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Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and The Book of Margery Kempe

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

104 MINNESOTA REVIEW SHEILA DELANEY SEXUAL ECONOMICS, CHAUCER'S WIFE OF BATH, AND THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE Few individuals in the Middle Ages occupy our attention as commandingly as two women—one fictional, one real—from the decline of that era. One is Chaucer's Dame Alice, the Wife of Bath; the other is Margery Kempe, the fifteenth century gentlewoman from Lynn, author of the first autobiography in English. Both women were curiously "modern," inasmuch as both were of the middle class; both traveled extensively in Europe and the Middle East; both were of an independent and robust nature; both preferred the autobiographical mode; and both were deeply concerned with sexuality, though from different perspectives: the one to enjoy, the other to renounce. Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife of Bath shows an acute awareness of what I am here calling "sexual economics"—the psychological effects of economic necessity, specifically upon sexual mores. The Wife of Bath belongs to the petite bourgeoisie; she is a

small-time entrepreneur in the textile trade which, already by the thirteenth century, had come to dominate the English economy and its international trade. From her suburb of St. Michael's-juxta-Bathon, Dame Alice is in no position to rival the great textile magnates of her time; she remains a middle-sized fish in a small pond, though, as Chaucer remarks with some irony, Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt, She passed men of Ypres and of Gaunt. (GP 447-448) The theme that Chaucer develops in Dame Alice's revelation of her marital history is that her sexuality is as capitalistic as her trade. For her, God's commandment "to wexe and multiply" (III D, 28) bears fruit not in children but in profit: marriage settlements and land inheritances from her husbands, together with everything she can wring from them by nagging and manipulation. The old image of copulation as the marriage debt Alice wrenches round to her own point of view by asserting that her husband must be "bothe my dettour and my thral" (155), adding the notion of an exploitive social relationship. She goes on to claim the profit motive as the basis for marital harmony: But sith I hadde hem hooly in myn hond, And sith they hadde me yeve n al hir lond, What sholde I taken keep hem for to please, But it were for my profit and myn ese? (211-214) DELANEY 105 The cynical conclusion to which Alice's experience leads is also phrased in the imagery of commerce: Wynne whose 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. (414-417) Her strategy in marriage is based on the economic principle of supply and demand: Forbede us thyng, and that desiren we; Preece on us faste, and thanne wol we fie. With daunger oute we aloure chaffare; Greet prees at market maketh deer ware, And to greet cheep is holde at lite l prys: This knoweth every womman that is wys. (519-524) Thus the Wife of Bath has thoroughly internalized the economic function of the bourgeoisie in reducing quintessentially human activity—love and the marriage relation—to commercial enterprise. She understands that as a woman she is both merchant and commodity: her youth and beauty the initial capital investment, and her age—the depreciation of the commodity—a condition against which she must accumulate profit as rapidly and therefore as exploitively as possible. In evaluating the Wife of Bath, however, we must also recognize the degree to which such internalization of capitalist method is a defensive strategy against the special oppression of women in a society whose sex and marriage mores were thoroughly inhumane. That is, Alice can inherit land and engage in business, but she can exercise no control over the disposition of her body. Her first marriage to a rich but impotent old dotard took place when she was twelve: not Alice but her parents or guardians would have invested this choice piece of sexual capital for the sake of social standing and a profitable settlement—just as we see...

SHEILA DELANEY

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