CHAPTER 3

Home Economics
The Marriage Debt in The Wife of Bath's Prologue *and* Tale *and* The Merchant's Tale

In wyfhod I wol use my instrument
As frely as my Makere hath it sent.
If I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwe!
Myn housbonde shal have it bothe 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 flesh, whil that I am his wyf,
I have the power durynge al my life
Upon his propre body, and noght he.

Chaucer, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, lines 149–159

The feeling of ["guilt"] of personal obligation [. . .], has had, as we saw, its origin in the oldest and most original personal relationship that there is, the relationship between buyer and seller, creditor and [debtor]: here it was that individual confronted individual, and that individual *matched himself against* individual. [. . .] Making prices, assessing values, thinking out equivalents, exchanging – all this preoccupied the primal thoughts of man to such an extent that in a certain sense it constituted *thinking* itself: it was here that was trained the oldest form of sagacity, it was here in this sphere that we can perhaps trace the first commencement of man's pride, of his feeling of superiority over other animals. Perhaps our word "Mensch" (*manas*) still expresses just something of *this* self-pride: man denoted himself as the being who measures values, who values and measures, as the "assessing" animal *par excellence*.

(Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay, Section 8)[1]

Financial debts preoccupy the merchant of *The Shipman's Tale* and, possibly, the Merchant-pilgrim of the *General Prologue*, but the kind of debt that concerns Chaucer the poet most often in the *Canterbury Tales* is the marriage debt. The idea that husbands and wives owe each other marital sex as a sacred

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duty, and that, in the conjugal act, they surrender power over their bodies to one another, originates in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

> Let the husband render the debt to his wife, and the wife also in like manner to the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband. And in like manner the husband also hath not power of his own body, but the wife.[2]

It is the marriage debt that allows the merchant's wife in *The Shipman's Tale* to pay one hundred franks to her husband in the currency of sex, preserving domestic harmony and her husband's honour thereby. Similarly, the answer to the concluding *demande* of *The Franklin's Tale* – who is the most "fre" – hinges on the question of what is owed between husbands and wives, on promises and contracts, on whether Dorigen has "power" over her own body, and on a close association of sex and debt: "For sikerly my dette shal be quyt" (5.1578). And the Parson contextualizes both of these tales by stating the Augustinian precept, also called simply the *debitum*, that husbands and wives "flesshly mowen assemble" for three reasons: to produce children, to avoid the sin of fornication, and to "yelden everich of hem to oother the dette of hire bodies, for neither of hem hath power of his owene body" (10.938, 939). Of all the Canterbury pilgrims, however, it is the Wife of Bath and the Merchant who most extensively and creatively use the concept of the marriage debt. The Wife of Bath does so to justify her power over her husbands and to animate the folklore themes of her tale; the Merchant, to justify May's adulterous dalliance with Damyan.

Literary, critical, and sociological reflections on the economics of marriage typically focus on the "marriage market," the commodification and exchange of potential spouses whose value is measured by their financial assets (dowries, income), physical assets (beauty, fertility), or some combination thereof; it is measured, that is, by whatever "output" they bring to the domestic economy.[3] To be on such a market is to be a human commodity, a piece of property. As Gayle Rubin and Luce Irigaray would remind us, usually it has been women bought and sold in this way, but parents of marriageable girls can also buy husbands on the marriage market, a fact that has furnished the plots of many modern novels, as readers of Jane Austen will attest.[4] Creative literature has tended to deplore the dehumanization that results from the reduction of marriage to commerce, but some prominent economists have asserted the natural applicability of economic principles to the empirical study of real marriage markets. Nobel laureate and free market advocate Gary Becker famously argued not only that individuals are guided by rational self-interest in choosing a spouse but that the "division of output between mates" within

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any given marriage depends on the same factors that influence one's choice of partner.[5] The spouse in a marriage who brings less money to the union, or is less attractive, will have to contribute more in other ways to ensure an optimal distribution of resources.[6] Becker's "Theory of Marriage" may not confirm the ideals of romance and humanism in fiction and poetry, but neo-classical economists and utilitarians have argued that, nonetheless, it accurately describes human behaviour in the real world.[7]

The utilitarian application of a market logic to marriage exemplifies the process of commodification, a process by which something once (naturally or traditionally) considered to be outside the domain of commercial exchange is transformed into a commodity that can be bought or sold. In Karl Polanyi's well-known argument, land, labour, and money are the three primary "fictitious commodities": goods that were not created for market exchange, but that, in capitalism, are treated *as though* they are commodities.[8] The marriage market, whether considered as a literary trope or a historical reality, where the goods transformed and traded are human beings, seems to fit Polanyi's definition equally well. Polanyi's classic work *The Great Transformation* attributes the creation of fictitious commodities to an ideology that not only demands a "free" market but that also allows "the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings."[9] Polanyi, with Marcel Mauss, rejects the "naturalness" of the market economy and its utilitarian logic, a logic of means–end calculation by which individuals seek to fulfill their own interest in the form of material gain. As Polanyi writes, the problem with a market society is "that its economy [is] based on self-interest. Such an organisation of economic life is entirely unnatural, in the strictly empirical sense *exceptional*."[10] Polanyi's critique of the market ideology is three-pronged: he challenges first the self-interested utilitarianism that characterizes the market system; second, the generalization of this utilitarian logic beyond the market; and, finally, the disembedding of the market from social relations such that market forces become autonomous and unchecked by any other value, relation, or concern.

And yet, what has become increasingly clear is that the logic of the market is far from purely utilitarian and rationally calculating. It is, rather, as Weber perceived, a logic of illogic that is often more self-destructive than self-interested; often, it is aimed more at pleasure or consumption than gain or profit.[11] The logic of the market is also driven by what Foucault called a *gouvernmentalité,* a management rationality, or "conduct of conduct," that harnesses the passions, interests, and values of individuals and communities and makes them productive in capitalist terms.[12] As Stimilli observes, capitalism possesses "an ingenious ability to put to work precisely what was 'useless'" – for instance, qualities such as flexibility

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and creativity.[13] And it does so not by acting on passive, dehumanized objects who are controlled, bought, and sold by a "market mechanism." If capitalist governmentality puts to work even our most useless, ephemeral, or illogical interests and desires, it does so because we willingly participate in its processes of commodification. If we are human capital, to use Becker's phrase, we are so only to the extent that we choose to manage ourselves as capital.[14] At the same time, what it means to willingly participate, to *choose*, in an economy of debt, an economy based on creditor–debtor relations, is hardly clear. Nietzsche's insight in *On the Genealogy of Morals* was that the creditor–debtor relationship institutes "an ethico-political process of constructing a subjectivity endowed with a memory, a conscience, and a morality that forces him to be both accountable and guilty. Economic production and the production of subjectivity, labor and ethics, are indissociable."[15] The debtor's freedom is constrained by the debtor's guilt, and the "free" market is free only insofar as its subjects are bound by an ethics of guilt and accountability.

The way in which the market system endows human beings with a kind of economic agency that is voluntary and yet constrained by debt finds a striking analogue in the marriage debt as it is defined in early and scholastic Christian theology. The economy produced by the marriage debt is not one in which husbands and wives are commodities to be bought or sold; rather, the *debitum* founds an economy of debtor–creditor relations. In this economy, spouses are neither equals exchanging goods in a free market nor commodified objects, and their participation in the economy depends not on their value as assets objectively measured, at least not primarily, but on a paradoxical freedom and a voluntary investment of self.[16] As such, the marriage debt epitomizes a capitalist governmentality, managing individual lives not through direct or violent control, nor through the generalization of a utilitarian market logic, but rather through the establishment of "norms focused on desires, passions, the same criteria humans use to valuate and choose."[17] In the marriage economy of debt, the primary resource to be produced and managed is the self.

