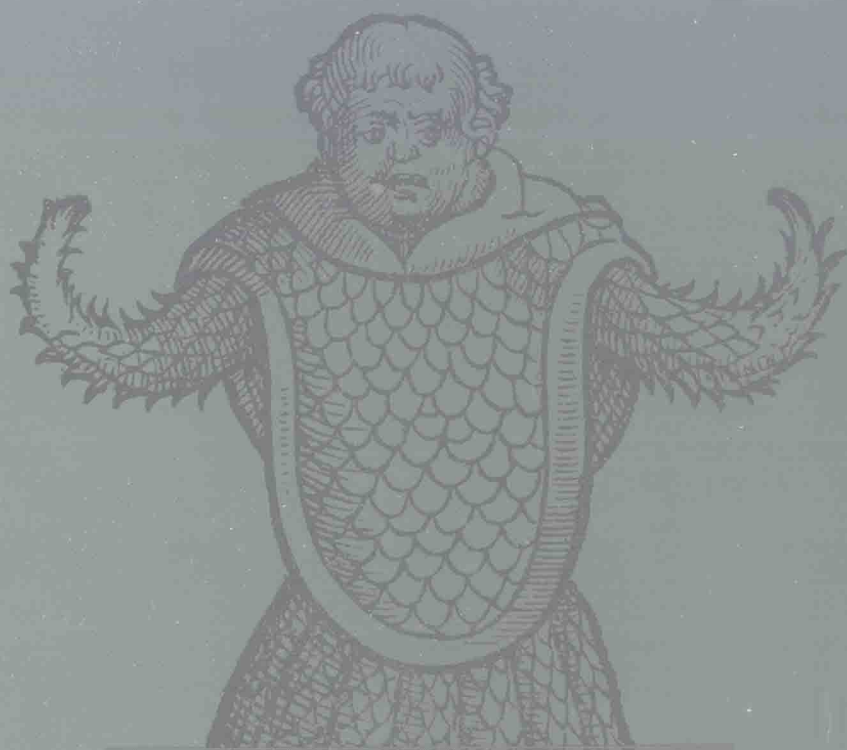


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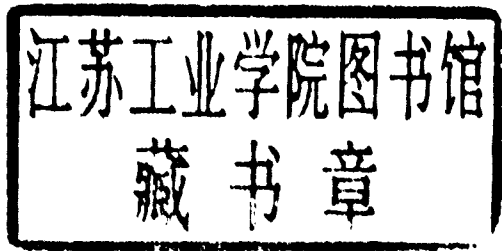
ODD BODIES
and
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MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

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An earlier and much briefer version of this book appeared as my doctoral dissertation “From Doomsday to Romance: Visual Judgment in Old and Middle English Narrative” (New York: Cornell University, 1999).

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASPR	<i>Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records</i>
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, series latina
CS	Cistercian Studies Series
EETS o.s.	Early English Text Society, original series
EETS e.s.	Early English Text Society, extra series
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>

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INTRODUCTION: TIME AND THE AUDIENCES OF VISUAL JUDGMENT

At the trial of the Knave of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*, the King, acting as judge, gives the White Rabbit a quick lesson on reading: "Begin at the beginning, and go on till you come to the end: then stop."¹ What he doesn't spell out, but instead shows by performance, is the site of judgment for a narrative read as evidence; judgment—the conclusive decision as to what precisely the evidence discloses—should take place only after the end of and outside the narration. While the linear teleology of reading (from beginning to end) and the placement of its judging audience (outside) may both seem obvious, the "end" and "outside" of a story are not always so clearly defined.² Shahrazad, famed storyteller of the *1001 Nights*, capitalizes on this difficulty. Her stories neither end simply, nor involve trivial inside-outside distinctions, as her narrative breeds stories within stories until it no longer expresses an uncomplicated division between "inside" and "outside."³

