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Theoretical theft: Chaucer, literary theory and the (re)creation of fictional character

Abstract:

Does the application of literary theory stifle the act of creative writing? Should one theorise only *after* the creative act? This paper argues that the fictional reinterpretation of a complex literary character may be facilitated and indeed enhanced by the prior application of theory. To be more specific, I argue that my creative rewriting of the Wife of Bath (of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*) has been empowered by Elizabeth Fowler's theory of 'social persons'. Further, I propose that Fowler's character theory has the potential to enrich the creation of many kinds of textual character. The following paper first introduces Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and one of its constituent characters, the Wife of Bath. It then describes Fowler's theory and applies it in broad brush-strokes to the Chaucerian portrayal of the Wife. Finally, I demonstrate the way in which such theory and practice of literary critique may inform creative writing in the case of my historical novel of the Wife of Bath, *The Scarlet Woman*.

Biographical note:

Carol Hoggart is a final year PhD candidate at Curtin University undertaking a creative-production thesis to re-interpret the Wife of Bath, of medieval poet Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. This will result in an academic exegesis and the medieval-set historical novel, *The Scarlet Woman*. Carol previously studied history and English at the University of Western Australia.

Keywords:

Character – creative practice – the Wife of Bath – historical fiction – literary theory

Does the application of literary theory stifle the act of creative writing? Should one theorise only *after* the creative act? This paper argues that the fictional reinterpretation of a complex literary character may be facilitated and indeed enhanced by the prior application of theory. To be more specific, I argue that my creative rewriting of the Wife of Bath (of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*) has been empowered by Elizabeth Fowler's theory of 'social persons'. In fact, I consider that Fowler's character theory has the potential to enrich the creation of many kinds of textual character. The following paper describes Fowler's theory and applies it in broad brush-strokes to Chaucer's Wife of Bath. I then show how scholarly theory may inform creative writing in the case of my historical novel, *The Scarlet Woman*. First, however, it is necessary to introduce the literary source from which my fictional endeavour springs.

The source

Geoffrey Chaucer is by far the best known of the medieval poets who, beginning in the fourteenth century, began to produce literature in the vernacular now known as Middle English. His longest and last poetical work, the *Canterbury Tales*, written between 1372 and his death in 1400 (Benson 2008: xxv), is the vehicle upon which much of his reputation rests. The *Tales* is a collection of stories ostensibly told by a group of pilgrims as they journey towards the greatest of medieval English shrines, that of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury. Chaucer describes thirty pilgrims in the 'General Prologue', all but three of them men, and includes his own persona amongst their fictional company. The body of the *Tales* then consists of the pilgrims relating tales of their choice as part of a story-telling competition. Some tales are also preceded by prologues in which the narrating character introduces him- or herself. The pilgrim introduced as the Wife of Bath—also referred to by Chaucer as Dame Alisoun and Alys—is the focus of my historical novel and hence this paper.

Chaucer-the-narrator introduces Dame Alisoun in the 'General Prologue' in the following terms:

> Boold was hir face and fair and reed of hewe.
>
> She was a worthy womman al hir lyve:
>
> Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve,
>
> Withouten oother compaignye in youthe, --
>
> But therof nedeth nat to speke as nowthe.
>
> And thries hadde she been at Jerusalem; (ll.458-463)

> [Bold was her face, and fair, and red of hue.
>
> She had been a worthy woman all her life:
>
> She had wedded five husbands before the church door,
>
> Not to mention other company she kept in youth,

But of those we need not speak.

And thrice she had made pilgrimage to Jerusalem;] (my translation)