In this chapter, I argue that the marriage debt is an architectonic principle in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* and in *The Merchant's Tale*: it not only structures their plots and furnishes their themes but also helps to explain the recurring link in *Canterbury Tales* between Christian sacramental marriage and the market economy. I first provide an overview of the marriage debt from its development in Augustine's defense of marriage in *De bona coniugali* to the establishment of marriage as a sacrament in later scholastic theology. This overview contextualizes the Wife of Bath's and the Merchant's references to the "dette," references that

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have been noted only in passing by previous scholars, or that, in the case of the Wife, have been read as misappropriations of an economic metaphor.[18] Ultimately, in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* and in *The Merchant's Tale*, Chaucer suggests that the commercial debt economy derives from the theological debt economy enjoined in the sacrament of marriage. If this is true, then Becker and Polanyi, proponent and opponent of the free market, respectively, may have it backwards: the genius or anomaly of capitalism is not its generalization of a utilitarian market logic to traditionally non-economic domains of life. Rather, the process of generalization moves in the other direction, from the indebted self formed, in part, through sacramental theology, *outward* to debtor–creditor relations beyond the household, from the private *oikonomia* to the public, from the marriage bed to the marketplace.

Managing Desire: The Marriage Debt in Patristic and Scholastic Theology

> We do not suggest that marriage is wrong, but because conjugal relations cannot occur without lust, one should abstain from entering a sacred place [after sleeping with one's wife], because lust cannot occur without fault. For it refers not to fornication or adultery, but to lawful marriage, when it says, "For behold I was conceived in iniquities."[19]
>
> Gratian, *Decretum*, C. 33, q. 4, c. 7

The twelfth-century jurist known as Gratian grounded his legal explication of marriage on Augustine's teaching on the three goods of marriage.[20] In *De bona coniugali*, Augustine begins from the premise that both sexual desire and sexual acts are sinful, and yet he sets out to justify marriage not only as permissible but as a tripartite good, the threefold purpose of which is procreation (*proles*) in a relationship of mutual fidelity (*fides*) that serves as a sacred sign (*sacramentum*).[21] The third good, the sacramentality of marriage, derives from Paul's comment in Ephesians 5:32, that Christian marriage is a bond that signifies the union of Christ with his church.[22] In emphasizing the sacramental, signifying power of marriage, Augustine attempts to forge a middle path between two extreme views current in late antique Christianity: on the one hand, Jovinian's anti-ascetic heresy, which held that marriage was equally valuable to virginity, and, on the other hand, Jerome's refutation of Jovinian, which, according to Augustine, "vilified" marriage excessively.[23] It is by way of explaining the second good of *fides*, itself a virtue "pertaining to any transaction, agreement, or partnership," that Augustine refers to the debt, insofar as each spouse owes

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the other sex "not merely in performance of the sexual act to bring forth children [. . .] but also in ministering, so to say, to each other, to shoulder each other's weakness, enabling each other to avoid illicit sexual intercourse."[24] By conceiving of marital sex as a debt, Augustine makes marriage a remedy for the sin of desire, saving marriage from Jerome's condemnation while still preserving virginity as the highest form of Christian life. The *debitum* is designed to contain the dangerous pleasures of the flesh, making marital sex an act of duty, of obedience to a precept, and a dispassionate transaction rather than an indulgence or a sanctioned surrender to an uncontrollable desire.

Paul also wrote, "Melius est enim nubere, quam uri," but Augustine does not say that marriage makes such "burning" licit; rather, he says, in effect, the institution of marriage makes it possible to have sex because you *ought* to, not because you *want* to.[25] First, there is an obligation to procreate; second, there is an obligation to help one's spouse avoid the sin of fornication. The duty to procreate is a duty to community, but the word "debt" is reserved exclusively for the sense in which marital sex constitutes an obligation that spouses have to one another. Weak and vicious people can, if they choose, abuse the marriage debt to satisfy their lust, but this would be the fault of the people, not of marriage. Payment of the debt ideally brings "lust [. . .] under a lawful bond" so that it cannot "float at large without form and loose; having of itself weakness of flesh that cannot be curbed, but of marriage fellowship of faith that cannot be dissolved; of itself encroachment of immoderate intercourse, of marriage a way of chastely begetting."[26] Calling husbands and wives to "minister" to each other, to carry the burden of the other's weakness by having sex, Augustine paradoxically construes the fulfillment of sexual appetite as a kind of sacrifice or renunciation. Viewed cynically, calling sex a debt in this way is akin to calling extortion a debt, as the corrupt summoner does in the *Friar's Tale*: it is a case of self-interested glossing, asserting that a word means its opposite for one's own purposes or gain. But viewed through the lens of Augustinian hermeneutics, to call sex a debt is to insist that the intention or will behind an act determines the meaning of the act. If one has sex with one's spouse to fulfill a selfish, physical desire, then sex is sinful; if one has sex with one's spouse to fulfill one's duty – that is, if one has sex in order to *renounce* one's selfish, physical desire – then sex is permissible.[27] Indeed, it became a well-known maxim in later medieval writing on the sacrament of marriage that marital sex was "a good use of an evil thing."[28]

Although he cites Augustine extensively in Book 4 of his *Commentary on the Sentences*, Thomas Aquinas's discourse on marriage focuses less on the

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problem of desire and more explicitly on the problem of power. For Thomas, the marriage debt is a voluntary servitude analogous to entering the religious life. But the language he uses to describe this servitude sounds very much like the language of mastery and governance used by the Wife of Bath, which I quote above as the epigraph to this chapter. Along similar lines, Thomas writes,

> As a servant is in the power of his master, so is one spouse in the power of the other, as is clear from I Corinth. 7. But a servant is bound by the necessity of a precept to render his debt of servitude to his master, as is clear from Romans 13:7: Render your debts to all: tribute to whom tribute is owed, etc. Therefore one spouse is bound by the necessity of precept to render the debt to the other.[29]

Thomas here links the marriage debt of 1 Corinthians to the command enjoining political obedience issued in Romans 13, drawing a clear analogy between the payment of sex in marriage and the subject's payment of taxes to his ruler. The passage in Romans, in turn, echoes Jesus's words in Matthew 22: render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, a verse often cited in scholastic discussions about the coinage, that is, discussions about "who owns the money."[30] In this way, Thomas suggests not only that marital sex is a kind of resource to be managed prudently and virtuously in the context of the household, as a principle of *oikonomia*, along with other kinds of material goods, but also that such economic management *is* a form of governance.

At the same time, consent to marriage cannot be forced; as in any legal contract, the parties must enter it freely and willingly for the contract to be valid.[31] For Thomas, the requirement of free will is of the utmost importance because, without it, the payment of the debt is not meritorious. Indeed, in order to count as meritorious – that is, to *count* in the spiritual ledger of salvation – marital sex has to be undertaken in the spirit of a gift, which he defines elsewhere as "an unreturnable giving [. . .] a thing which is not given with the intention of a return."[32] In order for marital sex to yield a salvific return, it must be given freely without the intention or expectation of a return. With this Derridean impossibility asserted, Thomas goes on to explain the apparent oxymoron of free bondage through the language of gift-giving and gratuity:

> A thing may be deemed gratuitous in two ways. In one way, on the part of the deed itself, because, to wit, one is not bound to do it; in another way, on the part of the doer, because he does it of his own free will. Now a deed is rendered virtuous, praiseworthy and meritorious, chiefly according as it

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> proceeds from the will. Wherefore, although obedience be a duty [*debitum*], if one obey with a prompt will, one's merit is not for that reason diminished, especially before God, who sees not only the outward deed, but also the inward will.[33]

At stake here is the nature of Christian moral action per se, action that is both freely chosen *and* lawful. One may be "not subject to the law" (Galatians 5:18) only if one's obedience to the law is freely chosen; in this right "spirit," gratuitous obedience transforms the law from an external set of constraints and obligations into an internal condition or state of being. Whereas, for Augustine, the will to obey makes licit an act that would be sinful if motivated by a desire for pleasure, for Thomas, the will to obey makes the act not only licit but virtuous. For Thomas, indeed, marriage is unique among the sacraments in the extent to which it depends upon the will and agency of human beings; he goes so far as to declare, "Matrimonium habet in nobis causam, sed alia quaedam sacramenta solum in Deo": marriage has its cause in us, but the other sacraments have their cause solely in God.[34]

