Alison
mediates this defense through the genres of antifeminist satire and the otherwise male-oriented romance. Yet neither genre, Crane argues, is sufficient to express her views: “satire denies [women’s] worth…[and] romance [only] seems a genre in which women’s excellence brings power” (24). Thus despite Alison’s complex incorporation of feminine ideals into her Prologue and Tale, her argument is nevertheless “partial, awkward, and illogical,” and her convictions of female sovereignty prove not only both elusory and contradictory, but inexpressible (Crane 24). They are, in effect, “all provisional, each canceling another” (Crane 27); for sovereignty cannot be defined in economic wealth, physical dominion, trust and respect, or even with regard to the desire for love. Alison cannot “pass beyond [the] limits [of the genres],” essentially failing to defend the idea of women’s sovereignty or even her own gender in general (Crane 25). But Crane’s analysis is not without its own incongruities.

For Crane’s emphasis on the literary context is disorienting at best, irrelevant at worst. Alison’s character, she asserts, is drawn from what she calls “estates literature,” a body of work in which women and their representations are divided according to their social status “in relations to men rather than professions or work in the world” (Crane 22). This “formulation of social identity,” Crane states, explains Alison’s dizzying drive to marry and points to the benefits she reaps from the “sexual economics” of marriage, the wealth of her husbands (22). But the Wife’s narratives themselves seem to acknowledge the procreative and sexual aspects of marriage rather than its financial perks. Indeed, “to what purpose or end / [were] the genitals made… / and for what benefit was man first wrought” if not for procreation and sex? (Prologue lines 121-124). Thus Alison admits to marrying her five husbands, not for their actual monetary value,
but rather their “nether purse,” their value in bed (*Prologue* lines 45-46). This is
the “debt” man “shall pay unto his wife,” not some pecuniary boon (*Prologue*
lines 135-137). For as Alison relates, she had already secured “their gold and treasure
more” as well as their land—what need, then, to tie the knot (*Prologue* lines 210)? Yet even these are not one-sided transactions; the Wife promises to “persevere”
and use her “instrument” for her husband “as freely as [her] maker has it sent” (*Prologue*
lines 154-156). Thus in light of the text, Crane’s imposition of a restrictive literary
context frames Alison in an entirely different character—a consequence seen all
the more profoundly in her historical and cultural confines.

In invoking the names of historical women such as the abbess Heloise, Christine
de Pizan, and the fanatical Margery Kempe, Crane attempts to compare Alison, her
values, and her behaviors with those of her contemporary realities. Exploring their beliefs
reveals that, unlike Alison, women of Chaucer’s time valued “submission and sacrifice”
and “watch[ed] vigilantly over their explosive sexuality” (Crane 22). Yet one must
remember, after all, that Alison is not a reality, but indeed a fiction who knows very well
her own aberrant nature. She does not hide her aggressive sexuality, but she does not
necessarily promote it either. When speaking of a life of chastity, Alison concedes to “let
those who will be clean, body and ghost” and that “of [her] condition, [she] will not
boast” (*Prologue* lines 103-104); for God “spoke to those that would live
perfectly; / And…such [is] not [she]” (*Prologue* lines 117-118). And it is true:
she does embody, in many ways, the very stereotype of clerical misogyny—the nagging,
manipulative, and sexually ebullient wife who is a hazard to the lives and souls of the
men around her. However, closer examination of the narratives reveals a more genuine
character than Crane gives credit to—one more capable of the sovereignty of marriage than one might first think.

To see past Alison’s catalogue of faults, as it were, is not an easy task. In her Prologue, Alison lists the characteristics and behaviors of the stereotypical wife. Of most pertinence, however, are the claims she makes about women’s sexuality: namely, that “[if] she be foul,…she / hankers for every man that she may see… / until she finds a man to be victim” (Prologue lines 271-274). But Alison, for all her sexual escapades, nevertheless performs them with her husbands. Although “[she] could walk out as fresh as is a rose” to satisfy her desires elsewhere, she reserves her instrument “for [her husband’s] own sweet tooth” (Prologue lines 453-455). And in her Tale, Alison presents Midas’s wife to uphold women’s sense of trustworthiness. She struggles to keep the secret of her husband’s shameful appearance and rushes down to tell the marsh, but she nevertheless keeps him safe:

“Nay for all this world to win
She would do no such villainy or sin
And cause her husband have so foul a name; Nor would she tell it for her own deep shame” (Tale lines 105-109).

Like Midas’s wife, Alison remains true to her husbands despite her other faults—and manipulations—and despite her fourth husband’s own infidelity. Because, although her “ancestors”—her stereotypical counterparts, perhaps, in Jenkyn’s book—“mayhap were rude” she herself still aims, ultimately, “to live right virtuously, / [and] be gentle when [she does] begin / to live in virtue and do no sin”: that is, to live happily, faithfully, and equally, in marriage (Tale lines 314-320).

