II. SEXUALITY AND TEXTUALITY

CHAPTER THREE: SEXUALITY AND TEXTUALITY

This chapter will discuss texts men created - and women's subversion of those texts for their very survival - in which the body and the book are yoked together. Interestingly the most vociferous, the most outrageous, of these subversions is a parody of them and was created by a man. Chaucer's Wife of Bath tells us - in an interpolation to the canonical text - that she was "of many clerkys' scoyling," that she had acquired that forbidden learning by forbidden sex with university students, breaking the barriers of literacy and celibacy those universities set up. To do so Chaucer has her challenge Pauline Epistles and Jerome's Vulgate. That joke had been present in La Vielle's sermon to Bel Acuiel in the Roman de la Rose. Those male texts inscribed by Paul and Jerome became the basis for canon law as well as paradoxically establishing modes of writing between men and women. Those male texts regulated sexuality and surprisingly establishing sexual relations in marriage on a basis of mutuality and equality, while prohibiting it otherwise. They also, surprisingly, upheld that marital sexuality against chastity in certain instances, instances which we will find in the fourth chapter, on pilgrimage. There we will meet with women who on pilgrimage preferred not to pay their marriage debt, seeking the power and freedom that chastity would give them and in doing so defying and subverting the texts of Paul and Jerome.

Jane Barr's essay discusses the accuracy of Jerome's translation of the Vulgate Bible from the Hebrew and Greek into Latin - except where he must inscribe women's sexuality. Thus the major Book of Christianity is seen to have been subverted and betrayed away from women by its male translator. Elsewhere, in discussion between Paula and Jerome, we find them squabbling over these inaccuracies.

The second essay, by Elizabeth Makowski, discusses women and sexuality in marriage in medieval canon law. While literature, in its imitation of life, can be persuasive, the abstractions and theories of law paradoxically have far greater application in praxis, being enforceable texts in reality, not merely vicarious reading. Where the literary texts make use of medieval legal practices it is important for us, as modern readers, to understand that legal and literary alterity. These legal texts become structure, become literary theory, to epistolary texts in Lain and pilgrimage texts in the vernacular. Thus, to grasp the status of women in men's texts, we have to look at
Paul and Augustine and their influence on the law concerning women and men, we have to look at Jerome and his transmission of the Hebrew scriptures to Christianity.

Legal structures, in a sense, are metatexts, theoretical abstractions, mapping, somewhat inexact but with much power, humankind. Similarly, the translation of the Vulgate Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, and then the logical formulations of university dialectic carried out by Jerome and Augustine, Abelard and Aquinas, are major textual creations shaping the Middle Ages. When celibate male clerics represented women as either the descendants of Eve, who had led mankind to perdition, or as divine virgins, free from the taint of Eve’s sexuality, they revealed less about women than about their own withdrawal from sexuality into the world of textuality. Women, in turn, tragically internalized those negations self-destructively. Yet, for each man and his text, there are - powerfully - women and their counter texts: with Jerome, there were Paula, Eustochium and Marcella; with Abelard, Heloise and her nuns of the Paraclete. And even illiterate Margery Kempe understood she had to create her counter text, her Book, in which to speak of her body and her gynecology.

Elizabeth Makowski states that

Marriage in Western European society was the preserve of the Christian Church throughout the later Middle Ages. The law of the Church played a significant role in the formation of doctrine concerning that institution, including the sexual relationship of spouses. Adopting a debt-model of conjugal relations, the canonists maintained that each partner owed marital coitus to the other. The lawyers emphasized the mutually binding character of this obligation and consistently defended the right of spouses to exact their marital due, insisting that this duty could be abrogated only by mutual consent. As heirs to an ascetic patristic tradition, however, the lawyers tended to be suspicious of fleshly pleasure. A peculiar and ambivalent doctrine resulted from this tension between an appreciation of the intrinsic goodness of the married state and a distrust of sex, one of its major constituents.

Her observations, based on what seem to be dry as dust legal tomes, actually show that medieval women possessed, legally, a surprising - to us - sphere of sexual equality - in sex. We need that knowledge to understand such texts as Chaucer's of the Wife of Bath, in which he has the Wife make use of these canon laws to assert her equality and even dominance - for she cheats and demands more than just the fair payment of the marriage debt while, at times, punitively withholding her side of the bargain to her spouses. This chapter suggests that that material is intertext to Abelard's and Heloise's Letters, Chaucer's Wife's Prologue and even Natalie Zemon Davis' Return of Martin Guerre. We recall the first chapter's disobedient wives.
This chapter originally ended with an essay on a wife and mother as pilgrim and inscriber of a book, on Dame Margery Kempe, who was copying Birgitta of Sweden, and who had to argue with her husband to get him to stop demanding the payment of the marriage debt.\5

In the next chapter to this, on pilgrims and hermits, we shall witness women freeing themselves from sexual bondage and exploitation. Our last chapter shall be on disobedient chaste nuns, opposing our first chapter's disobedient wives.

Notes

1 One wonders by whom that couplet was written - as one had done with the marginal gloss to Brunetto Latino's text concerning women in God's image. The couplet demonstrates an excellent reading of the text.
5 Gail McMurray Gibson asks that we buy her two books in which this essay likewise appears, the first, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages*, published by Chicago University Press, ISBN 0226291022, the second in *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Norton Critical Editions), ed. Lynn Staley, ISBN 0393976394, and which is not included on the web for copyright reasons.