The character who Chaucer then has speak for herself in 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue' certainly proves 'bold' in speech as well as face. The Wife employs the bulk of her lengthy 'Prologue' to describing, in sexualised and combative terms, her life—or, more precisely, her career through five marriages. Scholarly interest has been fuelled by the complexity and contradiction embodied in the tripartite characterisation formed by the 'General Prologue' sketch of the Wife, Alisoun's own garrulous 'Prologue' autobiography, and finally the 'Tale' she tells of a rapist knight and an ugly old woman. Ingenious arguments exist to demonstrate that Alys: masquerades as a lawyer (Houser 2013; Thomas 1997) or a preacher (Minnis 2008), reflects medieval stereotypes of the 'witch' (Basham 1995), is androgynous (Parker Rhodes 1979) or a metaphorical cross-dresser (Martin 2008), murdered at least one of her husbands (Palomo 1975; Wurtele 1988), or is falsely accused of murder (Hamel 1979), espouses the Lollard heresy (Blamires 1989), that her character is determined by the stars (Curry 1929) or not (Friedman 2000), is an advocate of penance (Kamowski 1993), or is even a female personification of Chaucer himself (Martin 1990: 217). Such arguments often make perfect sense—but only to a degree, for the complex construction of the Wife ensures that counter-arguments are as easily formed. One can as convincingly establish that Chaucer displays feminist sympathies through the Wife (Amsell 2011; Cooper 1996; Walzem 2008); as one can demonstrate that she is simply a misogynist's caricature of male fears and desires (Hansen 1988: 404). That few such contrasting arguments can be entirely dismissed only underlines the richness of Chaucer's portrayal. Thus, with Arthur Lindley, I contend that attempts to clarify the Wife's character by confining her to a single interpretation are bound to present but a solitary angle of a multi-faceted creation (1992). Adopting a different solution to Lindley's, however, I see that the Wife of Bath's complex characterisation may be more broadly appreciated by viewing her through the lens of Elizabeth Fowler's theory of 'social persons'. I then advance one step further: I lift this application of literary theory out of the realm of academic critique and turn it to my own fictional re-interpretation of the Wife of Bath.

The theory

Elizabeth Fowler's central theoretical assertion in *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* is that, in the process of making sense of a literary character, readers 'integrate the scrap-like details of characterization' (2003: 4) scattered throughout a written text into 'sets of personae' (2003: 2)—or, as Fowler defines them, *social persons*. Such social persons are the products of literary and social convention and, as such, 'are better regarded as the cumulative and changing sets of resemblances rather than as susceptible to definition by a list of features.' (2003: 1-2) Fowler then demonstrates her theory upon such late medieval and early modern poems as *Piers Ploughman,* the *Faerie Queen*, and the figures of the Knight, Prioress, and Pardoner from the *Canterbury Tales*. Her application of social person methodology to Chaucerian character provides me with a clear, even obvious, working model for a literary critique of the Wife of Bath.

Fowler defines social persons as 'familiar concepts of social being that attain currency through common use.' (2003: 2) That is, social persons are conventional models, even stereotypes, of character. Stated like this, Fowler's approach appears to invoke older formalist categories of character types—until it is noted that, in Fowler's application, *many* such social persons can attach to one character, sometimes by means of a mere word or phrase. Fowler's theory is one of *multiple* personae evoked in a reader's subconscious to haunt a nominally single textual character. Further, echoing reader-response theory (Fish 1980) and recent cognitive literary criticism (Culpeper 2009; Schneider 2001; Zunshine 2006), the nature of the 'social persons' conjured forth depends to a great extent upon individual readers' preconceptions. Although Fowler does not elaborate on this aspect, her theory is clearly based upon reader cognition and the mental processing of linguistic cues. This is intimated in such assertions as:

> When the human figure appears in words—in the tiniest evocative detail or the most generalized type—it offers the reader … a foothold … The task of interpreting the figure requires each reader to align herself or himself, cognitively and affectively, with the world that is conjured by words (2003: 32).

What this means, as Fowler goes on to illustrate, is that the mere hint of a social personhood in a text has the power to summon up an existing notion of character type with all its attendant associations in a reader's mind. This pre-established model of personhood is then applied, subconsciously, by the reader to illuminate, to 'flesh out', the newly-met textual character with whom it is now associated. The degree to which this social personhood is understood to apply to the character in question may range from the nebulous (perhaps based on one or two textual cues) to the strongly linked (if reinforced by repeated or particularly valid textual cues). Nevertheless, a reader's mental repertoire of associations is necessarily founded upon their own cultural milieu and prior experiences. In recognition of this cultural-historical specificity, Fowler's own analyses are strongly historicist and focus upon probable late medieval interpretations of the texts examined rather than those of contemporary readers. As will be seen, my own approach is not so exclusively historicist.

To put Fowler's theory into practice—what social persons do I propose an academic critique of the Wife of Bath reveals? I have not the space to delve deep and wide, so I shall contain my examples to three: wife, pilgrim and scarlet woman. The most obvious identity is that announced by her Chaucerian title: the Wife of Bath is a 'wife'. As if to underline this point, Chaucer has rendered Alisoun a serial wife—she has wedded five husbands and is currently looking for a sixth. Almost as clearly, Chaucer casts Alys as a pilgrim. Not only is she, in the immediate context of the *Tales*, on her way to Canterbury, but she has also made the most holy (and expensive) pilgrimage of them all—to Jerusalem—three times. Thus Dame Alys is to be viewed not only as a serial Wife but also a serial pilgrim. These identities of 'wife' and 'pilgrim'—with all the characteristics readers associate with these roles—are only the most evident social persons Chaucer's text evokes in regards of Alisoun. That the 'General Prologue' also declares that she is an urban cloth-maker of superlative skill is, as shall be seen, oddly linked to 'scarlet':