Much has been made in modern scholarship about the principle of equality enshrined in the marriage debt.[35] "[E]ven though in all other things the husband is above the wife as the head is to the body, for indeed *the husband is the head of the wife*," writes Peter Lombard, "yet they are equal in satisfying the debt of the flesh."[36] James Brundage, for example, sees in the debt a relatively radical sexual progressiveness: "The development among the canonists of notions of sexual equality may have been symptomatic of the beginning of a breakdown of the ambivalence that earlier Christian authorities had shown toward the position of women in society."[37] Dyan Elliott counters this positive view by pointing out that the theoretical mutuality of the debt is undermined by the social reality of hierarchy and deeply entrenched misogyny:

> The discrepancy between the equality claims of the marriage debt and the hierarchical matrix from which discussions of the debt are generated casts doubt on the reliability of these claims. In fact, I would argue that this vigorously defended equality masks an irresponsibility tinged with misogyny: it is grounded on the assumption that the same structure would necessarily benefit both husbands and wives.[38]

Moreover, what Thomas Aquinas means by "equality" in the limited arena of the marriage bed is not what modern scholars think of as equality. Rather, as Thomas explains, the type of equality that pertains to the marriage debt is that of proportionality rather than equivalence:

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> [T]here are two kinds of equality: namely, of quantity and of proportion. [. . .] Therefore, speaking of the first equality, a man and woman are not equals in matrimony, neither with respect to the conjugal act, in which what is nobler is due the man, nor as regards the management of the home, in which the woman is ruled and the man rules. But as regards the second kind of equality, they are equals in both things. For just as the man is bound to the woman in the conjugal act and in the management of the home in what pertains to a husband, so the wife is bound to the man in those things that pertain to a wife. And in keeping with this it says in the text that they are equals in rendering and requesting the debt.[39]

In other words, husband and wife are equals in the marriage debt insofar as the wife's passivity and subordination are *proportionate to* the husband's activity and domination.[40] In Aristotelian terms, such proportional equality is the principle of distributive rather than commutative justice: to unequal people with unequal needs, unequal amounts should be given.[41] Just as payment of the marriage debt is both free and not free, so are husband and wife both equal and not equal – proportionate but not equivalent – according to the terms of justice that structure the debt.

In setting out the terms for the economic management of desire, Christian sacramental theology does not so much solve the problem of sex for Christians as it *subsumes* it within the paradoxes of freely chosen submission and hierarchical equality. The cultural effort required to make these paradoxes plausible, to sanctify them and instill them, is indicated by the sheer amount of text generated on the question of marriage and the marriage debt: in condemning sexual pleasure and containing sexual desire within marriage, patristic and scholastic theology ends up making the governance of pleasure and desire the central preoccupations of church teaching for laypeople. Moreover, the nice distinctions between having sex and enjoying sex, choosing and obeying, convey an underlying ambivalence about the act they are attempting to legitimate: the technically sound but circuitous arguments seemed designed to grant approval of marital sex while still conveying distaste for it. It is hard to avoid the impression of a great semantic and syllogistic effort to transform an irredeemably base and dangerous act into a source of virtue by means of carefully calibrated measures of control and strategic renunciation. In short, the marriage debt sanctifies heterosexual sex by the letter of the law but retains a spirit of misogyny and fear of the body, while the language of debt and credit is used to sanction and reinforce the power imbalance between husbands and wives by cloaking that imbalance as a kind of economic exchange, that is, a free and equal exchange.

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Indebted and Enthralled: The Marriage Debt in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*

Through the Wife of Bath, Chaucer satirizes the ambivalence, and indeed the hypocrisy, about sex expressed in patristic and scholastic writing on the marriage debt, insofar as the Wife enjoins "free" bondage and relations of proportional equality. But Chaucer also uses the language of debt to describe the paradoxical production of both power and desire as capitalist forms: in the Wife's colourful paraphrase, the Pauline injunction becomes the means by which she "govern[s]" her first four husbands, "after [her] lawe" (3.219). There is a broad critical consensus that, in using the marriage debt to govern her husbands, to make them her "thralls," the Wife of Bath misunderstands, or deliberately misconstrues, the meaning of the *debitum* for her own self-interested ends.[42] Not only does she "[omit] the reciprocity of the marriage debt"; she also seems to confuse marital with monetary debts, or "debts of sex with debts of property."[43] For many readers, then, the Wife misapplies economic motives and values to human relationships that ought to be kept separate and sacred, and her own self-commodification in marriage results from a crass literalization of the *debitum*.[44] An embodiment of market values, the Wife reifies the debt just as she commodifies herself – "al is for to selle" (3.414). What is wrong with the Wife in this reading is what is wrong with monetization generally, insofar as the Wife takes a rule meant to ensure reciprocity, even equality, and wields it as an instrument of domination, at the same time as she trades sex for power and profit.

As Laurie Finke observes, nearly "every critic who has written about the Wife of Bath has remarked on the language of commodification the Wife employs to 'speke of wo that is in mariage' (3)."[45] Whether a critic takes this commodification as evidence of the Wife's concupiscence or as Chaucer's critique of a corrupt social context depends upon the critic's interpretative and political commitments. Thus, D. W. Robertson remarks that the sexual "ransoun" she demands from her husbands turns "her Pauline marriage debt into a means of prostitution."[46] For Finke, as in earlier feminist readings of the Wife of Bath by Mary Carruthers and Sheila Delany, this language of commodification expresses the Wife's identity as a "capitalist entrepreneur," and a figure embodying specifically fourteenth-century mercantile values.[47] According to Delany, the Wife's monetization of marriage and her commodification of her own body show that she has "thoroughly internalised the economic function of the bourgeoisie in reducing quintessentially human activity – love and sexuality – to commercial enterprise."[48] In Finke's reading, the Wife's inability

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to distinguish monetary gain from sexual pleasure, marital intercourse from financial transaction, owes to the destabilizing, transformative power of money itself. Echoing Marx, Finke notes that "money can act – almost like a metaphor – to transform one thing into something else, to enable an exchange among dissimilar things."[49] In this way, the Wife's prologue and tale manifest a kind of textual monetization.

But there is also a thread of criticism that attempts to exonerate the Wife from charges of capitalist greed and self-interest by placing her prologue and tale in a context of non-commercial exchanges and non-monetized giving. Robert Epstein acknowledges the fact that the Wife of Bath is "commodity-oriented" in many respects, but he argues that "even within the hyper-commercialised discourse of the Wife of Bath one can still see language that resists market-based explanations and seems to seek for alternatives."[50] The alternatives Epstein has in mind here are those based on the logic of the gift: he uses feminist anthropological accounts of the exchange of women in gift economies to contextualize those elements of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* that he sees as transcending economic motives and calculations.[51] Epstein's analysis of the gift accords with Alcuin Blamires's reading of the Wife of Bath as a figure of liberality and largesse. For Blamires, the Wife "explicitly (though not consistently) advocates a policy of bodily largesse, and she formulates this by drawing upon the mixed and moral discourses of liberality."[52] The Wife of Bath's largesse, her generous giving of her "bele chose" (3.447, 510), evinces the "inexhaustible credit constituted by female sexuality invoked by the merchant's wife at the end of *The Shipman's Tale*," for whom "sex has the same careless abundance, the same inexhaustible outpouring, as God's grace."[53] In both of these readings, the economy represented by the Wife of Bath is not a capitalist or mercantile one, in which the profit motive drives every action, but its opposite, an economy of liberality, of giving without calculating costs or losses.

