The Goddess and the Critics: addressing a problem in the construction of feminist knowledge

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Noam Chomsky, in *Rules and Representations*, asserts that the act of naming a thing determines the particular manner in which that thing is expected to behave. Therefore, the act of "defining" a thing is, in a sense, an act of "confining" it (Davidson 27). This is particularly so for "woman," in Jung's archetypal naming of her, as in his discussion of the anima/animus component of the human psyche. He defines the anima as the invisible feminine "weakness" in the male psyche but asserts that the animus, the corresponding male archetype of the female psyche, represents the capacity for reflection and deliberation as well as qualities of creativity, procreativity, assertiveness and initiative. By defining these qualities as specifically male, Woman is reduced to representing no more than self-knowledge for man. Moreover, Jung equates the worship of the soul to the worship of Woman, thus severely restricting the ways in which Woman is expected to behave. This is evident in his discussion of the significance of the Virgin Mother image: "she is a vessel of devotion, a source of wisdom and renewal" (Jung 7). In patriarchal, Christian terms, she is an empty vessel filled by the seed of the Holy Ghost so she might bear Christ, who embodies salvation through spiritual wisdom and resurrection. In effect, Jung has denied her the ability to possess knowledge as a being in her own right and reduced her to an object with only the capacity to represent the attainment of knowledge. She cannot "be;" she can only "be had."

The representations of women in medieval literature reflect this "lack of being," even in the works of Chaucer, who has long been a source of feminist debate. In fact, according to feminist theory, it is this very "lack" embodied in women by which the patriarchy defines its own masculinity: man has and Woman has not. He has

strength, a voice, and the light of knowledge and truth, while she is weak, silent, and the darkness of mystery and deception. Man exists in the spiritual realm and Woman in the physical. He is the active subject while she is the passive object. Woman is continually portrayed as powerless, intellectually inferior, and wicked, a vision evident in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, despite dissenting celebration of his supposed feminist stance.

In the "Knight's Tale," Emelye, a young uncomplicated maiden, does not "exist" until she becomes objectified as the desire of Palamon and Arcite. She doesn't own her voice or the capacity to make decisions regarding her future. At the tale's close, Theseus lectures Emelye on the importance of recognizing Palamon's desire and denying her own: "for gentil mercy oghte to passen right" (Chaucer 144). Also, Emelye is compared, as all women are, to inconstant Fortune because "she agayn him caste a freendlich yë" upon Arcite's victory at the tournament (Chaucer 124).

The Prioress is similarly unable to act, pitifully trapped as she is between two extremes, and thus ridiculously unable to fulfill either role. Chaucer's depiction of the Prioress as a somewhat misguided courtly mistress is unmistakable in the "General Prologue," beginning with: "that of hir smyling was ful simple and coy" (Chaucer 6). She cannot be a nun because she cannot distinguish between spiritual love and physical love, as is indicated by her brooch reading "Amor vincit omnia" (Chaucer 8). Her vocation, on the other hand, prevents her from being a mother, so she "mothers" small dogs.

The Wife of Bath, although she has been married five times, has no children. Hence, she has failed in what was patriarchally considered the most important role of Woman, that of mother. Instead, she is a physical creature, justifying her voracious sexual appetite as fulfillment of the divine instruction to increase and multiply. In addition, she is quite immodest about her promiscuous behavior, openly proclaiming her lust,

lecherousness, and lack of discrimination in following her appetite for young, virile lovers. Indeed, the wife seems to ascribe to the medieval patriarchal view of women: "Deceite...God hath yive to wommen kindely," (Chaucer 200) she says, as she takes great pride in having "got the better" of her husbands. In fact, the Wife of Bath epitomizes the negative aspect of Woman: she is wicked, deceitful, inconstant, and a slave to physical appetites.

Chaucer, personifying the dark and mutable mystery of the moon in the women of *The Canterbury Tales*, vividly expresses the medieval link between the macrocosm (the moon) and the microcosm (woman). In order to examine this link, let us first consider how the moon represents the "Goddess" and Woman.