> Of clooth makyng she hadde swich an haunt,
>
> She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt. (ll.447-8)

[Of cloth-making she had such a skill,

She surpassed the cloth-makers of Ypres and Gaunt.] (my translation)

This skill is followed by an emphatic linking of the colour red to the Wife's person:

Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed,

Ful streite yteyd and shoes ful moyste and newe.

Boold was hir face and fair and reed of hewe. (ll.456-8)

[Her stockings were of fine scarlet red,

Firmly tied, and her shoes supple and new.

Bold was her face, and fair, and red of hue.] (my translation)

Reflecting this textual rubicundity, the image of the Wife in the famous Ellesmere manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales* portrays her in a vibrant red gown. From these textual and paratextual clues was born my decision to cast Alisoun of Bath in fictional form as *The Scarlet Woman*.

It is all very well to list possible social persons within a text, but the meanings made in readers' minds in association with such ideas vary in accordance with a reader's background—which in turn varies with their historical context. The word 'scarlet' is a case in point, and my novel plays with both modern and medieval understandings of the word. 'Scarlet', as used by Chaucer in the late fourteenth century, was not an adjective understood as a synonym for the colour red. After c.1100, variants of the Latin noun *scarletus* are used in medieval languages across Europe to denote a specific fabric (Munroe 1983: 19). Scarlet was fine woollen cloth, felted to a soft denseness, and almost always created of English fleece (Munroe 2003: 216). It was fabric of very high value, and as such was frequently tinted with the best and most expensive of dyes (Hodges 1993: 365). In the later medieval Europe this was kermes, derived from scale insects of the *Coccidae* family, which, when crushed, produces a powerful red hue (Curta 2004: 47). Because the cloth known as 'scarlet' was so frequently dyed red by means of kermes, over succeeding centuries the colour became synonymous with the fabric (Munroe 2003: 213). Later, in early-modern English translations of the Bible, that figure of worldly temptation of 'Revelations', the Whore of Babylon, is described as bedecked not only in jewels, but also the most valuable dye of ancient times—purple—and what became the most expensive of colours in the Middle Ages:

I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast …

And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold
        and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of

abominations and filthiness of her fornication:

And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE
       GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF
       THE EARTH (Revelations, 17:3-5 *KJV*).

Thus the figure of a 'scarlet woman' entered the modern English language with all her attendant connotations of feminine vice. Yet in the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible used throughout the medieval west, the Latin used in this passage was *coccineus* [*bestiam coccineam*, scarlet-coloured beast] and *coccinus* [*purpura et coccino*, with purple and scarlet] (*Vulgate*: 1380). Variants of *coccina* were used in classical-era Latin specifically to denote kermes-dyed products (Munroe 1983: 15). *Scarletus* entered Latin and other European languages after c.1100. Thus the woman garbed in *coccina* in the Vulgate only became a 'scarlet woman' in common parlance once vernacular translations of the Bible displaced the Vulgate. The first such usage the *Oxford English Dictionary* records is Spenser's 'scarlot whore' in the *Faerie Queene* (1590). Such a figure was *not* current among Chaucer's contemporaries. It is implausible that Chaucer intended a social personage of 'scarlet woman' (in her late sixteenth-century cultural garb) be identified with Alisoun of Bath. However, readers create social person meanings not only on the basis of historical context, but primarily of their own. That is, we cannot divorce ourselves of our current cultural knowledge structures, especially in the subconscious connections made during reading. For this reason, I argue that Chaucer's references to 'scarlet reed', in combination with Dame Alys's own much-married state and blatantly sexual assertions in her 'Prologue', may prompt an anachronistic social person of 'scarlet woman' to arise in modern readers' minds in relation to the Wife of Bath. This is only bolstered by academic suggestion that the Wife is not to be understood as hailing from the English town of Bath, but from a bath-house—in medieval times, a place of sexual as well as hygienic transactions (Weissman 1980). Consequently, the social person of a bawd or prostitute is linked with the Wife, an association further supported in modern minds by Alisoun's 'Prologue' assertion that, so far as her sexual favours are concerned, 'al is for to selle' [all is for sale]. (l.414)