If economic approaches that read the Wife as capitalist fail to capture her exuberant, non-rational failures to calculate, ethical and political approaches that read the Wife as exemplar of liberality fail to explain the discourse of exchange that truly does dominate her text. Blamires grants that the Wife's largesse is tempered by a "disconcerting oscillation between generous and appetitive or mercantile impulses," but he does not attempt to reconcile these impulses, concluding only that the character and her texts are defined by contradiction.[54] Epstein's argument, too, rests with an unresolved tension between the Wife's "hyper-commercialised discourse" and the "poetics of the gift" that inform her tale.[55] Epstein, in a move that runs parallel to Blamires's, simply posits that the two economic modes,

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commercial and gift, co-exist, even as the Wife is an inherently contradictory figure, one who "commits herself to the marriage system in ways that seem conspicuously to undermine her own interests."[56]

While it is true that texts are sometimes riven by irresolvable tensions, I would like to argue that the apparent contradictions of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, particularly those that inhere in the theme of economic exchange, become meaningful and coherent when we read both texts in light of the marriage debt. As we have seen, in this long theological tradition, the conjugal debt is conceived expressly as an economic solution to the problem of sex, but it is a solution that depends on the conditioning of desire, or, as Foucault would put it, on the establishment of norms focused on desires and passions. The tensions that shape *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* are precisely the same as those that shape patristic and scholastic discourse on the marriage debt. In this discourse, sexual bounty and the spirit of liberality emerge out of the very proscriptions and prohibitions intended to contain and control them. The paradox that sees bounty generated by lack, negation, and prohibition is reflected on a rhetorical level in the sheer amount of text generated for the purpose of delineating a restriction, from the early patristic diatribes against sex and marriage to the detailed working out of the canon law by which marriage was established as a sacrament. Tracing the development of the doctrine from St. Jerome – the Wife of Bath's primary interlocutor – to Gratian and Thomas Aquinas, we move from total prohibition, insofar as all sexual desire is sinful, to total requirement, insofar as the marriage debt compels each spouse to pay upon demand. Indeed, in the legal terms laid out in the *Decretum*, the "obligation was absolute: it made no difference, at least in principle, where or when the demand was made; the spouse from whom the debt was required had to comply."[57] *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* show how the marriage debt creates a profitable domestic economy, precisely through the shaping and containment of desire.

In the Wife's reminiscences, an economy of desire and renunciation shapes her five marriages, but what the Wife's experiences show, in an almost direct rejoinder to Augustine, is that the renunciation of a thing, whether it be sex or wealth, creates the desire for it, and propels the circulation of things in exchange: the marriage debt, as all debts do, produces an economy. And if value is generated by lack, then debt is created by credit: the debt the Wife claims from her husbands is created, she argues, from the bounty and largesse she bestows upon them, from the untold pleasures of her *bele chose*. In a mischievous recognition that it is, in part, the problem of pleasure that the marriage debt is formulated to

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address, the Wife celebrates with unabashed delight the "actes" made licit by marriage (3.114). And yet, at the same time, she describes sex with her first three "olde housbondes" (3.) as a *debitum* indeed, an act she performs not to indulge her prodigious "appetit" (3.623) but as a sacrifice, a duty she "suffers." It is precisely the renunciatory aspects of sex with her older husbands that render it a form of payment in an economic exchange:

> I wolde no lenger in the bed abyde
> If that I felte his arm over my syde
> Til that he had maad his raunson unto me;
> Thanne wolde I suffer hym do his nycetee.
> And therfore every man this tale I telle,
> Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle.
> [. . .]
> For wynnyng wolde I al his lust endure.
> (3.409–416)

Lines such as these serve as support for the notion that the Wife turns wifehood into a kind of prostitution. But, arguably, she fulfills the spirit of the debt where the scholastic account delineates only the letter: she pays the debt to her husbands and maintains reciprocity without enjoying the act itself. In winning money from her husbands in exchange for sex, we might even say that she performs all that "pertains" to her as a wife *in proportion* to all that pertains to her husbands. That is, she exchanges with them not directly equivalent goods but proportional goods in that both receive what is most valuable to them.

The reason that sex with her first three husbands was onerous to her, moreover, is not, as we might imagine, that they are physically unattractive, but simply that they desired her "queynte" too much: "They loved me so wel, by God above, / That I ne tolde ne deyntee of hir love" (3.207–208). Their excessive desire for her dampened her desire for them, for, as she explains,

> We wommen han, if that I shal nat lye,
> In this matere a queynte fantasye:
> Wayte what thyng we may nat lightly have,
> Therafter wol we crie al day and crave.
> Forbede us thyng, and that desiren we;
> Preesse on us faste, and thanne wol we fle.
> With daunger oute we al oure chaffare;
> Greet prees at market maketh deere ware,
> And to greet cheep is holde at litel prys:
> This knoweth every woman that is wys.
> (3.515–524)

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In these lines, the Wife provides a succinct articulation of the law of supply and demand, a principle that was well-known and oft-rehearsed by the same scholastic theologians the Wife both echoes and challenges on the topic of marriage.[58] It was a law expressed in the ancient maxim, "Omne rarum est pretiosum," and repeated countless times in scholastic discussions of the just price, exchange, and value.[59] Augustine himself recognized that, in times of famine, a loaf of bread is more valuable than a pearl.[60] Likewise, according to Bonaventure, "the farmer labours more in stony and sterile soil, and though his produce is scantier, its value is greater, and those things which it is more difficult to make are often sold for more."[61] The law of supply and demand describes a mechanism the principles of which are closely analogous to the Wife's economy of renunciation and desire, insofar as the lack or scarcity of goods increases their value, their desirability.[62]

The key idea conveyed by the law of supply and demand is also the bedrock of a monetary economy, that material goods do not have an intrinsic value.[63] The Wife's "queynte fantasye" similarly foregrounds the positive feedback loop of scarcity, desire, and value equally in the social economy of marriage as in the material economy of goods and resources. Jankyn, her fifth husband, is "of his love daungerous"; he makes himself scarce, and therefore the Wife loves hym "best" of all her husbands (3.513–514). The desire generated in the Wife for Jankyn by his indifference – and his fine, fair legs – prompts her to give up the power and wealth so dearly bought from her first three husbands: "And to hym I yaf al the lond and fee / That evere was me yeven therbifoore" (3.630–631). Where once she sacrificed her body in the marriage debt, she now renounces, by paying out, her material possessions in exchange for sexual fulfillment. She occupies the role, vis-à-vis the young Jankyn, previously held by her first three husbands. This role reversal confirms the relativity of value posited by the law of supply and demand: the "queynte fantasye" is revealed to be shared equally by men and women, and the value of a thing is revealed to be determined not by its inherent qualities but rather by the desire aroused by its lack.

The way in which the Wife of Bath links economic value and subjective desire is modeled closely on the scholastic discussion of scarcity and price, which begins with Aristotle's distinction between voluntary and involuntary acts. In the *Ethics*, only voluntary acts can be praised or blamed as virtuous or vicious, while acts may be rendered involuntary either by ignorance or by compulsion. Some acts performed under compulsion are not wholly involuntary, for instance if they involve choosing between the

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lesser of two evils, as in a man who performs a wrong act in order to save his parents or children from being murdered.[64] This type of compelled but willed action Aristotle considered to be "mixed," neither totally free nor totally forced.[65] Medieval commentators on Aristotle took up this distinction in discussions about the voluntariness of sin, but it also proved foundational in discussions of value, price, and exchange. Alexander of Hales distinguishes between simple will (*voluntas absolutas et simpliciter*) and conditional will (*voluntas comparata et conditionalis*): "The condition in question can have a pulling effect, as when someone who would not sin simply would sin because of some great profit. Or it can have a pushing effect, as when someone would sin in order to escape death, with the removal of which [threat] he would not sin."[66] Likewise, in his *Commentary* on Lombard's *Sentences*, Bonaventure distinguishes between *coactio sufficiens*, as when someone is bound hand and foot, and *coaction inducens*, as when someone is threatened. Inducement, Bonaventure writes, is crucially distinct from force because it leaves the will free.[67] Such distinctions delineating degrees of freedom of the will were brought to bear on the just price insofar as it was conceived to prevent coercion and extortion. Ordinarily, a thing is worth what buyers are freely willing to pay for it.[68] But many factors can affect a buyer's willingness to pay, including extreme need, leading to varying degrees of compulsion, or what Alexander would call *voluntas conditionalis* and Bonaventure would call *inductio*. In such situations, a buyer might be induced to pay an exorbitant price, but their will is not entirely free, and the seller is to blame for exploiting, rather than relieving, their constraint. While scholastic economic analyses focused on material need rather than on sexual demand, the Wife of Bath suggests that both kinds of demand involve a conditioning of the will that increases the subjective value of a good, which in turn increases its market value; both demands tie value to human desire rather than to the intrinsic qualities of a thing.[69]

It is Chaucer's insight, expressed through the Wife of Bath, that the marriage debt governs and channels sexual desire in the same way and for the same reason that the law of supply and demand governs and channels the value of goods in the marketplace. Both the marriage debt and the law of supply and demand name the mechanism by which economic agency is constrained and conditioned, which is the same mechanism by which value is created and desire is stoked. In each instance of winning in the Prologue, likewise, the wills of the exchangers are "mixed," to use the Aristotelian phrase: formally free but in some way influenced or compelled. Scholastic concern with economic freedom typically focused on

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need as a kind of compulsion, a compulsion that renders high prices and usury unjust. But the Wife does not express "need" in this sense of the bare means of survival. Rather, she is compelled by desire for that which is precious because rare or hard to get. The fact that the Wife calls this desire a "fantasy" underscores the idea that the structure of debt shaping the marriage economy calls the desire into being precisely by denying it: just as material goods have no intrinsic value, what is desired above all in this economy is something not tangible, stable, or inherent, but whatever it is that you cannot easily have, whatever it is that you lack – something, in other words, not quite real. Moreover, the desire born of debt renders the Wife's household a productive economic unit of vigorously circulating wealth and power. She wins property in exchange for sex from her first four husbands, and exchanges her winnings for sex with Jankyn, only to receive again by the conclusion of her Prologue, with the additional profit of happiness and harmony.