Various medieval works, from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to moralizing or homiletic compilations of exempla, follow Shahrazad's example to create story collections within a framing narrative. Other types of medieval English works problematize or blur ends and boundaries of stories more subtly: they embed narratives within narratives in a less obvious manner, insofar as these narratives frequently contain the kernels of further stories, rather than full-fledged stories themselves. That sense of layered potential stories, and concomitantly, layered potential audiences as judges, distinguishes works designed for audiences who bring specific expectations—other phantom narratives—to each text. Hence, medieval works that draw upon a common consciousness or continuing "popular" tradition—stories, tropes, and concerns having wide currency throughout a society—inevitably undergo such layering. "Layering" refers here to an overlay of potential stories that offer different, additional contexts for narrative interpretation or judgment in comparison to the primary or more explicit stories. To the extent that these narrative layers imply different contexts,

they may afford different judgments. Christian eschatology, embedded with associated religious or exemplary narratives, perhaps provides the ultimate layered narrative. As Northrop Frye, in his discussion of the Barlaam and Josaphat romance and Caedmon's tradition of biblical poetry, concludes, one can begin at the beginning (the story of creation) and encompass the whole tradition of Christian narrative by the time one finishes following each narrative strand into its related strands: the only real end is the final end.⁴ Yet romance matter (concentrating, for instance, on the matter of Britain) comes in at a close second in its layering of narratives and narrative kernels. Even its individual narratives assume the existence of surrounding tales and traditions, including sequels or preludes. Hence, the *Carl of Carlisle* romance, for example, contains a catalogue of Arthurian knights together with a lengthy description of Sir Ironside: a preview of the next adventure-filled romance (coming soon to a court near you). Such a description points at other stories, whether told or untold locally within the text, that shape and reshape the world of the romance. Chaucer even parodies this literary structure in the "Tale of Sir Thopas," where he invokes "romances of prys, / Of Horn child and of Ypotys, / Of Beves and sir Gy, / Of sir Lybeux and Pleyndamour" (7.897–900), as though to remind an audience that his masterpiece could only be understood and judged within the context of all this great *frappe* of heroes and preexisting narratives.⁵

Tzvetan Todorov's approach to "embedding" provides a useful conceptual framework for this sense of narrative layering. Explaining his term "narrative-men," Todorov declares, "The appearance of a new character invariably involves the interruption of the preceding story, so that a new story, the one which explains the 'now I am here' of the new character, may be told to us. A second story is enclosed within the first; this device is called *embedding*."⁶ Such embedding may not even require an entirely new character. In a more sophisticated vein, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* sketches Gawain as an exemplary knight against a popular literary tradition, not to mention a lady, that has already defined him and decked him with specific expectations. At points, the Gawain of the text (the peak of piety and self-conscious humility) and the Gawain of popular tradition (a courtly womanizer) may as well be different characters with correspondingly different stories, one embedded within the other: each configuring a different narrative layer within this romance. Then the lady, the Arthurian court, and the external or reading audience of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* all witness and judge different aspects or views of its hero.⁷

This project approaches such layered narratives obliquely. I focus upon the endings of narratives and their external judging audiences or publics in order to examine the epistemological and narrative implications of those judgments. Christian eschatology provides the model against which to

gauge more literary manipulations of judgment. In eschatological narrative, Doomsday, the end of time itself, imposes a patent endpoint; God stands as the ultimately external judge. His judgment there is not open to question or appeal, nor do his verdicts allow for the possibility of future conflicting narratives: they stand as final and self-evident. In contrast, judgments and finality exist more flexibly and transformatively in other works, including sermons and romances. These genres are particularly amenable to borrowing and adapting themes, motifs, and narrative fragments from earlier renditions; since they are thus especially apt to layer stories and audiences through their close interactions with the popular consciousness, they model themselves against such eschatological certainty.

The sermons with which I am concerned contrast a fallible or uncertain human judgment in the present world with the final and indelible judgment of God at Doomsday.⁸ They urge their auditors to give confession—the narration of their sins—and be shamed before the priest in this world, rather than be publicly shamed by that parade of sins before God at the Last Judgment. These sermons thus privilege metaphorical vision in this world as a means to cleanse oneself for the more concretely visual perception of Doomsday, so that the crystallizing of metaphor into its most concrete formulation measures the temporality between this world and the next. The romances that I treat also express or acknowledge that uncertain gap (of perception, certainty, and time) between human and divine judgment; they do so by a proliferation of audiences whose public judgments may or may not be equally valid. Moreover, they may manipulate endings and external judgments by deliberately blurring the distinctions between the insides and outsides, or the endings and beginnings of narratives. Their judgments thus remain open to question. While Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Prologue" is no romance, it features centrally in this study because it blurs textual boundaries, not only between itself and the romance—the "Wife of Bath's Tale"—that it so memorably frames, but also at the beginnings and endings of the stories of her husbands; it pervasively entangles different senses of the Wife herself: narrating and narrated, outer and inner. Thus, like her heroine, both she and her husbands remain enigmatic and elusive. They stay intrinsically and inextricably layered, and they evade any conclusive judgment as to what, finally, the narrative has disclosed about them. The difficulty of rendering judgment in and on her narrations places these at the far extreme from the visions of Doomsday, where judgment, once given, cannot be rescinded or retracted.

