

Alison's Incapacity

To the Editor:

Susan Crane's "Alison's Incapacity and Poetic Instability in the Wife of Bath's Tale" (102 [1987]: 20–28), though superior to many of the articles it cites, finally demonstrates not so much the Wife's "incapacity" as the inadequacy of an approach that Crane shares with many critics of the Wife of Bath. The approach is characterized by a failure to distinguish sufficiently between the prologue and the tale and by the related assumption (despite words to the contrary) that Alison is a real person, not a fictitious character.

Crane is right in observing that "Chaucer's works often venture far from generic norms" (21), but instead of holding firmly to this perception, which would have enabled her to see Chaucer's success in altering the traditional genres of antifeminist satire and romance, she permits herself to be overwhelmed by the concept of Alison's "incapacity." It is Chaucer who has chosen these genres, and he has modified them to suit his purpose—in the prologue to enable the Wife to challenge antifeminist arguments and turn them to her own advantage and in the tale to challenge the romance assumptions not only of masculine but also of knightly superiority.

Crane has correctly singled out power and gender as the crucial issues in both the prologue and the tale, but she has not recognized Chaucer's modification of the genres of antifeminist satire and romance to create a text that enables the Wife to establish her views in relation to power, gender, and also class.

Satirical elements do intrude in the romance, as Crane points out, but she is mistaken in attributing them to Alison's "incapacity" to tell a story; rather, they are Chaucer's way of adapting the romance to the outspoken middle-class woman of the prologue. What Crane refers to as the Wife's slipping back into antifeminist attitudes, her being "incapable of sustaining the romance mode" (23), is in fact Chaucer's strategy. It is a strategy that involves providing her with an Arthurian romance that enables her to mock simultaneously the antifeminist attitudes and the aristocratic pretensions that characterize the genre of romance.

Overly preoccupied with the prologue, Crane pays insufficient attention to the dynamics of the tale, to the way they relate to those very issues that she herself singles out—power and gender. The links between the episodes—the knight's raping the maiden, the queen's question, the "olde wyf's" answer and sermon, and the knight's yielding sovereignty to his wife—point to Chaucer's adroitness in using the Wife as his narrator. Instead of asserting that the Wife of Bath and "her old hag do not exercise their hard-won power" (26), Crane might have considered the point made by H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., in "Of a Fire in the Dark": in both the prologue and

the tale, once the woman has been granted sovereignty she refrains from exercising it in order to achieve better relations between the sexes.

Instead of using the word *inexpressible* in connection with the Wife's views on sovereignty, she might have noted the high degree of expressiveness with which Chaucer has endowed this female character. To continually refer to Alison's inadequacy and failure reveals Crane's own inability to appreciate Chaucer's unique achievement. When Crane concludes that Alison "can only tear the inert texts that have determined her, and wish for more" (27), she is moving uncomfortably close to those critics who view the Wife as a "victim" or a "sociopath." By not bearing in mind that Alison is herself a text—albeit hardly an "inert" one—she has missed the chance to acknowledge that Chaucer, as creator of the text, has enabled the Wife to challenge the assumptions of both antifeminist satire and romance. Alison's supposed "incapacity" is actually Chaucer's triumph.

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Reply:

Perhaps I comprehend Esther Quinn's underlying discomfort with my article more fully than I do her specific objections. To begin with specifics, Quinn writes that I should distinguish the Wife of Bath's prologue "sufficiently" from the tale and that I should treat the Wife as a character rather than as a real person. Yet she goes on to explain that the tale's satiric elements are "Chaucer's way of adapting the romance to the outspoken middle-class woman of the prologue." This formulation connects prologue to tale and Alison to real women not less but more closely than I would care to do. For Quinn, the Wife exists prior to the tale, which is tailored to suit her. For me, the Wife is called into being through her words in prologue and tale; Alison is fictional in that she has no existence before or beyond the poetry, although some of her features certainly imitate human ones. (I extend this discussion in "The Trial of Alison of Bath: Case Dismissed," forthcoming in *English Language Notes*.) I think Quinn would agree that we speak of Alison's choices, actions, and gender while simultaneously recognizing that "she" is a literary representation developed from ideas about choices, actions, and gender in the marital satires and romances on which Chaucer drew.

With regard to genres, Quinn misreads as my own thesis a transitional passage she discusses in her fourth paragraph. She believes I argue that the tale's satiric elements betray "Alison's 'incapacity' to tell a story," but the passage to which she refers summarizes critical explanations that I oppose:

These explanations place Alison's tale beyond her control and