Free Bondage: Economic Power in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*

The Wife of Bath's Tale, scholars have long recognized, falls into the generic category of English "loathly lady" tales, a type of folklore narrative that originated in Irish sovereignty myths. In many of the Irish tales, a territorial goddess appears as an ugly hag who is transformed into a beautiful lady when the hero agrees to marry or have sex with her.[70] In these versions, the marriage or intercourse symbolizes the sacred union of the Sovereignty of Ireland (the *flaitheas na h-Eirenn*), embodied in the shape-shifting woman, with Ireland's rightful ruler, the hero who has proven his right to rule by submitting to the goddess. The English versions are Arthurian romances in which individual virtue, staked on the question of what women desire rather than territorial sovereignty, is decided. In this sense, the English versions may be said to domesticate the Irish myth, insofar as they make what was a story of political and territorial founding into a story of the household. In his *Confessio Amantis,* Gower uses the tale, here called "The Tale of Sir Florent," to illustrate the importance of obedience as a remedy for pride. In "The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnelle," the eponymous hero agrees to marry the loathly lady in exchange for the answer that will save King Arthur's life. And in Chaucer's version, the public ritual of sovereignty becomes a private battle of the sexes, for the Wife of the Bath uses the story to support the main argument of her Prologue that marital harmony is possible only when husbands surrender "maistrie" to their wives. What

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the later English stories share in common with the Irish myths, therefore, is a concern with power: who has it, how is it gained, over whom or what is it exercised?

While the Wife's discourse in the Prologue was premised upon the *debitum*, the precept that makes sex lawful, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* begins with a negative exemplum of that precept and a transgression against the law. The crime of rape committed by the knight precisely and pointedly violates the requirements of free will and mutuality in the marriage debt that the Wife explores in her Prologue.[71] In stark contrast to the Wife, who gives of herself "frely" and willingly in marital exchange, the unnamed "mayde" does not consent – the Wife is emphatic, "maugree hir heed / by verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed" (3.887–888); the sex act here is not a payment of a sacred *debitum* but a kind of theft. The knight's crime raises a "clamour" for justice, and justice in this case means a punishment of death, according to "the statut tho" (3.889, 893). In keeping with the mythological origins of the tale, the Wife emphasizes the historical otherness of an Arthurian world in which knights are executed for wronging women, but she also uses the difference between the mythic past and an implied present to set up a contrast between two different types of power. The law of the land *then* is embodied in the figure of the sovereign, who exercises, in Foucault's words, the power to let live or to make die.[72] Now is a time when "the grete charitee and prayeres / Of lymytours and othere hooly freres, / [. . .] serchen every lond and every streem" (3.865–867); now is a time ruled by pastoral rather than sovereign power. Foucault identifies Christianity as the predominant form of pastoral power; it is "the invention of a binding but not extrinsically coercing power in which people are both individually and collectively involved precisely because they are free. [. . .] The experience of freedom from the law coincides here with a form of total loyalty to the law on the part of everyone's life."[73] For Foucault, pastoral power precedes historically and develops into an economic power that does not constrain from without, does not coerce, but rather works through the values and desires of individuals. Economic power aims, in other words, at the production of a kind of *voluntas conditionalis*, the economically conditioned or impelled will, or, we might say, following the Prologue, an *indebted will* that is both free and not free.

Accordingly, the queen pleads for "grace" (3.895), for a gift from the king, not on behalf of the knight but for herself, that she may be granted the power to decide whether to kill the criminal or to spare his life. The queen's purpose in requesting this gift, as many have pointed out, is to

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give the knight a chance at rehabilitation. She charges him to set forth and discover "What thyng it is that wommen moost desiren" (3.905). If he returns in twelve months with the correct answer, his life will be spared; if he fails, he will be punished "by cours of lawe" (3.892). It was Chaucer's innovation to connect the question of women's desire to the crime of rape, and the change has far-reaching consequences for the meaning of the story. Most obviously, under the rubric of poetic justice, the quest implies that rape, sexual intercourse "by verray force," is the sheer opposite of what women desire. Considered in the context of the marriage debt, it is a crime that targets not only one's bodily integrity but, fundamentally, a crime that targets one's will, *voluntas*, that which serves as the basis of morality itself. The quest assigned by the queen is fitting in that it aims at the knight's own *voluntas*: where sovereign power punishes the body, pastoral power teaches penance, a punishment that is not a punishment but an education, a re-shaping of the will, exercised on the mind and heart of the transgressor.

Economic power is manifest in the old woman's success in educating her husband to the point where he freely and willingly hands over the reins of domestic governance, just as the Wife of Bath's husbands freely give her the "bridel" (3.813). In the case of the rapist-knight, his initial marriage to the old woman is a structural and metaphorical expression of his freedom, insofar as he has been freed from the sovereign law of the land *because* he is in her debt: he has made the contract exchanging her knowledge for his compliance. But, at this point in the plot, the knight does not yet desire his fate; he is brought to the marriage bed a most reluctant groom, he is repulsed by his wife's ugliness and age, and he is shamed by her low birth. Necessary for rendering his structural freedom a form of economic agency is the submission of his will in the marriage debt. He must not only have sex with his ugly wife; he must *want* to have sex with her (but only if that's what she wants) – he must change not only, or not primarily, his actions but his desires.

In the Prologue, too, the Wife's husbands' wills are compelled by the Wife's pastoral rule, which she wields primarily in the form of discourse: she *talks* them into submission. As the Pardoner wryly comments, she is a "noble prechour" whose rhetorical skill persuades him to abandon his plans to take a wife (3.165–168). Indeed, a good number of lines in the Prologue are taken up with the Wife's rehearsal of the kinds of verbal abuse she subjected her husbands to, abuse she sums up thus: "They were ful glad whan I spak to hem faire, / For, God it woot, I chidde hem spitously" (3.222–223). The Wife is a preacher and a pastor not only because of her

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deft use of Scriptural and patristic *auctors* but above all because she is able to compel her husbands, by convincing them of their guilt, to do what is best for her, which is also, as it turns out, what is best for them. Jankyn is stricken with remorse after striking her; her theatrical outcry, "O! hastow slayn me, false theef? [. . .] / Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee" (3.800–802), prompts him to beg for forgiveness, which she grants, and in so doing, becomes once again his governor:

> He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,
> To han the governance of hous and lond,
> And of his tonge, and of his hond also.
> (3.813–815)

It is a penitential spirit that moves Jankyn to surrender to the Wife, and she, in turn, wields her power benevolently and faithfully. The ultimate picture is not one of competing self-interests but of conditioned desires – desires *trained* to aim at mutual indebtedness and the profitable domestic economy that such indebtedness produces.

