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Chaucer's Wife of Bath's "Foot-Mantel" and Her "Hipes Large"

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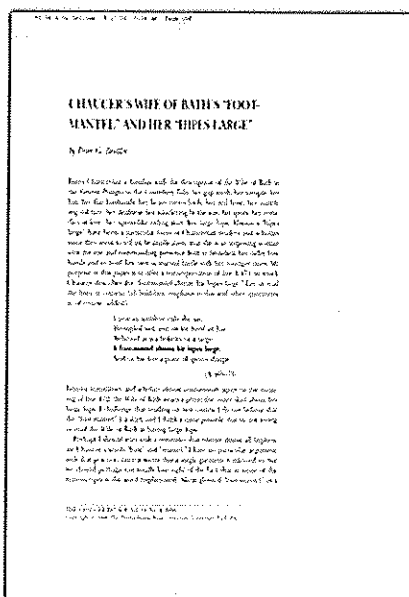
In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Every Chaucerian is familiar with the description of the Wife of Bath in the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*: her gap teeth, her wimple, her hat, her five husbands, her heavy coverchiefs, her red hose, her matching red face, her deafness, her wandering by the way, her spurs, her remedies of love, her apron-like riding skirt, her large hips. Alison's "hipes large" have been a particular focus of Chaucerian readers and scholars since they seem to tell us, by implication, that she is an imposing woman with the size and commanding presence both to browbeat her older husbands and to hold her own in marital battle with her younger ones. My purpose in this paper is to offer a reinterpretation of line A 472, in which Chaucer describes the "foot-mantel aboute hir hipis large." Let us read the lines in context (all bold-face emphasis in this and other quotations is, of course, added):

Upon an amblere
esily she sat,
Ywympled wel, and
on hir heed an hat
As brood as is a

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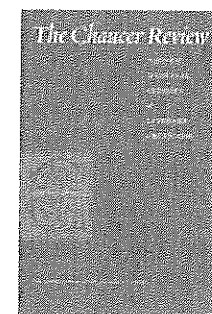
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bokeler or a targe;
A foot-mantel
aboute hir hipis
large,
 And on hir feet a
 paire of spores
 sharpe.

(A 469-73)

Editors, translators, and scholars almost unanimously agree on the meaning of line 472: the Wife of Bath wears a protective outer skirt about her large hips. I challenge that reading on two counts: I do not believe that the "foot-mantel" is a skirt, and I think it quite possible that we are wrong to read the Wife of Bath as having large hips.

Perhaps I should start with a reminder that editors almost all hyphenate Chaucer's words "foot" and "mantel." I have no particular argument with that practice, since it seems that a single garment is referred to, but we should perhaps not totally lose sight of the fact that in none of the manuscripts is the word hyphenated. Skeat glossed "foot-mantel" as a "foot-cloth, 'safe-guard' to cover the skirt." Skeat also referred to Tyrwhitt, "who supposes this to be a sort of *riding-petticoat*, such as is now used by market-women." Benson's Riverside edition glosses the term to mean an "apron-like overskirt." Other editors gloss the word to mean "a protective outer skirt," "an outer, protective skirt," an "outer skirt to protect her gown as she rode along," a "short riding skirt," an "outer skirt," an "apron-like skirt," or simply "an apron."

Joining the editors and glossators are the modern English translators. Although one translator, curiously, translates "foot-mantel" as a "saddle-blanket" and another as a "rug," almost all translators render it for modern readers as "an outer skirt," a "riding skirt," an "overskirt," a "protective skirt," or just a plain "skirt." Some translators keep



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the word "mantle," assuming apparently that modern readers will know what a "mantle" is. If modern readers do recognize the word, or if they look it up in a modern English dictionary, they will imagine that the Wife of Bath is wearing some sort of long cape or cloak, since the translators who translate "foot-mantel" as "mantle" silently delete the prefix "foot-." That deletion suggests the modern world's failure to understand what a foot-mantle is.

The *OED* and the *MED* are both hampered by the rarity of the term, since, indeed, Chaucer's only use of "foot-mantel" is apparently the first recorded written use of the term, and apparently the last one for more than a hundred years. The composer of the *OED* reference calls the term "obscure" and speculates that it may be "an overgarment worn by women when riding, to protect their dress" (s.v. "footmantle"). The term "overgarment" suggests that it is, like an apron or skirt or cape, to be pulled down over the dress. The *MED* refers to the...

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