Thus far I have proposed but a handful of the possible social persons whose attributes may be associated with Chaucer's multi-layered portrait of the Wife of Bath. There are many more. For example, the following may be argued: masculine social persons like preacher (Minnis 2008), pedagogue (Walzem 2008), knight (McTaggart 2012: 43), and merchant (Ladd 2012); contemporary female stereotypes of the gossip (ll.529-39), wandering woman (ll.544-58), and shrew (l.223); echoes of biblical figures like Eve (l.715), Solomon (l.35), and Delilah (ll.721-3); folktale allusions of elf-queen (l.860) and loathly lady (l.1100); or classical allusions to Hercules's wife (l.725) and Venus (l.611); and finally dark hints of Alys as an adulteress (ll.17-19) and murderess (Wurtele 1988: 125-6). While I have not the space to explore these potential aspects of Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife, it will be noted that all of the foregoing have either been argued by scholars or are mentioned in the Wife's portions of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Fowler asserts that the association of multiple social persons with a single literary figure 'causes us to feel a density in the character' (2003: 9). This is because, while individual '[s]ocial persons are, by definition, simple and thin; positioned among a number of them, a

character takes on complexity and weight' (2003: 9). The bewildering quantity of potential social persons that haunt the Wife of Bath gift her character that very complexity which has fuelled academic debate over her for so long. To apply E.M. Forster's famous character definitions, such a crowd of social persons about the Wife renders her a 'round' character (1962: 75). Conversely, a textual entity associated with only a single social person would seem 'flat'—one-dimensional. Such provision of density or 'roundness' in character offers a wonderful tool to a writer of fiction.

The (re)creation

Fowler's analysis is cast in the mode of academic argument. Operating within conventions of explication, logic and proof, scholarly inquiry can delineate only a limited number of social persons in the scope of an article or even a monograph, and such delineation will necessarily elide many possible interpretations. However, a fictional portrayal of character *suggests* traits in an open-ended manner through literary devices such as dialogue, action and context rather than directly asserting them through reasoned argument. Chaucer's poetry is a case in point— in offering us so many clues to Alisoun's characterhood, some of them conflicting, interpretations of her character are opened up rather than resolved. While Fowler's approach offers rich possibilities for academic critique, I now turn to the potential for social person theory to nurture the creation of fictional character.

In the following passage from my historical novel, *The Scarlet Woman*, Dame Alisoun's character is considered by one of her pilgrimage companions as the group exits the church after receiving their pilgrimage blessing from the Prior of Bath:

> But the crowd is not here for me. Bathonians—Bathites?—of all shapes and estates huddle before St Mary's on this chill March morning for *her*. As do the burgers and merchants. And the Pompous Prior himself.
>
> She is notorious. All know her and of her. Dame Alisoun, the much-married, the suspiciously wealthy.
>
> The Bawd of Bath.
>
> I look upon the crowd from the vantage of St Mary's steps. Some— mostly women of a lower order—smile and call blessings and God-speeds upon *Good Dame Alisoun*. Others speak loud only with their louring looks. Older worthies, men and women both. I look upon the object of their attention. Sooth be said, it is not easy. The Dame is of such compromised height that she is rendered invisible by the merest bystander. It occurs to me that here is one reason why the Bawd garbs herself all a-scarlet. *Hey, look at me! Don't trample me underfoot, and a-God's mercy, ne ignore me!* It is the pipsqueak shout of a ladybird or a robin. Oh, but there is another reason, if one nevertheless allied. I know it well. I, who am visually damned by my scruff and motley garb, yet know the hierarchy of cloth and colour. Scarlet is at the very top. Not red—*scarlet*. The Dame is a low-born wanton of no morals and less breeding who proclaims her worth by means of kingly cloth. (Hoggart 2016: 13)

Here, the reader approaches Alys through the inner monologue of a reluctant pilgrim and narrator of dubious reliability. Both medieval and modern notions of scarlet are made available through this secondary character's mental commentary and I have him interpret its possible significance in relation to Alisoun. The meaning he attributes to it, however, is clearly provisional—it is one character's somewhat jaded opinion. That different opinions on the Wife are also available is indicated by the varying reactions among the crowd. What is important to note from the point of view of creative practice, however, is that the appearance of these themes was not actively planned and implemented—in this passage or any other. Before I commenced writing my first draft, I had researched the various valencies of 'scarlet' and had included these ideas into a quite voluminous profile of social persons for my primary character. Once incorporated into my initial character-mapping of Alisoun, however, I found this social person content emerged with no conscious prompting during my creative writing process.