Mirroring the Prologue's economy of reciprocal payments between creditors and debtors, Chaucer makes the final transformation of the rapist-knight into an obedient husband the result of a lecture on Christian Stoic virtue. In explaining to him that "gentillesse cometh fro God allone" (3.1162), the old woman is saying, in the mode of Boethius's Philosophy, that he will have what he wants only when he learns to want the right things. She teaches an ethics of renunciation: just as the marriage debt teaches the denial of physical pleasure even in the act of sex, so here does the old woman teach the denial of riches for the sake of true wealth, the denial of bloodline for the sake of true nobility. Once the knight has learned this lesson, he is able to renounce his claim to sovereignty for the sake of economic power; like Jankyn does, he puts himself in his wife's "governance" (3.1231), allowing his desires to yield to hers: "[A]s yow liketh, it suffiseth me" (3.1235). What follows from the knight's self-denial is an economy of exchange, the same economy that shapes the Prologue, expressed in brief. For as soon as the old woman has "[gotten] of [him] maistrie" (3.1236), she gives up her claim. She becomes "bothe fair and good" by day and night (3.1241), and henceforth, we are told, "obeyed him in every thyng" (3.1255). Many readers have found this conclusion disappointing and out of step with the Wife's claim that she, along with all women, desires mastery. Lee Patterson considers the old woman's "pillow-lecture" on gentilesse "entirely traditional" and as evidence that, ultimately, the Wife's conventional desire for mutual affection, for

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happiness, in marriage transcends any element of commercial self-interest in her prologue and tale.[74] But this view mistakenly sees commercial self-interest as antithetical to the desire for happiness or affection, or some other apparently non-economic value, and sees both self-interest and happiness as values that are undermined by the relinquishing of mastery. In fact, according to the Wife of Bath, the pursuit of monetary gain, figured as the competition for mastery, is not antithetical to, but dramatically productive of, happiness and mutual affection, but only through an economy of debt, that is, through renunciation and self-abnegation. Renunciation and payment in the marriage economy of debt feeds desire and produces winnings for all – youth, beauty, and husbands "meeke, yonge, and fresshe abedde" (3.1259). Moreover, the closing lines of the *Tale*, in which the Wife curses "olde and angry nygardes of dispence" (3.1263), far from leaving us with a static happily-ever-after, suggest that the domestic economy continues, circulating wealth and power through debt in perpetuity.

In some lights, the equality and freedom promised in the marriage debt appear to be chimeras, or perhaps even deliberate deceptions, although the precise boundary between freedom and coercion, equality and subjection is hard to track because the participants in the debt economy as the Wife depicts it end up desiring, in all sorts of conditioned ways, their own coercion and subjection. The Wife's insistence that "al is for to selle" has been read as expressive of the processes of commodification and monetization eroding late medieval social and communal values. Her celebration of the marriage debt shows the extent to which, and why, human beings willingly participate in these processes. Foucault argued that the capitalist subject is one not bound externally by juridical constraints, who enjoys a formal freedom of the will and yet chooses a kind of economic and institutional bondage. In this light, the entrenchment of capitalist forms depends not necessarily or exclusively on blatant commercialization and monetization but primarily on the "establishment of norms that are not imposed from the outside, but which rely on desires, passions, and actions, and hinge, above all, on the same criteria of evaluation and choice typical of human life."[75] *Homo economicus* is the individual who must be left alone, who must be left free to pursue his desires and interests, precisely and only because he freely chooses to obey the law – as eminently governable, because he governs himself.[76] What *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* illustrate is the extent to which the Biblical and canonical precept of the marriage debt serves as a training ground for such capitalist subjectivization.

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"…That ye be nat yvele apayd": The Marriage Debt in *The Merchant's Tale*

Readers have long noted that *The Merchant's Tale* is framed as a response to the marriage debate in *Canterbury Tales*, both to *The Clerk's Tale*, when the Merchant compares his own wife's "passyng crueltee" to "Grisildis grete pacience" (4.1224–1225), and to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, when Justinus names the Wife of Bath in a metafictional appeal to her authority in matters "of mariage" (4.1685). But the Merchant responds to the Wife not merely on the conventional topic of the "wo that is in mariage"; as I will show here, *The Merchant's Tale* constitutes a companion piece to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* more specifically and pointedly in its focus on the governance of desire in debt as the essential link between the marriage economy and the commercial economy. As the Wife of Bath's expertise in marriage is expressed in economic terms, that is, in the terms of exchange, governance, and the profit of debt, so is the Merchant's expertise in "eschaunge" (1. 278) expressed in a tale about marriage. And for both, the economic nature of the conjugal relationship, in which marital sex is deemed a legally obligatory act of "paying one's debt," produces a paradoxical kind of constrained freedom and proportional equality. This freedom, which is also a kind of bondage, and this equality, which is also a kind of subjugation, characterize the moral and political condition of Christian sacramental marriage, as they do the condition of the capitalist subject.

The Merchant's Tale depicts the marriage market more starkly and frankly than any other of the *Canterbury Tales*. In his refutation of Theophrastus's claim that wives are a "dispence" (4.1297), a wasteful expenditure without return, Januarie insists that a wife is a man's most valuable possession, more valuable because more long-lasting than "londes, rentes, pasture, or commune" (4.1313). Januarie's notion that wives are property leads naturally to the idea that choosing a mate is a process of purchasing a commodity:

> Heigh fantasye and curious bisynesse
> Fro day to day gan in the soule impresse
> Of Januarie aboute his mariage.
> Many fair shap and many a fair visage
> Ther passeth thurgh his herte nyght by nyght,
> As whoso tooke a mirour, polisshed bryght,
> And sette it in a commune market-place,
> Thanne sholde he se ful many a figure pace

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By his mirour, and in the same wyse
Gan Januarie inwith his thought devyse
Of maydens. [. . .]
(4.1577–1587)

Recall that the Wife of Bath confesses a parallel "fantasye" in her prologue, insofar as she likens the stimulation of interest and desire in the marriage market to the law of supply and demand. For the Merchant, too, the object of desire in an economy of marriage is a "fantasye"; such economic desire aims at something that does not have inherent or objective value, only an unstable, fluctuating market value, a value determined by scarcity or lack. Januarie's desire for the ideal woman – "Hir fresshe beautee and hir age tendre, / Hir myddel smal, hire armes longe and sklendre" (4.1601–1602) – is clearly also a desire for a fiction; the narrative makes it comically clear that the bride he has conjured in his imagination is no more real than the virtuous wife described in the tale's opening ironic encomium. David Aers has drawn attention to the juxtaposition of the "purchasing" of May with the church's role in sanctifying marriage: "she was feffed in his lond" (4.1698) is followed directly by the line "to the chirche bothe be they went / For to receyve the hooly sacrement" (4.1701–1702).[77] According to Aers, this juxtaposition is Chaucer's way of signalling the "normality and culturally sanctioned nature of Januarie's conduct."[78] It is indeed one of the most cynical moments in the tale, when the sacrament is said to have "made al siker ynogh with hoolynesse" the crudely economic transaction that has been contracted between Januarie and May (4.1708).

The encomium to marriage may be ironic because, as the Merchant complains, real women are nothing like Griselda, and yet the ideal marriage it posits is one that optimizes the yields of "housbondrye" (4.1380). It is one in which the basic economic unit is not the individual consumer pursuing their whims and fantasies but the household. This is certainly the ideal that Januarie envisions. When he holds up a mirror in the marketplace, he pictures himself, first and foremost, as a wealthy and virile man uniting with an obedient woman (as pliable as "warm wax" [4.1430]) to have children and make the best use of his material goods – to "wex and multiplye" (3.28), as the Wife of Bath puts it. In this vision, wives are not only resources or chattel; they are also "keepers" of the economy (4.1380), as are husbands. The traditional complaint about the "dispence" of a wife is matched, and its antifeminist force mitigated, by Januarie's complaint about himself, that he feels he has "despended" his body "folily" (4.1403),

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underscoring the idea that sound husbandry shuns wastefulness and aims for conservation and productivity, but also that such productivity depends on the active contributions of both spouses. To support this view of ideal marriage, Januarie appeals directly to Augustine's three goods, and the marriage debt itself, creating a clear link between the "greet sacrement" that preserves chastity (4.1319) and women's role in marriage as home economists:

> If he ne may nat lyven chaast his lyf,
> Take hym a wyf with greet devocioun,
> By cause of leveful procreacioun
> Of children to th'onour of God above,
> And nat oonly for paramour or love;
> And for they sholde leccherye eschue,
> And yelde hir dette whan that it is due.
> (4.1446–1452)