Erich Neumann tells us the moon is the spiritual symbol of the feminine mysteries because it is the "Great Mother of the Night Sky." Similarly, Tillyard identifies the moon as a celestial depiction of Woman: "the moon was set to duplicate the queen in the heavens" (90). Taking the connection a step further, Laurie Cabot identifies woman and the moon as

> parallel aspects of the same phenomenon - an indication that the Goddess who manifested in the moon each month also manifested in [women's] own bodies (37).

This manifestation, evident in the use of lunar time to track menstrual cycles and pregnancies, and to predict births, illustrates a powerful link between the macrocosmic moon and the microcosmic woman. Yet it is a logical link, since both ancient and modern practitioners of Mother/Goddess religions assert "all women are [the] Goddess Incarnate" (Weinstein 71). Thus, if the Goddess is the moon and all women are the Goddess, then women are also the moon.

Among its myriad of associations, the moon symbolizes mystery, illusion, and the darkness of ignorance which, by its very nature, must give birth to the light of wisdom, as well as other apparently opposing characteristics (Hall LXXII). Most of all, the moon is the

very aspect of duality. As in the Goddess, whom it represents, there exist both light and dark, positive and negative, consciousness and illusion. Her mutability is inherent in the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth.

> As Robert Graves puts it,
> The New Moon is the White Goddess of birth and growth; the Full Moon, the red goddess of love and battle; the Old Moon, the black goddess of death and divination (69).

Despite the questioning of his definition of the tripartite Goddess, this representation appears frequently in nearly all discussions of the Goddess and Her manifestation in the moon and women. The faces of the Goddess are reflected in the three phases of the Moon (Cabot 26). The crescent (new) moon is the young, presumably innocent, maiden. She matures into the matron/mother figure, the face of the full moon, who wanes into old age and finally death (the dark moon). Then, as the dark moon disappears and is reborn, so too the Crone dies and experiences rebirth as the maiden. She is the Threefold Moon Goddess.

Chaucer's references to the Moon Goddess from the Classical epics, particularly Greek and Roman mythology, generally take the form of Diana, who is defined by virtue of the three forms she possesses (Chaucer 109). However, she may be known by a variety of names representing the three personae of the moon. First is Diana as Athena, Battle Goddess, or Artemis, Maiden Goddess of Wild Things. Second, she may take the form of Artemis, Protector of Youth, or Lucina, Goddess of Childbirth. Finally, she may be Hecate, Goddess of the Underworld or the Dark Moon Goddess. No matter what she is called, she is always the Goddess of the Three Forms and subject to lunar influences.

Chaucer presents the maiden as the new moon to us as Emelye. She is identified as a maiden of Diana, Virgin Huntress, and she is therefore an earthly reflection of Diana. Physically, Emelye first appears as Diana is frequently represented: golden-haired, youthful, royal,

virginal and beautiful (Boyd 5). Indeed, to Palamon, she is a "goddess," wearing the crown of flowers, another Dianic maiden symbol. Later, we see Emelye as Diana in human form as she rides out - "all dressed in green"- to the hunt. Diana, whose color was green, was the huntress and guardian of forests. Emelye hunts deer, an animal sacred to Diana, and signifying beauty, grace, agility, and regeneration, in the stag's antlers (Gimbutas 89).

Yet, Emelye must inevitably move into the phase of the wife/mother, just as the crescent moon must become the full moon, when she becomes Palamon's wife at the end of the tale. She must develop that "secret knowledge" that comes through the mystery of motherhood (woman's physical uniqueness) and its emotional, spiritual, and psychological connotations (Morgan 5). But the reverberations of the dark moon phase exist in Emelye as well. Arcite suffers bitter pain and death in her honor and so she is the "endere of [his] lyf" (Chaucer 130). She sits at his deathbed and performs the burial rituals guiding him into the afterlife. Even as the maiden, Emelye has already worn the three faces of the Great Moon Goddess.