All these judgments ultimately revolve around concerns of epistemology: what is perceived, how, and with what degree of validity? Such perceptions require a primary vehicle, often sensory; that vehicle then determines the validity of the perception for an audience.

In responding to that question, this project spans the entire medieval period and beyond to argue that modes of judgment in both religious literature—sermons and similar didactic texts—and secular narratives such as romances persistently emphasize vision and its publicly revelatory function. Religious works depict or evoke the Last Judgment; romances may encompass trials by combat, beauty contests between women, physical transformation tropes, and verdicts of King Arthur's court. In all these cases, in at least one layer of perception, seeing is believing. Thus, in the Old English poem *Christ III* and in a late medieval Doomsday play, black marks or labels of sin are publicly seen upon the sinful; in the Middle English romance “Sir Launfal” as well as its French source, the hero's lady is the fairest within the romance world to precisely the extent that Arthur's court, viewing her, declares her so. The visually disclosed evidence requires neither mediation nor interpretation, but appears self-evident to its audience. The discourse and metaphoric systems of such judgment scenes highlight a visual sensibility—a mode of thought, perception, and literary convention that I label “visual judgment.” Such visual judgment empowers a viewing and judging public or audience to see, create, and even revise truths. Romances, saturated with themes of display, invoke a particularly varied range of publics whose judgments may foreclose, shape, or threaten narrative closure. Detailed examination of these discourses and their audiences enables a fuller understanding of individual texts and their figures of revelation or teleological consciousness, and illuminates a much broader medieval popular consciousness—in which we can glimpse causes for the medieval popularity of texts that often fall beneath the radar of modern readers' tastes.

Whereas visual judgment adapts itself to various genres, it retains across these an interest in points of transformation: transitional instants that rechannel narrative potential from a “before” state to an “after” state in starkly visual terms. I refer to moments not only of literal judgment, but also of conversion, salvation, physical transformation, or validation—when souls, bodies, honor, or truth cease to hang in the balance. Indeed, each such moment implies or enacts judgment, visual or otherwise. While Doomsday represents the most irrevocable (and visually fertile) transitional instant in the medieval Christian tradition, such visually fertile instants—in a smaller scale—occur more often in romance narratives, in transformations between man and beast, between the courtly and uncourtly, between visual focus and narration. In fact, such repeated or repeatable transformations generate the narrative flexibility that, I argue, is the hallmark of romance from the Middle Ages to the present. One of the inherent interests of visual judgment thus lies in its affinity for certain genres, particularly romance. Romance's narrative flexibility, its ability to transform itself,

extends from the most basic level of plot (as, for instance, when monster transforms into man) to a more complex thematic or structural level as the story itself substitutes one adventure for another, or changes tracks, from one purpose to another, or from comedy to tragedy—just as Gawain's adventure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* repeatedly changes its apparent meaning or purpose: is it a test of courage, of courtesy, of truth, or is it a treasonous trick of Morgan le Fay's? Yet even those thematic and structural shifts seem curiously tied to more material and physical shifts by the green girdle and the enchanted Green Knight himself; if the Green Knight institutes a challenge that appears at first military and heroic in all its trappings, Bertilak's court persistently unmilitarizes the challenge—a bedroom challenge—that Gawain must face. This study examines the transformative nature of the genre and endeavors, thereby, to analyze and define its dependence upon visual construction.

Even modern romance movies such as *Shakespeare in Love* (as I propose finally) draw upon the themes and structures of earlier transformative romances. In recent years, cinema has engaged narratological issues by problematizing visual evidence, much as Gawain's adventure transforms and finally shatters into different viewpoints through scenes that can only be judged retroactively. Similarly, *Shakespeare in Love* not only drives its plot by a series of transformations between art and truth, it also layers stories upon stories—comedies upon tragedies, fiction upon history—to produce a revisionary tour de force of unstable narrative, whereby it reflects a long tradition well preceding Shakespeare's own manipulations of visual judgment.