The tale's deepest irony is the fact that Januarie misuses the "dette" precisely to justify and sanctify his desire for sex with a much younger woman; he marries to indulge the very sin that Augustine, Thomas, and Gratian devised the *debitum* to remedy and merely gives it the *name* of "housbondrye." The Merchant calls attention to Januarie's abuse of the marriage debt when Januarie declares, in an absurd contradiction of canon law, "in oure actes we mowe do no synne. / A man may do no synne with his wyf, / Ne hurte hymselven with his owene knyf" (4.1839–1840). Moreover, Januarie seems to be guilty also of "immoderately [demanding] the conjugal debt" – a vice that, the *Decretum* explains, is "not permitted" but is, rather, "overlooked on account of marriage."[79] The Merchant-narrator is cagey about Januarie's proclivities, but we do know that he tends to "lyve ful deliciously" (4.2025), building a walled garden with a locked gate that serves as a kind of outdoor sex park, where he might pay homage to "Priapus" (4.2034), and where,

> whan he wolde pay his wyf hir dette
> In somer seson, [. . .] wolde he go,
> And May his wyf, and no wight but they two;
> And thynges whiche that were nat doon abedde,
> He in the gardyn parfourned hem and spedde.
> (4.2048–2052)

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What these things might be that are not done in bed we are not told, but it seems clear that, in the terms of the *Decretum*, and against the ideal of chaste, procreative sex that Augustine had in mind, Januarie is treating May "in immodest, shameless, or obscene ways."[80]

May also misuses the marriage debt, but the principle of reciprocity that structures it – reciprocity that dovetails comically with the quid pro quo of *fabliau* justice – renders May's transgression understandable, perhaps even structurally appropriate. Januarie believes that "hir dette" entitles him to have his every sexual whim and wish fulfilled, but the corollary of this entitlement is that May, too, is entitled to sexual fulfillment: "Let the husband render the debt to his wife, and the wife *also in like manner* to the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband. *And in like manner* the husband also hath not power of his own body, but the wife." If May was dehumanized and rendered a passive commodity on the marriage market, the marriage debt, by contrast, makes her an economic agent, both a debtor and a creditor. She must bear Januarie's obscene exertions, but precisely because these exertions are odious to her, she wins the upper hand – the *maistrie* – and all the sexual capital in the conjugal economy. To borrow the Wife of Bath's parlance, Januarie desires May's "queynte" too much, and this desire costs him dearly.

The way in which the marriage debt grants May some agency, through a limited equality in marriage, is made more clear when we compare her case to the *Decretum,* as well as to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Day 2 – another literary treatment of the marriage debt and an analogue of *The Merchant's Tale*. In the *Decretum*, *Causa* 33 introduces the topic of the marriage debt with the following scenario:

> A certain man, who had been impeded by a witchcraft, was unable to pay the debt to his wife. Meanwhile, another man secretly seduced her. She separated from her husband and married her seducer in public. The impotent man confessed in his heart to God a sin that he had committed; consequently, his faculty of knowing his wife was restored, and he took her back. But once he received her, in order to have more time for prayer, and to be pure when approaching the flesh of the Lamb, he took a vow of continence, although his wife did not consent.[81]

This *causa* seems designed to inspire the plot of a fabliau. Indeed, as Grace Delmolino has shown, it very well might have inspired the plot of *Decameron* 2.10, in which the old, rich lawyer Riccardo di Chinzica marries, but then fails to satisfy, the young and beautiful Bartolomea, a

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novella which, Delmolino argues, "echoes and edits" precisely this legal scenario.[82]

In Boccaccio's hands, the central tenet of the *debitum*, that husbands are obligated to pay the debt to their wives as wives are obligated to their husbands, becomes a vehicle for playing on the stereotype of female sexual rapacity. A character who seems to materialize out of Augustine's defense of marriage as a necessary institution for those who cannot abstain, for those whose raging sexual appetites would "float at large without form and loose" if not contained in marriage, Bartolomea wants to have sex, and lots of it. It does not seem to matter much who the lucky man is; her complaint, even though her husband is described as "thin, dry, and weak-spirited," is that he does not service her often enough.[83] She becomes melancholic because he, in an attempt to disguise his impotence, insists on keeping to an elaborate schedule of holidays enjoining abstinence, which results in permissible sex just once a month. It is this sexual deprivation that makes Bartolomea quick to settle her affections on her abductor, a pirate named Paganino, when he proves himself able to perform multiple times every night. The *Decretum* is, of course, unambiguous on the legal point that spouses cannot dissolve their marriages on the grounds of impotence or frigidity once the marriage has been consummated; as Gratian writes, "Both evangelical and apostolic authority prove that a wife cannot be separated from her husband when he cannot render the debt."[84] But unconsummated marriages could be annulled, and the very fact that Gratian considers so many different scenarios involving failures to pay suggests a certain amount of popular sympathy for wives whose husbands defaulted. When Bartolomea declares defiantly to Riccardo, "my life with you amounted to one great loss, including both principal and interest" and that she has been forced to look elsewhere for her "profit," the *brigata* seems to take her side, if not morally at least in the sense intended by Dioneo, who tells the story for the purpose of illustrating the nature of women and "of what they are enamoured."[85]

Although 2.10 has not yet been identified as a direct source for *The Merchant's Tale*, it now seems very likely that Chaucer knew the *Decameron* as a whole, borrowed from it, and engaged with its genre, themes, and style.[86] I want to suggest here that there is a strong affinity between *Decameron* 2.10 and *The Merchant's Tale,* so much so that several key features of Chaucer's text come into clearer focus when we read it as a response to Boccaccio, particularly around the question of women's desire and the marriage debt.[87] Both tales begin with rich old men who decide, before they have met any potential brides in particular, to find and marry a

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young and beautiful woman, in spite of their own physical unsuitability for such a marriage – rich old men, in other words, who fix on the *idea* of marriage and then attempt, and fail, to impose this idea on a resistant reality. The legal profession of Riccardo, who is a judge, and therefore ought to show better judgement, becomes, in Chaucer's text, the mock parliament in which Januarie's friends (*Placebo* and *Justinus*) offer ineffectual counsel. Grand, festive weddings are followed by anti-climactic wedding nights in which the marriages are consummated only with much effort and medicinal aids. Both wives soon take young lovers. Boccaccio's Riccardo literally loses his wife at sea; Chaucer's Januarie loses sight of his wife when he goes blind. Both poets use sexual puns to facilitate the adulterous deception: in a play on Riccardo's inability to perform, Bartolomea pretends not "to know" him when they are reunited; in a play on the metonymic link between Januarie's procreative aims and his walled garden, between the "clyket" and the phallus (4.2046), May steals the key to the garden's gate and makes a "countrefete" to give to Damyan (4.2121). In the end, both wives end up with their sexual partners of choice, and both husbands end up humiliated.

To be sure, the two texts share much in common simply by virtue of their status as *fabliaux* and their use of the figure of the *senex amans*; but a comparison of the two highlights the pointedness of Chaucer's sympathetic portrayal of May's sufferings in the marriage bed. By contrast with Bartolomea, May is not eager for sex with just anyone. Her shriveled husband does pay his debt, most eagerly and regularly (albeit with the help of special spices and potions), but the narrative makes us feel, excruciatingly, just how unwanted these payments are. Januarie is repulsive and ridiculous, from the "thikke brustles of his berd unsofte, / Lyk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere" (4.1824–1825), to the "slakke skyn aboute his nekke [that] shaketh / Whil that he sang" (4.1849–1850). Chaucer's characterization of the lecherous old knight is so finely and brutally detailed that when May begins to make plans to fulfill her own "appetit" (4.2336), it is hard to imagine any audience, medieval or modern, failing to cheer her on. Gratian scolds the husband who seeks chastity: "Should she be made a fornicator by your continence? If she marries another while you live, she will be an adulteress."[88] As Delmolino observes, "this canon neatly encapsulates what all of the merchants in *Decameron* 2.9, with the exception of Bernabò, acknowledge: that women who are sexually neglected by their husbands [. . .] do not simply '[tenere] le mani a cintola' [twiddle their thumbs] while their men are gone (2.10.3). This reality does not make Bartolomea's adultery any less of a

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crime, yet neither is it entirely her fault in the eyes of the law."[89] By extension, Chaucer seems to suggest that May's crime is mitigated not by her husband's sexual neglect but, remarkably, by her aversion to him and by her sexual preference for someone younger, more attractive, and more likely to impregnate her. In this radical revisioning of the purpose of the marriage debt, Januarie fails to discharge his obligation not because he is impotent or unable but because May is "yvele apayd" (4.1565, 2392); his tender is unacceptable.