The Prioress, despite her vocation as nun, represents the second persona of the Moon Goddess. She embodies both the negative and positive aspects of the seductress and the wife/mother, emphasizing her attractiveness and her desire for physical love while remaining very conscious of her position in the Church. Her depiction as not quite nun and not quite courtly mistress aptly reflects the moon as the embodiment of duality and illusion. And so the Prioress is trapped between the polarities represented by the full moon phase, inherent in the roles of nun and courtly mistress.

Just as one would expect to find the full moon, the Prioress appears as the "goddess of voluptuousness" (Neumann 182) with her large figure and notably broad forehead. As such, she represents the fullness of life and fertility of the world. She is the source of nourishment

and protection, as tender and full of pity as Artemis, the Great Mother, signified by the moon's full face. The Prioress keeps about her small dogs, which she nourishes and protects. As the principle animal of the Moon Goddess, the dog worshipped Her by howling at the night moon (Gimbutas 116). The dog was also the companion of the dead and the symbol of Hecate, Mistress of the Underworld (Neumann 170). In the Prioress' pampered pets, we see her connection to the Goddess, containing the knowledge of life and death, made clear.

Her tale is a devotional to the Virgin, with an emphasis on her role as Mother, through divine conception. As the full moon, "Woman experiences her power to bring forth light and spirit, to generate a luminous spirit that…is enduring and immortal," (Neumann 320) just as the Virgin Mary did. Here, the Prioress may be simply worshipping the "Great Mother," however Christianized, as her tale raises no issues that her contemporaries would consider controversial. Yet she not only worships the Virgin but identifies with her as the "help of souls," a role she fulfills by her vocation as nun. Furthermore, hers is a tale of sacrifice; although Christian in nature, it exemplifies a central theme for the Great Goddess, wherein sacrifice is necessary for perpetual renewal. Also in her tale, there appears a widow (the old moon), and the Prioress praises Mary's miraculous sustaining of the slain child until she could guide him to heaven. These details provide echoes of the moon's final phases where the Goddess functions in both death and rebirth. Although her stage in the moon's cycle seems static, the waning moon is a period of growth from which the Prioress will move from her position of balance between the maiden and the matron. She will become fully the matron figure, whether or not it includes motherhood, and eventually the crone or wise woman.

The third persona of the moon is illustrated in "dame Alis," the Wife of Bath. She has survived five husbands and acknowledged that "age…hath [her] biraft [her]

beautee and [her] pitch" (Chaucer 202). Physically, she is the crone. She represents the moon in other aspects as well. Diana, as Artemis, is the guardian of handicrafts and Dame Alice was known for her skill in weaving. And, like Diana, the Battle Goddess, the Wife of Bath was an accomplished horsewoman. Although she offers a detailed description of her maiden phase, Dame Alice now stands at the edge of duality between the matron and crone phases of the moon.

The Wife of Bath employs her knowledge and experience to emphasize the physical aspect of human existence, a particularly interesting characteristic she shares with her symbolic moon.

> The Wife's assertion of bodily fact - of the various functions of the genitals, for instance - is an appeal to the half of human experience that cannot be disallowed by official doctrines on the greater importance of the spirit over the flesh (Cooper 151).

Dame Alice reclaims the physical organs from the spiritual realm by saying that, unless men and women live as saints, virginity is a perfection not for humans. Similarly, the moon is empowered as the symbol of the physical nature of humanity because the body, like the moon, shines only with reflected light. In short, the moon, like men and women, is considered beneath the stable heavens, and deceptive in nature.