Throughout the project, my use of the term “visual judgment” encompasses two specifically intertwined perspectives: visual and temporal. The visual aspect schematizes hierarchical relationships between audiences and the scene or central point of judgment. These hierarchies turn on physical proximity and exclusion from or inclusion within the sphere of judgment—as judging or judged, viewer or viewed. Additionally, these audience interactions distinguish between display (deliberate or otherwise) and revelation, and compartmentalize audiences according to their respective degrees of participation, knowledge, and understanding. In *Christ III*, such compartmentalization separates Christ, the saved, and the damned, whose respective levels of knowledge and participation clearly differ on Doomsday. Both the “Wife of Bath's Tale” and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* separate their external and internal audiences and their characters similarly. Thus, when the Wife's heroine whispers women's greatest desire into the knight's ear (and we hear of the whispering, but are not told its content), his knowledge and ours diverge; or when Gawain tells his tale before the Arthurian court, we hear only the synopsis of his words, and

cannot tell, for example, if they visualize his travels in the cold of winter precisely as the poet has earlier visualized them for us. Both these scenes, moreover, encode the revelation of knowledge within material displays viewed publicly, as the Wife's heroine's aged and ugly body reifies before the assembled court her feminine desire for sovereignty; or as Arthur's court sees Gawain's healed wound and green girdle, vivid emblems of the trials that he has undergone. Yet those public views differ from our own (imagined, or visualized, in our role as external audience), depending upon the interpretations that we have drawn—the conclusive judgments we have made—which may or may not match those of the internal courts of judgment. In other words, the green girdle clearly renders a visual judgment, but the precise content of that judgment remains ambiguous; its signification remains changeable, according to its viewer: a badge either of shame (as in Gawain's eyes), or of successful completion of the adventure (as in the eyes of the Arthurian court).

Visual judgment turns on temporality, or the moment of seeing, as much as on vision itself. It involves "temporal" in both its related senses: in terms of secularity, or the *saeculum* of human history, and in terms of time—concerns clearly linked throughout the medieval period. The impersonal flow of time underlies the various teleologies of human existence that shape medieval narrative, including the inevitability of death and Last Judgment—forms, as it were, of narrative closure for audiences—as well as narrative closure within a given text. Due to the distinction between eternal or divine (nonsecular) and human (secular) perception, different audiences either maintain or lack control over these closures as instances of visual judgment. As Boethius' *Philosophia* explains, God exists outside of time, and therefore sees and controls judgment regardless of any teleology that limits humankind;⁹ conversely, a human audience normally remains bound by time and can only affect judgment within such temporal bounds.

Doomsday, the end of time, accordingly reduces all viewers to one participatory audience, with God as judge at the apex of the hierarchy. "[T]he presente eternite of his sighte" (in Chaucer's translation of Boethius) coincides then with the present as experienced and visualized by its human audience insofar as they themselves also participate in the Last Judgment.¹⁰ Doomsday thereby "closes" judgment: no ambiguity remains, because no dissenting audiences exist. Here, it may be useful to divide medieval narrative along two broadly demarcated time schemes, "religious" and "secular," perhaps most easily distinguishable in terms of the relevance and inclusion of the Last Judgment. These two time schemes—up to and including the Last Judgment, or before Judgment—define the separate temporalities that respectively characterize religious texts (which presume an eschatological

frame of reference) and determinedly secular texts (which avoid any closures impelled by external forces like God or eschatology). Secular texts can reshape or evade final judgments; however, they cannot achieve a final closure insofar as they limit themselves to a time frame always prior to Doomsday and open to human knowledge and judgment.