After May receives Damyan's love letter (and then drops it down the privy to destroy the evidence), we read,

> Who studieth now but faire fresshe May?
> Adoun by olde Januarie she lay,
> That sleep til that the coughe hath hym awaked.
> Anon he preyde hire strepen hire al naked;
> He wolde of hire, he seyde, han some plesaunce;
> He seyde hire clothes dide hym encombraunce,
> And she obeyeth, be hire lief or looth.
> But lest that precious folk be with me wrooth,
> How that he wroghte, I dar nat to yow telle,
> Or wheither hire thoughte it paradys or helle.
> (4.1955–1964)

The Merchant-narrator's subtly paraleptic depiction here, both of May's plight and of her realization dawning – "Who studieth now but faire fressh May?" – responds as much to the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, with its quest to discover what women desire, as it does to Bartolomea's indiscriminate libido: whatever it is that women want, Januarie's performance in the bedroom and in the garden are certainly not it. There is, indeed, a striking echo of the marriage bed scene in the *Wife of Bath's Tale,* where the will and body of the young, beautiful spouse are violated by the old, ugly spouse, a violation made possible by debt, which turns out to be, in these texts, a constraint more powerful than direct physical force.

The way in which the marriage debt works as a constraint is dramatized in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Merchant's Tale* through the theme of rape, which appears in both as the shadow image of marital sex. Sacramental, voluntarily consensual, lawful: marital sex is defined in direct opposition to rape; and yet, both tales suggest that the *debitum* can serve as a smokescreen for coercion. In English legal history from the Middle Ages until the very late twentieth century, the marriage debt was indeed an instrument of rape precisely *because* it is premised on mutual consent and sexual (albeit proportional) equality, insofar as it rendered marital rape

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criminally illegible.[90] As Chelsea Skalak puts it, "[if] a husband holds power over his wife's body, and a wife over her husband's, then no possible use of those bodies can be termed rape."[91] *Decameron* 2.10 rehearses a version of this legal invisibility when it depicts the "raptus" of Bartolomea, from her perspective, as a welcome reprieve from her sexual drought. Initially, Bartolomea weeps "bitter tears" and will not be comforted by Paganino's sweet words; when talking fails, Paganino "turned to consoling her with deeds. [. . .] In fact, he was so good at consoling her in this fashion that before they reached Morocco she had completely forgotten about the judge and his laws, and was happier living with Paganino than anyone in the world could be."[92] Any possibility that sex between an abducted woman and her captor might be considered rape is precluded by the running joke about what it is that women really want. The Wife's fairy tale lens reverses the gender roles, so that it is the rapist-knight who is, fittingly, coerced into unwanted sex, which then becomes very much wanted, and the debt he owes to the loathly lady for his life is the force that binds him. But in *The Merchant's Tale* it is May who is passively "wedded [. . .] unto this Januarie" (4.1695) and brought to her wedding bed "as stille as stoon" (4.1818), forced to "obeye[n] be hire lief or looth" (4.1961). Accordingly, the narrative supplies an unequivocal answer to the question of whether sex with Januarie is a heaven or a hell for May when it evokes Claudian's *De raptu Proserpinae* in its "mythological interlude" scene.[93] Aligning Januarie with Pluto and May with Proserpina, this scene suggests that any shrewishness or cuckoldry endured by husbands at the hands of their wives is just payback for the hellish suffering endured by women whose bodies are not their own. The mutual reciprocity of the debt is reimagined here as an eternal tit-for-tat, and the mutual consent upon which the marriage debt is based theoretically is exposed as an empty legal form. The economic reality is the one decried by scholastic theologians as unjust and exploitative, in which one party is compelled or induced by circumstance, or by another's superior power or advantage, to an action they do not freely will.

Through Januarie and May's misuse of the marriage debt, Chaucer illustrates its inherent duplicity: the doctrine attempts to have it both ways, both legitimating and condemning sex, and so it is only appropriate that the tale's representative married people also attempt to have it both ways, using the debt to justify their desires without abiding by the constraints imposed by the debt. The sexual equality instantiated in the *debitum* as it is worked out by Augustine, Gratian, and Thomas Aquinas has proved to be as much a curse as a blessing for women: claims made by

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modern scholars heralding the *debitum* as a precursor to what we might consider true or meaningful sexual equality are inaccurate. And yet, the Wife of Bath does seize on the notion that a man must, in Gratian's words, "pay the debt, pay it even when [he] has not demanded it. God will count it as perfecting sanctification, that, although [he] [does] not ask it of her, [he] [pays] it to [his] wife when she asks."[94] This imperative Gratian issues in response to *quaestio* 5, which forbids a husband to take a vow of continence without his wife's consent, because of the risk of tempting the wife into adultery. Here, Gratian imagines a divine cost–benefit analysis, wherein the virtue of continence is a profit (*lucrum*) that does not make up for the loss (*dampnum*) of adultery.[95] As we have seen, the Wife of Bath exploits the terms of this imperative to the fullest; in so doing, she positively exemplifies the principle of the profit made from debt – of putting an evil thing to good use – taught by Augustine. What is made even more clear in *The Merchant's Tale* than in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* is the extent to which the marriage economy of debt tends to produce the opposite of what the precept of the *debitum* was meant to ensure. That is, the contract of marriage that was, presumably, entered into freely and willingly by Januarie and May, and that promised the free and equal exchange of sex, creates a reality in which Januarie takes his "plesaunce" against May's desire and in which May's desires evade the constraints of marriage in her adulterous union with Damyan. In its government of married bodies and souls, the *debitum* enjoins free payment of conjugal sex, but both the Wife of Bath and the Merchant suggest that such payments can be, paradoxically, indistinguishable from rape. In this way, Chaucer's texts on the marriage debt illuminate the emptiness of the debtor's freedom in an economy of debt. They also dramatize the intimate origins of capitalist governmentality, which is not imposed from without but generated within the cultural dynamics of desire and repression, and within the social relations of marriage and family.

Chaucer's treatment of the marriage debt makes explicit through satire the doubleness of the *debitum*, which imposes equality and freedom through obedience and submission. The debts of Sir Amadace, Sir Launfal, and Arveragus are double in a different sense: here, indebtedness is both a shameful secret and a heroic willingness to risk, insofar as passing the test of the near sacrifice is what allows the knight in all three cases to discharge his hidden debt. The charter lyrics instantiate the doubleness of debt by invoking money's representational power: insofar as Christ's body and blood are made present in the parchment and ink of poetic currency, money can stand for blood or, indeed, for life itself. It can also, as the

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marriage debt implies, stand for sex. *The Shipman's Tale* uses this representational power to satirize the faith or *creaunce*, which appears here as foolish credulity, that motivates creditor and debtor alike to make promises and to exchange. In the next two chapters, I turn to William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, where debt is also defined by a troubling and powerful doubleness. The theological starting point of *Piers Plowman* is, as for the charter lyrics, the metaphor of sin as a debt, and both the lyrics and Langland's poem aim ultimately at expressing the terms of pardon, that is, they aim at encapsulating in poetic form the requirements of debt payment as well as debt forgiveness or cancellation. But while the charter lyrics meditate on the suffering and death of Christ, inscribing thereby a sacramental poetics centered primarily on the Eucharist, *Piers Plowman* is more directly and persistently concerned with the sacrament of penance. In Langland's grappling with the components of penance – contrition, confession, satisfaction – and obstacles to penance, the Janus-face of debt makes it difficult to reconcile the dual and necessary aims of justice and mercy. If debt is a word that names, at once, an obligation and a failure to meet that obligation, the task of reconciling the justice of debt payment and the mercy of debt forgiveness is one fraught with difficulties that are semantic and epistemological as well as moral and theological. These difficulties are the main subject and focus of *Piers Plowman.*

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