The Wife of Bath has come full circle through the maiden and matron phases and is now the widow/crone, the Goddess of Wisdom, the culmination of all feminine knowledge. Dame Alice represents the Dark Moon Goddess, Hecate, who leads souls to the underworld. The underworld is the womb of the earth through which the dead must pass either to doom or to salvation and a higher existence (Neumann 157). Already she has led five husbands through the "hell" of marriage by becoming their purgatory on earth (Chaucer 205). Her final movement into rebirth is not borne out in her life but occurs in her tale. As a mortal human, she cannot

experience any sort of "real" death and rebirth. But, the hag in the Wife of Bath's Tale represents the voice of Dame Alice and "offers fulfillment of [the Wife's] conscious desires for mastery and a young and virile husband" (Cooper 156-7). The hag is, very simply, "the Wife's alter ego" (Cooper 164). The restoration of her youth and beauty can only be expressed as the regret of an unattainable desire, but is clearly the final phase of the moon's cycle.

Chaucer utilizes an impressive synthesis of the moon's influences within the *Tales* to personify the Goddess in his female characters, in the cyclic growth from birth to maturity to death. Through the individual women discussed here, the maiden/matron-mother/widow theme is powerfully effective. Each woman represents not only a particular face of the Goddess, but also her entire lunar cycle. The *Tales* allow a complete, though layered, vision of the three faces of the Goddess in the women of Chaucer's imagination.

Establishing "woman" as the Goddess Incarnate does not remove her from the patriarchal construct. However, the tripartite Goddess concept itself arises from the much older traditions of matriarchy explored by anthropologists the like of Marija Gimbutas, Margaret Mead, and Merlin Stone. And Neumann asserts that although

> this Western development, in which the patriarchal element nearly always overlays and quite often submerges the matriarchal, the fundamental matriarchal structure has proved so strong...that in the course of time the patriarchal stratum overlaying it has...been annulled (332).

All creation shares a symbolic birth from darkness. Matriarchy is, therefore, the "darkness" from which the patriarchy has sprung, in spite of its eager attempts to deny its origins. And, whether intentionally or not, it is the matriarchal tradition upon which Chaucer draws to empower his female characters with a knowledge of their own. For Emelye, the Prioress, and the Wife of Bath can

also be understood to occupy subjective positions representing "beings having knowledge," in spite of their patriarchal restrictions.

Although Emelye has no voice of her own, even the Knight's voice cannot diminish her power to know, her power of "being." Emelye, we are told, descends from the Amazons, "warlike, beautiful mankillers" (Boyd 4). According to the legend, Queen Hippolyta was taken in marriage only because she was defeated in battle. Her defeat was also Emelye's; however, Emelye remained unmarried, not belonging to a husband as the patriarchy would have her. She roamed about, apparently unchaperoned, and "took her amusement" (Chaucer 51, my emphasis) where and when she chose.

Emelye's true knowledge surfaces in her ritual prayer to Diana prior to the tournament. Her desire is to remain a maiden, "not wol I knowe companye of man" (Chaucer 108) and, in fact, to be removed from the objective position of men's desire. She asks for deliverance from the passions of her suitors and, if not that, to be given to the one who most desires her. In short, Emelye is a captive and, as such, can only submit to her captor's will. Although she gives voice to her true desire, there is no choice for her but admitting defeat and accepting marriage. Emelye is not simply torn between the two choices because she is an innocent played as a pawn, but intuitively recognizes the futility of denying the shaping force of destiny. In the tradition of the Goddess, she must submit to the "mystery of the marriage of death" to express her transformation in growing from girlhood to womanhood (Neumann 319).

Jung states "all manifestations of the Earth Mother are described as powerful...she is a divine being" (147). The Prioress in particular appears worthy of such reverence. She is the earthly manifestation of the divine Goddess, who is worshipped in the patriarchal system as the Virgin Mary. That the Prioress appears more as courtly mistress than nun is not contradictory when one considers that in the earlier Goddess tradition, feminine

sexuality was divine, sexual customs were an aspect of a woman's religious worship, and she dressed "in all her finery to do so" (Stone 161). Without the patriarchal condemnation, the Prioress would be fulfilling perfectly her role as "holy woman" in the female religion of the "Divine Ancestress" (Stone 157). But she struggles against her imposed, patriarchal role. The spiritual aspect for the Prioress is in her imagination, the starting point of all inner emotion and in her erotic feeling to which, "under the protection of religion, [she] gives an expression that surpasses all barriers" (Neumann 294). Her religion, and the expression of it, become a sensual experience, rooted in physical, feminine knowledge.