To take another example, here is Dame Alisoun through two different characters' perspectives: those of the parson, Sir John, and of the Prior of Bath.

The Prior snorted.

"Piety? The woman's about as pious as His Grace of Southwark's geese. Scarlet, she is, and I don't mean her dress. Piety, my …" At which point the Prior paused. "Oh. Pardee, Sir John. I had forgot. The woman's your mother, in't she? Technically speaking, that is."

He had not forgotten, of course. No-one save You, Lord, knows more of how matters stand between Alisoun and me.

"She is my mother by marriage, my lord." My reply was calm. Any fact is stripped of shock given the passage of sufficient time.

"You say sooth. Married your old Pa, and that was just the beginning of her career in men, eh?" The Prior chuckled. "Practically bigamy, all the husbands she's had since your sire. Bigamy … or is it adultery? Ah, the distinctions of canon law."

Thus the Prior tested me, O Lord. Thus he prompted and prodded me. As careful shepherd, he observed me close for all which went unsaid. He is my superior. He has care of my soul too.

"The Samaritan woman had five husbands and yet Our Lord gave her grace," I replied.

"Tsk. Don't puff off your preaching on me. You trying to tell me Alys of Bath is off to the Holy Land because she repents of them she wedded? Or them she never." Did my superior smirk? "And what does she propose to do with the fifth, eh? Stow him in a monastery? Take him along as a lapdog?"

Then he sobered abruptly. "So tell me, Sir Preacher, what reasons gives your mother to warrant a second trip to the Holy City? She asks permission of her parson—that's well and good—but it's the bishop who decides." He spread his hands wide. "And I stand in stead of the bishop in Bath. Burnell can't be dealing

with mere matters of his diocese. So convince me, Sir John. Why must the Wife of Bath go to Jerusalem? Again."

"I have spoken to her at length, my lord."

"And? Well, don't cork it up, man!"

"I am persuaded that she is urged by genuine devotion, my lord. She speaks with wonder of the land of Our Lord's birth. She desires to renew again that connection between heaven and earth that the Heavenly City best facilitates" (Hoggart 2016: 27).

Thus two characters tussle over the nuances of Alisoun's identities as 'wife' and 'pilgrim'. Again, I hint at the varying meanings of scarlet. That the more modern meaning of 'scarlet woman' might apply is hinted at by medieval means: the Prior's reference to 'His Grace of Southwark's geese' aligns the Wife with the prostitutes operating under religious protection just south of London. Alisoun's sexual licentiousness is further emphasised by reference to her suspiciously multiple marriages. The impression is left—I hope—that both characters exaggerate their case.

As in my previous example, the social person content of this passage was not specifically planned. What I had done well before the creative writing was to analyse Chaucer's text and delve into the scholarly discussion that has arisen in such quantity over the character of the Wife of Bath. I had applied Fowler's theory of social persons to Chaucer's Alisoun. I had compiled a profile of the social persons I felt relevant to my own writing purpose through analysis of *Canterbury Tales* material and its secondary literature. Further, I investigated historical conditions—for example, what it meant to be a late-medieval European 'wife' or 'pilgrim'. At the same time, I was aware of the inescapability of my own modernity. All my attempted historicity would, I knew, inevitably filter through a contemporary lens. So why not embrace it? Alisoun would be a scarlet woman in both the medieval cloth-making sense and the post-sixteenth century sense.

In sum, I find that the application of literary theory does *not* stifle the act of creative writing—at least in case of the social person analysis of Chaucerian poetry to the creation of an historical novel adaption. Admittedly, my example has launched a rather limited expedition into the unknown. Nevertheless, I propose that Fowler's theory is far more broadly applicable, not only to other fictional adaptions of canonical literature such as mine, but also to any textual enterprise that necessitates the creation of 'rounded' character. My experience has shown that assembling a voluminous social person profile for my character with the aid of Fowler's theory permitted these multiple persona possibilities to percolate through my subconscious when I drafted the creative work. In fact, I was surprised by the way in which aspects of social person emerged. It seems only fitting to let *The Scarlet Woman* in yet another of her social person guises have the last word:

"God give me patience, wiltow let thy japes be! Christ above, but I'd a sooner shove a turd in thy teeth as unbung yon barrel. *No, thou wrecched catiff! Take thy shrewed paws off*!"

Perhaps it is just as well that the Flemings at the gate have but a rudimentary grasp of English. But they do understand the 'no' part. In fact, she'd bet that the gist of her current argument would be understood in deepest Ethiope or the Isles of the Dog-Headed Men. Some language is beyond words (Hoggart 2016: 89).

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