Thus, what their audiences see ultimately reverts to a question of epistemology—of visual representations and their meanings. However, audiences form visual judgments as a function of time, and particularly the transformative potential of time. Such passing time is conceivable in organic terms as development, in literary terms as narrative. Narrative shows the passage of time; hence, different points of narrative may evoke different judgments. In turn, these different judgments raise the question of the role of audiences, without whom neither time nor judgment may even be an issue. Such issues complicate both Bede's story of Cynred's retainer and Chaucer's development of the Wife of Bath. In the former, when Cynred's retainer sees a vision of his damnation, he can judge that vision as either true or false: that damnation is not yet an accomplished fact, since the passage of time could involve his spiritual progress toward salvation; whereas someone whom God has seen as damned has no recourse to the transformative potential of time, since God's judgment exists outside of time. Likewise, the Wife of Bath's ability to judge the same husbands differently at different points of her past arises precisely from her consciousness of and subjection to passing time. All this implies that a final superlative judgment must be posted when time (and possibly space) stands still: otherwise, continued narrative may expose the non-finality of the judgment. Thus in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Arthur's queen can be the fairest of all; then Bertilak's lady can be the fairest, in a different space and time, without necessarily contradicting the earlier judgment. This potential for the temporal undermining of judgment again reflects the difference between religious time, with its teleology toward Doomsday, and secular time, always cut off from its conclusive end. Thus, the concerns of this project devolve upon the formal and thematic relationships (and distinctions, which can always be manipulated) between religious and secular genres.

The thematic approach of my project obviously covers a large area requiring severe and arbitrary limitations. I cannot in this project fully study all the intersecting strands—cultural, literary, or historic—that point toward the significance of visual revelation in judgment scenes, although I try throughout to develop the groundwork for further fruitful inquiry in several disciplines. By visual judgment, therefore, I refer primarily to the mode of thought, perception, and literary practice (in a selected range of narrative) that implies seeing is believing. That is, I pursue the theme of

visual certainty as framed in narrative moments, rather than through the scientific or psychological aspects of physical vision that might underlie it. This project concentrates on specific narrative actualizations of such visual certainty. It makes no full-fledged attempt to pursue “real” historicized sight, or its grounding in objects of art-historical study such as those Last Judgment scenes commonly found on church tympana or in manuscript illuminations. Although those material aspects would usefully evoke the cultural ramifications of my present concerns, their consideration would extend my study—the first on this topic—beyond feasible proportions.

Thus too, of necessity, I have chosen to focus on a limited number of main texts and traditions. As a consequence, my project does not pervasively follow the historical development of the mode of visual judgment. Instead, I follow the development of what I see to be its specific, culturally entwined concerns—binary visual figurations such as light versus darkness, the instances of transition between these elements in binary opposition, its bodily emphases, its implications in avoiding closure, and its influence upon narrative epistemology—through studies of texts that exemplify them within significant cultural and literary contexts. However, I have also attempted to bring together a nexus of English texts of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, where the interplay between religious and secular writings, as well as their different temporal perspectives, becomes especially relevant to the themes of this project. As previous studies have shown, late medieval England offered a mixture of semiliterate (yet with a textually malleable vernacular tradition) and semi-learned (yet interested in *lewed* or popular lore) audiences;¹¹ I propose that this context explains why, in this time period, romances became more self-consciously layered, both among themselves and with associated religious materials—and thereby set the scene for the production of the majority of Middle English romances containing themes of specifically visual transformation.

Yet, romances, while they provide the most immediate contexts that transform the mode of visual judgment, do not perhaps in the end comprise its most significant context. Hence, this project, within and through its limitations, presents for public judgment several broader vistas: a reading of the concept of “audience” and visual perspective as it informs medieval attitudes toward literature and popular culture; a look at the varied nuances of medieval (as well as, sometimes, more modern) “ways of knowing,” which in the end revoke as well as deploy certainties through the very displays that establish the need for or possibility of such certainty; and a methodology for exploring conjunctions of form and content as a generative force in medieval literary history. The generic structure of texts such as sermons and romances may most obviously echo the morphology of the themes that they encompass—for example, of transformation in the face of

religious or secular teleology—but such conjunctions do not comprise an isolated phenomenon. Indeed, such conjunctions prevail within the history of the uses and reuses of medieval narrative fragments in collections and larger wholes, didactic and otherwise, in an endeavor common to Chaucer, Langland, Robert Mannyng (and other compilers of exemplary narratives), as well as the anonymous collectors of the many, often yet unedited manuscripts that collect dust (as popular scholarly legend would phrase it) in the obscure corners of medieval manuscript collections. The concept of visual judgment establishes a point of origin for such study by examining one such manifestation reshaped through several genres.