It would appear from the manner in which the Prioress presents herself that her position in the priory was not the result of any desire to serve Christ. Instead, the nunneries of the Middle Ages represented opportunities women could not find elsewhere, such as education, organization, and responsibility. As head of the nunnery, the Prioress is responsible, in part, for teaching the initiates the worship of the Virgin Mary through song and prayer. The importance of this charge is reflected in her tale. The Prioress equates herself with the widow teaching her son always to worship Christ's mother. For it is She and the singing of Her praises by the innocents that ensures salvation. The nunneries also "provided women with openings to a profession and a career" (Power 90). In fact, many of the functions of women in nunneries made them as much a housewife as any Dame Alice.

The Wife of Bath is the most highly-developed female character of *The Canterbury Tales* and her voice is clearly heard. She embodies the realization of female wisdom through a primarily physical experience; she is one of the "wyse wyves," thus establishing herself an authority. In truth, she violently overturns her position of an "object of knowledge-as-control" (Code 32) in her confrontation with her fifth husband. She exercises her real authority by forcing him to destroy his "knowledge" and accept hers by

his burning of the book of wicked wives. Hence, she occupies the position of knowledge-as-control. She claims his knowledge false by rightly insisting the tales would be different had they been written by women.

The Wife of Bath repeatedly questions the evil men think of women who, in her considered opinion, have as much right to sexual pleasure as men: "man shal yelde to his wyf hir dette" (Chaucer 188). But Dame Alice adamantly refuses the confines of patriarchy: "After thy text, ne after thy rubriche, I wol nat wirche as muchel as a gnat." (Chaucer 199). There is no doubt she knows the texts of men for not only does she quote them but knows them well enough to interpret them to suit her own purposes. For example, she uses the proverbs of Ptolemy's *Almagest* to justify her marital discretions; she chastises her husbands who will not share her abundant "goods." But for all her twisting and intentional misuse of written knowledge, in the end, she discards it as useless because, in the search for knowledge, there is no substitute for experience. And that the Wife of Bath has in abundance. She speaks in a voice of knowledge and power.

Although Chaucer and his patriarchal system seek to denigrate the power of Woman, within each success germinates the very seed of failure. The underlying power of the ancient matriarchal tradition inevitably finds its expression, even through the language of the patriarchy. Emelye, the young innocent maiden, is empowered with a knowledge which she may not even recognize. Nonetheless, it is a powerful intuition about the transformation she must undertake. In Jungian terms, she has a "knowledge about things for which men have no eyes" (Jung 77). The Prioress finds her power in the worship of the divine, a worship not limited to the soul but encompassing the body as well. She longs for motherhood, for identifying with the Great Mother from whose power the wisdom of the Father was conceived (Chaucer 371). The Wife of Bath is the sum of all feminine knowledge. Just as is the hag in her tale, she is

the one with the answers, the one who knows life's secrets. She can exist in all worlds, mental and physical. She knows how to "be had" and yet how "to be."

Recognizing this, we now see the Virgin Mother image not as an empty vessel but as the Goddess of the Whole with her all-sheltering body who gives birth, nourishes, and transforms through rebirth all of life. She is the force that "hears the cries of the world," performs the sacrifice, offers redemption, and frees the suffering. She is not simply a source of wisdom and renewal but the "perfection of all knowledge," transforming the animal principle into the highest spiritual illumination (Neumann 332). Thus, all archetypes of the Eternal Feminine (Woman) are reunited in the loving Sophia and modern man may discover that

> in the generating and nourishing, protective and transformative feminine power of the unconscious, a wisdom is at work that is infinitely superior to the wisdom of man's waking consciousness (330).

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