For the Wife of Bath, a happy marriage is one based on the ideal of sovereignty—
but not, however, the kind Crane alleges her to have. What Alison actually proposes is
not a full transfer of power from husband to wife, but a mutual exchange of marital
“goods”. Alison’s concept of a husband is one who “shall be both [her] debtor and [her]
thrall”—one who will “love [her] well” and in return receive the boon of her body:
indeed [her] husband…shall have it, eve and morrow / when he’s pleased to come forth
and pay his debt” (Prologue lines 158-159). Money is less a form of exchange than
it is a shared part of her marriage; her husband is not to be “master of both [her] body and
[her] gold,”—for it is, after all “[her] gold as well as [his]” (Prologue 320, 316).
And as far as land is concerned, Jenkyn, like the men before him, inherits all Alison’s
“land in fee, that ever had been given [her] before” (Prologue 635-636). But
Jenkyn breaches her husbandly standards initially; he scolds Alison repeatedly, trying to
limit her outings and assaulting her with misogynistic proverbs (Prologue 781-
785). His lack of respect and love for her thus inhibits the mutual sovereignty she
requires of her marriage, and their exchange of blows, in a way, is a physical
representation of her struggle for equality. He hands “the bridle reins within [her] hand /
to have the governing of the house and land” thus giving her the entirety of the domestic
sovereignty, but we can assume that she no longer resisted his wishes, either—for she
“was to him as kind / as any wife from Denmark unto Ind, / and also true” (Prologue
lines 819-820, 829-831). Although much more ideal, perhaps, than Alison’s own
marriage with Jenkyn, the hag and knight of her Tale nevertheless experience a similar
exchange of power, resulting, ultimately, in their happily ending

In the Wife of Bath’s Tale the hag is never concerned with money, is content
without control, and in fact offers to be true and obedient to the knight from her very
request of marriage. It is the knight who begs her to “take all [his] wealth and let [his] body go”, but she “will not, for all metal and all ore / that from the earth is dug or lies above, / be aught except [his] wife and [his] true love” (Tale 207-210). She offers to please him regardless of her decrepitude and without his riches, but she is also aware of his reserve. Given the circumstances, the knight owes his wife more than just his love and respect, but also his life. Nevertheless he refuses to sleep with her, struck by “heaviness and grievous sorrow” for her poverty and age (Tale line 223-229).

Indeed, there are no initial exchanges within their marriage—whether of money, sex, or sovereignty—and therefore there is no contentment for either. However, trade opens when the hag offers the knight the choice:

“To have [her] foul and old until [she] die[s]  
And be to [him] a true and humble wife…  
Or else to have [her] yung and very fair  
And take [his] chance with those who will repair  
Until [his] house, and all because of [her]”
(Chaucer Tale lines 364-369).

The knight, in turn, offers it back to her; he “put[s] himself in [her] wise governing” and allows her to “choose which may be the more pleasing, / and bring most honor to [her] and to [him] also” (Tale lines 375-377). At this point, he finally acknowledges her as “[his] lady and [his] love, and wife so dear” (Tale line 374), and so with both the freedom of choice and the gift of respect, the hag transforms into a beautiful maiden. He is thus satisfied in his “worldly desires” as well in having a true and faithful wife, “both good and fair”, with whose life and death she commissions him to do “as [he] likes best” (Tale lines 385, 392). With this exchange of powers, so to speak, the balance in their relationship is finally established, and together “they lived unto their lives’ fair end, / in perfect joy” (Tale lines 401-402).
Thus sovereignty is not, as Crane suggests, the “ideal feminine power” nor “a surrender to male fantasy” (26-27). These are distinctly modern constructs imposed upon a medieval fictional character and her actions; Alison simply cannot stand up to the criticisms Crane imposes upon her through the lens of a literary or cultural historian. But she does not have to: her narratives speak for themselves. Given the textual evidence, Crane’s “conviction” of Alison’s view—that women “should not strive for equality in marriage, but…rather refuse to wield power that they have securely won”—is actually quite erroneous. Neither the Wife nor the hag surrender their sovereignty back to their husbands; their increased loyalty and devotion to their spouses stems only from their more mutual and egalitarian treatment. Alison’s definition of sovereignty is thus based on equality in marriage—indeed, it is equality in marriage: the powers within the relationship, be they “financial gain, domestic control, sexual aggressiveness, [or] love” are balanced out by one another, each shared in a certain way between husband and wife—that is Alison’s sovereignty, and that is what ensures a happily ever after (Crane 26).
Works Cited


Self Assessment

My first draft, though rather incomplete, served as a good start for me. My introduction, which received most of the criticism from the original reviews, has since been modified. I believe I clarified how Crane’s contextualizations actually miss the mark of Alison’s narratives, imposing 20th Century perspectives and expectations on a 14th Century fictional character and thus disregarding her message entirely. I also refined my idea of the “equation” of sovereignty, as I put it earlier, and described it more in terms of a business transaction. I believe the paper’s strongest points are in my breakdown of Crane’s argument and its inconsistencies, and I’m confident in the textual evidence I’ve drawn from the Wife’s narratives to help support me. I tried to mirror as best I could the progression of ideas presented in my introduction in the progression of the paper, and I think, for the most part, I was successful. But I may have structured that section of my paper somewhat differently. However, while I am also pleased with the evidence I proposed in favor of my argument for the equilibrium of sovereignty, I do wonder if I could have structured it somewhat differently.