The project begins, then, at the end: the Last Judgment. Chapter 1 examines the language and metaphors of visual revelation in Old English sermons and the poem *Christ III* so as to present a “prehistory” of the link between the visual preoccupations of Doomsday and more secular discourses. I analyze the imagery of vision and illumination in the poem against its cultural and rhetorical framework—biblical, patristic, and homiletic, as well as secular—to argue that the *Christ III* poet unravels the patristic and biblical metaphors of revelation in favor of a concrete visualization of Judgment. The poem literalizes light as a visible, transformative phenomenon that parallels the secular, heroic discourse of praise and shame. In this poem’s central tableau, the audiences of the Last Judgment (God, angels, devils, and humans) see the saved shine with light and the damned exhibit dark stains, thus socializing Judgment. Much as in secular determinations of praise and shame in Germanic heroic culture, public attention ratifies the permanence and temporal scope of the moment of Judgment. By comparing *Christ III* and Old English homilies with texts like *Beowulf*, I show how and why Anglo-Saxon poets and homilists alike grapple with ways to describe Doomsday’s unmediated truth. Since metaphor is always mediated, they seek to literalize metaphors inherited from the Christian Latin tradition. It is through this conflict that the *Christ III* poet develops distinctions among judgment and display before different audiences, and especially in this world as opposed to the Last Judgment—whose finality transcends metaphor. In the process, the poem creates light and darkness as a sense of the presence and absence of vision.

Chapter 2, spanning the Middle English period, discusses later elaborations on the underlying binary nature of the Last Judgment. Both Middle English sermons and romances visualize Doomsday as transformations from “foul” to “fair” bodies or texts. Their joint concern with change delineates a dual time scheme: romance time, which ends before Doomsday, and eschatological time. These transformations—bodily in romance, scribal in Wimbledon’s sermon—characterize the time before judgment: the penultimate period when change or redemption remains possible. I suggest,

moreover, that the admixture of religious and secular works of the later Middle Ages underlines a popular interest in that eschatologically penultimate period. The *Carl of Carlisle* romance, for example, frames visible transformations in religious language. Such secular texts allow audiences, perspectives, and judgments to proliferate at crucial moments of transition. As romances display fantastical transformations, apparitions, or beauty contests, their viewing publics wield plural perspectives that redefine physical signs through their perceptions. Audiences' ability to redefine physical/spiritual status through visual signs recurs in exempla (moral stories) throughout the medieval period. Such stories become increasingly popular as spiritual emphasis falls upon individual introspection and self-knowledge. The image of the books of conscience, recording an individual's moral ledger of good deeds versus bad, emerges as a crucial focus of visual judgment enacted upon the human body-as-text. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the two texts of the *Carl of Carlisle* romance, and the crossover from secular to religious closure that marks, in these texts, a transition from penultimate to final judgment framed in the visual terms I have described. I examine the relationship between romance transformation, on the surface of the text, and the religious language of transformation that underlies it—a relationship mediated by visual judgment.

Chapter 3 argues that the transformation from foul to fair and old to young in Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" reflects the Wife of Bath's manipulation of visual judgment. The "Wife of Bath's Prologue" and "Tale" link that transformation on the one hand to her concerns with time and teleology, and on the other hand to the question of women's beauty and its public display. Both Prologue and Tale treat public display as a locus of judgment that imperils private values and emotion. In her presentation, the Wife of Bath replaces affective with bodily concerns as she channels her emotions—her desires for both display and evasion, among others—into physical and public revelations. The first part of the chapter focuses on how the Wife deploys this sense of her own physicality through time to control and choreograph her autobiographical display against the discourse of visual judgment. In view of late medieval dramatic representations of judgment inscribed upon the body and Foucault's study of publicly displayed criminals, her persistent use of physical imagery to assign or evade guilt emphasizes her manipulations of her audiences, who—like the pilgrims—see her from conflicting perspectives. It is as if she shifts from the "books of conscience" to an autobiographical narrative that she can exploit through her evasive techniques. She seeks constantly to replace eschatological possibilities with their earthly and bodily counterparts and to turn back the teleological clock, away from final closure and final judgment. The Wife's avoidance of death, reminiscent of the Pardoner's revelers' pursuit of Death in its play