

BOOK REVIEW

Marion Turner. *The Wife of Bath: A Biography*

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. Pp. 336. \$29.95 (cloth).

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Fittingly, the *Wife of Bath*, the first “ordinary” medieval woman to tell a fictional autobiography, is the subject of the first modern biography of a fictional medieval woman, written by the first female biographer of the *Wife’s* creator, Geoffrey Chaucer. Marion Turner’s innovative biography of the *Wife of Bath* springs from two questions: where does she come from (sources and inspirations)? and what happens to her in the hands of the many generations of readers who have variously been drawn to or repelled by her; identified or sympathized with her; tried to silence her or to give her new contemporary voice in a surprising variety of accents (reception)? Especially readers new to Chaucer will benefit from Turner’s answers.

The first part of the biography, devoted to the *Wife of Bath’s* “life,” is resolutely nonfictional. Rather than invent a speculative extratextual life story to supplement the *Wife’s* confessional Prologue in the *Canterbury Tales*, Turner adduces solid historical research on the lives of real fourteenth-century women who resemble the *Wife* in one aspect or another of her complex experience—marital history, economic role, legal status, and so on—and sets them alongside the authoritative writings so influential in prior studies of the *Wife’s* inception. Despite her overwhelming textuality—she is a composite of all the widespread anti-feminist, misogynous stereotypes in Chaucer’s written culture—readers to this day have responded to her as if she were “real.” Chaucer, Turner argues, did not merely repeat the stereotypes as he found them, but rather imagined the experience of living under their rod. Her larger point is crucial: it is artificial to separate life and literature completely. Rather, life informs literature and literature informs lives. She demonstrates the point by relating histories of working women, married women, and women on pilgrimage, replete with documentary sources and historical analysis. Turner uses her encyclopedic knowledge of Chaucer’s late fourteenth-century milieu to show us women working in every aspect of the English economy. Although many of her examples are already known to Chaucer scholars, their cumulative impact suggests persuasively that the *Wife of Bath* is genuinely “ordinary” rather than a scandalous outlier. Similarly, Turner cites the “European Marriage Pattern”—in which women had relatively broad choice of marital partners, fewer children, and independent households in which they often inherited property upon the death of their spouses (56)—to show that the *Wife’s* personal history was much more representative than is commonly supposed or taught. Chaucer’s own daughter Alice was a real analogue to the *Wife’s* life trajectory: married thrice to successively more august spouses, she ultimately became the duchess of Suffolk and inherited great wealth from her last husband, William de la Pole, when he died in 1450 (62). The “life” of the *Wife of Bath* is clear, readable, and fascinating—and a real triumph in the way it synthesizes historical information about late medieval women so that their lives illuminate the *Wife of Bath* even as she illuminates them.

The second part, devoted to the *Wife’s* “afterlife,” is more uneven. Reading some parts—especially chapter six, “Silencing Alison,” on early readers like the scribe of the Egerton

manuscript (147–53), whose marginal commentary sought to put the Wife back into her proper place of quiet submission to all the authoritative pronouncements on women she struggles against in her narrated experience—resembles what the experience of listening to Jankyn’s “Book of Wikked Wyves” might have been for the Wife or any of her nonfictional sisters. Even here, though, another response to the Wife emerges: the sixteenth-century ballad “The Wanton Wife of Bath,” imagines the Wife continuing her argument with male authority when she reaches the gates of heaven, where ultimately Christ grants her admission. The very popularity of this ballad—as well as its appreciation of her verbal skills and point of view—resulted in repression, as the book was burned in 1600 (154–56). Over and over again, the Wife prompts sympathy and even identification, resulting in renewed efforts by authorities to silence her.

Less successful is the revival of Harold Bloom’s style of Shakespearean criticism in the argument that Falstaff is essentially a reprise of the Wife of Bath. Setting aside the precise historical particularities on which the rest of the book rests in favor of a more impressionistic kind of criticism, Turner suggests that the most important thing Shakespeare took from Chaucer, far beyond specific echoes of word and plot, was how to build a character. From the example of the Wife of Bath, Shakespeare learned how to transform the figure of Vice from medieval morality plays into one of the most substantial, complex, flawed, sympathetic, *alive* figures in literature. There’s no denying that it’s fun to think about Falstaff as the offspring of the Wife—but unlike anything else in the biography, the relationship is a matter of opinion and speculation rather than the adamant historical and textual foundations on which rest the interplay between sympathy and repression elsewhere in the Wife’s afterlife.

The afterlives of the Wife of Bath include much material new to me. Most astonishing is the degree to which the same dynamic has replayed itself so insistently in the 600-plus years since she first appeared: the spark of recognition on the part of so many readers, paired with the repressive will to silence both the Wife’s resistance and readers’ sympathy, whether on the part of fifteenth-century scribes, book burners in 1600, or patristic exegetes in the mid-twentieth century. The most contemporary reprises—for instance, Patience Agbabi’s *The Wife of Bafa*—are startling in their perception that her vigorous response to repressive gender ideology can be redirected to make the experience of colonialism equally vivid. And that vividness is finally why we need this biography of this fictional woman.